

The Ways of Grief
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Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington
June 7, 2020

Prayer

A Prayer for a Hundred Thousand Dead; Offered by Dr. Jill Biden

As the ventilators turn off, a hundred thousand last breaths blow through our towns like a hurricane. Even with the windows boarded up, families safe at home, we feel the walls shake – feel the gale move through us, cracking the joists and struts that hold us together. It sounds like asking for forgiveness, a missing laugh, replaying a voice mail, again and again.

There are so many empty streets, so many people left behind like damaged homes, stained with waterlines of loss. Still, we keep standing. We learn the lessons of grief: kindness, compassion, even – though it seems impossible – faith.

So on this day, when the bodies are too many to count and too heavy to carry, we lay them down and lift our voices. We pray for every life now gone; every sibling, friend, neighbor; every childless parent and parentless child; for every American who has run out of prayers:

Give us the heart to heal and comfort each other through painful times.

Give us the strength to witness, when we want to look away.

Give us the courage to grieve, remembering that we are a family, no matter where we live or what we believe.

Give us the humility to know that our lives are a gift we give to each other and that we must work to make this better.

Give us the breath to use our voice, to pray without ceasing for the people we love, to speak true and kind words, to say you are not alone.

Give us the mercy to forgive ourselves, to see the rubble around us with clear eyes, to rebuild and reimagine a nation, finally, truly, of life, liberty and justice for all.

Amen!

Sermon

Ever since the pandemic began in earnest in March, I have been avidly reading anything about the 1918 pandemic, which killed over 650,000 in America alone, and 50 million deaths worldwide. Just sit with those numbers for a minute and realize that the total population was less, then, so this impact would be even more significant.

You would think that such massive loss on a scale never seen since the bubonic plague would be something that people would have talked about for decades. But in fact, it almost disappeared from public consciousness. Even in just a few years following. There is actually only 1 memorial to those lost in the 1918 pandemic, and its in the little town of Barre, Vt, which lost 200 people, more in proportion to total population than any other town in America.

Why was it so forgotten? Why was it so covered over? Part of the answer is leadership, or the lack thereof. President Woodrow Wilson forbade anyone from speaking of the illness or the deaths, even though he himself almost died of it while he was negotiating the treaty of Versailles. He was afraid it would take away from the war effort and make people too fearful to step forward to help. In fact newspapers were forbidden to speak of it in any serious way and were threatened with prosecution under the sedition act, if they did.

So there was no one, from the top of American society down, who could openly mourn and grieve such egregious losses. What happened to that grief? How much did the lack of acknowledgement damage the American psyche?

There's a lot that could be said about how the erasure of this pandemic from public memory damaged our ability to respond in any kind of nimble way to our current crisis. But for now I want to concentrate on the spiritual dimensions of grief unacknowledged and unexpressed.

In his book, *Finding Meaning: the Sixth Stage of Grief*, David Kessler says "each person's grief is as unique as their fingerprint. But what everyone has in common is

that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed. That doesn't mean needing someone to try to lessen it or reframe it for them. The need is for someone to be fully present to the magnitude of their loss without trying to point out the silver lining."

So our ability to recover and make meaning of our grief is directly related to how that grief has been acknowledged.

I think the same thing is true with any deep emotion. And we see the effects of unacknowledged emotion acting out in explosive ways right now: with the deep emotion of rage. Rage that grows and grows as death after death, abuse after abuse, oppression after oppression, goes unacknowledged for years, for decades, for centuries. Grief and rage are cousins that jockey with one another in our psyches, so the explosive combination of the pandemic, and who it has disproportionately affected, along with newly egregious acts of racist abuse and torture and murder has created, literally, a firestorm in our streets. Rage unacknowledged. Fear unacknowledged. Grief unacknowledged.

A part of why these emotions are connected is that they share the same root: powerlessness. Collectively and individually we have been almost powerless in the face of the pandemic. Collectively and individually people of color have felt powerless in addressing the abuse of centuries that has been heaped upon them.

So what helps us grapple with our grief and rage. Do we just let them take us over?

We've all heard about the stages of grief that Elizabeth Kubler Ross brought to our attention many years ago. Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. Kubler Ross never meant that these stages were pre-scripted, but descriptive. They don't go in a straight line or in any particular pace. And yet, in my experience, they do describe how grief moves and changes in us over time. I have always said that grief takes its own time. It almost has its own life within us. It can't be rationalized or forced. We have to leave room for it to live within us.

David Kessler who I quoted from earlier was actually a colleague of Kubler Ross and his new book describes another, and I think, essential stage of grief: making meaning. He says, "What does meaning look like? It can take many shapes, such as finding gratitude for the time they had with loved ones, or finding ways to commemorate and honor loved one, or realizing the brevity and value of life and

making that the springboard into some kind of major shift or change. Ultimately, meaning comes through finding a way to sustain your love for the person after their death while you're moving forward with your life."

Meaning making is a way of finding a way to take back some modicum of control, not in the sense that you can make it different, but that you can find a pattern amidst the chaos, that helps give a structure to our feelings, rather than feeling completely unmoored.

Gregory Orr is a lyric poet who has created some of the most searing and moving odes to grief I have ever read. It is a subject about which he knows a great deal. When he was 12 years old he was taken on a rite of passage in his family: his first hunting trip. And during that trip he accidentally shot and killed his brother. Such a grief seems almost insurmountable. It took him years, but he finally began to make meaning of it through his poetry.

He says, "what poetry says to us is, you know what? Turn your confusion, turn your world into words. Take it outside yourself, into language.... What the words can do is, it doesn't change the disorder; it holds the disorder, which is the opposite move of, yes, well-meaning people who want to say to anyone in a moment of crisis, somehow its okay." In one of his poems he says, "Saying the word / Is seizing the world / Not by the scruff / Not roughly / But still fervent / Still the fierce hug of love."

Not all of us can be poets, but I think in recent times we've been witness to the power of saying the words. In the #MeToo movement, experiences which had been locked away in some cage of fear and shame, were able to be unlocked into words so powerful they could bring down giants of abuse. In the Black Lives Matter movement there is a constant refrain: Say the names. Say the names of those who are usually nameless, those whose loss goes unrecognized, unacknowledged. Say their names: George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, Dion Johnson, and so many, many others.

Saying their names does not take away the grief and rage. But it gives them form and substance and almost brings them back alive again. It makes their lives, and their deaths, matter in a way that they hadn't before.

There are not enough words in the English language to take away the grief and rage and fear that have been coursing through the blood of this nation. Nothing will take them away. Nothing will make them okay. But saying the names, telling the

stories, witnessing one another's pain, helps us see some beauty and love and meaning amidst the chaos.

Another poem from Gregory Orr:

This is what was bequeathed us:

This earth the beloved left

And, leaving,

Left to us.

No other world

But this one:

Willows and the river

And the factory

With its black smokestacks.

No other shore, only this bank

On which the living gather.

No meaning but what we find here.

No purpose but what we make.

That, and the beloved's clear instructions:

Turn me into song; sing me awake"

We make meaning of our grief and rage when we turn it into a call for how we are to live: to recognize the brevity of life and vow to live the life we are given to the fullest. When we take our rage at injustice and turn it into a quest to make change.

Again, from Gregory Orr: "To be alive: not just the carcass / but the spark. / that's crudely put, but ... / if we're not supposed to dance, / why all this music."

There is music, still. Music that helps us feel all the feelings. Music that stirs us back into life. Music that calls to us, saying in the midst of everything, we still can dance.

So let us tell the stories, say the names, dance the sad and beautiful dance of grief, raise the fist of commitment to justice. There may we find our way back to life. There may we find our way back to one another.

Benediction

From Patricia McKernon Runkle

When you meet someone deep in grief

Slip off your needs

And set them by the door.

Enter barefoot

This darkened chapel

Hollowed by loss

Hallowed by sorry

Its gray stone walls and floor.

You, congregation

Of one

Are here to listen

[listen to the words, the poems, the names, the calling]

Kneel in the back pew

...

Let the candles speak.