

Bali: a wound we must probe

ANNIVERSARIES are very important. We know this instinctively.

Each commemoration, each ritual, whether held in Bali, Canberra or other Australian capital cities in the coming week will bear witness to this.

At time zero, when disaster strikes, we have a need to see the body of our loved ones.

All our senses tell us that the beloved person is really gone.

This carves an unbridgeable gulf between the dead, and those of us still alive.

This unassailable knowledge also helps us to grieve.

And so does the support of those who love us and whom we love still.

They give strength and hope that will help in the struggle for a meaningful future.

Our need to be as close as possible to the dead at anniversaries such as this Sunday's Bali commemoration echoes the need to be as close as possible to the body after death.

It is important to uncover our wounds again and let them weep.

One bereaved relative said, "I want to go to Bali, and perhaps a really good cry will allow me to move on".

Our need for anniversaries expresses something else as well.

Paul Valent

Like seasons that recur, and years that pass, anniversaries bring together the two ways we measure events in time.

On the one hand events recur cyclically, on the other hand they move forward.

At anniversaries we look back, realise that events have not recurred, but that time has moved on.

We have survived, and we keep on surviving.

This helps us to differentiate past, present and future.

We are then willing to transfer emotional investments, especially love, from the past to the future.

This process is neither smooth nor uniform, though there is a tendency to want others to conform to one's own pace. "It is time to move on," survivors are told.

But then, they may be admonished for seemingly moving on as if nothing has happened.

These contradictory judgments confront many Bali survivors and their families, according to Chris Hill, a psychologist who counsels them.

"People deal with things differently," she said. "One should ask where people are at and support them, rather than impose judgments on them of where they should be."

Consultant psychologist to the State Bali Recovery Plan, Rob Gordon, agrees and adds: "Remember that the bereaved, survivors who did not lose anyone, rescuers, and the general community, have had quite different experiences to deal with."

Each would process their special circumstances, and at different speeds.

Though we must allow individual latitude in the grieving process, people are relatively vulnerable at anniversary times because their minds are engrossed in their worlds.

FOR instance, they may forget to take their medications or have accidents.

Extra care must be taken therefore while driving, and avoiding accidents at home.

Sometimes grief is blocked.

It can feel too much to grieve when too many horrific deaths occurred or when old and subsequent hurts build up.

As well, crying can be seen as a weakness.

Then there is the fear that we will cry forever.

One is caught between a drought and fear of a flood.

But tears of grief are like springs from the past that irrigate the future.

When grief is covered up permanently, wounds do not weep but fester.

Fear, hurt, guilt, anger, revenge, grievance and lost innocence, are entombed in their original state subject to cyclical, not progressive, time.

People then suffer so-called anniversary phenomena.

Anniversary phenomena include severe accidents, physical illnesses, depressions and anxieties.

They occur particularly at anniversaries commemorating loss.

Other danger times occur when surviving family members reach the age their older siblings or parents died or contracted a terminal illness.

These symptoms are often the same as, or resemble the deceased person's symptoms.

Allowing our hearts to express themselves truly at this anniversary is one way we can come to terms, at least to a degree, with a world that is not always kind.

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