When Keeping Company Is Therapy

After Swissair Crash, Mourners Needed to Tell Their Stories

By LISA CHERTKOV

SOMEONE calls for a doctor, and I approach to find a man sobbing. He is curled up, crying, in consolable. I could be in the intensive-care waiting room, or approaching a rape victim, or telling a father he has lost his son to AIDS. But this is nothing like any of those daily routines of doctoring, because I am on a plane bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia, with the families of those who died on Swissair Flight 111. The cabin is full of tear-filled memories and pain.

Every seat is taken up with grieving. The only happy news story of the lump that is benign or the leukemia in remission. There is none of the peace of accompanying a familiar patient and family through the last days of a terminal illness, insuring comfort and a chance to say goodbye. These are strangers thrown together by the horror of an unspeakable loss, and I am just a psychiatrist reminding myself that sometimes doctoring means nothing more than keeping company.

A day earlier my beeper went off and I responded to a call for volunteers for the Disaster Team organized by the city’s Department of Mental Health. I canceled my plans for the next few evenings.

When I arrive at Kennedy Airport, the Ramada Hotel’s banquet room is organized for disaster. It is a Friday, only 40 hours since the crash. Each table is set with phones and staffed with airline employees who assisted a small circle of grievers. Some have recently flown in from Geneva, others gathered from around the states. There is an ebb and flow of traffic, a “hurry up and wait” atmosphere as messages and levels of urgency travel up and down chains of command. And, there is the bizarre experience of break-time chatter as other volunteers ask me: Is this your first crash? Didn’t I meet you at Flight 880? How long have you been a disaster psychiatrist? I readily confess that I am a novice.

I register and am oriented and given a badge, and then I wait. I watch a father’s pain as he decides to return home to his young children, rather than stand by the sea where he lost his wife. He leaves behind a handful of photos of her, coming back in twice, and a third time, to confirm that someone will call him if they identify her body.

On Saturday morning, I am assigned to be the psychiatrist for the flight to Halifax. Families board the plane together, each wearing a clip-on tag saying “Swissair Family Member.” I sit in the second row on the aisle, identified to the flight crew. I suddenly realize that there is an unusual attention to the safety video. There is a rush as the monitors click down, uncomfortable laughter as passengers look around for exits and then a sob at the mention of a water landing. There is the usual sharp intake of breath at takeoff, but a closer look reveals a few silent tears, clenched hands of memory.

The flight path mirrors the disaster, and families count the minutes...