

Original Message

From: Payton, Robert

Sent: Tuesday, September 18, 2001 6:40 AM

Subject: Getting back to normal

One of the Fellows asked me when it would be all right to "get back to normal." For those of us who suffered no direct personal loss in the events of last Tuesday, when will it be appropriate to turn back to our own business? In our secular and diverse culture, when does the period of mourning end? Last Wednesday, when we decided to turn away from television because we were just seeing the same terrible things repeated, or recurrent scenes of the workers still digging at Ground Zero? Or Thursday, when the news turned to strategies of retaliation? Or Friday, after the day of prayer and remembrance? Or Saturday, when we saw the news coverage of the first firemen's funerals? Or will it be Monday, when the New York Stock Exchange reopens? When can we resume our own lives without showing disrespect for the victims and their families, or a lack of seriousness about the events and their consequences?

I watched ABC television throughout the week. I knew that we crossed a threshold of consciousness when the first commercial appeared. The commercial had been prepared long before the events of the week; it was a reminder that there was a world and a life before the 11th of September and a declaration that there would be a life -- crass and intrusive and determined to pursue its own interests -- after the 11th of September.

Diane's question was a moral question: When is it appropriate to return to normal life without showing disrespect for the feelings of others? It is a sensitive and responsible question. The checklist of questions in the first paragraph is an attempt at an answer. First, you set aside for their own judgment those who suffered personal and immediate loss. Second, the people closest to those who were hurt directly will have to accommodate to others at some point; the public display of mourning and sorrow must also come to an end. Third, a number of people went back to work immediately; it was their show of defiance of the terrorists, much like those who boarded commercial airliners as soon as space was available and permission to take off was granted. Fourth, many people continued to do their work throughout it all, and scarcely missed a beat. The young woman who cut my hair didn't miss an appointment except when everyone in the shop stopped to watch the events of the first day.

The notion of what is appropriate is what Cicero had in mind when he spoke of *decorum*. For Cicero, "*Decorum* is a moral concept of great importance for a life lived in the public eye. It embodies the notions of both fittingness and visibility. By observing *decorum* one will be seen to do the appropriate thing, taking into account the specific context and one's own status. The word is linked etymologically with *dignitas*. [From the editor's notes on

the new Cambridge translation of On Duties.] Decorum is not a notion that plays much of a conscious role in American culture; it came almost as a startling new idea when I brought it up in seminar last year. Lack of decorum defines immature behavior; decorum and dignity are signs of maturity.

It seems to me that we need another notion in addition to reviving that of decorum: something to guide us in determining how long we will think and talk about the 11th of September and its victims, and when their tragedy will be forgotten. What is the half-life of tragedy in a society known best for its short attention span?

RLP