

---

## 1. Seeking Closure

“Let me start with my tattoo, it’s of two flowers on my back,” said an anonymous woman as she explained the aftermath of a bad relationship. “The tattoo helped to give me closure on the emotional strain I had experienced.”<sup>1</sup>

Another woman, whose husband had cheated on her, found closure to his affair only after he agreed to shave his head. Her psychiatrist recalled that his client was fortunate that her husband was willing to go through with this “closure ritual.” As the psychiatrist stated, “In therapy we often suggest a small ritual to bring closure, such as writing letters to those they have an issue with and burying or burning them.”<sup>2</sup>

Getting tattoos and shaving heads are not the only rituals suggested for closure after bad relationships. “Six Feet Isn’t Deep Enough!” reads the plaque on an official Wedding Ring Coffin. Jill Testa, creator of the coffin, encourages people to “give a dead marriage its proper, final resting place. The Wedding Ring Coffin is the perfect gift for yourself or a loved one for bringing closure after a divorce. It’s time to bury the past and move on to a new tomorrow.”<sup>3</sup>

People in the death care business—whether for humans or for pets—also talk about closure.

Melissa Tomlinson works on dead people’s hair for a living. She has been dressing the dead for over twelve years, time enough to change her perspective on death. “When I was younger, I thought of it as sort of morbid or scary. Now I look at it with a lot more compassion. I see the families, and I

just try to give them a little closure. When the deceased appears peaceful and healthy, the family receives some closure.”<sup>4</sup>

“Welcome to At Peace Pet Memorials,” reads a website selling pet urns. “I don’t know how to truly emphasize how important closure is. When my companion of 10 years ‘Mr. Sibbs’ passed away, I was not there. I paid a disposal fee and never saw him again. . . . I still to this day have nightmares that I left him somewhere and now I can’t find him.”<sup>5</sup>

How can one compare closure for affairs, divorce, death, and pet grief? And can tattoos, shaved heads, Wedding Ring Coffins, peaceful-looking deceased loved ones, and pet memorials all really bring closure? People ranging from psychiatrists, tattoo artists, and entrepreneurs to pet grief experts and death workers speak of closure as if everyone knows what it means. Yet it seems to have many different, if not contradictory, meanings.

From bad relationships to terrorist attacks, the concept of closure enters the cultural debate about how to respond when traumatic things happen. Schoolchildren are told to find closure after a shooting. A nation seeks closure after 9/11. Mourners search for closure after a funeral, and family members want it following a homicide. Families of missing persons search for closure, as do Katrina survivors and other victims of natural disasters. People are told to find closure after their pets die. Closure is also sought after divorces, bad dates, abortions, adoptions, and abusive experiences.

But what is closure? There is no agreed-upon answer. Closure has been described as justice, peace, healing, acceptance, forgiveness, moving on, resolution, answered questions, or revenge. And *how* are you supposed to find this closure? People try to find closure by planting trees, acquiring memorial tattoos, forgiving murderers, watching killers die, talking to offenders, writing letters, burning letters, burning wedding dresses, burying wedding rings, casting spells, taking trips to Hawaii, buying expensive pet urns, committing suicide, talking to dead people, reviewing autopsies, and planning funerals. And this is just a partial list.

Although there are numerous definitions and interpretations of closure that I will attempt to untangle in this book, closure usually relates to some type of ending. Closure typically implies that something is finished, ended, closed. Finally you can move on. Yet this dominant use of closure receives plenty of criticism. Although some who are grieving seek closure and others report finding it, a significant number of voices cry foul; they argue that closure does not exist and that it only promises false hope. Still, advice for finding closure thrives. Journalists, politicians, businesspeople, and other professionals use closure as a central theme in writing, politics, and sales. People offer others hope through the promise of closure, but can it be found?

It is exploited for political gain. It is sold for financial gain. It is used to counsel those who hurt, to help them through their grief. But is that what they need or even want?

This book explores how and why the idea of closure jumped from a relatively unknown research term to a new emotional state that people are seeking or telling others to find. I uncover the varied interpretations of closure and demonstrate how it became a political tool and a commodity used to sell products and services.

Closure has become a new emotion for explaining what we need after trauma and loss and how we should respond. When I argue that closure is a new emotion, I am not claiming that people are experiencing some feelings that were never felt before, such as the experience of grief lessening. I am arguing that there is a new way of thinking about and talking about emotions.<sup>6</sup>

Although humans' physiological emotional responses may be limited, the way we label emotional states and try to achieve (or not achieve) them changes. For instance, consider "self-esteem." Although people may have always had some level of regard for themselves, the idea of "self-esteem" is recent (and quite different from "pride," which was long considered sinful). Self-esteem became a goal for people to achieve for themselves and for others, especially children. It resulted in products, experts, curricula, and policy decisions. The creation of self-esteem had significant consequences.

Similarly, people have felt grief and may have wished that it would end, but "closure" is a new term and new way of thinking and acting on this grief. Our grandparents did not seek closure after the death of a loved one. Closure is a state that people want to bring about in themselves and in others. And, like "self-esteem," it has resulted in new products, rituals, experts, strategies, and ways of seeing the world. This is especially true in the funeral industry. Historically, funeral rituals had many purposes: comforting the grieving, caring for the body, preparing the departed for the next life, building solidarity among the survivors, sharing religious messages, and so on. The importance of these purposes varied culturally and historically. However, for the past two decades, funeral directors have emphasized the "need for closure" as a major purpose of funeral rituals. Although closure has become a form of common knowledge, there has been little critical insight into its consequences. Funeral homes would have you believe that closure will result from the products and services they provide, but there is no clear evidence that this is true.

To help explain the rise of closure and its impact on our social world, I build on research in the sociology of emotions and social constructionist studies of social problems. From the sociology of emotions, I borrow the

understanding that society provides *feeling rules* and people are expected to change their emotions to fit these rules. Feeling rules are informal guidelines that tell us how we should react to certain situations.<sup>7</sup> Societies and institutions have different feeling rules, and these rules change, with consequences for the people who are expected to meet them. Furthermore, when one set of feeling rules becomes dominant in a culture, it makes it difficult for us to imagine other ways of handling a situation. Closure represents a new set of feeling rules and expectations for people.

From the social constructionist study of social problems, I use the idea that the way we name and describe experiences has consequences.<sup>8</sup> “Closure” is not some naturally occurring emotion that we can simply “find” with the right advice. Rather, closure is a made-up concept: a frame used to explain how we should respond to loss. The term “frame” has been adopted from the sociologist Erving Goffman to describe how people identify, interpret, understand, and label their experiences and to explain social problems.<sup>9</sup> We make something like closure “real” through social interactions. Any understanding we have of closure comes from how people have defined it through stories, arguments, court cases, and so on. This does not mean that the pain from loss is just imaginary, but how we interpret and respond to the loss is shaped by our social world, such as popular culture, life history, social norms, friends, and family.

Often, when a concept like closure becomes so popular in our culture, people assume it must exist. We do not examine how it emerged as a belief or what alternative views might be better in understanding our world. Using a sociological lens, this book will show how the meanings of closure have been constructed through social processes and how that affects us. Describing a set of emotional experiences as “closure” and creating a number of cultural narratives about it have implications for the way people experience grief, tell others how to grieve, sell and buy products, and make political arguments. Because the meaning of closure is shaped by the social context, we have a variety of contradictory interpretations of how to get closure. And these dominant arguments about loss marginalize alternative ways of thinking about grief.

In order to understand the history of the term “closure” as well as contemporary interpretations of it, I examined a wide range of documents, including newspaper and popular magazine articles, websites, research journal articles, court cases, autobiographies, and other books.<sup>10</sup> Since closure is used to talk about so many issues, my research covers topics from pet grief to terrorist attacks and people ranging from psychics to forensic pathologists. Throughout this book, some examples I share are funny and others are heartbreaking.

## The Rise of Closure

Beginning in the 1990s, the concept of closure became more prevalent in popular media. On November 9, 1995, an episode of *Friends* featured Rachel on a date complaining about not getting over Ross. Her date tells her, “Look, I’ve been through a divorce; trust me, you’re gonna be fine. You just can’t see it now because you haven’t had any closure.” Rachel replies, “Yeah! Closure.” She finds a cell phone and, drunk, leaves a slurred message on Ross’s answering machine, including the line “I am over you. And that, my friend, is what they call closure.” In 1997, Dr. Frasier Crane, the main character of the sitcom *Frasier*, also searched for closure after getting dumped. *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* aired an episode called “Closure” in 2000, in which Detective Olivia Benson tells a rape victim that closure does not exist. Other television shows and movies featured closure in the cases of missing people, death of loved ones, recovery of dead bodies, revenge after a rape, and preparation for the end of the world.

Closure talk goes beyond sitcoms and crime shows. Tangled understandings of closure began showing up prominently in journalistic accounts of national tragedies in the 1990s. Contradictory claims about closure are interwoven in the painful stories surrounding these tragic cases.

On April 19, 1995, at 9:02 a.m., Timothy McVeigh bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people and injuring more than 800—at that time the deadliest terrorist act on American soil. Nineteen of the victims were children from the day care center in the building. People who followed the media coverage of the tragedy may remember the poignant photograph of the firefighter holding a dying infant, bloodied and limp. Closure emerged as a political buzzword during McVeigh’s trial and pending execution. For instance, in a discussion about moving the trial venue, Patti Hall, a survivor of the bombing, protested moving the trial out of Oklahoma, saying, “This was done to Oklahoma people and we should . . . be able to attend the trial and be there for closure.”<sup>11</sup>

Four years and one day after the Oklahoma City bombing, on April 20, 1999, people watched in disbelief as Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold carried out what is now commonly known as the Columbine High School massacre at Columbine High School near Littleton, Colorado. They killed twelve students and one teacher before committing suicide. Four months later, Columbine High School reopened. Jennifer, a seventeen-year-old junior, said at the time, “Most people have already had some kind of closure at the school. We went back a couple of times for renovation, registration, to paint tiles. Now, we’re just ready to move on.”<sup>12</sup> Some of the parents of slain children

disagreed. In December 1999, Brian Rohrbough, father of Daniel, one of the first students killed, told a reporter that “to say that we want to move on and put this behind us, that’s not true.” As the reporter interviewing Brian stated in his article, “For some of the families of the dead children of Columbine, the very idea of ‘closure’ is an insult and a hoax. There can never be closure for them.”<sup>13</sup>

In the spring of 2001, attention shifted back to Oklahoma as Timothy McVeigh’s case became a rallying cry for death penalty advocates and a high-profile forum for the discussion of whether families of victims should be allowed to view an execution. Closure was a central theme in media coverage of the case and a powerful rhetorical tool for politicians, prosecutors, and advocates pushing for the death penalty. Entertainment Network, Inc., an Internet company in Florida, unsuccessfully claimed that McVeigh’s execution needed to be broadcast on the web in order to give the country closure.<sup>14</sup> Attorney General John Ashcroft used the closure argument in his decision to allow closed-circuit television of McVeigh’s execution for the victims and their families. Ashcroft said that he hoped his closed-circuit television show would help Oklahoma City’s bereaved “meet their need to close this chapter in their lives.”<sup>15</sup>

Although more than 1,000 people were given the opportunity to view McVeigh’s execution in June 2001, fewer than 300 did.<sup>16</sup> The day after McVeigh’s execution, the front page of the *Hartford Courant* featured the following quotation from a family member: “It Still Hurts.”<sup>17</sup> One family member told a reporter, “The only ‘closure’ I’m ever going to have is when they close the lid on my coffin.”<sup>18</sup> Others were holding out hope. A brother of a victim said, “I expected more closure or relief. It really didn’t provide as much as I thought it would but time will tell.”<sup>19</sup>

The 9/11 terrorist attacks came only four months after McVeigh’s execution. Within a few years of this tragedy, we heard claims that some people were achieving closure on 9/11.<sup>20</sup> However, others argued that there was no closure. On the sixth anniversary of the attacks, the *New York Times* published an article highlighting criticisms of former mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s response to the people killed in the attacks. Sabrina Riversa, who was mourning a friend and firefighter killed on 9/11, blamed Giuliani for her lack of closure: “Because of Giuliani we never had closure. We never had closure because as soon as 9/11 happened he had all the remains shipped to Staten Island, in the dump, in the landfill. And we never had closure because of him.”<sup>21</sup> Earlier that year, a firefighters’ union also protested Giuliani’s treatment of the missing bodies, saying that his “scoop-and-dump operation” to remove debris from Ground Zero did not protect the human remains.

“Mayor Giuliani’s actions meant that fire fighters and citizens who perished would either remain buried at Ground Zero forever, with no closure for families, or be removed like garbage and deposited at the Fresh Kills Landfill.”<sup>22</sup>

After the death of Osama bin Laden on May 1, 2011, people immediately debated whether we could finally have closure on the 9/11 attacks. Throughout the nation, headlines declared that his death did indeed mean closure: “Bin Laden’s Death Brings Closure to Many,” or “Families Find Closure in Bin Laden’s Death.” Strikingly, other headlines proclaimed the opposite—there is no closure: “Bin Laden’s Death Does Not Bring Closure,” or “For 9/11 Families, No Such Thing as Closure.” Some argued that closure was possible after bin Laden’s death because there was justice, the end of a chapter, or relief after a decade-long hunt for him. However, many people wanted others to know that closure incorrectly implies that the pain and grief has ended. In other cases, individuals claimed there is no closure because the war against terror will continue or because they were not able to see pictures of bin Laden’s dead body. It was clear in reading the commentary on Osama bin Laden’s death that even though people did not agree as to whether his death provided closure, most stories assumed closure was real and something people needed.

Unfortunately, 9/11 was not our last tragedy. Hurricane Katrina. A shooting at an Amish school in Pennsylvania. A shooting at Virginia Tech. Another killer at Northern Illinois University. Devastating tornadoes. The list goes on. In today’s world, a tragedy does not happen without someone suggesting how people can find closure. Contradictory claims about closure are interwoven in the pain and grief surrounding these stories.

Obviously, we had national and personal tragedies in our world before the 1990s. However, no one called for closure after the Holocaust. Media coverage of John F. Kennedy’s assassination did not focus on closure for the nation. (However, closure is discussed in *contemporary* media coverage of past tragedies such as the Holocaust and Kennedy’s assassination.) Why, in today’s world, do so many expect closure? And is it needed? Or possible? And from where did closure emerge?

Closure did not just spring up in journalism or television shows. We need to follow several threads in our culture to understand the rise of closure: research studies, political movements, court cases, shifts in popular culture, and the funeral industry’s need to broaden its services. We turn first to various research studies that have focused on closure.

One of the earliest uses of the term “closure” was in Gestalt psychology. In 1923, Gestalt pioneer Max Wertheimer used the concept of closure to explain how our brains group objects together as a whole rather than as

individual parts. A mind fills in missing information to complete an image. Another use of closure in Gestalt psychology argues that people have better memory of events or tasks that are unfinished or not closed.<sup>23</sup> Contemporary psychologists tend to view closure as a psychological concept that can be measured and correlated with its causes and effects. In the early 1990s, researchers in social psychology developed a scale that is supposed to measure one's "need for closure." According to this research, those who have a high need for closure prefer order, predictability, security, and decisiveness and are uncomfortable with ambiguity.<sup>24</sup> A decade later, in psychological studies about coping strategies following the September 11, 2001, attacks, closure is defined as the ability to put a trauma behind you and reach an even keel.<sup>25</sup>

Even within the discipline of psychology, we can see that closure has been defined differently over time. There is no natural or constant definition of the term. The concept shifts in meaning depending on the particular researcher studying it. We can see through a social constructionist lens that these processes introduce varied interpretations of closure.

Beyond psychological studies, there have been disparate uses of closure in disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, mathematics, and computer science.<sup>26</sup> However, there is no one definition of closure, and popular use of the term is quite different from the way it is used in scholarly studies. Closure went from a little-known research term to a popular concept in mass media.

Why did closure take off in our popular culture during the 1990s in spite of not being well defined or understood? To answer that question, we look to what happened culturally and politically in the previous three decades, which set the stage for closure's popularity. Victims' social movements; a rise in therapeutic language and goals; court decisions; and our cultural expectation for happy, inspiring, and quick resolutions have all contributed to the popularity of closure. We turn next to the world of crime victims and their advocates.

The crime victims' rights movement was part of the broader "victim movements" in the 1960s and 1970s that helped change the way we think about victimization and gave new language to frame personal problems.<sup>27</sup> Other movements central to this time and related to crime victims include feminism, civil rights, restorative justice, and law-and-order conservatism. These movements brought the role of victim front and center in U.S. culture and were instrumental in setting up scenarios and creating language that ushered in the political use of closure.

The crime victims' rights movement grew out of a mix of liberal and conservative ideologies in the 1960s and 1970s and led to more resources and rights for victims, including increased participation in the justice system.



Hundreds of organizations emerged out of the larger crime victims' rights movement. Groups such as Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation (founded in 1976), Parents of Murdered Children (founded in 1978), and Mothers Against Drunk Driving (founded in 1980) significantly changed how we think about crime victims and their role in the criminal justice system. These groups vary in their focus and ideology. For example, Parents of Murdered Children advocates the death penalty, while Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation opposes the death penalty. However, they all played an essential role in expanding the scope of victims to include family and friends of the direct crime victim. Perhaps most significantly in the case of homicide, families of the direct crime victim are now routinely seen as victims or co-victims. In 1982, Congress passed the Victim and Witness Protection Act, which included, among other things, victim restitution and the use of victim impact statements at sentencing in federal cases. Also in 1982, President Ronald Reagan created the President's Task Force on Victims of Crime to examine and recommend improvements in how the victims of crime are treated.

Over time, many advocates in these various movements adopted the concept of closure to help explain why victims needed particular resources or rights. Exactly *what* victims needed was debated. Some groups argued that closure would come through more punitive criminal justice policies, while other groups said closure would come through practices that emphasized healing. We see this exchange of closure politics most clearly in the death penalty debate, which is discussed in chapter 7.

But why closure? After all, "victims' rights" does not automatically translate into "closure." To better understand the appeal of closure, we turn to therapeutic movements in law and media.

In 1987, David Wexler and Bruce Winick introduced the concept of "therapeutic jurisprudence."<sup>28</sup> They used the term to argue for a perspective within law that is concerned with how laws, legal proceedings, and the people involved produce and experience both therapeutic and anti-therapeutic consequences. Therapeutic jurisprudence is interested in the impact of the law on emotions and psychological health. It encourages the use of law and legal processes as a means to heal people.

The U.S. Supreme Court has also brought together law and mental health. In *Payne v. Tennessee* (1991), the Court ruled that the Eighth Amendment does not prohibit a capital sentencing jury from considering victim impact evidence. In its decision, the Court offered several reasons why it reversed its earlier position, including a statement that fostered future use of closure rhetoric in crime politics. The Court argued that allowing victims

to give their testimonies would help redress some of the harm caused by the crime. This decision signals a willingness for using victim impact information for therapeutic reasons and thus opening the door for other arguments calling for legal practices as means for victims to find healing—or “closure.”

Victim impact statements, which are not limited to death penalty cases, acknowledge the importance of victims’ families’ emotions and have legitimated punishment for therapeutic reasons. Although not all victims support the death penalty or call for vengeance, victim impact statements have paved the way for the institutionalization of closure. The U.S. Supreme Court’s *Payne* decision in particular gives legal support for legitimizing this new reason for punishment. The closure argument has allowed advocates of victims’ rights more success in the justice system whereas expressions of other emotions such as grief, shame, and vengeance are usually not allowed in legal debates.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, since the 1991 decision in *Payne*, closure has been referenced in numerous legal decisions. Jody Madeira, an advocate of therapeutic jurisprudence and professor of law, proposes that we view closure as a “strategic, sense-making process” that can be used in the legal system to help victims. She notes the increasing number of legal decisions referencing closure in cases of procedural concerns (preventing unjust delays in process), victim participation in legal proceedings, and therapeutic goals.<sup>30</sup> Following are some examples of such cases.

In 1994, the Arizona Supreme Court stated that “victims are entitled to closure.”<sup>31</sup> In 1995, a Mississippi judge argued that accepting guilty pleas in murder cases in exchange for life imprisonment allows family members a “certain degree of closure.”<sup>32</sup> A 2001 court decision in Hawaii ruled that a victim’s family and friends are deprived of closure that comes from a conviction when the defendant commits suicide.<sup>33</sup> In the same year, a court decision in Tennessee argued that a defendant’s refusal to say where a victim’s body was located deprived the victim’s family of closure. The defendant’s “refusal to give closure to the victim’s family” was cited as evidence of the “cold, heartless nature” of the defendant.<sup>34</sup> In a 2003 decision in Louisiana, a state court argued that finality of judgment is an important goal: “Those who have been victimized and the families of those who have been victimized desire closure, especially in a brutal and senseless crime against an innocent victim.”<sup>35</sup> In Florida, a 2005 court decision stated that a defendant’s confession provided closure to the victims’ families.<sup>36</sup> In 2006, an Illinois court argued that one of the main reasons for the collection of DNA was to “bring closure to victims.”<sup>37</sup>

Court decisions were not the only places where therapy for victims became the focus. In the 1960s and 1970s, a new “pop psychology” and self-help movement emerged that set guidelines for how to help your broken self

heal after traumatic events.<sup>38</sup> Popular culture, including talk shows, movies, and television shows, also introduced formats and language that invited the use of closure talk. New forms of victimization and melodrama appeared on television talk shows, which became increasingly popular in the 1980s. Oprah Winfrey's "change your life TV" and the *Dr. Phil* show led the way in showing people how to "regain their power" and change their own lives.<sup>39</sup> This pop psychology helped shape the victim as someone who needed to be fixed. The self-help movement opened up new narratives for victimization, healing, and the central role of therapeutic stories.

Popular culture has a melodramatic focus on crime victims, revenge, and the need for therapeutic closure. Typically, crime stories are framed as a story about the victims' pain and suffering and revenge on the offender, thus offering closure to the victim. Television has fostered a model of criminal justice based on revenge and concern for victims. The connection between television and the victims' rights movement took off in 1983 when John Walsh became a spokesperson and helped create two docudramas about his son's disappearance as well as the television series *America's Most Wanted* in 1988. Walsh's format helped create a retributive perspective about crime as innocent victims versus evil offenders and the search for justice as defined through the lens of vengeance. Shows like *America's Most Wanted*, *COPS*, and a host of movies help to make this image popular. Preceding these shows were vigilante movies such as *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *Death Wish* (1974) that tapped into the audience's desire for revenge.

We see a similar storyline play out in court cases. Elayne Rapping argues that the format of death penalty hearings shocks people by showing the victims' horror story, enraging viewers, and offering moral closure "in which the highly personalized resolution of one person's experience of victimization, through the court's revenge on a single perpetrator, suggests, disingenuously, that the larger problem of social violence itself has somehow been solved."<sup>40</sup>

Social problems and court cases have become entertainment in the form of tabloid news and reality crime shows. Producers see victims, conflict, and emotion as key in getting people to watch their shows. Prosecutors and politicians see victims and emotion as crucial in winning cases. Grief, pain, and hope have increasingly become popular topics, and the concept of closure is a useful narrative for telling these stories.

The concept of closure has also benefited from a culture in which the focus on people's grief is common but mostly constrained by limited patience and expectations that the person will solve the problem within a brief amount of time, without much discussion of the actual pain, and with a relatively quick resolution so that bystanders can assume that the person is moving on.

We live in a society that is uneasy with pain. There are few storylines that allow us to sit with pain and grieve for very long, let alone for the rest of our lives. It is not surprising that journalists and television producers are also cautious about showing too much pain without a happy ending. Happy and inspiring endings are dominant themes in mass media that open the way for the concept of closure. An editor for *Good Housekeeping* told me that a positive resolution to any problem is an important part of good storytelling: “If you leave people unresolved and adrift, it is not going to give the reader the sense that she can also take charge in her life.” Editors and producers believe that people need to be given hope that situations can change and that there will be a happy ending or they will not tune in for more. People do not like downers.<sup>41</sup> The concept of closure provides a perfect framework for telling stories about pain and grief while providing a reassuring ending.

But it is not just media editors and producers who like the concept of closure. To get a complete picture of why closure emerged so prominently in the 1990s, we need to look at what happened in the funeral industry prior to that time. Closure in the death care industry is the focus of chapter 4, so here I will just mention a shift in our culture that helped introduce closure into the funeral profession.

Again, we go back to the 1960s, when the funeral industry came under heavy attack from its critics. In the twentieth century, the number of funeral homes increased, and the funeral industry became the dominant way of caring for our dead. However, criticism of the funeral industry emerged with the profession and continues today. One of the most famous books criticizing the modern funeral industry was Jessica Mitford’s *The American Way of Death*, published in 1963. Like many critics, Mitford focused largely on the economic side of the industry, accusing funeral homes of inflating prices and exploiting those who grieve. Her book was a best seller and got people talking. Funeral home directors had to go on the offense to justify their services. As part of this strategy, funeral directors began selling themselves as grief counselors in addition to their other services. Rather than just selling services for the dead, they billed themselves as helping the living. They added grief counseling services to their language and, in some cases, literally to the bill. Closure eventually became a neat package to explain those services.

Winding its way through different avenues such as politics, law, media, self-help, and the funeral industry, closure has emerged as a dominant—though not consistent—concept in our everyday talk about grief and loss. It has become a central part of sales talks in the funeral, grief, relationship advice, and memorialization industries. This marketing reinforces further the popular belief that closure exists and can be found. Closure has emerged as

a “need” that people can fill through services such as funerals, psychic readings, private investigations, lawsuits, memorials, executions, divorce parties, private cremations, and autopsies. Although closure is not the only need that is used in selling these services and products, it has emerged as an important theme in advertising for these industries. Through all of this, some people believe that closure is an emotional state that exists and can be reached.

However, closure is not just a marketing device. Used to tell stories about an array of issues, including grief, victimization, the criminal justice system, capital punishment, abortion, terrorism, adoption, euthanasia, and school violence, closure has developed into a powerful political tool for talking about social problems.

Closure is entrenched in our popular culture not because it is a well-defined, understood concept that we *know* people need but rather because it is a useful way to tell stories for many people, including journalists, salespeople, politicians, and, sometimes, those who are hurting.

Perhaps you are thinking, so what if people are seeking closure? And more power to them if they can find it. What is the problem? And if businesses can sell products and services that help with closure, is that not a good thing? Similarly, you might argue that politicians ought to be helping crime victims find closure. Maybe you are even seeking closure yourself so you can move on from a traumatic event. Despite Americans’ widespread acceptance and support for closure, the phenomenon is nevertheless accompanied by social and emotional risk. Furthermore, closure is not the only narrative for guiding us in our response to bad things. This book explores how our social world is shaped through the recent expectations that we need closure and raises concerns that accompany this cultural perspective. Significantly, we must uncover how closure talk shapes feeling rules for grief and loss.

There may be helpful things about some narratives for seeking closure. The concept of closure may help some people think about loss in their life, but the very same word enrages others. Whether you choose to dismiss closure or embrace it, the fact is that closure is changing our social world, and we need to understand how.

## The Rest of the Story

Here is the plan for our exploration of closure. In chapters 2 and 3, we learn more about the many interpretations of closure, including those that deny its existence. Chapter 2 shows why closure is used to describe so many situations and seemingly contradictory emotions. In this chapter, we start to untangle the web by identifying six types of closure talk: closing a chapter, remember-

ing, forgetting, getting even, knowing, and confessing or forgiving. We also begin to see that in spite of the range of interpretations, all six types imply that closure exists and encourage people to assume that finding closure is possible, good, desired, and necessary.

Chapter 3 examines the bereavement research that has helped shape popular notions that closure is needed for normal grieving. Then I identify two types of people who argue there is no closure. The Walking Wounded represent those who say they cannot find closure even though they want it, and Myth Slayers are those who say closure does not exist. These types of individuals help us think about feeling rules and the impact closure talk can have on emotions, grief, and relationships.

The next three chapters turn our attention to how closure is used in marketing campaigns to sell services and products. In chapter 4, we learn about the sales talks of those who are in the business of death, including funeral home directors, home funeral advocates, ash-handling businesses, and the pet grief industry. Competing groups shape feeling rules through their debates about what are “proper” and “dignified” ways to care for and remember our dead loved ones.

Chapter 5 explains the growing “assurance business” that taps into closure as knowledge. Lawyers, psychics, medical consultants, and forensic pathologists all use closure as part of their sales talks. Not only are these individuals and businesses selling answers, but they are creating worry as a way to generate more business.

In chapter 6, we learn how businesses sell mock vengeance and symbolic death as therapy that is supposed to provide closure after a bad relationship. To help grieve a relationship and find closure, you can now write relationship obituaries, buy Wedding Ring Coffins, symbolically bury your ex-partner, and plan end-of-a-relationship services and divorce ceremonies complete with divorce announcements, cake, and party gifts.

The next two chapters turn our attention to closure as a powerful political tool for talking about social problems. Chapter 7 invites us to consider the ongoing trauma and grief that family members of homicide victims face and the contradictory advice about closure offered from pro- and anti-death penalty advocates. Not only does the closure talk in death penalty debates affect feeling rules for grieving loved ones, but it also shapes our policies and public opinion about capital punishment.

Chapter 8 alerts us to the politics of mourning, sacred space, and public memory as we examine how closure plays a role in debates about roadside memorials and memorials for Columbine and 9/11, as well as politics in abortion. In the politics of mourning and public memory, there is a collision

of competing definitions of closure and perspectives on how to find it. The main collision involves whether closure means forgetting (one gains closure when one stops thinking about the loss) or remembering (one achieves closure by finding ways to memorialize the loss). Other collisions involve *who* is worthy of remembrance and how much, if at all, public mourning should be regulated.

The concluding chapter focuses on how we might frame grief beyond closure. Why is the concept of closure a concern and how might we better navigate around the marketing and political rhetoric? How can we think about grief in ways that might give us hope without the pressure of finding closure?

Although I emphasize the need to pay attention to how closure is used in political and commercial rhetoric, it would be wrong to suggest that it is *only* politics and profit-driven marketing that drive the concept of closure. Hope also keeps people seeking closure: hope for healing and hope that the pain will lessen. Individuals and businesses compete to tell people how to find that healing. Although hope itself is not created by politics and marketing, the narratives for fulfilling hope are often influenced by these forces. And certainly those using the concept of closure to market products or push political agendas are targeting people's hope for healing.

The hope for a healed self after the devastation of tragedy and grief is poignant and common. Hope keeps people searching for help. Hope keeps people looking for answers in other people's stories and advice. Because people who grieve are often broken and hanging on to hope, it is important to examine grief narratives and the motivations behind those stories to help understand the implications they have on those who hurt. There are many ways to grieve, and there is hope for healing. Along the way, though, there are people trying to shape what you do in the midst of pain for a variety of reasons. Hope is a valuable resource and, unfortunately, used as a means for marketing products and ideas. We need to guard hope.

I invite readers to use the knowledge gained in this book to help understand experiences with loss. By recognizing the tangled web of closure and the reasons behind the rhetoric, we can help ourselves and others navigate the emotions and feeling rules that come with grief and loss.