chasing "closure"

by nancy berns

Many bereavement scholars, grief counselors, and those grieving dismiss the idea of closure, but it continues to thrive in popular culture, politics, and marketing. Closure remains a dominant narrative about how to respond to a loss in large part because it's an effective political and marketing tool. The concept also fits our culture's quest to do things efficiently, following proscribed rules to get to a goal—in this case, an end to pain or loss. Since we are enmeshed in a consumer culture, it comes as no surprise that people turn to the marketplace to find grief rituals. Before we can consider how closure is sold, though, we must first discuss what it *is*.

Closure means many things to many people. It is a word used in diverse topics from medical procedures to computer programming, but I'm discussing a more recent use of closure that is applied to trauma and loss. Although definitions vary, the most common interpretation of closure is a satisfying end to some traumatic event. Closure, then, is presented as an end stage of grief. And, since we all experience grief at some point, it's become accepted that we must all also seek closure so that we can move on, preferably as quickly as possible.

Now a central part of narratives of loss in realms like politics, media, and advertising, closure in some ways limits our empathy, failing to capture the varied experiences of many who grieve a death or other losses. The term is tossed around whether someone is recovering from a bad divorce or the death of a pet or trying to keep going after a natural disaster, terrorist attack, or shooting in their community. It's become a new, one-sized label for explaining what we need and how to respond after trauma, even as it's widely applied in a range of disparate conversations. Closure can be identified with justice, peace, healing, acceptance, and forgiveness as easily as it can be applied in conversations about unanswered questions or even revenge. Which is to say, far from the tidy finality it implies, closure's very confusing.

So, closure is not some natural emotional state that we can simply reach. Rather, it's a constructed concept, a cultural frame (how we translate our cultural and social experiences into explanations) for how we should respond to loss. Any understanding we think we have for this slippery concept of closure comes from how others have defined it through stories, arguments, court cases, and so on. This doesn't mean that the pain from loss or the process of healing is imaginary, but that how we respond to loss is shaped by our social world.

closure's popularity

The concept of closure, as applied to trauma and loss, took off in our popular culture during the 1990s. In the preceding three decades, cultural and political events had set the stage for this popularity. For example, the crime victims' rights movement, part of the broader "victim movements" of the 1960s and '70s, was instrumental in setting up scenarios and creating language that ushered in the political use of closure. Over time, many advocates in these movements used the concept of closure to help explain why victims needed particular resources or rights. Perhaps most prominently, death penalty advocates used closure for victims' families as an argument for capital punishment. By the '90s, court decisions began to reflect—and directly reference—victims' need for closure.

The past few decades have ushered in various other movements that focus on language about healing and closure, including self-help, pop psychology, and therapeutic jurisprudence. Furthermore, the funeral industry plays a central role in popular understandings of grief because funeral home directors rely heavily on the idea of closure to sell their services. And, toward the end of the century, the concept of closure began showing up in news coverage of national tragedies, including cases such as Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing, the Columbine school shootings, and the attacks of September 11, 2001. Closure is also used in entertainment media to tell stories about crime, violence, death, and grief.

When traumatic things happen, as they inevitably do, people experience a kind of loss and they grieve over what has been lost—whether a life, relationship, home, or some other treasured part of life. In wondering what to do after such a blow, people might look to others; in many cases, they find cultural, religious, or family rituals to guide them through their grief. But if they do not have a strong religious or family tradition to follow, they may turn to other places—maybe even to a consumer culture that's ready to help provide rituals and meanings for those experiencing a loss. Using closure to sell products and political ideas, salespeople and politicians become a potential resource for individuals trying to navigate a time of confusion and pain. And if people believe that there are "proper ways" to grieve and that they "need closure," they may be more likely to accept what I consider "closure marketing." So let's take a look at how closure is used.

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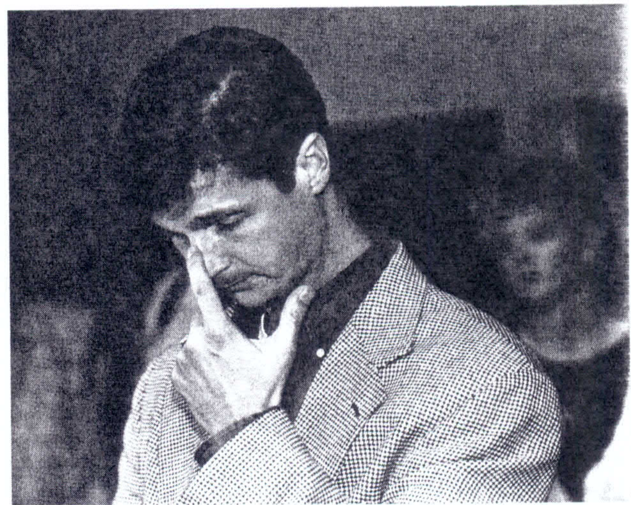

AP Photo/J. Pat Carter

Oklahoma state senator Brooks Douglass cried after witnessing the execution of his parents' killer in 1996. Douglass authored the legislation that allowed families like his to be present for executions, writing in *USA Today* that the experience provided closure. He later made a film about his parents' deaths, *Heaven's Rain* (2010), in which he starred as his late father.

Contexts, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 48-53. ISSN 1536-5042, electronic ISSN 1537-6052. © 2011 American Sociological Association.
http://contexts.sagepub.com. DOI 10.1177/1536504211427869

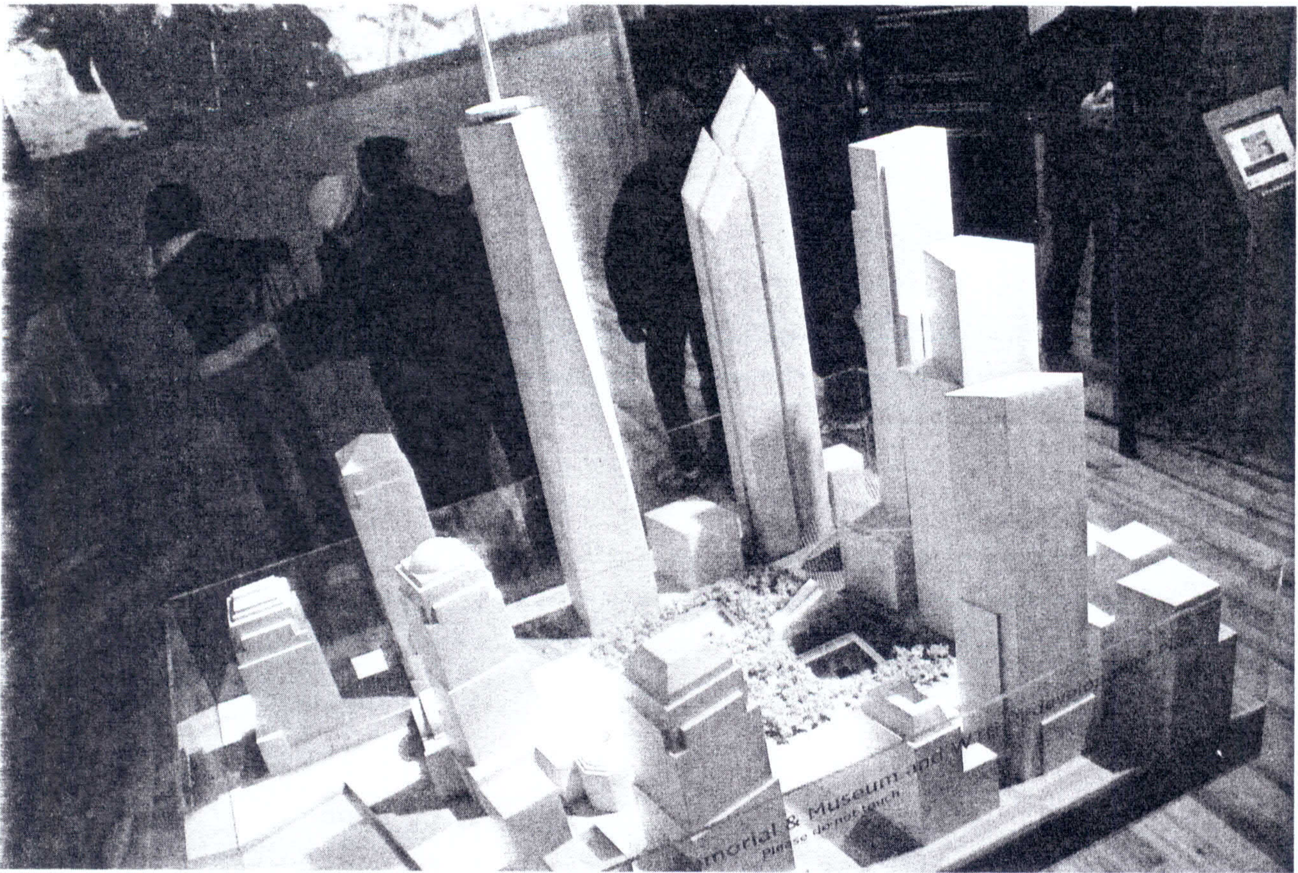

Photo by Kevin Jarrett via flickr.com

Ten years later, the Ground Zero memorial site is not yet finished and debates over its final form continue. It's perhaps too hard to plan for one site to meet the needs of so many people.

death care industry

Closure has become a neatly packaged concept used to sell services within the death care industry. In the 21st century, trends, like a rise in cremations, increasingly challenge funeral directors' profits. According to the National Funeral Directors Association, in 2009, 37 percent of deaths resulted in cremation as the choice for final disposition in the U.S., and analysts predict that portion will be 59 percent by 2025. This trend concerns funeral homes because they lose money if families choose cremation with no additional services: a typical cremation package costs $1,000-2,000, while a traditional funeral averages between $6,500 and $10,000.

Funeral home directors, then, need to convince people that at least some of their services are still needed even if cremation is the final disposition. This is where closure comes in. For example, DeVoe Funeral Services, Inc., located in New Jersey, highlights closure in their description of a funeral: "A funeral is an opportunity for relatives, friends, and neighbors to reflect upon and celebrate the life of the deceased and gain personal closure." And Kohut Funeral Home (Allentown, PA) states on their website that "viewing is part of tradition for many people who consider it part of closure."

As part of their marketing, funeral home directors sell embalming (not legally required in most cases, but funeral homes generally require it for a viewing) and a public viewing as necessary for people to reach closure. Many people may choose embalming and a viewing and benefit from those services, but this does not mean they need those services or that they will lead to closure. But the marketing by some funeral homes will tell you otherwise. Iowa's Hugeback Funeral Home characterizes cremations this way: "The best known option is 'direct' cremation. However, 'direct' emphasizes no viewing or visitation, no service, no casket or burial, and sometimes... no emotional closure for the survivors."

An increase in cremations also means more families have to decide what to do with the ashes. From aerial burial to burial at sea, a growing number of businesses have seized the opportunity to tell people how to "properly" care for a loved one's ashes in a way that provides closure. Air Legacy, a business that scatters ashes, claims succinctly: "Aerial Ash Scattering is perfect closure." Another scattering business, Everlife Memorials, says "aerial scattering offers a means of closure to families who are ready to take the final step in the grieving process."

Other death care businesses promise closure through their services or products, including memorial soil (planting soil mixed with human or pet ashes), Teddy Bear Urns (stuffed teddy bears that hold small amount of ashes), or Lifegems (diamonds made from a loved one's ashes). Pet grief is another area that has

seen tremendous growth in business opportunities regarding death. Pet grief businesses sell private cremations (as opposed to communal cremations), special pet urns, and memorialization products as ways for owners to find closure.

more businesses sell closure

There are a variety of businesses beyond the death care industry that use closure in their marketing. Many forensic pathologists sell autopsies using the concept. They claim that by acquiring additional medical information one can find closure to any questions about death or doubts about proper medical care. Pet owners are even told they can find closure by ordering a necropsy (animal autopsy) to learn why a pet died.

Wrongful death attorneys use closure to sell the idea of suing others in order to have peace. Psychics tell people they can bring closure by talking to the dead to get questions answered or to know the dead are doing well. And private investigators claim that finding out what really happened—through their services—will bring you closure. The motto of one private investigation firm in Ohio is, in fact, "Your Key to Closure."

Companies selling DNA private profile kits promise "future closure" in the event you or a loved one cannot be identified after death. These same businesses sell paternity tests in order to find closure on questions about who fathered a particular child, and infidelity detective kits claim to help you find closure by examining your mate's clothes to see if he or she is having an affair.

The emerging "divorce party" industry uses closure to sell a range of products including cakes, break-up party invitations, cards, and divorce gifts. DivorceMagazine.com calls a divorce party "the coolest concept in closure." Many businesses with break-up products adopt a theme of mock vengeance, selling items like Voodoo dolls, knife sets in the shape of an ex-partner, divorce cakes decorated with a murdered groom or bride figure, and Bury the Jerk kits and Wedding Ring Coffins to help you "bury the past." Break-up party games, such as Pin-the-Tale-on-the-Ex and Penis Piñata, are supposed to playfully help you find closure.

Clearly, using closure in marketing has its appeal. For one, selling closure is a nicer, more comfortable idea that's easier to sell than straight-forward autopsies, embalming, expensive caskets, lawsuits, divorce parties, private investigations, DNA profile kits, and so on. These are difficult services to frame and market, but the emotional appeal of closure resonates with many people. And it's not to say we should prohibit the availability of the products and services listed; it's simply deceptive and exploitive to promise closure in order to close a sale.

politics, too

Closure changes its meaning depending on the context and audience, which makes it easy to use in political arguments. The idea of closure provides a form of political shadowing: shining the light on closure and victims' pain and healing allows more politically cumbersome issues to stay in the shadows. For example, death penalty advocates claim that killing a murderer will bring closure to the families of homicide victims. They can use the more uplifting rhetoric of closure and therapy for victims in order to mask particularly difficult problems of capital punishment, such as racial and class discrimination, questions of innocence, and incompetent legal counsel.

Closure has even worked its way into legal decisions as a fundamental goal of law enforcement. The case for widening the scope of those who have to give DNA samples rests, in part, on the closure argument. Politicians say, "We need to collect DNA in order to provide closure for victims' families," and yet they rarely explain what that actually means. For several years, most states have been collecting DNA samples from anyone convicted of a felony; now states have introduced legislation that will allow the collection of DNA from anyone who is arrested (even if not convicted). The justification focuses on victims' families and shifts attention away from issues such as privacy and due process. But the claim that we should collect more and more DNA, even from those not convicted of any crime, raises considerable ethical and privacy issues. Collected samples are stored indefinitely, and most states have no policy of destroying a sample even if the person is never convicted.

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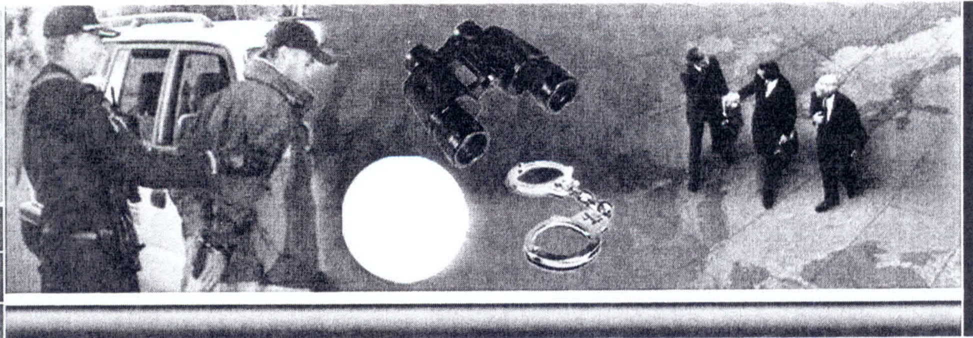
We know that victims' pain and healing are both important. But we should not lose sight of what is lurking in the shadows when closure is used as a political talking point. It may be a worthy discussion about whether to have a DNA database and whose DNA to collect. However, when the promise of closure is used to sell these political strategies, it distorts the grieving experiences of victims.

distorting our understanding of grief

Closure talk frames grief as bad and therefore something that needs to end. This rhetoric implies that closure exists and assumes it is possible, good, desired, and necessary. These assumptions (and the larger narratives that carry them) build feeling rules for how we are supposed to respond when bad things happen. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild introduced this concept of feeling rules—informal lessons we internalize about how to feel and express our feelings in specific situations—as



kellypi.com

Kelly Professional Investigations, Inc., an Ohio private investigation company, promises that their services are "your key to closure."

a way to explain the consequences narratives have on people's emotions. We attempt to manage our emotions in different situations in an effort to look and feel the way we think we are supposed to look and feel in any given context.

This means there are problems when one's experience fails to live up to the promise of closure. For example, some death penalty advocates believe that after an execution, victims' families will be relieved and have a sense of closure. They argue that the pain felt when a loved one is murdered is so great that only seeing the same suffering on the part of the offender can bring healing. However, for many victims' families, executions leave only an emotional disconnect—they do not feel the closure promised. Judy Busch of Oklahoma City witnessed the execution of the man who murdered her granddaughter. After the execution, she was upset and said, "It was so quick and so sterile and so serene. It left me feeling angry." Similar to Judy's comment, responses from families of homicide victims after viewing an execution commonly include, "It still hurts," "There is no closure," or "I'm even angrier." On a wider scale, following the death of Osama bin Laden, pundits declared that there could now be closure to 9/11. But many families of those who died in the terrorist attacks bin Laden's group perpetrated argued that his death did not bring closure because there is no such thing.

Following "feeling rules," we attempt to manage our emotions so as to look and feel the way we think we are *supposed* to look and feel.

It is not just in cases of murder where those grieving doubt that closure exists. Many people do not like the idea of closure because of what it implies. Individuals are different in how they interpret the concept, but here are some general reasons people give for dismissing closure: It is not possible because the pain never completely goes away. Closure is not good because it provides a false hope and not desirable because people do not want to forget their loved ones. And the language of closure is not necessary because there are other ways to find and describe hope and healing. Joseph Dougherty, who grieves for his brother, captures the frustration with this concept: "Closure implies finality, something ending or in completion. I challenge those of you who have lost a loved one to tell me if a single day passes when that person hasn't been in your thoughts, even if only for the briefest moment. Closure never occurs, because as long as all of us here today live, we will carry a part of this man in our hearts and our souls."

Bereavement research goes in different directions. There are scholars who say everyone's experience with grief is distinct and there's no specific timeline for grieving. Within this larger framework, there are theories for understanding grief that challenge the concept of closure, including meaning making and continuing bonds. The concept of "continuing bonds" explains that people who grieve often search for ways to stay connected with their deceased loved ones. Continuing bonds is a dominant perspective in grief research and contradicts most interpretations of closure, but reflects the accounts of many who share their experience with grief.

From a different perspective, there are scholars who try to define criteria that measure some distinction between normal and pathological grieving, which shapes expectations for the "right" and "wrong" ways to grieve. This move reflects the medicalization of grief, which refers to a perspective that views grief as a disease that needs to be cured. Medicalization has led to language and grief models that set out proper ways to grieve within expected periods of time. Even though the word closure isn't a central component in this research, the framework for the medicalization of grief trickles down into popular culture. Most people are not going to be reading research articles, so short-hand descriptions are used to explain what "normal" grief looks like. Closure is often the short description of the "normal end stage" of grief, and the research criteria established for "normal grieving" get translated to "finding closure."

But the distinction between "normal" and "pathological" grief is a construct, with researchers deciding (and not agreeing) on what belongs in the categories of right and wrong.

Even though the expectations for "normal grieving" are constructed, they have real implications. On the basis of these criteria, people who do not fit the normal expectations or timeline for grieving might find themselves labeled as pathological, abnormal, complicated, or chronic. Employers may expect bereaved workers to return to levels of normal productivity after a few days, while family and friends wonder why someone cannot find closure and move on.

the bottom line

The distorted message about grief that comes from closure marketing is this: You need closure. Salespeople and politicians have entered the business of grief counseling, but their advice is rooted in profits and politics. Expecting people to "find closure" within a particular time frame or after specific rituals does not help our understanding of grief. Selling products and politics in the name of closure exploits the emotional pain of grief, but it does not mean that closure exists or is needed.

Loss happens to us all. We grieve. Having a loved one die or facing another type of loss—whether through natural causes or a criminal act—can lead one on a long and difficult journey. You do not need to be alone in this journey, and there is a lot of hope for learning how to integrate a loss into your life. However, no one product or piece of legislation will be the answer. It is helpful for many to have social support and cultural rituals for grieving, but we are going in the wrong direction when politics and the consumer market are sold as that support.

recommended reading

Attig, Thomas. *How We Grieve: Relearning the World,* revised edition (Oxford University Press, 2011). Stories of grief help us understand how people relearn the world after loss, including issues of individuality, continuing bonds, active grieving, and meaning making.

Hochschild, Arlene. *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling* (University of California Press, 1983). Emotions are managed through surface acting and deep acting, and this has been exploited for commercial purposes in work settings.

Horwitz, Allan V. and Jerome C. Wakefield. *The Loss of Sadness: How Psychiatry Transformed Normal Sorrow Into Depressive Disorder* (Oxford University Press, 2007). Psychiatry fails to distinguish between a depressive disorder and normal sadness, contributing to faulty understandings of depression.

Illouz, Eva. *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and The Culture of Self-Help* (University of California Press, 2008). The language of psychology penetrates all aspects of American culture and complicates identity, emotional life, and healing.

Sturken, Marita. *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Duke University Press, 2007). Americans respond to national traumas through consumerism and tourist rituals, focusing on the emotions of loss without attention to critical frames of social and political issues.

Nancy Berns is a sociologist in the culture and society department at Drake University. She is the author of *Closure: The Rush to End Grief and What It Costs Us.*

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