

"Fountain of Sorrow: The Grief of an Entire Nation"
 Readings and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
 October 10, 2021

From "They're Not Coming Back" by Rob Dyer

Churches around the nation had a reset button hit. In-person church was halted and then, slowly, restarted. In the meanwhile ... our church members were laying down some of the activities and hustle of everyday life that used to conflict with church options.

But they were doing this all while at the same time picking up the stress of daily pandemic navigation and experiencing the rise of political and social tensions. And a general feeling of exhaustion grew in our people.

From *Becoming Wise* By Krista Tippett

We are at such an interesting, unnerving moment. As we take up the task of inventing common life for this century, we are struggling, collectively, with divisions of race and income and class that are not new but freshly anguishing. Here's what's new: a surfacing of grief.

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It's early evening and for those around the table, it's been a long day. All of us have work to which we are deeply dedicated and that demands much of us. Each of us brings the same kind of dedication to the Immigration Advocacy and Support Center. We greet each other as we always do, with genuine gladness. It is good to be together. It is in this spirit that the Board meeting begins.

In a matter of precious moments, that genuine gladness is shattered by anger. A hand comes down hard on the table and we are jolted to a new and strange terrain. Tears are shed. Rash decisions are made. Damage is done (although now mended). But in the moment a general feeling of exhaustion has left us dazed and confused.

Later, when trying to figure out what so quickly made heat rise and fury set the room aflame, the reason is plain: grief is a powerful accelerant and it is surfacing everywhere of late.

Of course it is. Our communities, our nation, is a fountain of sorrow and we are only now beginning to recognize its depth and affects. To grasp the underpinnings we need only to speak these awful numbers:

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In our country
44.2 million cases
710,000 deaths

In our world
219 million cases
4.5 million deaths

But that's the start of the sorrow. The pile on comes when we consider that it didn't have to be this bad ... that people of color, Black and Indigenous bore the brunt of the fall out ... that disinformation saturates and poisons minds and hearts ...

That's the broad brushstroke of sorrow. Here are a few finer points ...

That our children and youth have suffered so and with them, their parents. That we missed out on shared milestones and celebrations. That in our times of trouble, we were denied the comfort of loved ones for so long *and* as heartbreaking, that we were denied *offering* comfort to others. I was struck by how hard it was to live without a sense of spontaneity. No spur of the moment meeting for breakfast or for a beer or cup of coffee. The losses were large and small and I'm not going to be able to give voice to all of them here. But I want to offer you the chance to do a bit of that. If you are here in Unity Hall, turn to a nearby Soul and share a loss that still lingers in your heart. If you are in the online pews, share the same in the YouTube chat.

We are each of us grieving something / someone / some way.

We have been through something together and that something is STILL, STILL, STILL, not over. Or at least it's still not enough better so that we don't have to hum the hymns on Sunday morning, for one. That calls for a stamp of our feet. If you're frustrated and sad and anxious and you know it, stamp your feet.

Stamping our feet together feels good. It lets off some steam. It makes us laugh. How do we do that in larger community and as a nation?

In an article in "The Atlantic" writer Garrett Graff reflects on the impact 9/11 had on the ways that we grieve as a nation. He points out "the new set of rituals for collective grief." This will sound familiar to you. He says that now the aftermath of a range of tragedies from shootings to natural disasters, the aftermath follows a distinct arc: "The community that experiences the tragedy announces itself 'strong,' [as in "Orlando Strong" (slide)... or "Boston Strong" (slide), flags fly, the news media run pictures and profiles of the victims whose promising lives were

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cut short, the president and other national leaders arrive for a mass funeral in a stadium or convention hall, and monuments get built quickly.”

But our collective grief in the pandemic is different. Our grief is as fractured as we as a nation are fractured from each other and from our views of the pandemic itself. There is no spiritual unity to speak of and for many Americans, including many Souls gathered here this morning, that in and of itself, makes for even more sorrow. Graff concludes,

“... whatever shared national spirit existed in the first weeks of the pandemic has been fractured beyond repair. ... [T]he unending duration of the tragedy—every day feels like the 200th replay of the same day in March [2020] —makes our grief feel all the more exhausting. We have nothing to unite around The sadness and fury are still present, but ... they don't galvanize; they paralyze.” From “The Grief Americans No Longer Share”. *The Atlantic*. September 20, 2020

And as Krista Tippett wise observed, this one is such *“an interesting, unnerving moment. As we take up the task of inventing common life for this century, we are struggling, collectively, with divisions of race and income and class that are not new but freshly anguishing. Here's what's new: a surfacing of grief.”*

Here's what we know about grief and about sorrow: it can be paralyzing if not given voice or space to break loose. If we don't name it or stamp our feet. But then, you have to take it a step further. We have to integrate sorrow so that it turns into something beautiful otherwise, it festers and it's not so pretty when it does. It comes out looking like anger complete with hands banging on tables where friends stare wide-eyed, dazed and confused. Again, how do we do this in community?

To state the obvious, All Souls is a faith community. As a reminder: that means we kind of specialize in tending to and then integrating sorrow – individual and collective. We ritualize grief in simple ways that belie a profound power that leads to healing. We speak the names of those we have loved and lost. We come forward and light candles holding joy and sorrow. We sing and sometimes, we hum. We remember together. We remember that love is strong as death.

Krista Tippett's wisdom, shared earlier, was part of a chapter entitled “Love”. In it she remembers a conversation she had with the late Congressman John Lewis. The two spoke of beloved community - how to create it. With interest I re-read that passage with this moment in mind – our divisions and still, the need to collectively grieve.

You'll remember that Rep. Lewis was a leader in the civil rights movement – a very young man at the time – and was beaten as he and hundreds of others attempted to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Talk about a divided nation. Let's not forget that this time is not the first in our modern history when the nation has been divided. But honestly, has it ever been otherwise? Even so, we can't give up the dream of sharing one world. We are Universalists! We can't forget that that means we must nurture a dream of one world as we are all interdependent. We are all siblings. Somehow.

Keep in mind that I say so as a white, cis-gendered, educated, able-bodied (for now), well-enough-off human. I *don't* say this as a Black young man beaten up by white police officers as I fought for the right to vote.

How Rep. Lewis kept his heart from turning to stone? Here's what he said about creating beloved community with hearts wide open. He said that ...

You live as if you're already there, that you're already in that community, part of that sense of one family. If you visualize it, if you can even have faith that it's there, for you it is already there. And during the early days of the movement, I believed that the only true and real integration for that sense of the beloved community existed within the movement itself. Because in the final analysis we did become a circle of trust, a band of brothers and sisters. It didn't matter whether you were black or white. It didn't matter whether you came from the North to the South, or whether you're a Northerner or Southerner. We were one.

We studied. We prepared ourselves. It's ... not something that is natural. You have to be taught the way of peace, the way of love, the way of nonviolence. In the religious sense, in the moral sense, you can say that in the bosom of every human being, there is a spark of the divine. From Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living by Krista Tippett pg. 111

Which, I remind you, is exactly what we say when we dedicate our children. We say that within each child there is a spark of the divine.

I think that in this moment – when sorrow is so close to the surface of every human heart, when our country is experiencing a surfacing of grief so profound – that maybe, maybe, acting as if, as if we are already living in beloved community, while also tending to and honoring our personal sorrows through tried-and-true grief rituals and perhaps new ones, maybe, *just maybe* this grief will not only lift but also it may help us to create the beloved community of which we all dream. It's worth a try. Let's try to live into the "as if."

Let's be gentle with ourselves and with each other through these days, dear Souls. Let's find ways of jumping into the fountain of sorrow that is our nation, and instead of drowning in our sorrow, let's kick up our heels – toss coins into the fountain and wish for and live into beloved community turning our personal and collective grief into something truly beautiful.

Keep on, Beautiful Souls.

Amen. Blessed be.

Further Reading:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/america-loses-its-capacity-common-grief/616234/>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/05/grief-mourning-death-pandemic/610933/>