

It's time to face the collective grief of COVID-19

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Workers bury bodies in a trench on Hart Island on April 9, 2020, in the Bronx borough of New York. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

(RNS) — A close friend said to me this week that it seems as if “our entire nation is experiencing turbocharged grief and doesn’t know how to grieve.”

For many Americans of faith, the peak of the COVID-19 contagion is coinciding with our major holidays — Passover for Jews, Holy Week and Easter Sunday for Christians, with Ramadan beginning next week for Muslims. These holidays, while joyful, are also moments to grapple with what it is to be human and to remember profound loss.

Americans are known worldwide for our culture of individualism and our resourcefulness. Surveys reveal that many of us think that “God helps those who help themselves” is a verse in the Christian Bible. It’s not.

When everyone is supposed to act confident, happy and grateful, it's hard to experience collective suffering and grief. And yet there is no escaping that COVID-19 means we will all suffer, even if we are not currently experiencing illness. In our American ethic, the stronger normally help those who are weaker. But when everyone is grieving the loss of something, how do we help one another from a standpoint of weakness?

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One way is to openly acknowledge our collective grief. As a social scientist, I think first about the biggest sources of suffering in our nation.

In any time of national disaster, the poorest and most vulnerable are hit hardest. For example, a [recent study by Pew](#) revealed that those who are financially affected by COVID-19 are more likely to suffer a profound sense of psychological distress. And we know that, in places where racial data has been collected on deaths from the virus, [black Americans are much more likely to die from the effects of COVID-19](#).

From my own initial studies of how faith communities are responding to COVID-19, I also know that lower-income congregations are less likely to have the financial and technological resources to switch quickly to staying connected or providing religious services and solace online.

Then there is the collateral grief resulting from COVID-19. Several friends who work in hospitals with critically ill people have told me that one of the saddest things they have witnessed is people dying from *non*-COVID-19 related causes alone, not able to be surrounded by any family or friends in their last days and hours.

Grief appears in other ways too. My university students are grieving the loss of a well-deserved graduation ceremony with family and friends.

In the midst of such widespread grief, it can be hard to take seriously our own grief, which may feel small in comparison. But to be of the most help to ourselves and to others, we need to be able to acknowledge the loss. As some Christians have pointed out, this Easter [felt more like Passover](#) and, while Easter was meaningful, the rituals of Good Friday and Holy Saturday allowed us to do the important work of acknowledging the losses of these times.

Acknowledging our grief can lead us to open ourselves to the goodness of the world.

Several pastors I have talked with recently in doing my research mentioned that they are planning to hold an in-person Easter service — even if it's nine months from now — so the community can experience the joy of celebrating together. They told me that the collective suffering we have experienced in these past few months makes the joy of actually being together in person seem so much greater.

We can turn to science as much as faith to do this work, as scientists themselves do when they are people of faith. For my book "Why Science and Faith Need Each Other: Eight Shared Values That Move Us Beyond Fear," I interviewed a scientist who is a Christian who talked with me about alleviating the suffering of the earth. "I always kind of start from the basis of human beings as ... being the stewards of God's creation," he said. "In light of that, we understand that the world is good and it's beautiful. ... We should not just try to understand it but also preserve it and protect it."

It is in the acknowledgment of suffering that we are motivated to alleviate it. Acknowledging the losses and suffering COVID-19 is bringing to our broader society and even the smaller losses that we are experiencing as individuals readies us to receive gratitude and joy.