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9/11: Honoring memory without reliving tragedy

Jamie Manson | Sep. 6, 2011 Grace on the Margins

Ten years later, the images aren't any more bearable or any less surreal.

And, yet, it is likely that every Sept. 11 television tribute that will air from now until Sunday will replay, multiple times, the same horrific video recordings of the mass death and destruction that we witnessed that day in 2001.

About eight years ago, I decided to stop watching television on 9/11 anniversaries. I realized that every time I saw the towers swallow the plane, erupt in a fireball, and crumble into a collapse, I was being re-traumatized.

Perhaps this was because Sept. 11 was, for me, as much a personal tragedy as it was a national one. The Twin Towers were completed just a few years before I was born. I never knew the city without them. I could see them from the fourth floor of my high school, from the parking lot at my college, and from the bridge when I headed to Connecticut for graduate school every Monday morning.

Though I did not lose any family or friends in the attacks, the tragedy affected many in my community and permanently disfigured that landscape that I always called home.

It made sense that repeatedly watching the destruction of my city and of the countless lives within and below the towers was affecting my emotional and spiritual health. If the tragic death of one of my family members was caught on video, would it be any healthier for me to watch it over and over again?

In this new era of cell phone cameras and YouTube, it feels like everything is captured on video and all videos are unlimitedly accessible. The Sept. 11 footage isn't the only tragedy that has been captured and replayed.

A few months ago, a young father fell to his death at a baseball game when an outfielder tossed a foul ball his way. The man's fall was captured on camera. So was the face of his stunned 6-year-old, as he watched his father plunge 20 feet to the cement below. News outlets showed the video repeatedly. My local news station showed it five times inside of its 30-minute broadcast.

A similar tragedy was captured a few weeks ago at the Indiana State Fair when a stage collapsed in high winds, killing seven concertgoers. The image shows the rigging falling on people as they desperately try to run out of its path. I have seen that video more than a dozen times -- even as recently as this weekend. News programs feel the need to replay it every time they make even the smallest reference to the story.

These video recordings of horrific events have ushered in a new way of dealing with tragedy and death: to relive it. Over and over again. We seem convinced that the best way to cope with death and tragedy is to get stuck in the event.

But is it only stunting our grieving process?

Rather than trying to persevere through our grim recollections, we now seem inclined to perseverate on each frame of the motion picture. As if watching it multiple times will help us make sense of the unimaginable. As if viewing it compulsively will somehow numb us from the anxiety that we could be the victims someday. As if reliving it continually somehow honors the dead.

This isn't to say that retelling the story of one's tragic experience isn't important. Storytelling is a healing way to integrate the experience into the whole of one's life. It is a crucial part of making meaning of an experience. It gives us a chance to be present to our own narrative and for someone else to be present to us.

Before the omnipresence of video cameras, all we had to deal with tragedy was our memory. It was up to our minds to provide flashbacks and, over time, to soften the pain and poignancy of our recollections. Our memories led us through the initial shock and, eventually, helped us journey to acceptance. Though videos document an event, they can also trap us in the trauma stage.

I'm not suggesting that we forget or find "closure" on our Sept. 11 memories. I've always felt that closure was a fictitious state invented by our therapeutic culture. I don't think any words or beliefs could ever close wounds left by suffering, loss and devastation. We do not need to "move on" from the tragedy, but we do need to move more deeply into making meaning of it all.

Meaning-making doesn't imply placing blame on human evil or chalking up suffering to God's mysterious way of teaching us a lesson. Regardless of how well we try to explain them, so many tragedies in our world will always remain senseless.

The best we can do is seek out the grace in the midst of the horror and find the strength to allow that grace to help us transform ourselves out of grief.

So, along with my troubled recollections of Sept. 11, I also hold on to the memory of the endless lines of people at blood banks throughout the country. Just days before the terrorist attacks, donations to the New York Blood Center were at a critical shortage. After the tragedy, they had to turn people away in droves because of overwhelming supply.

It has always fascinated me that the first thing we thought to do in a moment of great chaos, fear and destruction was to literally give of our blood in remembrance of our fallen neighbors. It was one of the few actions that seemed to give people a sense of order and purpose in the uncertain days that followed the catastrophe.

Few moments in our history were so sacramental.

Though my memory still brings me back to the eerie, heavy silence throughout the streets and neighborhoods in the days after Sept. 11, 2001, that image of so many people offering our bodies for the lives of others gives me profound hope. It reminds me that, for all of the harm, anger, greed and abuse that wrack our world, tragedy and suffering can still elicit what is best in the human spirit: generosity, courage and sacrifice.

This recollection is, for me, a more life-giving alternative to an anxious fixation on tragic images. Through my memory, I am able to honor those who died while also remembering this vision of how we ought to live. The best memorials, after all, not only acknowledge the painful past -- they set our eyes toward a more hopeful future.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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