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Constellating Grief

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Constellating Grief

Cover Page Footnote

To all of the people, identities, experiences and expectations that have died in this pandemic. Your losses will continue to inform our shapeshifting grief and allow us to integrate your important lessons, at a pace that is "just right" for us.

Over 500,000 people have died from Covid-19 in the United States in the past year, with more dying every day. Each day, we find ourselves in the middle of a seemingly uncontrollable pandemic with new, unknown Covid-19 variants complicating our progress.

Pause here.

Take a breath.

Notice your body posture and where you might be holding tension.

What happened in your body as you read 500,000 people and linked it with death?

What does this number feel like? Is it hot? Cold? Quivering? Out of reach?

There is no right or wrong answer, simply your personal experience.

I invite you to feel the edges of this number and notice if you are inside of it somewhere, or simply on the edge, looking in.

This numerical way of categorizing our loss does not do justice to the way in which our lives have been upended and forever altered. The structuring of our losses into columns and grids - it is a way for us to disconnect from the reality of our experiences.



There is definitely hope at the end of this long, winding tunnel (in the form of a vaccine and herd immunity), but even when we get to a place where we can hold one another again, there will be the reckoning of our losses. This essay is an invitation to examine the various types of grief that show up in your physical body right now. Instead of waiting for the “right time” to investigate and process the changes in your life, I invite you to start that journey now. Take your time with the words and notice how they land in your body as sensations, emotions, images or memories. If you feel like something is too big or brings up a fresh wound, I invite you to sit back and orient to your surroundings. Notice where you are right now:

What do you see?

What do you hear?

What do you smell?

What do you feel?

What do you taste?

Notice what you notice - how does it make you feel?

What resonates within you?

Once you feel like you have a sense of where you are, take a moment to notice your breath - the way it gently expands and contracts in your body, much like your heart is always expanding and contracting. If you feel settled, feel free to return to these words in your own time, with a sense of open curiosity. They will be here waiting for you, whenever you are ready.



Everyone has lost something or someone in this pandemic, yet not all of our losses have been validated or seen as worthy of grief. To clarify, I'd like to explain that I don't just mean the death of a human being when I speak about loss. I also mean the loss of the sense of

control over our lives and our patterned ways of being - having to wear a mask, stand six feet apart, wash our hands relentlessly, give up hugs, avoid in-person gatherings, losing our jobs, losing all forms of our health, losing access to healthy food and healthcare, losing childcare and schools, losing relationships and losing our sense of who we are.

Grief is a complicated word with a lot of misconceptions and misunderstandings. We often see grief as the elephant in the room, waiting for us when our loved ones die, swallowing us whole and leaving behind an unrecognizable mass. From my experience as a human being who has lived through and survived various types of death, I find that this is not so. Grief shows up before the visceral loss - it's the slow disintegration of our past knowing - the slipping of our steadiness and sure-footed certainty of who we are, where we came from and what we are doing. Some may call this process anticipatory grief, but there is also a subtle energy shift in our body that may not be consciously acknowledged.

Most of us have no idea who we are or where we came from and grief is the final puzzle piece that breaks us wide open. Many of us have lost our ancestral lineage through violent means or purposeful amnesia, which untethers us from a sense of place in our body, spirit, and land. If our ancestors fled their respective countries or were brought here unwillingly, they might share their stories of violence or refuse to connect to the traumas they carried. As a result, we tend to avoid the pain and suffering of our family line, feeling shame, guilt, and deep wounding as it continues down our lineage through our children and grandchildren. We have the power to stop the embodied generational trauma, grief, and shame by seeking out the sacred art of ritual.

Many of our ancestors processed grief by wailing, dancing, preparing and sharing food, telling stories, sitting with the deceased body and leaning into tightly woven communities. There are still cultures today who have a healthier understanding of death and have sidestepped the death-phobic culture of the West. Those of us who grew up and continue to live in Western culture are often left bereft with a deeper well of emptiness - grasping at fragments of conversation, celebration and remembrance of those who have passed. If only we could hearken back into our known lineages to bring forth a new way to carry death and unburden ourselves of the idea that grief is something averted or unspoken. It is not that our bodies don't remember how to go through the sacred rituals of death, but that our culture seemingly shames us into silence, disconnecting us from our birthright to grieve. While it may appear that we have grieving rituals in place in our American culture, we actually don't give much time and space to an embodied sense of grieving. Grief is presented as a linear event and is delegated to the time right after death, at the funeral/memorial and possibly on the anniversary of the death. It's a time constrained activity that limits the reality of our loss.



When we lose our job or a friendship, we lose a sense of ourselves - our identity and labels shift. We are no longer just a worker, a lover, a friend, a sibling, etc. but we have shifted into a new awareness of being. Somehow those labels fade away in the face of loss and we are now someone new, someone different. It can be very dysregulating when the rawness of our current self meets up with the powerful storyline of our past self.

A storyline, a perspective of what has been - that is our true identity. And as we navigate together this life in the time of Covid, our storylines seem to get as muddled as our timelines,

and our disordered sense of time seems to flit about haphazardly. If we feel like we are out of time and no longer able to identify the person we have become, we have entered a state of dysphoria - a transcendental and liminal space lacking an anchor in reality. In fact, our binary ways of thinking seem to get in the way of our ability to integrate these new storylines and move into a world of fluid and ever-changing possibility. Stepping fully into the shape of our authentic selves, in whatever form that takes, is true transformation and integration. But it's slow, hard work. In some cases, our old patterns and categories of identification have either been lost to us or we have become overwhelmed by their unhelpful or unhealthy attributes.

When we lose sense of ourselves, it's easy to fall into negative self-talk, a diminished sense of worthiness and the deep dark hole of depression. As we step away from these relationships, understandings and ways of being, we often feel empty or devoid of purpose and meaning. We wander around aimlessly, waiting for something to pull us in the "right" direction.



What if we are simply misinterpreting spaciousness for emptiness? Depending on our current mood or perspective, emptiness could also be seen as a large space, waiting for the right people, experiences or professions to show up. Additionally, we might miss out on opportunities or positive changes if we are so focused on the things that we no longer have. Gratitude can be the gift that somehow makes sense of the chaos around us and pulls us firmly into a direct experience with the "here and now." Grief is often interpreted as "big work" and "heavy," which lands us in a fear paradigm, whereby we avoid grief at all costs. What if, through the naming of our individual threads of grief, we were able to weave together a winged creature of our lived experiences? What if our lived experiences were able to inform our ways of flying and soaring through this new landscape as a collective? What if our numerous griefs allowed us to sense into this natural world that we currently inhabit? It's scary to lose a sense of yourself and way of being in the world, yet the fear is not always present. Other beautiful possibilities show up when we tend to our grief with compassion and love. And while it's true that grief is something that lives within us and through us for the rest of our days, it isn't always in the same form, sensation or experience. Our grief is what makes us empathetic humans and allows us to connect with one another in a seemingly disconnected world. As social creatures, we all need connection and community to keep us together - so that some of us can fully be in the grieving process while others hold space and witness our alchemical expansions and contractions.



This viral pandemic has also laid bare the truth of inequity in all forms in our country, so that some days we feel like the crushing weight of all these sorrows, pains and unfair situations will completely destroy us. Yet somehow humanity is surviving. It's almost like sharing our stories, struggles and anxieties is gently tying us back together. It's as if we were a fly, lovingly held in the web of the spider, who will devour who we once were, so we can become something new. I imagine the tender care that the spider infuses into its web, for it is only abiding by the rules of the chain of life and the spider means no real harm - it just has to eat, too. We all have to die sometime, and the speed in which the spider snatches up its prey can be likened to the speed

of death itself. The process shows up in different ways, and while it is anticipated on varying levels, it still takes us by surprise. In this way, grief is an inherent shapeshifting experience with no final destination or form - simply the understanding that all things change, whether you feel ready or not. The web of community and compassion can help us reorient and emerge as an agent of change, with support, love and a chance to be seen.

Pause here.

Take a breath.

Notice the way your breath moves in and out of your body.

Bring awareness to your body posture and what you might be holding or releasing.

What happens in your body when you think about connection? Community?

Notice if you are carrying personal grief.

Shift your awareness out a bit and notice the shared grief in your community and relationships.

Which emotions are coming up for you?

In your own time, I invite you to orient to your surroundings and notice what you notice.



Unfortunately, we seem to notice the feeling of disconnectedness more than our ability to purely connect with a simple glance, masked smile or wave and the beauty of community seems so far removed from our interpretations of this pandemic life. Grief can sometimes seduce us into the land of unfeeling and unknowing, numbing us to the reality of the world around us. It promises us rest, but really just tricks us into submissiveness. When grief shows up this way, we are at our limits and feel exhausted or overwhelmed by all of the feelings and turmoil. We sometimes dissociate our minds from our body and inner knowing - particularly when being present is incredibly painful. Compounding this intimate style of fracturing, is living in a death-phobic culture. We are taught myriad ways to “get through” the deaths that show up, but we are rarely shown how to honor, celebrate or embrace the sacred journey that our past self or beloved has traversed.

Now is the time to reclaim our deaths, births and rebirths. We must honor the gift that grief gives us, which is the ability to slow down and be present with our feelings, sensations, memories and stories. I’ve noticed an interesting pattern in the way we’ve been navigating the pandemic. Many of us have been fighting against, running away from, or simply shutting down the reality of our losses, which means that we are denying our grief a chance to be processed fully. Additionally, our culture wants us to continue on this unrealistic storyline that everything is “okay.” Well, everything is not okay. And while that may seem big and bold and insurmountable, we can all be “not okay” together. We have the power to show up for one another and hold space in the simplest of ways.



The most revolutionary and radical shift that we can make as a society is to release our fear of grief, ride the waves of our emotions and sense the presence of those in our community who sit with us. We need to orient towards the neutral, to get us out of our collective avoidant

and anxious patterns. Simply noticing the people, animals, scents, sounds and fabric on our bodies can gently wake us from our numbing slumber. Waking up to our grief doesn't need to be sudden or jarring, we can slowly and gradually orient our senses to the reality around us, without judgment. It is possible to waken with the subtle curiosity of a newborn baby or engage with a quiet alert mindset. In this state, we are not overwhelmed and we are not overly clingy to the sense of things around us. Instead, we are allowing ourselves to be lovingly shaped by our new reality, with compassion, patience and a deep regard for the alchemical process that we call grief. Feeling grief means that we have tapped into the universal frequency of love, which is the most powerful frequency that we can feel and become. We do this by experiencing love, being seen as our authentic selves and being held in a manner that will forever change us. The biggest truth is that we will never be quite the same again, and that's scary, terrifying, wonderful and exciting all at the same time.

Our journey together is coming to an end.

Take a breath.

In your own time, bring awareness to your feet and your contact with the ground.

Keep breathing -notice how your lungs expand and contract; how your abdomen rises and falls.

I invite you to bring your awareness to your heart center.

As you breathe, imagine your breath coming in and out of the center of your chest.

Be curious about what resides there, in your heart.

Take your time; give it some space.

There is no rush or timeline for this process and it can be repeated as often as you wish.

As you bring your awareness out towards your surroundings, take time to orient and notice what may look or feel different to you, without judgment. Take a moment to practice "just being" in a fast-paced world that centers "doing." I invite you to choose rest, slow down and embrace the possibilities waiting for you in the liminal space of the grieving process, knowing that you are never truly alone. We are all here with you - carrying on and remembering in our own unique way.