

The Port Arthur anniversary services: post-disaster rituals and symbols

The excellent article: 'In Remembrance: Post Disaster Rituals and Symbols', by Anne Eyre (1999) provides a valuable framework to reflect on some of the immediate responses to the Port Arthur massacre in 1996. And more specifically, on which to evaluate the Port Arthur Anniversary Church Services held in Melbourne in 1997 and 1998, and why one was not held in 1999.

The value of symbols and ritual has been explored by many authors and in many disciplines.

Indeed the sociological perspective Symbolic Interactionism, first developed from the work of a school of American philosophers is concerned with the 'inner or phenomenological aspects of human behaviour'. A study which provides another perspective on this topic.

Herbert Blumer (1962) suggests that Symbolic Interactionism rests on three basic premises:

- that human beings act on the basis of meanings that they give to objects and events, rather than simply reacting to external stimuli such as social forces or internal stimuli such as organic drives.
- those meanings arise from the process of interaction rather than simply being present at the outset and shaping future action
- that meanings are the result of interpretive procedures employed by people within interaction contexts

Mead (1934) sums up the Interactionist perspective, 'without symbols there would be no human interaction. Social life can only proceed if the meanings attributed to the symbols are largely shared by members of the society'.

A symbol then, is a sign that points to itself and away from itself. A symbol does not simply stand for an object or an event, it defines them in a particular way and indicates a response to them.

As Eyre (1999) points out :
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psychological, social and political issues associated with these aspects of the immediate post impact and longer term rehabilitative stages of disaster.'

This paper examines, from a sociological Symbolic Interactionist perspective, and, I may add, with hindsight, some of the events that occurred after the shootings at Port Arthur. The paper also covers an evaluation of the first two anniversary services in Melbourne, using as a framework, the paper by Anne Eyre 'In Remembrance: Post disaster Rituals and Symbols'.

Port Arthur Sunday 28th April 1996

Port Arthur is a historical site and a former penal colony in Tasmania, Australia, On Sunday 28th April, 1996, a lone gunman shot and killed 35 men, women and children and seriously wounded a further 29 people. For many other people the legacy of that terrible day still continues.

*I can but keep surviving to enshrine their spirit in the world
The incredible unconditional love, the warmth and freedom, the dance,
The spontaneity, cuddling and kissing, they are no longer there. I will however, proudly endeavour to keep their spirit alive throughout my life.
My love for them will never die and never be taken.*

(Walter Mikacs, whose wife and two children were among those killed.)

Shock and horror occurred all over Australia when news of the killings and the number of victims became known.

The news of the shootings was bad enough but the fact that the mass slaying had occurred in Australia, which had been relatively sheltered from this kind of event, added to the dismay and sense of unbelief.

'The greatest massacre in Australian history' screamed one national newspaper, conveniently forgetting the history of Port Arthur as a penal colony and the exter-

mination of the aboriginal people in Tasmania. Still it made good copy.

Expressions of, support, anguish and vexation poured into Port Arthur and Tasmania, not only from within Australia but from all over the world. As had happened at Bradford, Hillsborough, Dunblane and Aberfan, tributes of flowers soon formed a tapestry of colour around the Broad Arrow café where the first shootings occurred.

A message of condolence from the 'people of Dunblane' was the first of many that would be sent to the grieving and bewildered people of Port Arthur struggling to come to terms with what had happened as a result of the shootings by one of their own community.

One of the early areas of conflict was the length of time that police detained people at the site. The shootings encompassed a wide area so that the crime scene was extensive. People could not understand the delay in allowing them to move away from the death site.

The growing presence of media representatives became so pressing that arrangements were made to bus them around the site and give them sufficient access to sites appropriate to obtain information and film.

As an unbelieving nation came to grips with what had happened, all over Australia churches opened their doors encouraging people to pray for those affected by the tragedy. In many churches, halls and memorial sites people gathered and candles were lit.

Ecumenical services were held all over Australia, and in Canberra senior politicians of both major parties offered their prayers and condolences to those affected by the events of that day. Counsellors offering their services staffed many churches.

Services were quickly arranged for the Port Arthur community and in Hobart an Ecumenical Service was planned and held at the St David's Anglican Cathedral.

While not evident at the time, the first of many conflicts were already beginning to surface. For example, some of the people of Port Arthur who travelled to Hobart for the service subsequently complained that the service was for the

politicians, dignitaries and Heads of Churches rather than for those specifically affected by the shootings. Later the complaint was that the focus was on the site and not the people.

On July 15, over 700 people attended a cleansing ceremony at the Port Arthur historic site. The ceremonies involved members of Tasmania's Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim communities as well as Christian. Given the multicultural nature of the Australian population sometimes the needs of faiths other than Christian are forgotten.

In time a memorial cross and plaque were erected with the promise of a more permanent memorial. However as was the case with a number of the planned memorials as listed by Anne Ayre, the very thing that could have led to a unifying of the Port Arthur community contributed to an extended controversy.

The crux of the problem was what to do with the Broad Arrow cafe, the scene of the shootings. A strange dichotomy arose. Many in the community wanted it to be razed to the ground. But many of those who actually lost loved ones in the cafe felt a sense of attachment and wanted it retained.

It was not until January 1999, three years later, that the problem was resolved when agreement was reached that the plan for a permanent memorial would include the remaining walls of the Broad arrow cafe, a fountain and reflection pool.

The memorial will not dominate the historic site, but its importance cannot be underestimated. It's part of history whether we like it or not. Areas have to be set aside for people to reflect, to be on their own and to contemplate what happened. The memorial cross, erected after the shootings, will remain.

Conflict resolution

Eyre points out in her paper, *'In recognition of various forms of giving, or convergence in the aftermath of disaster, much has been learned and applied, especially with regard to careful planning and distribution of disaster funds'*. In the case of the Post Arthur experience conflict still exists over the distribution of the \$3.6 million appeal money.

A committee was established to distribute the money working to a formula described by the Tasman Council Mayor as a levelling-out formula. Those getting workers compensation were not to get anything under the Criminal Compensation Act. Glen Martin, whose parents were killed at the Seascope boarding house, said 'I don't believe that the right

victims got the money...those who are having psychiatric treatment got the money but people who are trying to get on with their lives are missing out'.

Initially the people of Port Arthur turned inward, reaching out to each other. Such was the intensity of this process of bonding and fusion that it couldn't last. Friendships became strained, personal relationships began to disintegrate, couples broke up and marriages broke down. The distribution of Appeal money and the selection of people for bravery awards aided this process of disintegration.

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Rifts began to appear in other areas as well, between the Port Arthur Historic Site, the main employer on the peninsula and the mainstay of the local economy, and the local community

The turn over of staff in a normal year would rarely reach more than 10% of the workforce. In the immediate aftermath of April 28 1996, the figure stood at 80%.

Criticisms began to surface. Talk of a conspiracy began to be heard. 'There is a cover-up going on to protect the Tasmanian Tourist Industry'.

The desire of some visitors to concentrate on the shootings rather than on the historic site as a whole, became an issue and led to the erection of a sign at the toll booth, itself the site of seven shootings:

The Port Arthur Shootings April 28, 1996

This event has touched us all and causes us much pain
Written information is available from the staff

However, we ask you not to discuss the incident with us.

This, then was part of the background to the first anniversary event held in Melbourne, Victoria on April 28 1997.

First anniversary

Out of the 35 people killed, 12 resided in Victoria and many more Victorians were among the seriously wounded. Since that day in 1996 a strong survivors' support group has been established with some people coming from inter-state which indicates its continuing value in meeting the needs of the members.

Had the survivors' group been more visible in 1997, and the Victorian Council of Churches planning group more aware of the importance of including the survivors in the planning of the service, the service would not have ended up in being mainly clergy directed and planned.

Not that having members of the survivors' group involved would have necessarily eliminated disagreements within the group itself over content and process as was evident in the planning for the 1998 anniversary.

Representatives of the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Uniting churches formed the major part of the worship planning committee. The Assistant Manager of the State Human Services Disaster Recovery Unit, a Human Services Deputy Recovery Manager, the consultant psychologist to the Victorian Dept. of Human Services, all of whom had been deeply involved in the initial response to the actual shootings, and two survivors also had input to the planning of the service.

The first discussion was controversial. The clergy agreed that the theme should be the keystone of the Christian faith, that of forgiveness and reconciliation. But were they expecting too much? Were the survivors ready and willing to forgive, was the concern.

The consultant psychologist believed that the survivors needed to face the issue of forgiveness if they were not to continue to live strengthened only by the need to hate. To do so he said, 'continued their suffering as victims.'

That was all very well, but where were the survivors in the journeying?

During the past year there had been many articles and interviews on the subject of grief and significant loss. 'Lives torn apart by evil insanity', 'Time to talk'. 'The living dead, coming to terms with tragedy'. To what extent had they understood, far less accepted?

However, the decision was made to go with the theme of 'Forgiveness and Renewal', and for the service to be held in a central, downtown, bluestone, century old Church which gave an atmosphere of timeless solidarity and security. To involve representatives of many denominations and other faiths, a procession of Heads of

Churches and other clergy and leaders marked the opening. Survivors took part in the service (not a significant part but a part), and a liturgy appropriate for the occasion was agreed upon.

No specific invitation was made to the Government or their representatives, though some did come in response to the public invitation.

At a similar Memorial Service in the old convict church at Port Arthur, fallen oak leaves symbolising change were the focus of the first memorial service. Over the past year visitors to the site had donated 2000 daffodil bulbs to go towards a mass planting in a special garden location. To link the service in Melbourne with Port Arthur, daffodil bulbs were to be given out to all who attended, with a request that they plant them in their own gardens. It was interesting to hear in the aftermath of the second anniversary service in 1998, people asking each other as to how well their daffodil bulbs had grown.

There was also a desire to let people know that there were still those who could be contacted if anyone felt the need for counselling. What was not wanted was an announcement to that effect during the service or the inclusion of names in the order of service.

What happened was that the bulbs were placed into a small plastic bag, bound with a ribbon and with a small card attached which read on one side, 'a symbol of love and hope' and on the other a list of contact names of counsellors. A small child and a survivor carried the bulbs in a basket into the church and placed them in the centre of a circle of burning candles to symbolise the defeat of darkness.

Arrangements were also made with the media to make a space in the church for one camera, the film to be shared among the stations, access to survivors who were willing to be interviewed in exchange for no media presence in the adjoining hall where lunch was to be served. There was a need after the service to ensure privacy and emotional security for the survivors, family and friends and, if required, counselling. The media kept the arrangement.

A lesson learnt was that the media, who needed to get their stories, were not insensitive to the needs of the survivors and their families and, if given the opportunity, were willing to help.

White doves were released as the congregation came out of the church, again a symbol of peace.

The major question over which there was great discussion and some disagree-

ment, was whether there would be a prayer for the perpetrator. In the end the answer was in the affirmative, although that was at the insistence of the clergy.

If the theme of the service was to be forgiveness and renewal they argued such a prayer had to be included.

After short prayers 'For those who have died', 'For those who mourn', 'For those who survived' with a brief silence between each with background music played on a harp, (there was a concern that complete silence may be too difficult for some of the congregation to cope with).

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Then came this prayer:

'For the perpetrator of this tragedy: Eternal God, for his cross of shame Your son forgave those who conspired and put him to death. Give us the strength, and help us through your grace, To move beyond vengeance towards him who perpetrated this horror To forgiveness and pity in the circumstances which led to such a crime. In his anguish, may he know remorse and your forgiveness. May the offering in prayer of our forgiveness be the beginning of our own peace. These things we ask in the name of our murdered, risen and victorious Saviour, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen'

The clergy didn't have to wait long for a reaction. As soon as the people were in

the hall some of the survivors angrily asked 'how we could have possibly thought that they could pray for that Bastard'.

We had failed; it was too soon, too much to expect, we were naive to say the least.

Some months later at one of the gatherings of the survivors, one of the most vocal persons in her denouncement of the prayer came up and apologised for her reaction after the service. 'You know', she said, 'we were so angry with you for asking us to pray for the perpetrator that all we could do afterwards was to share our anger, hatred, disgust and rage at you, the event and our pain. And you know, when some of us met some time afterwards we discovered that for all of us it was the first time we had really vented our feelings and we felt all the better for it. Is that' she asked, 'the beginning of forgiveness?'

Second anniversary

When the Victorian council of Churches was asked to organise the second Anniversary service in 1998 there was some doubt as to whether such a service hindered, rather than helped, the survivors to get on with life and to put Port Arthur behind them. That was certainly the view of a psychologist.

However, the gatherings and picnics were not only continuing, numbers were growing with new members from other states.

It would seem on that evidence that there was still a need, so a service was arranged, but this time with major input and participation by the survivors and fewer clergy.

The theme agreed to was 'Remembering our Journey' and the location was the Lutheran church at the developing new area of Southbank on the Yarra River. The church was a relatively new building, bright, modern and with an outlook to the city and the river. The atmosphere was of newness and life and the service reflected that image.

As for the first service, the Chaplain of the Hobart hospital flew into Melbourne and spoke to the congregation. He had already met some of the survivors three years previously as they arrived for treatment from Port Arthur and also the families who came to identify the dead and to grieve with the living. He had gone down to Port Arthur just before catching the plane for Melbourne and described the new beginnings and growth taking place at Port Arthur.

'I sat at the waters edge', he said. 'I watched the sun rise and give birth to a new day and I rejoiced in that rebirthing.'

In Melbourne, the sun was shining after the rain. There was movement and colour among the people. Boats were moving along the river and the service had an atmosphere of renewal and new life. Perhaps the most moving moment came when one of the survivors read this piece:

We believe in the gift of sorrow, which carries us back to humanness
And reminds us of the way we dreamed life could be
And marks the love and sacrifice of many people.
Love which calls us to find new paths through the blurred landscape of our tears.
We believe that, despite betrayal and violence in ways we do not fully understand
We are not left alone, that many people are standing with us and along side us.
And we believe that we need not stay sorrowing forever,
But that our spirits and hopes can rise and lift us as surely as day follows night.

Third anniversary

This year, 1999 there was no request for an official anniversary service, instead the survivors, families and friends met in a garden and had their own service. It was a full service with prayers, poems and readings, some of which had been written by the survivors.

There were moments of silence to remember the past, those who had been killed or injured and for the survivors themselves. The service over, they then had a picnic.

They have one regret. The Victorian survivors wish for a 'Memorial Place', somewhere where they can gather to remember, a plaque, which celebrates survival. To date this request has not been granted.

The journey out of the night continues but for some, still slowly.

Anger, remorse, loss of power and control, conflict over tourists. Those on work cover and those without. Those who received Appeal monies and those who missed out. The need to continue the tourist industry on which the livelihood of the people of Port Arthur depends and those still grieving. Anger about the new \$5 million tourist centre which is being promoted as a catalyst for Port Arthur's spiritual, not to mention financial rebirth. Memorials, preserving the past, getting on with living in and for the future. A need to hate and to express that hatred and anger. The place, site, time and number of anniversaries, who conducts them, who they are for, participation, participants:

'Post-disaster rituals and symbols are a valid and important area of study because they have significant implications for disaster management, not only in terms of practical, logistical arrangements, but also in terms of managing sensitively and appropriately the range of psychological, social and political issues associated with these aspects of the immediate post-impact and longer term rehabilitative stages of disaster'. (Ayre 1999)

To ignore this advice is to add to the pain and delay recovery.

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Postscript

This year Australia welcomed many refugees from Kosovo and housed them in a number of States.

Those housed in Tasmania approached the Trauma and Counselling Unit requesting support and assistance with organising a 'Homage for the Kosovars' and inviting the staff of the Haven Centre where they were housed to participate.

The event occurred almost one month after their arrival. All the residents were taken to Hobart, the Capital of Tasmania where they silently paraded down one of the main streets, each carrying a lighted candle.

The group then gathered around an Albanian flag and mementos and symbols of the war and their displacement were placed on it. There was a moment's silence, then a message of thanks to the Australian people was read.

A group of Kosovars then took a bottle containing a message of peace to the waters edge and launched it into the sea. Songs and speeches completed this simple but meaningful ceremony.

Truly grief and pain knows no boundaries.

Conference announcement

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