

Grieving, Grappling and Getting Through during Covid-19

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The cruel paradox by which we always deceive ourselves twice about the people we love — first to their advantage, then to their disadvantage – Albert Camus, A Happy Death

Love is the gap between desire and fulfillment – Kiran Desai, The Inheritance of Loss

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing global death and disease and societal turmoil. Awareness of impending mortality and disruption of our external world has evoked anxiety, depression and vulnerability, and for many of us, a resuscitation of experience of early losses. As a first-year candidate starting analytic training in 2020, reading Freud's Mourning and Melancholia (1917) was particularly poignant as it lays the foundation for object relations borne out of a process of experiencing and coping with loss. For many of us, early developmental processes became activated during the pandemic as we confronted unexpected losses and demands from reality that put enormous strain on our psyches. In this essay, I describe what I have learned about grief during the pandemic--that mourning is a process rather than an outcome that exists dynamically within an intersubjective and dialectical field. I will then describe the relevance of rituals and my daily engagement in traditional Indian practices in promoting and holding the process of mourning as a live experience within an intersubjective and dialectical field. Finally, I consider how circumstances like pandemic and political upheaval can prevent mourning, and the crucial importance of external reality in aiding this process.

Like so many others, I experienced my share of losses last year. A dear childhood friend died suddenly, a few months into the pandemic. Another important and cherished friendship crumbled under the strain of distance and physical absence. A family member lost his life to Covid back in my home country of India. I could not attend his funeral. These events set off in me a plethora of extreme and opposite feelings—idealization of the loved one, gratitude, relief, heartbreak, frustration and anger. How does one reconcile days of absence and lack of closure

with evenings that are flooded with associative vortexes of tender memories? As surely as reality pressed upon me to adjust misaligned intrapsychic and interpersonal states amidst these losses, I knew from Mourning and Melancholia that it also held opportunities to integrate these incompatible states. The key elements that have facilitated my task of mourning during this pandemic include the press of transition, recognizing that destruction and creation occur simultaneously and learning to become comfortable with polarized emotions in the knowledge that eventually, something new would emerge in the gap between extreme emotions. I have also learned that the task of mourning occurs in interconnection with the external world. Far from a standard, resolution, or state, I have come to see mourning as an incomplete and ever-fluctuating process of unifying love and hate, connectedness and separateness, real and imaginary and sorrow and gratitude.

Death and loss of friendship had me reflecting on the role of rituals in allowing a person to grieve through a testing of reality. When I immigrated to the US as a young adult, I was struck by its emphasis on marking important beginnings and endings through celebration and a coming together of community—this to me, made American society a deeply ritualistic one. As a young, inexperienced woman feeling lost in a strange, new world and mourning the loss of my home, these rituals sustained me spiritually. I went through many milestones here in my adopted country including graduate studies, motherhood and falling in love. During the pandemic, perhaps more than ever, I have come to feel deep reverence for the rituals that saw me through some of these important times, e.g., the surprise baby shower from friends, the invitation to Thanksgiving dinner from a co-worker the year I was very alone and graduation ceremonies that extended into family reunions. In the thick of the pandemic, I started analytic training, an event normally made auspicious by my professional community with a host of rituals surrounding

feasting and gathering. Like therapists across the country, I moved my practice to my home office and struggled to engage with patients meaningfully against intermittent polarized impulses toward despair and intense optimism. This struggle was especially acute in the absence of many of the usual clinical processes or rituals that we normally utilize to accommodate both reality and fantasy, the conscious and unconscious and connectedness and separateness. For instance, recurrently, the clock both beckons the patient and signals departure. The tissue box both sanctions tears and suggests that they should be wiped away. Clinical rituals are a medium by which negotiation occurs of what was versus what is, what might have been versus what can never be.

In Indian tradition, death rituals perform a similar function, marking the beginning and end of life and time, fostering familiarity and comfort through repetition, and carried out in conjunction with community. A central paradox in Hindu philosophy is that of permanence and impermanence. Essential to this dialectic is the belief that the body and the soul are separate entities. Hindus believe when we die, our physical being disintegrates but our soul persists. Within this core permanence-impermanence dialectic, mourning becomes possible through a recognition of paradox, of transition and via rituals marking the dialectic in interconnection with the external world. Rather than aloofness or a stance of resignation, mourning takes the form of a paradoxical balancing act of holding on and letting go. An ultimate test of balancing this dialectic in Hinduism, is the acceptance of death.

Had I been able to attend my beloved family member's last rites, I would have participated in the act of cremating his body to set the soul free to begin its next life. Following cremation, I, along with family and friends would have immersed his ashes in the Ganges, symbolizing at once the paradoxical transience of his body and immortality of his soul.

Following this, my family and I would have returned home to perform a ceremonial bathing, the act of purifying our bodies and later, our home, allowing for repetitious behavior that often accompanies the process of dealing with loss. During the almost two-week long intense mourning period, my family and I would have limited our social interaction and stayed mostly at home with one other, allowing grief to gain expression--through a full range of emotions--and as complete a resolution as possible. This custom of keeping engagement with the outside world somewhat limited would have continued for a full year following the intense mourning period, aimed to protect me and my family from making life-altering decisions in the aftermath of loss. In this way, the collective act of mourning would have helped to accept and manage loss through a ritualized process in which transition and repetition are facilitated and dialectic space held between permanence and impermanence and creation and destruction of life.

Barred from the opportunity to mourn in the usual mode of sharing in rituals, I turned to my daily practice of yoga and meditation to manage my losses. Paradoxically, the permanence-impermanence dialectic is crucial not only in Hindu death rituals but also in the very act of daily living. Hindus believe that although daily life consists of a string of interconnected moments that give us a sense of continuation, the individual moments themselves are impermanent, rising and falling like ripples of a river—their nature down to the tiniest molecule being essentially transient. This permanence-impermanence dialectic then is a way not only to manage death but also the transience of life. This paradox is embodied and manifested in my daily spiritual practices of yoga and meditation.

My mother began teaching yoga to me when I was in the second grade. Her favorite yoga pose, Utkatasana or “chair pose”, she said, did not offer the glamor of an inversion or a fancy arm balance, yet it was one of the most challenging and satisfying poses. I still remember the day

she taught me this pose, post-snack after returning from school. Her instructions were clear and gentle. “Bend your knees to a right angle. Imagine that the back of your thighs and calves, and the soles of your feet are pressing down and yearning to merge with the ground beneath you. Now lift your torso and stretch your arms as if you could pluck the stars right out of the sky with your fingers. Now stay here for five full, long breaths”. Very quickly, I discovered how difficult breathing became, but with my mother encouraging and prodding me, I tried to remain steadfast in a stance that was making wildly opposite demands of my body and psyche. Each time we practiced, there were five total iterations of variably difficult poses in between, each eventually returning to the challenging chair pose. My mother would occasionally say something comforting like “There is no such thing as the perfect yoga pose. What you end up in, is a perfect pose”. At other times, she would urge me to hang on just a few breaths longer with “Keep your mind cool to balance the fire in your legs”. At the end of each practice, I would reward myself by going into Balasana or “infant’s pose”, in which I got to curl up into a fetal position, head touching knees, arms flopped to my sides, breath slowing down to a steady, soft beat. Somehow, with time and growing confidence, my breaths in chair pose went from being short and labored, to progressively long, deep and comfortable. I have returned to this pose again and again during the pandemic, so many years since the day my mother first taught it to me. What I did not know then is that in fact, she showed me a way to cope with life’s losses through an unassuming and deeply intelligent exercise that is the physical embodiment of the psychological task of mourning – balancing stillness and movement, reaching out and turning inward, steadiness and precariousness and pain and comfort.

Although I began meditating when I was quite young (a basic meditation class was part of the school curriculum), I was introduced to a technique invented by Buddha called *Vipassana*

(translated as “seeing things as they are”) in young adulthood after going through a major relationship loss. My best friend, who was a regular practitioner was convinced that it would help me cope with my heartbreak. We signed up for a ten-day silent workshop taught by Indian master S.N. Goenka, in a modest church overlooking Lake Vermilion outside Minneapolis. The workshop required that during those ten days, we did not read, write, speak or make eye contact. The task was to simply focus on learning the technique and practicing it for 11 hours daily starting at 6 am and ending at 6 pm, with a break for lunch. It is remarkable how quickly, given the right conditions, the brain hones into physical sensations coursing unceasingly through our bodies, whether in the form of pleasant activity such as buzzing or tingling or unpleasant, such as pressure or pain. Normally we go through life unaware of sensations the shifting emotions produce, nonetheless reacting to them continuously. The core of Vipassana lies in cultivating the capacity to observe these paradoxical sensations of craving and aversion with the same impartial awareness. This is no small feat, I discovered, because some of the pleasant sensations were extremely alluring and some other unpleasant sensations were downright painful. Struggling through sustained focus and impartial awareness of everything from no sensation at all to episodes of pleasurable and agonizingly painful sensations for hours and days, however, bore fruit with a brief miraculous moment. On the fourth day, only 20 minutes into the sitting, there was an extraordinarily exhilarating and liberating feeling in me that I had never previously experienced. So unfamiliar and unbounded was the feeling that I was almost instantly jolted out of it. What I experienced in that brief, ephemeral moment, I believe, was the phenomenon that Hindus hold is created between extreme states, called Egolessness or non-self, a state in which there exists neither the wish for eternal life nor the fear of death—a state in which there is no “I”. I have not managed to recapture the feeling since that day despite years of regular practice. I

suspect this is because its appearance depends on finding the most elusive of dialectics—the presence and absence of self. Hindus believe that transformation occurs between extreme states through a coming together of paradoxical experiences of affirmation and negation and presence and absence of self. In both practices—yoga and meditation—negotiation occurs in relation to dimensions of the external world i.e., physical and psychic forces. In yoga, the dialectic involves simultaneously surrendering to and defying the physical force of gravity. In meditation, holding the tension between craving and aversion occurs against the psychic force of yearning and desire for comfort. And so, while the real world felt as though it was crumbling around me, these daily practices helped manage losses, both large, such as the death of a loved one and infinitesimal such as the transience of the passing moment through recognition of paradox, of transition and in conjunction with the external world.

What happens when events like cataclysmic global disease and political division not only rob us of our rituals but also destroy our very relationship with external reality? At the macro-level, we saw polarization intensify, whether in the form of partisan power struggle over health policy or incrimination of specific groups of people. At the other extreme, reparative efforts burst forth, such as the Black Lives Matter protest movement, a long belated response to racism and inequity. Within my own psychoanalytic community, polarized issues of universality and particularity returned to sharp focus, instigating an intense reexamination of the universal applicability of the psychoanalytic method in the context of ongoing reckoning with the particularities of subjective psychological experience. As the new preferred mode of remote therapy threatens the psychoanalytic frame and the delicate paradoxes it embodies, the very survivability of psychoanalytic technique is being doubted. These disturbances have helped me

understand the crucially important role of external reality, in swaddling us in place while facilitating forward movement—in normal times so imperceptibly as to hardly be noticeable.

I write this essay at the end of Phase 1 of Covid-19 vaccine distribution. Spring is only a month away, and just the other day, after a seemingly interminable period of silence, I heard the chirping of birds while out for a morning walk with my dog. Hope returns, but at the same time, uncertainty persists about how and when we could go back to any hint of our old, familiar lives. Every day, there is sobering news of new-found variants of the virus and elusiveness of the long-range goal of herd immunity. Even as I continue to uncomfortably navigate the hope-despair dialectic, I am reassured by the generosity of Indian rituals and practices wherein extreme states are accommodated and understood as normal and expected in a process of loving, losing and starting again.

I have tried to describe in this essay how during the pandemic, I have come to see mourning as a dynamic, constantly fluctuating process. I believe mourning resides between poles--in a space that is more than the sum of its extreme states. Rituals hold great power in facilitating the dialectic experience of mourning and holding the tension between opposite emotions. Mourning is appropriate in describing a range of losses, from death of a loved one to the transience of the passing moment. Mourning is thus a live process, always vulnerable against serious disruptions in external reality. External reality, in normal times, provides the scaffold within which transformation occurs in the space between the inner and outer and reality and imagination.

