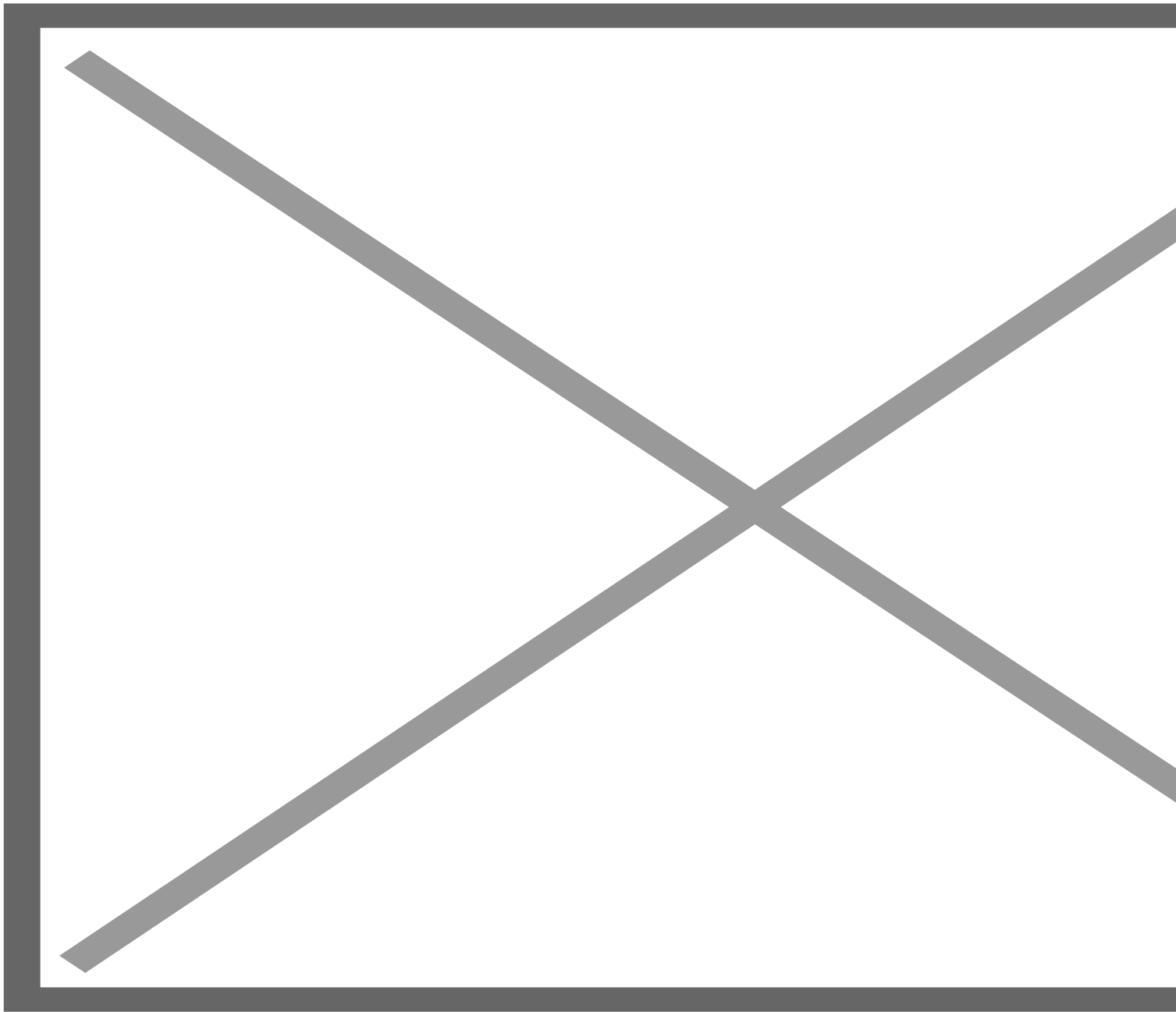


Mandatory mourning

What the responses to Charlie Kirk's death reveal about truth, power, and the Christian call to honest grief

by [Mac Loftin](#)

October 14, 2025



Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

In the opening scene of *King Lear*, the dying king compels his three daughters to say in front of the court how much they love him and how sad they'll be when he's gone. The best performance will get the largest inheritance. Goneril and Regan, the eldest daughters, are effusive. They're obviously lying, but the king is looking for flattery, not honesty. But Cordelia, the youngest, refuses to play the game. "I cannot heave my heart into my mouth," she says. "I love your majesty according to my bond; no more nor less." Cordelia tells the truth about who Lear is and how she feels about him. For this, she's cut off and banished.

I thought a lot about Cordelia as I read about the [more than 145 people](#) fired over social media posts about the gruesome murder of Charlie Kirk. Some were fired for celebrating his killing, but others, more disturbingly, were fired for posts that explicitly condemned violence while acknowledging Kirk's racist views or mentioning the poster's own indifference to his death. J. D. Vance, streaming live from the White House to host Kirk's podcast (a Vice President's duties never end), egged the mob on, urging Americans to call the bosses of anyone insufficiently sorrowful over Kirk's death and demand their firing. The whole country was stuck in that scene from *King Lear*, lined up and ordered to give a histrionic performance of grief or face the sovereign's wrath.

A kind of martyr cult has been formed around Kirk, and we're all being conscripted to join. I'll admit that I'm a firm believer in the moral, political, and theological value of publicly mourning the dead. [I even wrote a book about it](#). The scandal of the cross is that God loves with an infinite love every single person, even the person you think is the least deserving of that love. And the terrible demand the cross lays on us is to imitate God's infinite love—an impossible demand, meaning we must ceaselessly beg God's forgiveness and ceaselessly widen our narrow hearts. Every death further breaks the ever-broken heart of God, and we are called to be like God and have hearts that likewise break at every death.

But when it comes to public acts of mourning, it's always worth asking: whose deaths are we allowed to grieve, and whose aren't we?

This is the question posed by Judith Butler in their 2005 book *Precarious Life*. Butler wrote that our public life is riven by unequal "grievability." There are deaths we are allowed to publicly grieve and those we are not. Butler's focus is on the "ungrievable," those losses we either cannot recognize as worthy of mourning or those for whom the state prohibits public mourning. Their key example of an ungrievable life is the Palestinian.

Twenty years later, our situation is a bit different. Sadly, the prohibition on mourning Palestinian death remains in effect. Though liberals may at times face criticism in progressive spaces for outspoken Zionism, no one is getting fired or deported for saying too little in support of Palestine. A social worker at one New York hospital was recently [fired](#) for putting a small postcard on her desk that said "Let Gaza Live," and a labor and delivery nurse at another was [fired](#) for calling what Israel is doing a genocide. But while Butler contrasted the ungrievable with those we are allowed to mourn, with Charlie Kirk's death, we were confronted with a death we *must* mourn. You can be fired for saying too much about Palestinians getting killed, but you can also be fired for saying you don't care about Kirk getting killed. We have been compelled to publicly grieve for Kirk. And like Lear's daughters, we have to put on a good show—the shriller and less convincing the better, because that demonstrates our willingness to debase ourselves for the leader.

The right put on quite the show. Kirk's memorial service was a cross between a political rally and a rock concert, with speakers walking out to soaring guitars and dazzling pyrotechnics, shouting about revenge and punishment. Stephen Miller, ostensibly giving a eulogy for his friend, instead addressed "our enemies": "You have nothing to give. You have nothing to offer... You have nothing. You are nothing."

Even weirder were the smaller services held in churches around the country, in which uncanny AI avatars of Kirk addressed worshippers from beyond the grave. "I'm fine," [said one](#), "Don't waste one second mourning

me.” AI-generated videos flooded social media: Kirk wrapped in an angel’s wings and ascending to heaven; Kirk chatting with Saints Paul and Stephen; Kirk on a cloud taking selfies with John F. Kennedy and Abraham Lincoln. Just days after Kirk’s death, Turning Point USA sent out a fundraising email from his widow, with links to sign up for automatic monthly payments ranging from \$25 to \$100,000. Kirk was useful to the American right in life, and they wasted no time making use of his death.

The combined powers of the bosses and the state were brought down on anyone refusing to join the public mourning of Kirk, but it’s not clear that what the right is doing with Kirk’s memory is truly mourning. Mourning requires telling the truth. The work of mourning, as Freud writes, involves taking honest stock of whom we have lost and what our relationship to the lost other was and now is. The truth about Kirk is that he dedicated his life to making this country a crueler, dumber, more violent place. (It’s not worth repeating here the exhausting litany of despicable things Kirk said about his fellow human beings, but over in [Vanity Fair](#), Ta-Nehisi Coates helpfully summed up his legacy). Another truth is that people find it hard to care that a life spent in this way has ended. Whatever it might mean to mourn Charlie Kirk—to confront the fact of his violent death and move forward in the wake of it—requires telling the truth about who he was and how we feel about the America he helped to create.

One person who told the truth about Charlie Kirk is Ball State University employee Suzanne Swierc. She [wrote](#) on her personal Facebook that Kirk’s death was “a tragedy.” Nothing he said or did, she insisted, can “excuse his death.” She also wrote that Kirk was not “a wonderful person,” and that his death “is a reflection of the violence, fear, and hatred he sowed.” “While I find it difficult,” she wrote, “I can and do pray for his soul.” Swierc’s post is remarkable for how plainly it states the truth: the truth about Kirk (he sowed violence, fear, and hatred) and the truth about herself (she finds it difficult to pray for him). This is what the work of mourning looks like. For telling the truth so plainly, Swierc was publicly shamed by the state’s Attorney General, put on a watchlist, and fired by her university.

Americans have been compelled to parrot the lie that Kirk was our day’s Martin Luther King, and to lie about our feelings towards him and his legacy. But of course we don’t have to. We can, like Cordelia in *King Lear*, tell the truth. Doing so might make us end up like Cordelia: cut off from any security and financial stability, exposed to the violence of the state. But if the Christian answer to the question of grievability is that every life must be made equally grievable—that we can and must mourn every starved infant in Gaza as well as every callous demagogue like Kirk—then the demand to tell the truth weighs on us far heavier than any worldly power’s demand to lie.

So I actually agree with J. D. Vance. We should mourn Kirk. And that means telling the truth: Charlie Kirk was a virulent racist. He should not have been killed. But I will not miss him.