

The Death of Kobe Bryant: Why The Community Grieves

For many, the death of icon Kobe Bryant, his daughter Gianna, and seven other victims on Sunday, January 26th was jarring, devastating and unthinkable news. Almost immediately after the story broke, so did the hearts of millions who respected the late sportsman. Many so beautifully expressed that it wasn't about knowing the man, or following his career, but more about the human experience. We can all relate to the certainty with which we speak with family and friends, part from them each day, and expect to see them later. Death often reminds us of our own mortality as human beings. It can't be controlled, and it becomes easy to feel out of control when trying to manage our reactions to loss. Many draw the lesson that life is fleeting and it becomes clear that death is the great equalizer no matter who the person. However, beyond the lessons we try to glean, death and dying are very different in the digital age.

Death in the Digital Age

Social media gives us the ability to share shock, sadness, and rage about the circumstances surrounding this tragic death. We are both comforted and numbed to the memorable moments flooding timelines and news outlets repeatedly showing the same highlight reels. Interestingly enough, sports have often been the way people can unwind and escape the things that may be bothering them. Now, even major sports stations are all remembering the great athlete causing many to feel flooded with grief with no way to cope.

Sharing in solidarity and finding common ground with a community of grievers is a normal expression of mourning. But the nonstop content is the down side of grieving sparked by social media. Grieving as a community has almost always been in the fabric of the black experience. Many feel losing Kobe was like losing your own brother or friend. He was an integral part of our culture and communities making his loss an intimate one. Such loss causes many to struggle with the feeling that your community needs you, that you will be less informed if you grant yourself a 'grief break', all while feeling pressure to express how the life of the icon personally impacted yours.

Here are some helpful tips to consider when reflecting and processing how your reaction to loss is expressed:

1. Take Time To Be Aware

What is the death bringing up within you? As alluded to before, death can make you realize your own sense of mortality. There is no right or wrong feeling to have while grieving. All emotions are valid, even for an individual you have never met. We don't have to meet someone personally to feel the ache of family members and friends suffering. To be nervous and anxious, even feeling physically sick at the thought of what another human is experiencing, are just a few of the things grief can trigger within a person. These feelings are perfectly normal. It's just important that you be aware of how you're responding to grief and make sure you're taking care of yourself.

2. Triggered

Oftentimes, grievors and those who have not even suffered the loss of a loved one by death feel triggered when someone dies. Many times a chord is struck within them causing them to think about other experiences of loss. The tragic and sudden death of individuals like Kobe Bryant cause us to remember loved ones we've lost, a parents divorce, the loss of a time period, or even a show or character we admired. For many, Kobe Bryant represented key moments from childhood to adulthood. He was looked up to because of his "mamba mentality," or his fierce competitive nature. There was excitement about what he would do in retirement and how he would transition off the court. All of these things and more are being mourned by many. This is why it is critical that you take the time to identify what is being triggered within you and why.

3. Logoff/Unplug

Social media has programmed us to want the latest news first. We often need validation that we are not alone in our feelings. This reality is heightened even more when everyone is grieving the same person at the same time. We want to know that others slept terribly this week, are feeling helpless and crying tears of sorrow as well. It is good to be informed, to connect, and bond over tragedy, but it is extremely easy to get and feel overwhelmed. Remember to practice self-care by logging off and taking a break when necessary. Breaks don't only apply to reducing your online presence, it also means stepping away from a conversation that may be too much or turning off the radio. Find activities and ways to cope that positively recharge you so you're able to go back and mourn with the community of grievors, but still able to function and keep moving forward.

4. Don't Forget The Children

All too often children are the forgotten grievors as we work through our feelings and share with peers. We may forget that children can be deeply impacted by the changes death brings, especially sudden and unexpected death. They too may be triggered by the loss of one of their favorite celebrities and/or have questions about what death means for them or their families. Adults may not have all the answers but children certainly take their cues about grieving from what adults in their life display. Don't let things outside the home be the only teachers. Instead take time to have face to face conversations with children about how they are impacted. As the famous C.S. Lewis quote states "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear." It can be incredibly scary to navigate a world where the next loss may be around the corner. In times like these it's important to remember that banding together and giving voice to our fears, uncertainties, and sorrows may just be what is needed to make it through the ups and downs of grief. I'd be remised if I didn't remind you to hold your loved ones a little tighter today, forgive and be free, and speak encouraging loving words. Live life purposefully.