“No, You don’t Need ‘Closure’”

As a cancer doctor, I see death — and see how the loss of a loved one is a part of each person’s life forever.

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There are few among us who have not experienced the loss of a friend or loved one. Often it comes without warning, in an accident or, as we’ve seen all too often recently, an act of terrorism. The experience of loss after a lingering illness like cancer, though more expected, is just as deeply felt. As time passes, we often hear how important it is to gain closure—a way of tidying up to help us move on with our own lives.

The reality is that closure is a myth. My personal and professional experience with those who have lost friends and family, including children, has taught me that going on with life is not the same as gaining closure. The wound of loss is a part of each person’s life forever. We continue to think about those dear to us, though perhaps not every day or with the same intensity. Recollection is sometimes provoked by a date on the calendar or, less predictably, by a sight, sound, aroma, melody or place that evokes the missing person.

These personal moments, seemingly forever paused in time, can cause us to feel alone, especially during sentiment-filled holidays. The danger of the idea of closure is that it heightens this aloneness, by giving us a false expectation that these experiences should and will at some point end. They won’t.

No matter how much time has passed, memories remain. To deny them is to deny precious moments of love, fellowship, gratitude and inspiration. Grieving changes the experience of loss, but does not eliminate it, and is not intended to do so. To close the memory does not sustain the healing or help in proceeding with life. Such echoes from the past are voices in the present and are sometimes warmly felt.

As humans we all yearn to remember. Nearly every culture has its way of preserving the past. We build memorials to perpetuate collective memory, whether it is the Vietnam Memorial or Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., the field of empty chairs in Oklahoma City, or the 9/11 Memorial in New York.

Cemeteries offer a communal “safe space” where grief is openly welcomed and expected, forever. Visitation rights to a plot do not suddenly expire six months after a burial, a time that some in the medical community suggest is the “normal” grieving period. In the Jewish tradition, the acknowledgment of the annual yahrzeit, the anniversary of the death of a family member, is always done in the presence of others, provoking a collective memory of the person.

These occasions—sometimes formal, but more often spontaneous—are not about closure. Rather they are about the fullness in each of our lives that came from our family, loved ones and friends, as well as others who were touched by that person’s presence.

In my work as a cancer physician, I often write to the family of a loved one who was under our care, months after the death. It is a time when most of the people who helped support them through the days and weeks immediately after have gone back to the busyness of their own lives. The bereaved are left alone with their own feelings and thoughts. The letters are a chance to remain connected, but also a way to convey that their loved one is an important memory for us, too. These words of acknowledgment are always welcome, reassuring those whose lives have become interwoven with ours that their loved ones are alive within us, as they are in their own families.

A few months ago, I ran into a woman who many years ago had, at a very young age and early in her marriage, lost her husband to cancer. Since then she had moved away, met another man whom she adored, married him and had a family. Together they raised their children. She had built a successful career. Seemingly she had found closure from the tragedy of her early life. As we finished talking and she began to walk away, she turned around, and with eyes full, said: “I think of him almost every day.”

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