TV BIDS FAREWELL TO ITS PRINCESS

Her sudden death was heartbreaking; saying good-bye was heartwrenching, and TV helped us mourn  

BY SUSAN STEWART

I know for a fact that Diana existed apart from television: I once shook her hand. It was exciting—she was already an international icon—but almost meaningless. All I remember is a blur of blond hair, a purr of a greeting. There are at least a dozen film clips of Diana more vivid in my mind than our actual off-screen meeting.

The Princess of Wales was beautiful, misunderstood, and kindhearted. We know these facts only because of one more: On TV, she was magic. As the first telegenic royal, Diana was an oddity in a family whose stateliness and mystery are difficult for the TV camera to capture. But on film and tape, she was the only royal who counted.

Who would have thought her death would have undone so many? Last week the world was a tapestry of flowers and flags and weeping faces—of grief as pure as anything we’re ever likely to see on television, where rehearsals and ratings points blunt the sharp edges of emotions.

Nothing was blunted with the reporting of Diana’s death. At first, anchors and commentators struggled, not to fill airtime with a story that had so many ironies it practically wrote itself, but simply to make sense of it, which nobody, of course, could do.

Early on, this meant watching scant footage—the crash site, the family statement, a clip of Di in a black dress—more than once. “On days like this, sometimes you end up regurgitating information,” apologized Ed Gordon, an MSNBC anchor, on Sunday. We knew what he meant.

Like the royal family, TV news is a creature of protocol. Public grief gels into a familiar procession of lyrical montages and dry-eyed experts. But Diana’s death broke the rules. It was a shock almost too big for television to comprehend. Those on-screen—normally poised anchors struggling for composure, Elizabeth Taylor crying, John Travolta offering support to the Prince and his grieving sons—didn’t know any more than those watching. We were all in this together. It was not so much a global broadcast as a global group therapy session.

As the story unfolded, all of us participating more or less equally, television managed to assert itself, giving the event an emotional (if not a logical) structure that bore a striking resemblance to what psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross called the stages of dying.

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