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A Mourning to Remember

When elephants come across the bones of one of their species, the animals appear to mourn. They circle the bones, curl their trunks around them, marvel at their feel, and sometimes carry them for a short distance. They show no interest in the bones of other animals. It is only when they realize a fellow elephant has been lost that they are compelled to perform such rituals.

Humans share this intense need to memorialize. Indeed, some type of grief process has been documented in every culture. But while there exists similarities in the way people mourn, each person's struggle is unique. There appear to be as many ways to mourn a life as there are to live one.

This morning marks a year since the beginning of the first full day of grieving for the victims of the Columbine High School shooting. It would be nice to think that everyone who mourns feels completely healed now, as if our calendar somehow had the magic to tie misery in neat bundles and dispose of suffering like sacks of garbage.

Unfortunately, despair knows no boundaries, and can hit hardest at anniversaries, strengthened by cues that often go unnoticed: a blooming tree down the street, an annual foot race, the emergence of iced tea at restaurants.

It is with humility that I recall the first client I provided psychotherapy to who was struggling with bereavement. I attacked the client's issue with unnecessary precision, trying to "fix" the situation prematurely. I stumbled along until she taught me that what she really needed was my acceptance of her grief. I could show it through a simple act – listening to her story.

And she told it. Again and again and again she described her loss to me, each time touching on a new detail that opened the smallest aperture for growth.

Perhaps it is the uncertainty of what death brings that urges us to revisit our stories of grief. Like personal Zapruder films, our losses can replay themselves incessantly, and we can spend countless moments analyzing them in search of answers to unanswerable questions.

And it is not just our personal losses that beckon us. We seem to have an endless curiosity for others' stories of loss. It is no coincidence that news has become inundated with tales of misery. There is something within human nature, especially today, that

seems to yearn for it. We stop to stare at car wrecks. We read stories of sorrow. We watch movies we know will make us cry. Why this fixation?

It may be that when the story of a life has ended, there is part of ourselves forever lost, the reflection of us we see in another's eyes. Through remembering, we keep this part of us alive along with the deceased. It is the ultimate paradox: by recalling death we invoke life.

And it is powerful. Like metal filings drawn by magnetic pull, the entirety of our life's many events can be repositioned, and thus reinterpreted, by a loss. We can look back at a single moment with a departed loved one and find that, with their death, the event takes on a whole new meaning. The very fabric of our beings can change. Our mission in life can be completely altered.

Of all the technological brass rings humans have grabbed, eliminating pain, suffering, and death have not been among them. It seems we are unable to build upon the wisdom of our ancestors when we face the hardest of tasks. We all, in one way or another, must start by scratch as we confront the essential lessons of being human; lessons of life, lessons of love, lessons of loss.

Somehow we manage to learn them.

Elephants finally drop the bones of their brethren and start off down the dusty trail that leads to the future. But it may be true that they never forget.

Neither do humans.

And this, after all, may be the most bittersweet of gifts.

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