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Keara Pringle
Denison University

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Coping with the Oklahoma City Bombing: Emphasizing Ideas of Rescue and Recovery in the Face of Tragedy for Children

by Keara Pringle

As with any historical event, people construct a variety of conflicting narratives based on their different interpretations of the event. Some narratives may focus on the positive outcomes from an event while others may emphasize the sorrowful results. However, in constructing the collective memory of the past, the public emphasizes a particular storyline over another for such reasons as to maintain the continuity of the past, or in the case of a tragic event, reduce the horror behind a certain story. When the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was bombed in 1995 by Timothy McVeigh, 168 people were killed, nineteen of whom were children from the Murrah day care center. Since the children were exposed to such destruction and violence, the public naturally became concerned with how to help the children comprehend such a tragedy. To explain why such attention was directed towards the children, Joan Menefee, Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Stout explains in her article “From the Mouths of Politicians: Representing Children in the Public Sphere” that children “are less equipped to deal with the uncertainty and anxiety associated with large-scale violence and destruction” (Menefee 105). In constructing the children’s memory of the bombing, adults emphasized how rescue and humanitarian efforts that occurred after the bombing helped the community recover and heal, and they thus downplayed the negative consequences of the bombing in favor of a “progressive” narrative of the event. By focusing on the positive story-line of the bombing for the children, adults began to incorporate this explanation into their lives and therefore felt a sense of hope for the future. In addition to the adults helping the children, the children’s words, as seen through their letters to volunteer workers, firefighters, and

doctors in Oklahoma, healed the psychological wounds of many suffering adults.

Even though certain narratives associated with the Oklahoma City bombing such as the “toxic” narrative are conveniently left out when constructing the memory for the children, society has particular reasons to forget parts of a story. Since collective memory is formed through a selective process where some stories of an event are promoted by groups in power, history represents a selective outlook on the past. Therefore, what we as a society choose to remember shows what we want to illustrate. In particular, when constructing the memory of tragic events, Marita Sturken, Director of Media, Culture and Communication at New York University, discusses in the introduction to her book that we leave out certain painful memories because they “may be too dangerous to keep in the active memory” (Sturken 7). By choosing to forget certain memories through repression, people are protected from painful or fearful emotions (Sturken 8). Furthermore, forgetting the painful memories allows us to move forward with our lives instead of dwelling on the past. As Elie Wiesel, Noble Prize winning author and Holocaust survivor, discussed memory in his Nobel Peace Prize lecture in 1986, he emphasized that “the memory helps us to survive; forgetting allows us to go on living. How could we go on with our daily lives, if we remained constantly ware of the dangers and ghosts surrounding us?” (qtd. in Koppelman 105). If society did not collectively lessen the horror associated with tragic events, our sense of hope in getting past the event would be diminished.

Before we analyze how the collective memory of the Oklahoma City bombing emphasized ideas of healing, we must understand the historical context of the event along with the trauma and loss of the event. American sociologist Stuart A. Wright explains in his book that the main conspirator of the Oklahoma bombing, Timothy McVeigh, was connected to a “loose coalition of militant-right groups” referred to as the Patriot movement (Wright 19). The Patriot movement felt that the federal government was becoming too hostile, and they began to believe

that they were “engaged in a war with the government” (Wright 20). McVeigh explained in a letter to Fox News on April 26, 2001 that he planned the bombing of the Murrah building as a counter attack against the federal government for all the gun raids that they had participated in over the years, especially the 1993 siege on the Branch Davidian Complex in Waco, Texas (McVeigh). Therefore, on the morning of April 19, 1995, McVeigh parked a truck containing an ammonium nitrate bomb at the north entrance of the Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City and detonated the bomb, destroying a large portion of the building as well as surrounding buildings.

Up until the attack, the nation regarded Oklahoma City as the “heartland” of America, a region that was not only essential to the economic and political growth of America but also rooted in rural and traditional values of generosity. In his book entitled The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American History, Edward Linenthal, Professor in the Department of History at Indiana University and editor of the Journal of American History, discusses that this image of Oklahoma City as the “heartland” of America diminished after the attacks because it “[shattered] the assumption that Middle America was immune to acts of mass terrorism as well the assumption that the nation still had ‘zones of safety,’ such as day care centers” (Linenthal 2). As a result of the bombing, Americans perceived that they were no longer immune to danger, and therefore American’s sense of safety and security lessened.

In Linenthal’s study on the impact of the Oklahoma City Bombing on the public, he identifies three narratives that each offered a description of people’s reactions to the bombing. The “progressive narrative” describes the goodness of the Oklahoma community, which was shown through the community’s response to help in the rescue effort and heal those who were suffering (Linenthal 46). The “redemptive narrative” offers a religious explanation for those struggling to understand the death of the innocent workers and children in the building. In contrast, the “toxic narrative” concentrates on the horror behind the tragedy and

incorporates the stories of increased suicide, domestic violence, alcoholism, and divorce that were seen as a direct result of the bombing (Linenthal 43). Since each one of these narratives emphasizes the importance of one issue, they effectively leave out a particular component of the story.

These competing narratives help us understand people's reactions to such a horrific event and guide us to make sense of the situation. Linenthal discusses how society tends to prioritize certain interpretations of an event in his concept of "preferred" narratives. He explains that "some events threaten bedrock convictions so severely that we engage them only by softening the story, reducing the sheer horror of an event by grasping for comforting and reassuring story lines" (Linenthal 41). Since children are more vulnerable and innocent, adults believe that they need encouraging story lines to help them deal with their fears and anxieties rather than a narrative that emphasizes the devastating results of the bombing. Therefore, adults would "prefer" to emphasize a narrative that focuses around ideals of recovery and hope because they feel it protects children from their fears. By introducing children to a community's generosity in light of a disaster, they are able to understand that there is hope in recovering and that the process of healing from tragedy is possible.

In addition to emphasizing the progressive narrative, adults try to limit children's view of the toxic narrative, particularly as it was shown through media in television, because they want to protect them from being exposed to images of violence. Although the children's reactions to the television news programs vary, the media plays a critical role in children's emotional and social lives. Examining the connection between media and emotion within children, Barbara Wilson, Professor in the Department of Speech Communication at the University of Illinois, argues in her article that media has the power to provoke fear and anxiety in children because children directly respond to specific "emotionally-charged" events presented through the television (Wilson 92). Wilson argues that children are easily convinced that a violent or tragic event portrayed on the news will happen to them because the

news stories are more realistic than television or cartoon programs. After the September 11th terrorist attacks in New York City, one survey reported that parents said that thirty-five percent of American children experienced one or more stress symptoms such as sleep problems from their exposure to the images of the burning Twin Towers on television (Wilson 94). Furthermore, in a national survey published in 2002, sixty-two percent of parents with children ranging from two to seventeen years old stated that their children had "sometimes become scared that something they saw in a movie or on television might happen to them" (Wilson 93). Even though parents cannot completely shield their children from the news, Steven Pierrel, psychologist and Associate Professor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine at Baylor College, informs us that "parents can help them feel safe and help them better understand the world around them" by talking with their children about a distressing event and answering their children's questions and concerns ("The Tragedy of Terrorism: Helping Your Kids Cope"). To reduce the effects of the toxic narrative, parents need to provide positive reassurance to their children in order to protect them developing anxiety from the news stations.

Specifically, after the Oklahoma City bombing, the news coverage of the Murrah building affected the children because the news replayed images of destruction and loss. Discussing how children were affected by watching the news, Linenthal presents a case study from a child psychiatry group at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center who argued for a "strong correlation between the emotional distress of children and the amount of television coverage of the bombing they watched" (Linenthal 75). The group explained that for several days after the bombing, images of the blown up building were circulating throughout most of the television stations that children watched. Since most children's parents were not always around to provide comfort to their children, many children were left to develop their own fantasies associated with the bombing. For instance, some believed that a new building was destroyed every time the news displayed an image of the destroyed Murrah building, while others

became frightened that the walls of buildings they were in would also crumble around them. In addition, some children developed sleep disturbances while others would constantly talk about the bombing (Linenthal 75). Although the news stations likely had no intention of negatively influencing children, they shaped the children's interpretation of the bombing and inspired their fantasies of the tragedy.

One way that the adults have sought to alleviate children's emotional confusion during tragedies, such as the Oklahoma City bombing, is by publishing children's books that offer a simplified explanation of a painful event. Rather than entirely protect the children, the books serve as a way to guide the children through the facts of the event and reassure them that they can overcome tragedy. In particular, author Nancy Lamb wrote a book entitled One April Morning: Children Remember the Oklahoma City Bombing that incorporated quotes from fifty Oklahoma children in her personal narration of the event. Even though Lamb emphasizes people's suffering after the bombing in the beginning of the book, she slowly turns the focus of the story towards the progressive narrative viewpoint by stressing the public's rescue efforts after the bombing. For example, Lamb writes that the anxious "people looked around and thought 'There must be something I can do'" (Lamb 17). On the same page Lamb shares stories of how the public gave blood for local hospitals, donated money and food, and opened church doors for anyone in need as a way of illustrating that there are ways to deal with such suffering. By emphasizing the public's generosity, Lamb encourages children who are reading this book to believe that their own wounds will heal by helping others in need. In addition to presenting the progressive narrative, Lamb guides the plot outside the context of the bombing in order to teach broader lessons of compassion and generosity. As the children who experienced the bombing were able to witness the compassion of the community and attempt to incorporate the same ideals of compassion in their own lives, "they realized that expressing their feelings helped them cope with their fears" (Lamb 27). Even though the children from Oklahoma realized healing can take a long time, they found that eventually the pain will

lessen in their hearts and life will continue on but with a greater meaning if they focus on helping those people in need.

Ironically, as adults placed a major emphasis on helping the children understand this event, they also struggled to comprehend the tragedy; however, by emphasizing the progressive narrative to the children, adults felt better within themselves because they were filling children with positive reassurance and hope. Indeed, in this scenario the children actually functioned to "help" the adults. Frances Jones, Co-Founder and Executive Vice President of Feed the Children, states in the introduction to her book that the "... children's letters healed my empty spaces and filled my empty spaces..." (Jones 7). The children's encouragement and love in their letters to firefighters, doctors, and volunteer workers in Oklahoma City, soothed thousands of distressed adults. Reading the encouraging thoughts of the children's letters, adults were able to realize that if the innocent children were able to cope with such events, faith in overcoming the tragedy and creating a brighter future within the older community would be possible.

In a similar way to the children's books, the Oklahoma City Memorial functions as an area for children to express their feelings and therefore heal the wounds of both adults and children. Jo Thomas, writer for the New York Times newspaper, explains in his article "Unfinished Task: The Memorial in Oklahoma City" that the children's area of the memorial offers "assurance that the world holds far more good than bad" (Thomas). To provide this assurance, the children's area consists of a wall of tiles which were sent to Oklahoma City by children around the world shortly after the bombing occurred ("Symbolism"). These tiles signify the children's "outpour" of love and compassion to Oklahoma and demonstrate a model of hope for everyone to exemplify that reminds adults of the love and support they have. In addition to the tiles, chalkboards are built into the ground to allow children to continually express their feelings of the bombing indirectly to the public. Through the chalkboards, children are able to cope with their feelings of sadness and pain, adults are reminded to be hopeful and not become consumed with sadness. Just as the

children's letters filled several adults' "empty spaces," the children's area was a reminder to both adults and children that our wounds would heal (Jones 7).

Since children are less capable of dealing with the harsh realities of violence and loss, adults try to reduce the horror of a tragedy in order to help the children cope with their confused emotions. By emphasizing comforting story lines, adults surround children with ideas of hope and faith in overcoming their grief, and as a result the adults began to integrate these positive outlooks into their own lives. In order to keep the memory of an event active, we must forget those painful memories that prevent us from moving forward with our daily lives. Even though the Oklahoma City bombing exemplifies one instance where the public's response to the tragedy allowed not only children but adults to heal and move forward with their lives, the public's response can teach us how to react to future events that occur in our nation. Although a situation may not include the death of innocent children, adults should make sure to engage and protect children in order to comfort their fears and confused emotions.

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