

“CLOSURE”

Robert Fulford's column about the word "closure" (The National Post,

November 10, 2001)

On Thursday, the Chicago Housing Authority agreed to pay US\$2.1-million to the family of a five-year-old boy who had been dropped to his death from a vacant apartment by two older boys. According to the Associated Press, the authority's spokesman said he hoped this would provide some "closure" for the family of the murdered child.

Every era brings popular words that no one quite understands, or -- worse -- everyone understands differently. Closure has been such a word for 10 or 15 years. It describes something that is highly desirable but also quite vague. Those in emotional pain are said to need it, and many hope to achieve it if they can figure out what it is and how to get it. Some people apparently think that just mentioning it is consoling, as if the word itself had magic properties. At the very least, discussing it demonstrates that someone's distress is being taken seriously.

Around 1910, the Gestalt school of therapy in Germany brought the term closure into psychology to describe the way scattered and troubling feelings can resolve themselves in coherent and stable mental patterns. Today, it means much more -- coming to terms emotionally with tragedy, or rapidly ending the misery caused by grievous loss.

People recovering from love affairs also sometimes yearn for closure -- and some find it on the Internet. One place to go is www.geocities.com/Athens/Cyprus/3199/, where the first page says "Get Closure! Store your emotional baggage with us!" You write an account of your broken relationship, explain what you learned from it, and include a final message for your former beloved. The message will be delivered to his or her e-mail address, with musical accompaniment chosen by the sender from a list that includes I Am a Rock and I Can See Clearly Now.

To provide vicarious succour for others, the contributor's story appears anonymously on the site. Currently, one closure-seeker explains what her heartbreaking relationship taught her ("Never trust a man") and sends a hate-mail to her ex: "I hope you never have a moment's peace. I hope you'll call and want to get back together again and I'll have the guts to tell you to..." The sound track plays You'll Never Find Another Love Like Mine.

To the Chicago Housing Authority, closure means something like comfort. To the woman quoted, it means something like revenge. Its many meanings now fill the air around us. I didn't realize how omnipresent it had become till the other night, when I heard the chairman of a public meeting say that after the question period, "we will be looking for closure around 9:30." He had heard it so often he was using it to mean simply "end."

In Canada closure as a parliamentary term had its burst of national fame in the mid-1950s. The Liberal government was pushing through a bill to create a natural gas pipeline from Alberta to central Canada. Because the opposition was determined to resist as long as possible, the Liberals cut off debate by invoking the legal but unusual tactic of closure. This was considered, in all but Liberal circles, dictatorial. A *Globe and Mail* cartoon showed a guillotine attached to the Peace Tower, descending on the House to decapitate democracy.

That was a different kind of closure, but not entirely different. C.D. Howe, the Cabinet minister responsible, wanted the pipeline bill passed by the end of that Parliamentary session. In phrases that

weren't yet popular, he wanted to "get over it" and "move on." The voters moved on, too: The fury aroused by closure helped defeat the Liberals in the 1957 election.

In the 1990s, closure became part of American legal discourse, most notably in the case of Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber. When he was convicted, a Texas paper ran a headline, "Verdict brings sense of closure for families." That easy assumption has always struck me as nonsense. Everyone wants a mass murderer caught, especially the relatives of those murdered, but the idea that a conviction will restore the spirits of the afflicted is dubious. "Closure" was the reason for allowing hundreds of survivors to watch McVeigh put to death. Attorney-General John Ashcroft said it would help those who had lost relatives to "close this chapter in their lives." Perhaps, or perhaps it rendered the experience, in long-term memory, even more hideous.

Those who think we can manage our feelings about tragedy are usually deceiving themselves. The idea seems to be based on a belief that we can sort our feelings into separate chapters that won't leak into each other. Nothing in human experience supports that notion. Consciously seeking "closure" is a way of trying to shorten the length of time it normally takes to soften the edges of grief. Everyone can sympathize with this desire without believing that the techniques clustered around the term closure will help.

In 1930, the young Morley Callaghan wrote a novel, *It's Never Over*, about a man who is being hanged for murder and the way that event reaches endlessly into the lives of people connected with him. A woman who lost a relative in Oklahoma City gave a reporter a response that made good sense to me. "There is no such thing as closure for people who lost family in the bombing," she said. "The only closure is when they close the lid on my casket."

CLOSURE: IS IT A REALITY? by Carole Dyck, R.N.

From *We Need Not Walk Alone*, Summer 2003

The use of the word "closure" is often heard in public circles or in the media especially after a tragedy and implies finality. The word comes with the sense that there will be a time, day, or event like a funeral that marks when a grieving person will be "healed" or "over it," as though it were a disease and you could magically take a pill to be cured. There is an expectation that when the eulogies are said and the casseroles are gone, the grief somehow magically goes away. The truth is that those of us who are in TCF [[*The Compassionate Friends, Inc.*](#)] realize that the death of a child or sibling changes our lives forever, and we will never truly "be over it." Yes, we will not have the intensity of the pain and sorrow we had at the beginning of our grief. We will go on with life and find a new normal for us, but life will never be as it was before the death, and we will never be fully "healed." Sometimes those around us have attempted to comfort us by pointing to deadlines, replacements, or "at leasts." We have heard it said, "At least you have other kids," or "You can have another baby," or "Hasn't it been 6 months?" Many see "comfort giving" as a short-term support effort, and soon we will be "over it" as we are kept busy returning to the tasks of daily living and focusing on our blessings. These comments hurt rather than provide the comfort they are meant to provide. Grief follows no plan, no stages, timetable, formula, or schedule. There are no road maps; there are no absolutes.

We learn in TCF that everyone grieves differently. Grief is like being lost. The familiar things we relied on to live each day are gone. We must find new anchors or stabilizers along the way and learn a new way of relating to the world and people around us. We are forced to learn to live without our child or

sibling. The reality of our loss often far outweighs what we have remaining. Grief is all consuming, distorts reality, and we begin to mark time in “before or after our loved one died.” No one can hurry the process of grief; no one can do it for us. Not even our spouses, parents, or other children can help us in those early days. The truth is that when our grief is new, we feel exhausted physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We barely have enough energy to breathe. We feel as though we have no control over our lives anymore, nor do we care. We realize on some level we are helpless. We might even feel hopeless or purposeless. Some of us feel isolated, lonely, and misunderstood. Some feel like everything is trivia compared to the loss we have experienced. Some feel as if the world is spinning on around us, and nobody really cares that our child, sibling, or grandchild died. All of these feelings are normal and part of the grieving process. And yes, we also need to realize it is a process—a very long, gradual, and difficult process. Time does not heal all wounds, but time softens the intensity of the grief. What helps is finding those who will listen with their hearts and give us hope and understanding. Those who will spend hours, days, and months with us as we tell our story over and over so we can somehow believe it ourselves. What helps is to surround ourselves with those patient people and meaningful activities that comfort and support.

Gradually, the cold darkness of grief begins to give way to the warmth of the memories, acceptance, purpose, and reinvestment in life. We learn to speak of our loved one without crying, and we begin to accept that whatever time we had with him or her, we would have taken even if just but a moment. We learn that grief is the price we pay for loving our child or sibling so much, and we wouldn’t want it any other way. Our relationships with family, friends, and yes, even God can be strengthened or challenged as we look for new ways to connect with them. We may lose old friends who don’t really understand. We learn that problems in life are not overwhelming. We are handling the worst thing that can happen to us; what else can happen? We learn to more deeply cherish those we love. We help others in grief without batting an eye. Sometimes we pick up “gifts” along the way by becoming more caring, compassionate toward others, and appreciative for what is important in life. New strengths can develop as we find our new selves along the way. Life will be different as we learn to cope, but still have meaning.

For those of you who are new in your loss, we hope that you will continue to share your sorrow with us and learn from those further ahead on the path of grief. Someday it won’t hurt as much as it does now, and you won’t always feel “this elephant on your chest.” We encourage you to ask the family and friends around you for what you need and tell them when their expectations for you are too high. We hope you will explain to them that your grief is not on a timetable and will probably not ever reach what society calls “closure.” Explain to them that you will always miss your child or sibling, but you will learn to live with a broken heart. We hope you will inform them that the mention of your child’s name is music to your ears and it’s okay to talk about him or her. Your TCF friends will be with you and hold your hand every step of the way.

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