Mass Grief and Public Traumas

By John D. Moore, PhD

UNDERSTANDING MASS GRIEF

In recent days, we have been reminded once again just how fragile life truly can be with the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17. While details and specifics about what exactly happened are still emerging, one thing is for sure – the incident has touched off a wave of public emotions ranging from shock, to outrage to deep, raw grief.

As a therapist, I have some experience with death and loss in the work I do with clients, including first responders, military veterans and the survivors of horrific accidents. I’ve also tried to provide some insight and understanding into what people may be feeling during periods of mass grief.

And so mass grief is what I would like to focus on for this blog-post in the context of public tragedy.

Mass grief, also referred to as “mourning sickness”, can be defined as kind of collective, societal grief that is triggered by a public trauma or celebrity death.

Mass grief commonly occurs where there exists a trio of ingredients. These include:

1. human connection to the event

http://blogs.psychcentral.com/life-goals/2014/07/mass-grief-and-public-traumas/#at_pco=tst-1_0&at_si=55ba043251376ebc&at_ab=per-2&at_pos=0&at_tot=2
2. personal connection to the event

3. When the familiar becomes unfamiliar

Let’s take a look at each of these points in more detail so that we can gain a better insight about why so many, perhaps even you, are grieving at this point in time.

**Human Connection to Event**

In the case of Malaysia Airlines flight 17, we see a large number of innocent people horrifically taken from us without warning. Specifically, I am talking about 298 souls that were here one moment and through no fault of their own, gone the next. As we process this loss, we think to ourselves … *that could have been happened to someone I love. It could have happened to me.*

And so instantly, through tragedy, we make a *human connection* to the public trauma. Sadly, we have seen this phenomenon many times before throughout history, including tragedies like TWA Flight 800, the events of September 11 and more recently, the Sandy Hook Elementary school shootings and the Boston bombings.

Human connections to public *traumas* also happen when specifics involving a tragedy in some way remind us of loss that we have experienced in our own lives. This makes sense because as humans, we relate through association … through what is familiar.

**Personal Connection to Event**

Personal connections to an event have a major impact on mass grief. Here we are talking about the loss of people we may know or may *not* know. In other words, when we begin to see the faces of the people who have died and learn more about their private lives, we discover they are longer “passengers” or “students” or (fill in the blank) … but instead, were real people with real lives and real families. In short, they become powerfully humanized.

An example can be found in Dr. Joep Lange, a *leading HIV researcher* who was on the doomed flight. And so suddenly, through story telling (i.e. news, radio, Internet) *the loss of one becomes the loss for many.*

Life is fragile indeed, which leads to the final point.

**When the familiar becomes unfamiliar**

The intensity of public grief and outpouring of emotion is amplified by the nature of the tragedy. This is particularly true when *the familiar becomes unfamiliar.*
In the case of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, we have learned that the aircraft was literally shot down from the sky. We scratch our heads and ask ourselves, *what happened and why?* We wonder *how* something like this could have been prevented, repeating a silent, inner-narrative that whispers … *it isn’t supposed to be this way. This wasn’t supposed to happen.*

The images we see from public tragedies adds to our grief and is often at odds with our collective memories of a given object, person or experience. Examples include pictures of the aircraft before departure, a broken fuselage lying on the ground and the personal effects from victims scattered in a field. All of these images make us experience a kind of mental glitch – in other words we “see” it but it just doesn’t compute.

*When the familiar becomes unfamiliar, it shakes us.*

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**Summary**

It is still hard to process the loss of so many regarding Malaysia Airlines Flight 17. The mere fact that we struggle to understand this kind of tragedy speaks to just how complex grief can be and reminds us of our fragility.

I would argue that collective grief is a necessary part of our human condition. It helps us to bring meaning to the moment, center us in the here and now and contextualize the importance of our relationships with others.

I hope this short blog post helps anyone who may be grieving at this time. My thoughts and prayers go out to the families and loved ones of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 and to all who have been impacted by this loss.

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