Community Grief

There is a remarkable scale of shared loss in the U.S. but it doesn't often translate to collective grief or mourning, partly because of the deep fractures in contemporary U.S. society. Nevertheless there are great stakes in grieving together, among them, a sense of connection, and shared fate; and the work of righting our social injustices. Sites of public memory, such as monuments and memorials, can be powerful sites of the work of collective grief, and healing.

Here's a heartbreaking factoid about the United States: "The U.S. is an outlier in the level of gun violence it tolerates. The rate and severity of mass shootings is without parallel in the world outside conflict zones" (The New York Times). The New York Times reported this data earlier this summer in the wake of mass shootings in Buffalo and Uvalde, just ten days apart. (The total number of shootings this year is now 414 according to the Gun Violence Archive)

The devastation in the wake of mass shootings represent a distressingly familiar form of shared loss for Americans. "We are a nation traumatized into forgetting, psyches so pulverized by mass death that we vacillate wildly between rage and numbness—waiting until the cycle begins again, so frequent it masquerades as normalcy," writes Jacqueline Lewis, senior minister at a New York church (Slate).

In the last few years, these losses have been layered upon by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has taken the lives of more than one million people, a spike in violence against Asian American communities, alongside ongoing violence against BIPOC communities, including acts of police violence. Nora Gross, visiting assistant professor of sociology at Boston College observes that collective grief reaches beyond events with a death toll. "We can also be collectively grieving for the loss of a way of life, a foreclosed future or a set of unrealized ideals — as in the pandemic, climate grief or our collective grief over the scourge of gun violence in our country," Gross explains (CNBC).

The January 6 riots at the U.S. Capitol represent an important example of this. "We talk about grief as the breaking of the assumptive world. We have an assumptive world in which we have peaceful transitions," said grief researcher David Kessler in the immediate aftermath of the riot. "We can work anything out, we can disagree but it doesn't make you my enemy. And all that broke down for us yesterday" (KCRW).

Each of these examples makes clear that many different kinds of losses rip across American society, but collective grief—defined as grief experienced when a group of people like a city, country or those belonging to a particular race or ethnicity share an extreme loss (Research Paper, CNBC)— and the corresponding meaning-making processes that allow the nation to make sense of them together, are often harder to come by in the United States mainstream.

Nevertheless, collective grief is replete among American communities outside of the mainstream.

Marissa Evans, a journalist with the Minneapolis Star Tribune writes, "Grief in this country has always had an equity problem." (The Atlantic). She was articulating the particular depth and complexity of collective grief that Black American people face amid small and large scale acts of racial violence. She continues reflecting on the disproportionate deaths from COVID-19 in Black communities and the police and vigilante killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Tony McDade. "2020 has only amplified the issue, as Black deaths have come in back-to-back blows, from the coronavirus, police brutality, and the natural deaths of those we look up to most. Each new death, each new example of an old injustice, renews our grief, sending little shock waves of sorrow. We are in the middle of a Black bereavement crisis, and we do not have the privilege or time to grieve."

In the referenced piece, Evans also helps clarify the mechanics of collective grief, that is, what factors are present that make certain kinds of losses land as collective and shared, and other losses land as private and personal. "We [Black people] feel the pain and loss of Black life as if it were our very own blood that had been brutalized—because it easily could have been," she writes.

This is resonant with the idea of fictive kinship, a sociological team that describes connections among Black Americans. The term refers to the extension of kinship or familial obligations and relationships to individuals not otherwise related by blood or marriage (Research Paper). Evans recalls President Obama's evocation of the language of family in relation to the killing of Trayvon Martin. "You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could have been my son," President Obama said after Trayvon's killer was acquitted. "Obama, along with countless other black people, mourned Martin's death and the acquittal of his killer as if Martin had been our own son or sibling, […] This familial language is metaphorical, of course—I know that the pain I felt seeing [Philando] Castile killed doesn't compare to what his loved ones felt. But it's the best metaphor black people have to express the grief that unites us," she writes.

We may summarize the above by saying, a sense of shared fate and a sense of deep connection—the very qualities that the contemporary United States has difficulty cultivating at scale—are essential to experiencing grief collectively. Amid a zeitgeist marked by culture wars and deep political divides, the devastation of shared loss does not definitively translate to shared grief or mourning.

Grief researcher Mary Frances O'Connor of University of Arizona observes that our brains experience grief related to personal losses differently from collective losses, in ways that may explain the disconnect. In crises, she observes, our brains juggle multiple needs. "You can't underestimate the need for belonging," she told the New York Times. "When something terrible happens, people want to connect with their "in-group," she said, where they feel they belong, which can push people further into partisan camps" (The New York Times). That fleeing to spaces of belonging explains the tendency after tragedies like mass shootings to retreat to fractured talking points about how we move through the challenges of our moment. "Instead of grieving together and taking collective action, though, each crisis now seems to send the country deeper into division and fighting over what to do in response," writes Elizabeth Dias, reporter at the New York Times (The New York Times).

Dias' reporting captures other challenges to collective grief in the United States, including the numbing effect of horrific acts of violence that ripple across the country with alarming frequency. "It's not that we don't care. We've reached the limit of how much we can cry and hurt," Rabbi Mychal B. Springer, manager of clinical pastoral care at New York Presbytarian said. "And yet we have to. We have to value each life as a whole world, and be willing to cry for what it means that that whole world has been lost" (The New York Times).

Rabbi Springer's words reverberate with an important insight—much is lost to the dearth of collective grief and mourning in mainstream U.S. culture. Collective grief can be generative particularly when it stirs communities toward transformative action; for instance, grief over the loss of the lives of many, including four little girls, to the 1963 Ku Klux Klan attack 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama was among the animating emotions of the civil rights movement (Research Paper).

Researchers in the department of psychology at University of Arizona, Da'Mere T. Wilson and Mary-Frances O'Connor., argue that grief's generative potential may be found in its etymology. "Perhaps the best way to understand the generative nature of grief is through the word's etymological roots," they write. "The word 'grief' stems from the Old French *grever* meaning afflict, burden, or oppress, which became the Old French 'grief' meaning wrong, grievance, injustice, or calamity. Individuals who experience the loss of a loved one often note experiencing anger because of the acute sense of unfairness or injustice that accompanies the loss of a loved one … The anger and sense of injustice that marks the grief experience makes it a powerful experience with the potential to catalyze efforts to "defend oneself or loved ones" against injustice. This act of resistance and thriving in the face of grief is functional and has both individual- and community-level assets" (Research Paper).

Hiding from collective grief, consultant Bianca Mabute-Louie argues, is part of what keeps sanitized myths of the United States alive. Myths like, the idea that evading of the truths of genocide, enslavement, interment, forced labour, and broader U.S. histories of racial violence, which feed into myths that systemic racism is not real.

Conversely, narrativizing collective grief could disrupt those patterns.

"There's something sacred about Asian Americans making our heartache visible," Mabute-Louie writes. "As we mourn publicly, we delegitimize the current order of things. Simply put, our tears, our poems, and our testimonies communicate that things are not okay and that we have been in pain. When we take up space with our grief, we dispel the 'model minority' myth that adamantly claims Asian Americans don't experience racial trauma. When we tell the truth about racial violence, we challenge the hegemonic numbness and silence. We reveal the fallacy of America's 'post-racial' narrative, and our stories rescue us from disappearing into this country's amnesiac fog" (Elle).

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The above exploration of the limits to collective grief in the U.S. notwithstanding, there are moments when the U.S. public rallies in near universal outpourings of grief. A recent example: the protest movement following the police killing of George Floyd, the largest protest movement in U.S. history. Political scientist David McIvor writes, "As they unfolded over the next days and weeks, the protests seemed like a moment when Black grief — a feeling familiar for Black Americans after the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Trayvon Martin, Emmett Till and so many others — might finally become collective grief for the rest of America" (The New York Times). The scale of collective grief following Floyd's death, the push into the mainstream (perhaps seen most clearly in the shifts in acceptance of Black Lives Matter, particularly among white Americans) McIvor argues, was partly a response to the loss of democratic ideals: "the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that was extinguished for Mr. Floyd and for too many others."

And, McIvor continues, the kind of outpouring of collective grief mourning in contexts like the killing of Mr. Floyd has important potential for the health of a democracy: "A democratic politics of mourning implies not only the clarification of our public ideals and commitments — our civic attachments — but also a wrestling with the ambivalence in American history and Americans' psyches. Mourning is the work not only of integrating what has been lost into our personality, but also of integrating the personality itself: our fears and our hopes, our vulnerabilities and our power."

Choosing to engage ambivalence would require stepping away from patterns that often emerge in times of grief. Such patterns nudge communities away from complexity toward easy views of good versus evil such as those that gripped the U.S. public in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. In such contexts, “a complex picture of identity and history that might inspire dialogue and collaborative action, [is replaced by] the raw energy of mourning channeled through the quick and relatively easy identification of scapegoats or magical fixes.”

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It goes without saying that the U.S. stands to learn a great deal from other cultures about practices of collective grief and mourning. In particular, the example of nations like Germany and South Africa are often cited as parallels to the country’s history. Germany is well known to have numerous monuments and memorials to those killed by the racial and fascist violence engineered by the Third Reich, and to have evolved a national culture that has reckoned to a large-degree with both the violence done by the German state and its soldiers. The country for instance has no monuments to Nazis and numerous monuments to the victims of genocidal violence.

But complex engagement with the particular role of foot-soldiers, the Wehrmacht, in the atrocities of the Third Reich, represents a relatively recent shift, the result of a concerted effort to reckon both with collective grief and collective responsibility (The Atlantic). In the first five decades after World War II, the idea that the Wehrmacht were largely innocent, was popular.[1] “Remarks exculpating German soldiers continued to be made in public through the end of the 20th century… ‘Those brave men who defended their homeland against the Bolshevik menace were no better or worse than millions of soldiers before or after them,’ [the talking points went].”

As a corrective, the Hamburg Institute for Social Research created a Wehrmacht Exhibition, which spotlighted the atrocities carried out by the Wehrmacht. The exhibition toured 33 German and Austrian cities from 1995 to 1999, and helped dispel the myth of an innocent Wehrmacht (Wikipedia).

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The story of Germany, and of models the truth and reconciliation commission of South Africa, is a reminder that memory is often an element of collective grief and of the work of tapping into grief’s generative potential. Of course, monuments and memorials, public spaces of remembrance, are often contested in the United States, having become a tool in the hands of those who seek to sanitize and obfuscate parts of the country's history. Nevertheless, many monuments across the country are expressions of what we might qualify as a generative collective grief. Two of those, the Vietnam War Memorial, and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice at the Equal Justice Initiative are worthy of consideration.

Both memorials are feats in the power of design in the work of articulating and reckoning with grief in its collective form.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice is a six-acre site that uses sculpture, art, and design to contextualize racial terror. Among its striking elements are eight hundred Corten suspended steel monuments to represent the counties in the United States where racial terror lynchings took place, each engraved with the names of its victims. (Equal Justice Initiative) There is also an ongoing effort to collect soil from these sites of racial violence, and integrate them into the memorial. Ultimately, “the experience of moving though the memorial provokes feelings of deep unease, remorse and loss but also speaks of an unresolved and silenced history” (architecture.com).

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[1] Much like the argument that some white Americans make today that their ancestors didn’t enslave people, or efforts to otherwise sanitize their history, observes Susan Neiman.

The Vietnam War Memorial is similarly richly complex, a memorial to U.S. soldiers killed in the war in Vietnam. The memorial is a V-shaped wall of black granite sliced into the ground, on which has been carved the name of every one of the more than 56,000 Americans who died in Vietnam (The New York Times). Maya Lin, the artist and architect who designed the memorial as an undergraduate student at Yale University speaks of the cathartic act of healing that can come from searching for the name of a loved one on the wall.

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Ultimately, collective grief is about our connections with others. “We share collective grief because we have empathy,” one psychologist says (CNBC). It reminds us of our deep ties to each other, of the fact that our lives and worlds are interconnected. As former U.S. poet laureate Tracy K Smith reflects, reacting to those who orchestrate the losses that trigger collective grief: “it is easy to sink into that feeling [that these people are] wild outliers. But when I slow down I realize there is something alive in our culture that has harmed those people. Whatever that something is, it is harming all of us, we are all vulnerable to it, it wields some sort of influence upon us, no matter who we are” (The New York Times).

In grieving and mourning together, we step into the possibility of deeper connection, and perhaps may find paths to societal healing, and more just futures together.

— Dupe Oyebolu
for The Mash-Up Americans