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Amish Grief and the Rest of Us

Steven M. Nolt

Do the Amish grieve?

That was the question stunned observers asked in the wake of the appalling October 2, 2006 Pennsylvania Amish schoolhouse shooting. The horror of that day – five girls killed execution-style in a tranquil school by a local milk truck driver, and five more wounded – mixed with shock at the news that victims' families had offered words of forgiveness, quickly raised concern about the emotional response of the Amish community.

Perhaps because the Amish refused media interviews, they appeared silent, even stoic in the face of evil. Did they feel no emotion? Were they dangerously denying grief as they offered forgiveness to their children's killer?

Despite what some outsiders may have thought, Amish parents grieved their children's deaths as deeply as non-Amish parents do.

Yet their grief had a particularly Amish flavor. Like many aspects of Amish life, their public grieving was restrained. The funerals were solemn, but hardly emotionless. Those who gathered cried freely, if quietly. Some later said they cried every day for weeks afterward. One Amish woman, knowing the depth of her pain and that of her friends, wondered if Amish people grieve more intensely than non-Amish people. After all, she said, they "can just turn up the radio and try to forget it."

It would be difficult to establish that Amish grieve *more* than other people. They do, however, employ rituals of mourning and allow more structure for grief than do most Americans. Grieving Amish families are rarely alone, typically receiving visitors daily for two or three weeks, followed by a year's worth of Sunday visits. As well, mourning women dress in black when they are in public or social gatherings, which reminds others in the community of the death so they can respond appropriately to the bereaved.

Occasionally, Amish experiencing loss find additional help outside their tradition through grief support centers in their communities. Nonetheless, a father who lost a daughter at Nickel Mines spoke for others when he said, "The best counseling happened when we parents got together and talked. That's where we got our most support."

But the Amish not only expressed grief in particular ways. Their understanding of grief is also distinctive.

All people seem to respond to tragedy with some mix of heartache and anger, but different cultures manage that mix in different ways. Societies, like our own, that accent individual choice tend to sanction much more anger as part of grieving. We assume that events are the result of decisions, so if something goes wrong someone must have been at fault and should pay the consequences. Such cultures see the world through the lens of personal responsibility, but also assume that the retributive desire to “get even” is natural.

In contrast, collectivist cultures, like the Amish, which view many aspects of life as interconnected or divinely ordered, tend to respond differently to calamity. They don’t assume that they can completely control life, nor is their impulse to assign individual blame for every disaster.

The Amish response to the awful events a year ago was instinctively to grieve deeply the deaths without needing first to focus anger on the killer. In fact, Amish expressions of anger centered on the tragedy itself rather than on the gunman. As one Amish woman explained after attending the viewing for the youngest victim: “It really made me angry. I wasn’t angry at [the gunman]; I was mad that she was dead, just mad at the evil.” Several months after the shooting a father of one of the slain girls reflected: “It’s been a very, very hard experience, but I don’t hold any hard feelings against anyone, not against the killer or anybody in his family.”

Profound grief without vengeful anger was an authentic part of the Amish response to the school shooting and paved the way for the community’s expressions of forgiveness.

What might those of us who admittedly live in a more individualist-oriented ethos learn from Amish grief? Our cultural biases have often led us to assume that we have innate needs in the face of violence and injustice, particularly the need to get even.

But perhaps our real human need is to find ways to move beyond tragedy with a sense of meaning and hope.

One thing we learn from the Amish is that the way we choose to move on from tragic injustice is culturally formed. For the Amish, the preferred way is to offer forgiveness – and offer it quickly. That offer, including the willingness to forgo vengeance, does not undo the tragedy or pardon the wrong. But it does constitute a first step toward a future that is more hopeful, and potentially less violent – a future that Amish grief, which runs counter to so much in our choice-soaked and blame-driven society, quietly invites us to consider.

Steven M. Nolt is a professor of history at Goshen College, a Mennonite liberal arts college in northern Indiana. He is coauthor of the new book Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy (Jossey-Bass).