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Meditations on Grief

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> "... the idea that the ultimate, hidden truth of the world, is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently."[1]
> —David Graeber

As witness:

Recently, standing in the middle of a covid ward I felt compelled to record the sounds of breath that were overwhelming the room. The deep ones, the broken ones, the ones through machines. As these auditory sensations vibrated through my body, I kept being reminded of the innumerable spiritual/religious traditions on how each life when entering this world is awarded a specific number of breaths. Life is measured through breath, and each breath I was taking, and each breath I was hearing, was leading to each of our ends. But an end to what? Each of these people were dearly loved by others, the ones in the waiting room, the ones clinging to any sign of hope that they would hear their loved one's breath once again, in their homes, in their beds, and in their arms. Waiting for a doctor or a nurse or just anyone to give them some news, some indication that there was still possibility of life. While doctors rushed from bed to bed grappling with their own inability to understand life, disease, cure and death, refusing to give up, I also

noticed that they were refusing themselves humanity; they refused answers to the wait-ers, or brusquely told them off for caring, for being in their way, for being human. Through this I kept thinking that perhaps the biggest tragedy in this room and the connecting waiting rooms, those created in parking lots, at traffic stops, through the dead of the night, was not necessarily the ending of life, of the breathing tangible body, but the inability to witness any of it. There was no one witnessing these last breaths, and there was no one witnessing the horror and trauma of the wait-ers. In the urgency and action, the people for whom all the activity was taking place, were forgotten.

In the wake of the pandemic and its many losses, one thing is clear, we are living through a crisis of life, if we can't breathe each other, are any of us breathing at all?[2]

While these meditations are located in the specific experience of covid as lived in Karachi, Pakistan, they echo the sensations of this historical moment worldwide. Grief here stands not just for the loss of persons but the loss of imagined futures and importantly the dissipation of all organizing beliefs and thoughts of the grief stricken, like rationality, science, medicine, data, and statistics that previously provided comfort and predictability. In line with Sufi thought, these meditations seek to think grief as teacher, and to reflect on our concepts of life, death, breath, urgency, action, and anxiety. As teacher, the sensory modality of grief, not only reveals the world as it is, the structural inequalities as well as the environmental, social and conceptual devastations they cause,[3] but also forces us into a mode which allows a different way forward. While these meditations grapple with the sensorial experience of grief, they cannot be written outside the practical realities that are faced amidst loss, the non-sense of modern life. The tremors of grief and the ways in which it remains a starker

reality for some more than others echo the rampant injustice, and unequal world we have created, however at this moment, albeit layered through differing levels of depth and experience, grief is also collective. And while grief splits each of us apart, it also holds promise, as Maulana Rumi writes, 'Don't turn your head. Keep looking at the bandaged place. That's where the light enters you'*[4]*; and in the grips of collective grief, as at this moment, we have no option but to surrender to its journey, and allow the light to find us, not as salvation, but to bear witness.

As sensorial:

What no one tells you about grief is how palpable it is. How it overwhelms every part of you, whether it is experienced for moments or years, it is a weighted shadow that follows you around, creeping up on you from every angle, seeping through every crack, splitting you open, melting your body, annihilating your mind, and forming each anew to serve its purpose. With every moment you realize you are not the one grieving, grief is the overarching reality within which you now exist; in a moment grief became your master and you its faithful servant.

Grief does not come in stages; it comes in spirals. One jumps from rage, to joy, to guilt, to regret, and fear within moments, and then it starts all over again with a different permutation, spinning you at its mercy. Grief packs a myriad of emotions with intensity, ironically forcing the griever to recognize that they are still living. Mocking us perhaps that within death there is still life, albeit outside of time and space, disconnected from everyone and everything we have ever known. An isolation and a separated-ness mimicking the dead, but not quite there.

Grief, like love, is always larger than life. That's not new. Losing a loved one always forces one to grapple with the fragility of life and our absolute lack of control. There is nothing new in that either. Neither is the guilt, the regret, the rage, and the inability to comprehend. What is new, and what I think this pandemic, coupled with ecological devastation is begging us to grapple with is to stop rebuilding the same. And maybe even to stop building at all. It is begging us to reflect, to stop forcing thoughts, actions, energy into and within the very frames that created the problems in the first place. Grief is conspiring to allow our minds and bodies to become empty and through this emptiness to become receptive to thoughts and ideas, to the sensory vibrations of life and death, and especially of breath.

As non-sense:

Amidst the loss comes its administration, a resonance of how contemporary journeys of grief are deeply entrenched in the socio-political structures of modernity, which lack spaces for care, intimacy, and stillness. The griever is flung into dealing with the organization of funerals and issues of inheritance. The time one wants to spend wrapped in a womblike blanket, hopelessly trying to grapple with the incomprehensible, one is forced into courts and administrative offices, dealing with a bureaucracy that is neither competent nor empathetic. Wearing multiple masks, one finds oneself wandering from office to office, making non-sense of loss and inheritance, of legacy and pain. Most of the people you meet in these spaces are struggling with the exact same pain you are, but between your masks and theirs, there is a world of disconnection. A world of fear. A burden of the unspeakable. You try and help each other, but you can barely help yourself. You try and connect but you can barely feel yourself.

During covid there is an added bureaucracy of vaccination. How, when, where, which, what. Every shot a reminder that your loved one didn't get a chance to receive this possibly lifesaving injection. The guilt is overwhelming, combined with the anger towards all those who refuse the vaccines for a multitude of reasons, or are just lazy about it. Those who don't wear masks and cough and sneeze in your face. You feel broken, unable to fight, enraged that these assholes get to live, enraged that you feel you should be able to decide who lives and who dies. Confused about how you got here.

One of the things I have learnt as I navigate my own grief is the discomfort the griever creates in others. From meaningless obligatory platitudes, to religious verses which are equally hollow, people avoid the griever like the plague. In a strange way the griever is shunned, uninvited, unwanted, because grief and tragedy require a language, a love and a space, that people at large refuse to wrestle with. Grievers therefore flit towards other grievers in the hope for connection, a connection that seems impossible in the disconnection of what makes grief, grief; grief is ineffable, and griever to griever the ineffability resounds. The bonds you had created in the past seem distant as within your own discomfort you learn you have to manage theirs. Through all of this you come to realize that while there is many a well-intentioned person in the world, the world severely, and to its own detriment, lacks kindness, empathy, and integrity.

Of the still living:

The silver lining in pandemic grief, if there was any, is that at this moment grief is airborne, and in its interconnectedness it amplifies. While the amplification of something like grief is, for the modern

person, resolute to have a painless existence, hard to handle, I am reminded of Bhittai's gorgeous verse:

> *Oh grief*
> *I long to grow in you*
> *I would trade a million joys*
> *And my head besides*
> *In exchange for your caress [5]*

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, a reknowned Sufi saint from Sindh, knew that grief, its overwhelming burden, and experience as suffocation, has the ability to make one come alive- an aliveness that is not in gratification but in seeking, in the unbecoming and the abyss. Its intensity holds no comparison to joy, which is often experienced as ephemeral, tied up with a fear of its end. Grief already exists smack in the fear, the worst is already happening, and so presents as a becoming outside the scope of fear, hope, and joy. Timeless and spaceless, grief travels in the necessity of the unrequited, the simplicity of desire, and exhaustion.

As billions of us live in this mourning of immediate loss, and the rest join in through different levels of grief, of lockdowns, of normalcy, of jobs, of homes and of travel - we have an opportunity to remake the world. Through my own losses and my own grief which obstructs my breath each day, I read through the amazing work people are doing in amplifying the issues of the old-world order, who it hurts, who it benefits, and how the public health and environmental crisis has been created and exacerbated by our mortifying institutional structures and problematic public policy. I think the pandemic has done wonders for making stark the multitudes of inequalities that existed in our previous 'normal' and each of those need to be addressed, and that too with urgency.

However, I am also forced to contend with the burden of how we contemplate urgency. Urgency as action, the ways of activism, of demand, and of change, that we have learnt, and employ, don't necessarily break the cycles we need broken, and are systemic in their own right. Perhaps this moment allows for, and even necessitates a different register of world- making. Could it be that, instead of retaliatory and urgent action, what we need as a collective is to listen to the wisdom of grief, the inability to act, to surrender to our absolute lack of control, to become receptive to our thoughts and bodies and allow the earth to move through us? Perhaps it is not per chance that breath, the most sensorial indicator of life, has become an unwitting signifier for this historical moment, the breathlessness of George Floyd as a marker of racial and structural inequalities, the viral pandemic, and ecological disaster. In linking the rhythms of grief, death, and breath one finds the urgency of the moment is not one of action as we know it, but to stand still and to bear witness to what we are, and have been, calling life. It compels us to let go of our intellectual stances of reason and action and permit the body to feel its way into a new world. To allow this apocalyptic moment to not only unveil the oppressive structures of the old but reveal a form of action that is born of an urgent stillness and receptive inspiration; that's what gut-wrenching grief teaches us.

The sensorial tremor of grief is emptiness; the lack that the griever conceptually translates as anxiety, panic, and fear, an insurmountable void that they feel needs to be urgently filled with movement. Maulana Rumi, after losing Shams, also vibrated with emptiness,

> *I placed one foot on the wide plain of death,*
> *and some grand immensity sounded on the emptiness.*

I have felt nothing ever
like the wonder of that moment.[6]

However, for Rumi the abyss in which the griever is frozen was not a state of panic, but an invitation to stillness. As Imam Ghazali, one of Islam's most influential philosophers, in *Risalat Sharh as-Sadr* also writes, such vibrations represent the spiritual expansion of the heart. In other words, as Rumi adds,

My eyes are closed, and my heart at the 'open door.'
My heart has other five senses of its own;
These senses of my heart view the two worlds [7]

Accordingly, the heart in these writings is/has a sense, much like sight and smell; through the emptiness created by grief the heart learns to perceive what the other senses cannot, opening up new avenues of connection and intimacy, making the ineffable, somehow effable.

For me this means not simply attempting to curtail all the deaths that have happened and are happening, but to make meaning for life and death, grief and breath. Because death and grief are inevitable, but the experience of our life and breath may not be. Because when, and if, all this is over, each of us, drowning in our own grief, will need each other in ways that I hope are kinder, more spacious, and most of all that will allow our collective breaths to have ease. I hope this deep collective grief can teach us to stand witness to each other and every molecule around us that made us life, to recognize our intimate inter-connectedness; our symbiotic fragility and resilience.

As I listen to my recording of what I know are sounds of broken breath I can't help but notice how deeply they mimic the sounds of

the earth quaking, thunder rumbling, fires burning, glaciers snapping and as my friend humorously added, of alien communication. Whether we came into this world with a limited set of breaths, whether it is through the act of god, the cosmos or extra-terrestrial whispers, we are being guided to build the world differently. The expanse of grief has cultivated within us a potential, a capacity to receive/perceive possibilities of action/inaction and of worldmaking. I hope we can embrace the stillness, the darkness, and the profound intimacy between each of us and the world with humility.. The promise of grief was never salvation or the end of pain and suffering, but a promise of perceiving and cultivating the sensations of slow, deep, shared breath - the sounds of the still living which can never be disentangled from the already dead, but can become more meaningful.

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[1] David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules. On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureacuracy. Melville House: 2015, p. 89.*

[2] Cf. Timothy K. Choy, *A Commentary: Breathing Together Now*, Engaging Science,Technology, and Society 6 (2020) 586 – 590; Ibid, *Breathers Conspire- On Drawing Breath Together*, 4S/EASST 2016 conference: Science and technology by other means Conference, https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/easst2016/paper/30820.

[3] On “conceptual loss” see Jonathan Lear, Radical Hope. Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation. Harvard: 2006.

[4] Jalalluddin Rumi. *The Essential Rumi*. Trans. Coleman Barks and John Moyne. San Fransisco: Harper Collins: 1995, p.142.

[5] Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, *Shah jo Risalo*, Kaliyan Adwani digital edition, prepared by Abdul Majid Bhurgri. See also: Shabnam Virmani and Vipul Rikhi, *I Saw Myself: Journeys with Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai*, Penguin Random House India: 2019, p. 46.

[6] Coleman Barks. *A Year with Rumi: Daily Readings*. HarperCollins: 2006, p. 192.

[7] Jalalluddin Rumi. Masnavi I MaNavi the Spiritual Couplets of Maulana Jalalu-dDin Muhammad Rumi. Trubners Oriental Series by E.H. Whinfield, Routledge: 2000, p. 155.