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Right to grieve not public property

By Maria Tumarkin

In Bali they don't mark anniversaries of tragic events. Or rather they did not, before two terrorist attacks tore through the island on October 12, 2002, and, then again, three years later. Out came people from Australia and other nations - survivors, relatives, witnesses, the public at large, declaring their need to mark, commemorate and erect monuments.

And so overwhelming was their need that Balinese people moved to make room for our yearly dances of commemoration. Strange it may seem, but public commemorations of tragic events are not universal or compulsory. For the people of Bali, once the purifications ceremonies are complete, anniversaries can serve to re-awaken the evil spirit, to inflict spiritual harm on the community and the dead. Yet for countries outside Bali, whose nationals died in the blasts, Australia, England, America, 21 altogether, anniversaries commemorating the terrorist attacks have effectively functioned as the sacred rites, the ultimate tributes to the victims and their legacy.

Today, on the 10th anniversary of the Port Arthur mass shooting, it is vital that we recognise that public anniversaries are not an inherent or undisputed part of civic life. "Anniversary" culture is just that - a culture, a specific expression of collective values and expectations, which can and should be examined from time to time if only so our compulsion to commemorate does not turn into a hollow and injurious reflex. The profound discomfort over the 10th anniversary of Port Arthur tragedy tells us that the time for reflection is now.

In the closing months of 1999, The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald published the results of their "Poll of the Century", in which the Port Arthur massacre was identified as one of the nation's biggest tragedies of the 20th century. Yet the term national tragedy is deeply misleading. It obscures and displaces the fact that the blows of tragedies are absorbed by individuals, not by some amorphous collective bodies. No matter how intricate or rousing the national rhetoric, nations do not carry the burden of loss and violence. People do. People are the ones with their lives turned upside-down.

Yes, we sat glued to television, in shock, scared for our children, our sanity, our image of the peaceful, innocent Australia. But the victims' families and others directly touched by the massacre were the ones who had to live with empty chairs at dinner tables, with the fear of closing their eyes at night, with the heart attacks two decades too early. We are not on the same plane. Today is not our day.

With Anzac commemorations just behind us, the idea that national identity is sustained by the rituals woven around collectively experienced traumas is self-evident to say the least. But tragedies are not public properties. They are
not for everyone to feel and touch. No matter how large their scale, how far-reaching their consequences, they are, first and foremost, private events. The Port Arthur tragedy may have shaken Australia to the core but it is not owned by the nation. No one has any entitlement to it except for the people of the Tasman Peninsula and Port Arthur staff and survivors and the relatives of those who did not survive. Anniversaries are especially the times when we need to recognise this and to back off.

But, of course, precisely the opposite happens. Here comes the whole unwieldy anniversary machine complete with the weeping politicians and journalists in search of the ultimate hyperbole. And there is, it seems, no escape.

Many of us have had an experience of loss behind us, most likely nothing in the nature of Port Arthur, but of a profound loss nonetheless. Would we like to invite the nation to our cemeteries? Would we like our grieving to be televised? Maybe some people would find this kind of attention uplifting, reassuring, strength-giving. But for others it would be the worst kind of injury or violation. Why is Port Arthur any different?

At the 10th anniversary of the massacre, we need to re-examine the consequences of the national appropriation of tragic events, especially in our recent past. We desperately need to take another look at our commemorative urge. Could it be that it is doing more damage than good? On days like today, we need to revisit our moral and social obligations, not our sense of entitlement, to the people and places marked by tragedies.

To people who carry the events of April 28, 1996, on their shoulders, please forgive us. Please forgive all the hoopla, our callousness and the endless media reports. Please forgive all the noise we make, especially today when you need just a bit of quiet. It is hard to know how to express our pain and our empathy and our overwhelming admiration for your strength. Perhaps, one day we will learn.

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