Grief in the Body Politic

The way we deal with loss shapes our capacity to be present to life more than anything else. The way we protect ourselves from loss may be the way in which we distance ourselves from life.

Rachel Naomi Remen
Kitchen Table Wisdom

Remen says that the way we deal with loss, as much as anything, shapes how we deal with living. We protest our losses to help us learn what is truly lost and can’t be changed. And sometimes we don’t learn and get stuck living life in protest. Don’t give up what you don’t have to (unless you decide it’s not worth the effort) is not bad advice and a challenge to do and discern. With all that in mind…

I see grieving people and they are talking about voting.

Here in the United States, we are in the midst of a presidential election season. Passions, opinions, rhetoric—everything feels intense. Preparing to lead a social work graduate class on grief and loss, it struck me that grief is in the middle of politics, perhaps especially this year, but not only this year. We talked about this in class, and the presence of loss and the grief in the body politic felt even larger than at first consideration. We are always a grieving people because we all have had personal losses and deaths. In political seasons we grieve together, but we do not grieve the same things.

This year, and every year, there are those of us grieving what has been lost. Our country as we knew it. The familiar feeling of community and who “we” are. Something important and
fundamental is gone. We want it back. We want our country back. We want that feeling back and the way the world looked and sounded. It worked for us once before and we are not accepting that it can’t be recovered. We feel in exile with the need to reclaim our home, believing that home as we knew it can exist again. In the pain of our felt loss, we raise our hands and voices in protest. We will not “go gently into that good night.” Anger is on the surface, but it is hurt and fear underneath. What we value is slipping away and it must be protected.

This year, every year, there are those of us grieving the loss of security about gains won and progress made. We hold to the thought that “the arc of the moral universe…bends towards justice,” yet what if what has been accomplished is undone? Coming so far, we fear not just stagnation in our journey to the more perfect union but retreat. We see potentials up ahead, more progress within our grasp, but the ground is not firm and the way is threatened. Can we grieve that we have not yet experienced—a loss of hopes, dreams and aspirations? Yes, but not without a fight. Life has been struggle, every past gain has been struggle, and it is no time to rest. In the pain of our felt loss, we raise our hands and voices in protest. We will not “go gently into that good night.” Anger is on the surface, but it is hurt and fear underneath. What we value is at risk of being taken away and it must be protected.

This year, as in every year, there are those of us who are disgusted by all the choices that life provides. We vacillate between sighs of resignation and curses of despair. A pox on both, all, houses. We search but find no options worthy of our energies and devotion. Feeling worn down and discouraged, we withdraw our concerns and attentions—it is too stressful to care too much. Sometimes our feelings of helplessness weigh us down and it is hard to take any step away from where we find ourselves. Other times we find ways to accept our helplessness which paradoxically frees us to other opportunities not entangled in the community struggle. In the pain of our felt loss we raise our hands and voices in protest…or we go find somewhere else to be with our hands and voices.

It is our human condition to have loss—loss of person, identity, relationship, place in the world, home and dreams. Are there any losses of worth that don’t touch on some or all of these aspects of living? Are there any uncomplicated losses? Is there an election of consequence that does not include or threaten loss?

No two people grieve the exact same loss when there is a death in the family as our relationships are unique and our needs for grieving our own. It can be hard to talk about the pains of loss as there doesn’t seem to be enough room between us for both my pain and your pain. In the big family of the body politic, do we not all have our own losses and griefs, our sharp-elbowed pains and fears? Loss and grief are constants, but the way we perceive, experience and express them are ever changing. All will converge, again, on election day, bringing diverse losses (and gains) for our diverse community as our story continues.

This year, every year, life will continue. I hope we can find more ways to be kind to each other and to ourselves as it does because grieving people deserve some kindness.

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One of the many helpful essays for parents on the What’s Your Grief website.

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Keeping a grief website and blog going leads to lots of thoughts about life, death and grief. Co-founder and program director of the What’s Your Grief website expresses this very well.

Questions of Life, Mortality and Grief by Eleanor

Greg Adams  
Program Coordinator  
Center for Good Mourning  
goodmourning@archildrens.org

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