

Finding Closure

Grieving practices after the WTC terrorist attacks

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Closure

- “Dr. John Rolland, a psychiatrist and co-director of the Center for Family Health at the University of Chicago, said, "Many families are waiting for some sign, like DNA analysis, that tells them, 'Yes, this is your family member,' to reach a stage of finality that a loss has occurred. [...] "There are differences in people's readiness to accept death," Dr. Rolland noted. "Not everyone in a family will come to closure at the same time. This is one of the things that tears families apart. One person may say, 'Get on with it, you know he's dead,' and another will say, 'You're a pessimist.' “
 - The New York Times, September 20, 2001

Closure

- But families tell me that there's no such thing as closure or getting back to normal

But what is closure?

- Moving on through various ‘stages’ of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance (this seems to suggest that grief needs to be finished—closed off)
 - Kubler-Ross 1969
- “Bereavement: Intense yearning or longing for the deceased, intense sorrow and emotional pain, and preoccupation with the deceased or the circumstances of the death are expected responses occurring in bereavement, whereas fear of separation from other attachment figures is central in separation anxiety disorder.”
 - DSM V 2013: 194
- Closure: “the ability to put trauma behind you and reach an even keel.”
 - Berns 2011: 8

But what is closure?

- Berns (2011: x) aims to “shed light at on how closure has become a new emotion that people are seeking even when it is not at all clear what closure means or even if it exists. Closure has emerged as a new way of talking about grief and loss, which has led to new expectations for those who are grieving.”
- Closure is a made-up concept “to explain how we should respond to loss” (p. 4).



Closure

*The Rush to End Grief
and What It Costs Us*

Nancy Berns

From closure to *finding closure*

- **How do WTC victims' families invent rituals in the wake of 9/11?**
- Research in New York City on the WTC tragedy
- 2,750 victims
 - ~22,000 human remains; 60 % identified, 40 % unidentified
 - Identification took in most instances longer than a year and still continues with a last identification made last year (2015)
- Interviews with ~50 interlocutors involved in 9/11's forensic, emotional, legal, bureaucratic and politicized aftermath
 - How did family members of WTC victims grief when it took so long until someone was identified?
 - What changed when someone's body was identified and repatriated?
 - How to mourn in the absence of a body to grief over?

- Slides are deleted as sharing slides/quotes is not in accordance with informed consent procedures

Grieving practices

Identified

- Peaceful, calming, divine intervention
- Able to bury someone, a place to go to, journey in healing, proof
- Identification sometimes comes with information about recovery location, allows kin to construct a story about a loved one's death and hence adds to personhood

Remaining at large

- No certainty, no ceremony with a body to pay respect and say goodbye to
- No burial of a body renders problematic resurrection in religious doctrines
- Incoherent narratives, denial and hope (your mind plays tricks on you)
- Empty grave burials, objects or ashes buried that represent a missing person

Final remarks

- Identification comes with various 'goods'; remaining at large becomes associated with 'bads'
- In the absence of bodies to bury, families often copy 'normal' funeral and burial practices
 - Empty grave burials, objects/ashes representing a missing person, memorials
 - Ash, dirt, ground, soil
- *Finding closure* becomes articulated through the practices where victims are not identified:
 - Uncertainty, no narrative about someone's final moments
 - No place to go to

Final remark

- Referring to “closure” and “moving on” normatively underscores normal grief trajectories
- Achieving closure as a societal rule of how to behave, act, feel, communicate etc.
- DVI practices should hence not aimed at achieving closure, but at facilitating the tasks and its practices of grieving

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