How do we grieve the hundreds of thousands of people the COVID-19 pandemic has killed?

We posed this question to five writers.

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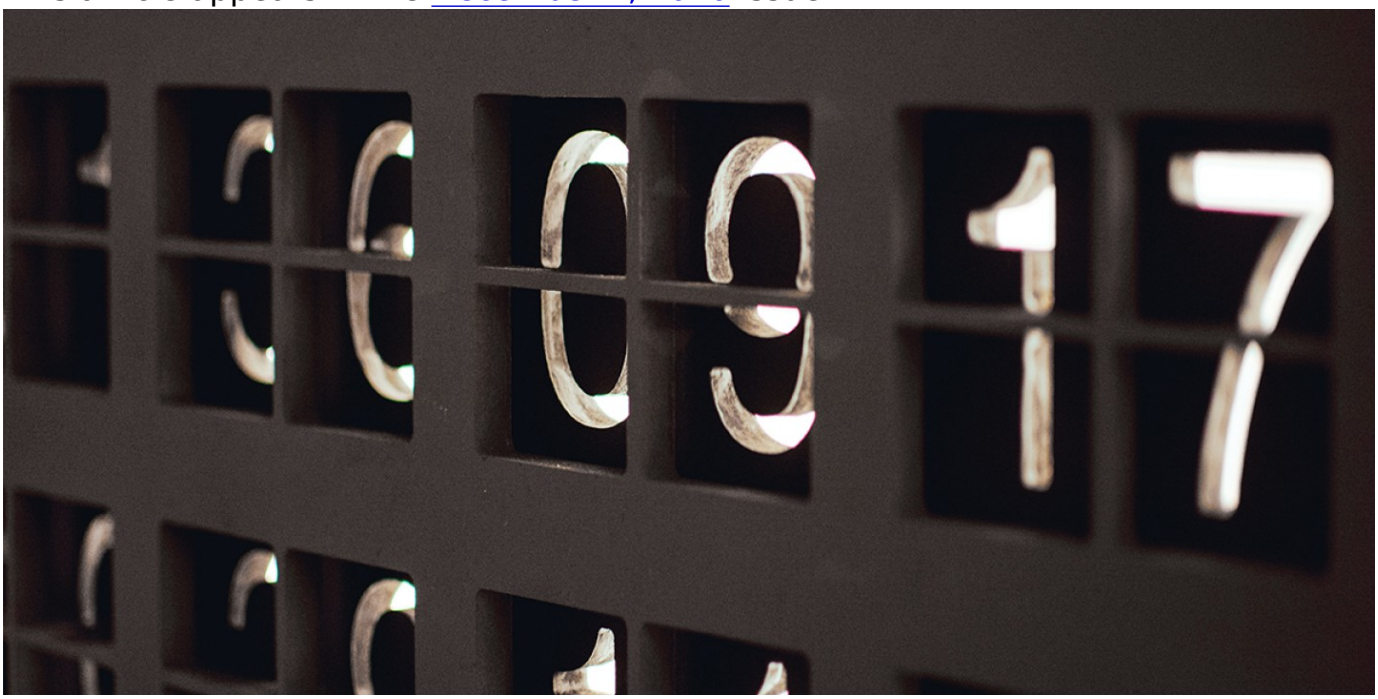

(Photo by Nick Hillier on Unsplash)

Grief is a strange thing. One might describe the pain we feel as love, stopped at the source. Grief is what happens to love when its subject is no longer there, when it has no one to receive it. The effect is pain.

Something similar happens with communal grief. We feel the pain of loss when we recognize humanity—our own or that of our loved ones—in the tragedy. The nation grieved in 1986 as we watched the tragedy of the space shuttle *Challenger*, the turn from pride and wonder as a schoolteacher traveled into space to shock and sorrow upon viewing her very public death. We grieved as a nation in 2001 as a mundane morning was disrupted by the televised deaths of thousands of innocent civilians in

terrorist attacks.

Those moments of tragedy, like countless others, brought us together in a shared outpouring of grief over the passing of people we didn't know. We didn't have to know them to shoulder the pain with their families and grieve their loss. It was visceral.

In October, we learned that 545 migrant children remain separated from their families. That should have roused a national response, but it didn't. Neither did COVID-19 when it began its route through the United States, impacting predominantly states run by Democrats—our federal government chose to ignore it. Now the virus is all over the country, and more than 240,000 people are dead as a result. And yet we still have not grieved, not as we did for previous national tragedies. Something is wrong.

There's no right way to grieve. But a lack of grief when it's clear that trauma has happened may indicate that the body is unwell.

When social boundaries are drawn too narrowly on the maps of obligation, we miss a lot. Narrow lines of obligation make it less likely that we see humanity in the losses—those suffering are outside the bounds of our concern. Many have not yet felt the impact of pandemic-related deaths on their personal lives. These deaths remain for them little more than a political talking point, one that helps or doesn't help their side.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was speaking of another moment of great communal pain when he said, "It remains an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below . . . from the perspective of the suffering." The suffering group he refers to were oppressed and outcast people, a community placed outside the boundaries of obligation, whose pain is usually invisible.

To realize the moral fiber of our community, to become who we must be in this strange time of tremendous suffering, we need to see through the eyes of the groups of people who are suffering the most within the country that we'd like to call great. Even if we have not been touched by this trauma, we are humanized when we acknowledge and value and grieve the lives of others, especially those who are suffering. Perhaps, if we can learn to mourn 200,000 people, it won't become 300,000.

In the midst of such a huge number is ambiguity and anxiety about the future. But if we can see the toll taken on our communities by the wave of pandemic-related deaths, perhaps we can recover something of our collective humanity as well.

—Reggie Williams, who teaches Christian ethics at McCormick Theological Seminary and is the author of Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance

It's impossible to hold one person's pain for them, much less to hold the pain of thousands upon thousands. In this pandemic, either we're in the storm or we're in the eye of the storm, floating there and feeling it all around us—the grief, the disrupted lives, the danger. What could happen and what has already happened reverberate in the air.

The word *bereft* keeps occurring to me. It's a form of *bereave*, a word from Old English that originally meant to deprive of, to rob, to plunder, to dispossess. It's strangely fitting.

We are a plundered nation, a society robbed of more of its people than was necessary because of a ruling class more intent on plunder than on the safety of human beings. But then, we always have been a plundered land, a nation built on the backs of the labor of exploited peoples. And being "robbed" of old ideas of nation is the right thing at this time, the only way forward. The pandemic has hurt people of color the most; it has found an alarming number of Americans willing to sacrifice the aged or the immunocompromised in the name of continuing with life as usual. We must be collectively dispossessed of the illusion that some Americans deserve safety and health more than others. We must fully internalize the lesson of our own fragility and use this knowledge to defend ourselves against being robbed of our humanity.

The arts are in a unique position to teach us to hold such complexity and contradiction. When the pandemic hit, I had just started an artist's residency at Emmaus Way, a church in Durham, North Carolina. As a spiritual-but-not-religious writer, I was eager to find out what I could offer this community and what I might learn. But soon the quarantine began, and my readings and workshop went online. In those confusing and painful early days of isolation, I quickly realized the community lacked the emotional bandwidth to write about what they were

witnessing. So I turned to poetry, offering up the words of poets, those experts in witness.

I shared poems by Franny Choi, Ross Gay, Tomas Tranströmer, Naomi Shihab Nye, and US Poet Laureate Joy Harjo. I found myself reflecting on how poets help us "hold" the difficult truths, such as the rage that can accompany grief or the history of injustice that has gotten us to this point in our national story. We need them to help us imagine what the loss of even one life means, as well as to imagine ways forward as a loving society.

In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, poet Claudia Rankine explores post-9/11 existence through innovations in hybrid form, stylistically performing themes of disconnection, searching, and grieving. How does the text find any movement beyond nihilism and locate a position from which to reclaim hope—without providing an imaginary resolution to this very real despair?

The last section of the book proposes a strategy of presence. Art helps us to claim the right to presence, even hope. Rankine cites Celan ("I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem") and ends with these words: "In order for something to be handed over a hand must extend and a hand must receive. We must both be here in this world in this life in this place indicating the presence of."

The only humane response as a nation to what we are enduring is a reevaluation of our collective humanity and a renewed awareness of our interconnectedness. If we accept the call to presence, nobody can rob us of the fierce compassion we need.

—Joanna Penn Cooper, a writer, teacher, and literature scholar who is the author of *The Itinerant Girl's Guide to Self-Hypnosis* and *What Is a Domicile*

How do you mourn more than 240,000 dead? A year ago, who could have imagined such a question? In our lifetimes, we haven't experienced a loss of life of this magnitude.

I fear that the politicization of the pandemic has disconnected people from the harshest of realities: these are not merely numbers on a page; they are real human beings, each one created in God's image. All of those who lost their breath as a devastating consequence of this horrible virus were made by the God who "blew

life’s breath into their nostrils” (Gen. 2:7).

In this moment, Christians have a particular responsibility for both a pastoral response and a prophetic one. We make a statement about valuing life when we adhere to common sense, evidence-based practices to mitigate the spread of the virus. As churches, we can model empathy and understanding by demonstrating safe practices that reduce the loss of life.

We can also turn to lament as a powerful tool for mourning both individual and social pain. Lament is a truth-telling exercise, what Walter Brueggemann calls the “anti-silent,” a space where we can be completely forthright about our agonies, fears, and losses.

As a chaplain who works in health care, I have seen how frontline workers have been inundated with death while facing their own fear and vulnerability. As a clinical ethicist, I’ve been rocked by the racial disparities that have always existed but are now exposed in the virus’s morbidity and mortality rates. How does one mourn such gravity, catastrophic failure, and loss—particularly when the death dealing is ongoing and relentless?

As my own emotions range from sadness to fear to anger, I think of the psalms of lament and the raw, fearless emotion that the psalmists express to God. Lament tells the truth about pain.

When we lament the losses of 2020, we make a theological proclamation that affirms the full humanity of each of the valuable lives that has been lost. We honor those lives by being “anti-silent.” We must speak out—speak directly to God and name our pain and suffering, speak to other Christians and remind them of our collective responsibility to care for one another, and speak straight to the whole of society to say that things are not right.

—Kerri N. Allen, a Presbyterian minister and a Reformed and womanist theologian and ethicist who currently serves as the manager of mission and spiritual care and a clinical ethicist for Advocate Aurora Healthcare

In the midst of a global pandemic, a group of Christians decided to gather and sing loudly about the love of God. They said it would be a witness. They said it would

bring healing to our city. Portland had been making national headlines for the brutality of local and federal police against Black Lives Matter protesters. I went to observe and bear witness to the larger story at play. But I also went to figure out where I stood in relationship both to my fellow Christians and to a God who demanded praise while so many suffered.

I looked around at the crowd. Some of these people, no doubt, could have COVID-19 or get it at some point in the future. Some would recover, some would spread it to others, some would be affected the rest of their lives, and some would die. And now there was the added burden of people believing there must have been something wrong with them if they caught the virus. They must not have sang loudly enough or had enough faith. After all, the God they served was greater than COVID-19. God had not given them a spirit of fear.

I watched the faithful gather and sing. I watched them refuse to mourn. I watched them turn up the volume on their loudspeakers so they couldn't hear the voices of the counterprotesters, whose signs asked for criminal justice reform and for people to wear masks. I saw how easy it is to ignore grief when the music is loud, the lyrics triumphant, the key change coming around the corner to lift your spirit and remind you that you are on the winning team.

I went home that day and cried at what felt to me like the death of something in my life: my identification with White evangelical Christianity. I realized afresh how I did not have the language, the spiritual practices, or the imagination to worship a God who lamented and mourned with the suffering—and yet that was all that I craved.

The truth is, I don't know how to mourn so many deaths. I don't know how to listen to the cries of protest and suffering without wondering how my life might be affected, without rushing to quick solutions or dismissals of pain. I don't know how to lament, because I was born and raised in the midst of an empire that has to silence grief in order to continue to grow and exploit the world and its people.

But my faith community is just one small strand in the rich tapestry of Christianity. In the Bible I see a faith based on articulating just how bad the world has been to the most vulnerable in our society—and how this grieves the heart of a good and loving God. When I look to faithful Christians from other traditions, I see a richer and deeper community I can lean on and learn from. I see fellow believers who trust that God can handle their anger, rage, lament, confusion, betrayal, bitterness. I see

Christians who are intimately connected to grief and who believe in a God who knows what it is like to mourn death on a personal, visceral level.

Whatever comes next for Christianity in the United States after this pandemic, we know who will lead the way forward. Jesus already told us: it will be those who intimately know how to mourn, and we will be blessed if we learn to listen to their cries.

—D. L. Mayfield, author of *The Myth of the American Dream* and *Assimilate or Go Home*

I've sat at the bedside of the dying, and I've conducted graveside funerals. The reality that many of the people who have died from COVID-19 were alone as they passed from life to death—and that many didn't receive a decent burial—has left a mark on my soul. How do we mourn such an unfathomable number of dead? How do we weep for the unknown?

In prayer, I remember the details I have read in the news. I imagine the lives of these people.

You were poor. No safety net from your hardworking parents, no one to help you with child care. You were an essential worker, and it was a death sentence. Lord knows you didn't have the luxury of working from home; you couldn't even afford internet service. So you kept the grocery shelves stocked. You cared for the old folks at the nursing home; you were a daughter or a son to them when their sons and daughters couldn't show up. You were an agricultural worker, harvesting fresh food, milk, and wine. But those who ate and drank what you harvested, delivered to our doors while we sheltered in place, were not even conscious of your existence.

You labored like Sisyphus. Day in, day out, you pushed your rock up the hill, only to have it roll back down again. And for what? As you lay dying in the hospital, no one could visit, no one could sit with you and express care or remorse, except for maybe a compassionate nurse or doctor—total strangers.

Maybe there was no one to come, anyway. Maybe, as an agricultural worker, you were far from your home in the hills of Mexico. You worked to feed Americans, and you lay there knowing there would be no one to feed your family back home. You

were long gone from your family and community. Here, you were nobody.

Maybe you were a single parent, worried sick about your children because there is no one to care for them now.

You died alone. I imagine your corpse in a white body bag, stacked on top of others like you, like those found in a U-Haul outside a Brooklyn funeral home when the morgues were overflowing. When the stench became too much for the neighbors, the authorities were called. I pray you were spared this indignity, but you might have been one of those bodies the subcontracted city workers laid to rest in a potter's field, an unmarked mass grave off the coast of the Bronx.

When I pray, I stand at this grave and ask forgiveness. Our country failed you. The church failed you. America considered you essential workers, and yet your lives were expendable. You were Lazarus, and we were the rich man who rendered you invisible.

This is an ode of remembrance for you, a eulogy. In this life, you were forgotten. In death, few, if any, mourned your passing. But I mourn for you now. It's on us to care for those you left behind, to strive to never let this happen again.

—Marlena Proper Deida Graves, author of *The Way Up Is Down* and *A Beautiful Disaster*

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Unfathomable loss."