

# Mourning the death of a public figure

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Wednesday, Aug. 30, 2017, Prince William, left, and Prince Harry place flowers among the other tributes to their late mother outside Kensington Palace, London, on the eve of the 20th anniversary of her death. The princes have made mental illness one of the causes. (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth) (Kirsty Wigglesworth, AP)

***By Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan, Springhill Avenue Temple, Mobile***

When someone close to us dies, we naturally feel bereft, saddened in a fundamental way that goes beyond words. Our grief may take many forms, and even if we do all of the right things to express our emotions, it may last a very long time.

When a public figure passes away, particularly when it's sudden and unexpected, it can produce in us many of the same responses that we feel when we lose someone in our own immediate family. Whether it was someone we saw frequently on TV or perhaps someone we heard from the pulpit weekly, or even someone we only saw in

the theater or a concert hall every couple of years, the impact can still be dramatic and deeply upsetting.

The death of a public figure can provide us with an opportunity to not only remember the individual who had such an impact on our lives, but to help us as a community - whatever constitutes that particular community - to understand what our deepest values are and how we can pay homage to them. Researchers have found that there is a certain time frame following a the death in which the community as a whole are particularly open to examining the relationship they had with this public figure and what that might tell them about what is really important in life.

I was too young to remember the assassination of John F. Kennedy, but his passing was a constant presence in not only my childhood but also that of my entire peer group. There is the tendency to idealize public figures, such as President Kennedy, who are cut down in their prime, leaving all of the challenges that they faced open and unresolved. We can't help but believing that if such people had lived, they would have surmounted all of the obstacles they faced and found ways to, if not create a perfect world, at least make it much better. There's a visceral sense that if Kennedy had lived, there would not have been a Vietnam War, and many of the worst aspects of what happened in the 1960's and 70's might have been avoided.

For others, it was the death of Diana, the princess of Wales, that had the most impact on their lives. Here again there was a sudden, tragic death; in this case in the Pont De l'Alma road tunnel in Paris. Princess Diana was a very different kind of public figure than President Kennedy. She had been plucked out of obscurity by virtue of her marriage to Prince Charles, heir apparent to the throne. But there was something in her personality and her emotional reaction to events, both within the palace and in society as a whole, that made many of us feel that she was our friend, our confidant, someone we could relate to.

But the public figures who have the greatest impact on us, and whose deaths therefore have the most potential to move us, are people who are not famous but rather our local leaders. It may be the coach of the little league team, a beloved teacher, a small town mayor, or a youth pastor. I have a friend here in Mobile, Alabama, whose parent was a beloved obstetrician. He delivered everyone's babies, and became part of their family as a result. When the civil rights movement began to gain momentum, he was one of the first local white people to embrace the goals of an equitable society and to devote his civic activities towards that goal. These local leaders are still not necessarily our personal friends, but we do know them, we've seen them, we've shaken their hands, and most of all we've seen firsthand the impact they've had on the people around us, and especially the people we love.

It's sad that sometimes we only realize how much a person has done for a community when they are no longer alive. As a rabbi, I have officiated at my share of funerals, and it's not unusual for someone to remark that the funeral was so nice that it was a shame that the person we were remembering couldn't be there to enjoy it. Of course in a metaphysical manner they are there, but it would still be nice to have them there in the flesh, smiling and acknowledging all of the accolades. The greater point, however, is that the acknowledgement of what these public figures mean to us and have meant to us can help us to ask the broader questions in life. What did that person do that was so important? What might their legacy be? How can we continue their work? And perhaps most importantly, why was their work so significant?

We dread the day when we lose the people who shape our lives and give meaning to our existence. Yet death is one of the few certainties in life, and so we accept that such days may and will occur. But it's not all doom and gloom. We can take advantage of the tragedy and the loss to do some serious and sustained thinking about what makes life meaningful and what we need to do to make the world a better place.