



Sara Press //

On a warm day in October, I found myself staring at fallen leaves in a forested burial ground in Toronto. My parents and I stood back from the constellation of mourners, all of whom had been asked to sign their names on a contact tracing form before entering the service. We surrounded the departed's grieving family; together, apart. A few mourners entered the inner circle to hug

members of the family, while others, like my parents and I, held back. Touch, the most fundamental form of care, felt too dangerous. Tears revealed what was concealed behind masks. As the children scattered their mother's ashes, dozens of family members across the world watched over Zoom.

The woman whose death we were mourning did not die from COVID-19, but the pandemic prevented many of her loved ones from being there that day. This has been a common experience for millions of people worldwide who have been forced to grieve in isolation. Mourning is a shared social practice, but the social distancing and safety protocols put in place due to the pandemic have required many to mourn in ways that complicate the grieving process.^[1]

Most contemporary theories of grief can be traced back to Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), which suggests that grief functions to detach thoughts and emotions from the dead so that the bereaved can move on with their lives.^[2] As John Archer explains, "This can be achieved only through an active process, later termed grief work, whereby the attachment to the dead person is given up through continued confrontation of memories and thoughts associated with the loss" (45). Grief work requires coming to terms with the feelings that we encounter after a loss. But what happens when we are unable to directly confront death?

Despite reinventing rituals online, the familiar customs that many of us lean on in times of loss have been denied. Few are given the opportunity to attend wakes and visitations, or sit Shiva in person.^[3] Burial practices have also changed dramatically. There can be no passing of a shovel to pour dirt on a grave, no washing of a body as compelled in Islam and Judaism.^[4] As Rebecca M. Entress notes, "Many customs for the afterlife are based on religion, and inevitably some religious requirements [cannot] be followed, leaving families with anxiety about their loved ones in the afterlife" (857). Such unresolved feelings are heightened in families of COVID-19 victims, who are unable to claim the remains of their loved ones.^[5] Regardless of faith, without a proper burial or confirmation of death, it is much more difficult to accept or cope with the loss.^[6]

These unresolved feelings brought on by disrupted burial rites and COVID-related deaths can be understood as "ambiguous losses."^[7] The term is used to describe a loss that occurs without closure, which may complicate and delay the grieving process. For example, when a loved one in the military goes missing and dies, family members may still feel that person's presence even though they remain physically absent.^[8] In the case of healthy individuals who died suddenly from COVID-19, these ambiguous losses are magnified by the safety protocols that prevented family members from seeing their loved ones prior to and following their deaths. This lack of closure can make it feel impossible to let go of the person and move forward.

Every loss is unique, and every person struggles with different kinds of grief. While we mourn the loss of loved ones during this pandemic, many also mourn the loss of homes, jobs, routines, and stability.^[9] Efforts to prevent the spread of the virus have impacted how children and teenagers learn and socialize, how people date and develop relationships. The ways in which people worship and receive support have also been dramatically altered, as well as how people exercise and eat,

seek entertainment and medical care. We are forced to be vigilant about the holidays and special events out of fear that these celebrations might become superspreader events. This tension between physical safety and mental wellbeing pervades our everyday lives. In many ways, we are grieving the loss of life as we once knew it.

And yet, even if life returns to some semblance of what it was, many of us must continue the grief work that was disrupted by the pandemic. It will take time to mourn the dead. Grieving is not an isolated event, it is an ongoing process. For millions of people, jobs will remain lost; the loss of economic stability will linger; and the absence of in-person work, education, funerals, and celebrations will require renewed resilience from us as individuals and communities. While we are all experiencing different forms of loss, we must be mindful of those who are most vulnerable. For the “long-haulers” of COVID-19 who are still sick, for racialized populations who continue to receive disproportionately worse medical care, and for the chronically ill and underresourced populations: we need to continue to address the concerns that we have been confronted with during COVID-19. This year has been referred to as “a year to forget,” but we must remember all the valuable lessons we have learned from our losses.

Works Cited

[1]“How Coronavirus Complicates the Grieving Process.” *Penn Medicine News*, July 30, 2020. <https://www.pennmedicine.org/news/news-blog/2020/july/how-coronavirus-complicates-the-grieving-process>

[2]Archer, John. “Theories of Grief: Past, Present, and Future Perspectives.” *Handbook of Bereavement Research and Practice: Advances in Theory and Intervention*. Washington: American Psychological Association, 2008. 45-65.

[3]Imber-Black, Evan. “Rituals in the Time of COVID-19: Imagination, Responsiveness, and the Human Spirit.” *Family Process*59.3 (2020): 912-921.

[4]Ibid

[5]Entress, Rebecca M. et al. “Managing Mass Fatalities during COVID-19: Lessons for Promoting Community Resilience during Global Pandemics.” *Public Administration Review*80.5 (2020): 856-871.

[6]Ibid

[7]“How Coronavirus Complicates the Grieving Process.” *Penn Medicine News*, July 30, 2020. <https://www.pennmedicine.org/news/news-blog/2020/july/how-coronavirus-complicates-the-grieving-process>

[8]Ibid.

[9]Some people are also experiencing the loss of connection to their cultural identities and social security. As Celia Falicov notes, “Immigrants suffer a series of traumas during the migration process: losses of family, language, and culture” (871). Moreover, the conditions of isolation caused by discrimination have been heightened by the physical isolation and economic vulnerability precipitated by the pandemic. New immigrant families and undocumented workers face increasing uncertainty regarding their ability to work and seek medical attention without health insurance. However, there are resources available to help immigrants and undocumented workers during this time: <https://www.informedimmigrant.com/guides/coronavirus/#>

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