

Turning mourning into voyeurism

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September 12, 2011

I'm sure it will end today when the news media go back to reporting on the most urgent question of our time — which GOP candidate will win the Tea Party debate on Monday night? — but this past weekend's coverage of the tenth anniversary of 9/11 was relentless. (I know I could just turn off the TV but when you write a blog on religion, culture, and politics, you gotta do the research).

The packaging of the 9/11 narrative, with its stunning visuals, has been masterful these last ten years — compelling, emotional, inspiring. And ratings gold.

But it strikes me that grieving-through-media does not serve us well, individually or collectively.

First, there's the fact that we have so much video footage of that terrible September day. Year after year we see the planes crash into the towers; we watch replays of the *Today* show's morning coverage, knowing what Tom Brokaw and Matt Lauer don't yet know.

What if we had video of Antietam or Gettysburg and watched it on an endless loop? How would this be helpful?

And then there's the nagging sense that grief-by-television is really voyeurism. It feels like we're peeping in on the suffering of others, crashing the wakes of strangers, participating in the exploitation of private pain and loss.

I'm reminded of why it is that some religious traditions have strictly prescribed periods of mourning. Which isn't to say that, with robot-like control, it's possible to ever really “get over” the death of a loved one. But Jews, for instance, *do* certain things (and don't do certain things) as a way to process grief — and then they stop.

Of course, they remember their loved one and they relive, at times, the pain of their loss. But they don't intentionally recall it over and over and over. They don't wallow in it. They don't fetishize the feeling.

Watching 9/11 coverage on CNN in our living rooms by ourselves is not really grieving, and it provides no opportunity for our mourning to be turned into joy (Psalm 30:11), which is the hope of those who believe. Instead, it borders on self-indulgence and makes of us, the living, not comforters or bringers of hope but useless voyeurs.

Originally posted at [Intersections](#).