

The front pages of the papers were given over to one news story. The Prime Minister rushed home from her Pacific Islands Summit. And a colleague suggested that our school hold a minute's silence.

Australia had been stunned by the death of five soldiers in Afghanistan – the ADF's darkest day since Vietnam. The tragedy was heightened by three of the losses coming at the treacherous hand of an Afghan soldier – one of the “allies” that the Diggers were there to assist and train.

Yet, considering the request for a silence, I hesitated. A school's reaction, or non-reaction, to a news event sends a powerful educational message. An interruption to the normal schedule tells students that “this is important; it affects you”. But the corollary, and the cause of my indecision, is that a tragedy that does not impact on the school day is therefore less important, even less tragic, compared to one that does.

This was not the first time that an Australian had died in Afghanistan; these five victims joined 33 that had fallen before them. Yet there was no minute's silence or prayers in synagogues for Blaine Diddams on 2 July; for Luke Gavin on 29 October 2011. Was their death, their sacrifice, any less noteworthy?

The reason for the difference in popular reaction is an obvious fact of numeracy. Five deaths on one day is more shocking, harder to deal with, than one. Five times the tragedy generates even more than five times the reporting, more than five times the emotional and political consequences. But even then, it does not always follow that the more deaths brings more attention to each life lost.

Indeed there are at least two separate calculations at work. The first, if described mathematically, would be a complicated graph of individual attention plotted against the numeric size of the tragedy. Five losses merit more attention than one, but when the number grows too large, although the horror and shock increase, the names and stories of the individual victims recede beneath the overpowering statistics. The names of the 202 killed in Bali, or the 2977 victims of 9/11, are rarely remembered because it is a practical impossibility to list them all. Thus the rare occasions when the identity of each casualty is recalled, by the recitation of names on anniversaries, or by the permanent carving of those names into stone memorials, seem even more overpowering and poignant.

The other consideration is rarely admitted, despite its obvious effect. As far as the news splash goes, the significance of a life is proportional to how “like ours” it was. Reports of the Bali bombing even today often do not refer to 202 victims, but to “88 Australians, as well as others”. We can understand that, just as we feel the loss of family members more keenly than we do the passing of strangers, so the death of compatriots generates more emotion than that of foreigners.

Yet our feelings extend more to some of those foreigners than others. An old adage amongst journalists observes that 10 Western victims of war, or a natural disaster, gain more coverage than 100 in Asia, or 10,000 in the developing world. This indifference further compounds the tragedy. Not only do we hardly grieve for thousands of victims of earthquakes or tornados in Bangladesh or Haiti, we tend to view such events as inevitable occupational hazards of living in the third

world countries, rather than as a call to action for the rich countries to protect the world against such disasters.

The concept that each person is created “in the image of God” means many things, but one consequence is abundantly clear – that each human life is of infinite worth. If the world were fair, then each loss would receive the same attention and the same respect from the rest of humanity as any other. But the world is not fair. Newspapers, like people, are neither able nor willing to distribute their gaze with such equanimity. Just as the angel of death appears to strike at random, so its modern sidekick, the ghoul of publicity, acts without justice.

Our school held a moment’s silence on Friday. It took only a little thought to conclude that it was right and appropriate to share in a national moment of grief, and join other citizens in acknowledging the especially heavy loss for our armed forces. At that time, details had not been released, and we could only tell students of “five soldiers, bringing the total killed in Afghanistan to 38” who had died the previous day. This week we can give those soldiers names, and we can remember the bravery and service of James Martin, Robert Poate, Stjepan Milosevic, Mervyn McDonald and Nathanael Galagher. If only we could stand in silence and name every victim of every tragedy. But in the real world, we can’t.