

Opinions

The pandemic will pass. Our grief will endure.



(Michael Woloschinow for The Washington Post)

By **Eddie S. Glaude Jr.**

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Americans have been told to brace themselves for difficult days ahead. The numbers are uncertain, but mass death is at our doorstep. If we do everything right and shelter in place, [we may still see](#) between 100,000 and 240,000 dead. These are staggering numbers, but more importantly they are real people. Mothers and fathers, uncles and aunts, daughters and sons, friends — people whose deaths will disrupt the lives of families and rend the fabric of communities across this nation. Those who survive this madness will have to figure out how to live together in the company of grief.

We've already heard stories of Americans dying in quarantine and families longing to be with them in their final hour. Under these conditions, people are not able to grieve properly. They cannot perform the traditional rituals surrounding

death. They have to sit shiva alone. They can't have the wake or home-going service with family and friends at the repast. They can't participate in a second-line parade in New Orleans.

This virus challenges how we think life should end. People shouldn't be alone when they die, without someone holding their hand, running their fingers through their hair, and offering a loving face for eyes to look upon one last time. But they will die, and some will die alone, and loved ones will have to live with debilitating regret: that they didn't get a chance to say "I love you" or to give that life the respect it deserves with the rituals of mourning. This sense of regret will cling to their grief, giving it jagged edges that repeatedly cut and wound.

[Full coverage of the coronavirus pandemic]

In "A Grief Observed," C.S. Lewis wrote, "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep

on swallowing.” That sense of fearful grief will be a persistent feature of our national politics moving forward. Americans will carry their dead into the voting booths. Their dead will shadow assessments of the words of politicians. They will hover over our choices about the future of America.

This doesn't mean that the [coronavirus](#) will suddenly resolve the political and existential divides that define our country today. In fact, the pandemic has revealed how deeply broken we already are. Rabid partisanship, crass individualism and breathtaking inequality have left brittle our sense of connection and bond. We are siloed, segregated and left to our own devices — all of which intensifies the depth of grief in the face of mass death.

[Sign up for our [Coronavirus Updates newsletter](#) to track the outbreak. All stories linked in the newsletter are free to access.]

Appeals to American exceptionalism aren't helpful in such a moment. Uses of the metaphor of war to mobilize our

national energies won't go very far. President Trump does not inspire sacrifice and loyalty. Instead, one gets the feeling that, by Trump and his ilk, we are left alone to deal with the reality of death. Death is yours and yours alone, the president seems to suggest, while he concerns himself with [opening up the economy](#) again, because "that's who we are."

In the coming days, we will not be able to escape the grim reality of death. We will not be able to run past the fact that people are dying with appeals to cold statistics and talk of "flattening the curve." We will not be able to banish death to the far reaches of our communities as we have done long ago with cemeteries. The makeshift morgues and [temporary burial trenches](#) will be in plain sight. We will not be able to ignore what is happening as we have done for decades with all of the carnage left in the wake of our never-ending wars and the consequences of cruel economic choices. Death is at our doorstep.

Americans have to find a way to grapple with and make sense of what is happening to us. Maybe we need periodic days of national mourning and prayer — some public ritual to acknowledge our collective sorrow. Perhaps a daily reading of the names of those who have died. Maybe we need to talk about a memorial to those who sacrifice their lives to save others. We have to do something as a country to confront all those bodies in the grave. With such death, as Lewis put it, “the act of living is different all through.”

We must attend to our national grief. Mass death cannot be reduced to a private, individual moment. As Walt Whitman wrote in “The Million Dead, Too, Summ’d Up”: “... the dead, the dead, the dead — our dead — ours all (all, all, all, finally, dear to me) — or East or West — Atlantic coast or Mississippi valley.”

The dead are *not* yours and yours alone. They are *ours* — all of them. No matter the color of their skin, the people they loved, their Zip code, the language they spoke, or the political

party they supported — they are *ours*. We just have to figure out what *ours* will mean when colored by such unimaginable grief.

The Opinions section is looking for stories of how the coronavirus has affected people of all walks of life. Write to us.

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