

# Grieving Ourselves Whole

BY WILL HECTOR

WAS RECENTLY IN a corporate office when a thud interrupted the whirl of strategic planning.

“What was that?” someone asked.

“A bird hit the window,” said another.

There were a few sounds of sympathy, and one woman said, “I want to go hold it.” Another woman spotted it on the ground one floor below, and, her voice lilting hopefully, said, “Its wing is still moving.”

At this point things seemed to shift. Compassion, nurturance, and mourning were hurled against the staid wall of workplace norms. Who can practically weigh the life of an injured bird against the collective inertia and consensus of repressiveness among coworkers needing to pay rent?

“It’s just a pigeon,” announced the first voice, interjecting a mechanistic perspective. It was well timed. It seemed to quell the uncertainty of emotion and the complexity of empathy, returning an air of rationality to the initial outpouring that could be described—albeit momentarily—as healthy grieving.

Just like that, nature collided with a culture that provides an illusion of our dominion over it—and lost handily. An event went from potentially being a reunion of compassion to a group exercise in suppressing grief by stuffing loss and challenging questions into a file cabinet drawer.

This story illustrates the confounding human capacity to override our sorrows and losses. Consumer culture, and the corporations that fuel it, benefit mightily from this capacity. This is because grief is as powerful an aspect of being human as the ability to love, and quelling it separates us from our

most resourceful and capable selves, making us easy prey to the manipulation that underlies overconsumption.

## The Value of Loss

Grief, notoriously hard to define, is the engagement of loss. It’s a process that looks different for everyone. It’s not completed by checklist or through Kubler-Ross’s five stages. To engage with loss—the death of a loved one, but also the passing of a moment—is to feel one’s connection to life and to define one’s experience of love. Grief drives us to intimate connection, brilliant creativity, and our clearest thinking when we allow it to.

It is the foundation of love because it frames relationships for us.

But grief is ostracized in a culture of material accumulation where loss is to be avoided. The systematic disengagement from the biosphere that began with agrarianism and grew exponentially through the production and consumption practices of capitalism has reached epic proportion. And now the natural world, like an ignored partner, is protesting with increased volatility and unpredictability to the extent that we are approaching the brink of extinction.

To heal this crisis we must grieve our lost connection: engagement with this loss means examining our consumption habits and rethinking what is acceptable behavior in the workplace and outside of it. To do this meaningfully is to reexamine capitalism—or any other economic system that doesn’t incorporate grief.

Would the workplace be more innovative, healthy, and productive if employees were encouraged to express themselves fully—including their grief—instead of being coerced into



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narrow roles that center around optimism, competition, and growth? Would schools and neighborhoods be safer, and the politics of hatred vanquished, if grief were a celebrated part of our educational and cultural systems? We tend to view our differences as granting us power, proclaiming ourselves special by virtue of ethnicity, possessions, test performance, or other distinctions that separate us. I wonder how our relationships might shift if we were willing to lose our identities even a little. When we hold on too tightly, we fall prey to the delusions of identity; if we could grieve our lack of dominion, we wouldn't have to draw such hard lines around everything that defines "us" versus "them." Grief denied is augmented, perverted, and passed on.

At its core, war is about survival. Armies concurrently ply violence in an attempt to project loss onto each other. To escape death—or the illusion of it, through our threatened faith systems, exploitation of resources, or a territory grab, to name a few methods—we kill instead. If we could fully accept loss—meaning to face and to grieve it—it is hard to imagine we would be so easily driven to the rage and hatred necessary for war. But if left to fester, unattended grief around the perceived loss of what we hold dear can be manipulated by warmongers. Misappropriated grief after 9/11 propelled the "shock and awe" campaign that followed. The subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have, in turn, become recruiting tools for ISIS. Grief denied does not lose its power; it powerfully reemerges in another form. And if war's victims—and its heroes—don't grieve, the cycle continues into the next generation.

Unexpressed grief also has subtler repercussions: inhibition and perversion. When we suppress grief, we narrow our experience of living. To cope with this deadening of the self, we employ distractions and defenses, including addiction, overconsumption, anger, dissociation, and a desperate pursuit of entertainment. Amidst this bevy of transgressions, right action gets twisted into wrong action.

Wrong action can appear in surprising places. Two years ago I joined other writers, psychologists, activists, and nonprofit leaders at a retreat led by environmentalist Joanna Macy aimed at creating a "great turning" toward a healthy biosphere. On the final day of the workshop, I shared a lunch table with two participants whose frustration and fury over climate change ran so high they had become hopeless.

The workshop had offered plenty of opportunity to grieve. There were stories and sorrows in every lecture. But at lunch, absent the formal workshop container guided by a wise leader for just an hour, it seemed my companions allowed their anger to unconsciously rule without grief to mitigate it. They regressed to planning a desperate, lonely act. They proposed a perpetual carbon-burning art installation that would increase release of carbon into the atmosphere as a way of "showing the world" just how messed up and wrong-headed its "apathy" was.

To my ears this was a perversion of grief into anger that drove the desire to destroy the very thing we were unbearably saddened over losing. The inability to grieve had mutated into apathy, which, not coincidentally, was the very target of their anger. Such projection further polarizes and disintegrates us.

The unwillingness or inability to grieve distorts our perception of reality. To grieve is to live with a heart fully exposed; viewing the world through the eye of such a heart is the experience poets have been espousing for centuries. But grief is elusive and fluid—one day engulfing us and the next day waning to an ember. If we're able to endure the less bearable days—be it through substances or behaviors—we can fool ourselves into thinking the quieter days of grief are all we have to contend with. And if we can't fully experience what's in front of us, including grief with every heartbeat, we'll make choices based on illusion. The consumption culture is the perfect accomplice for such illusory choices, stoking and slaking our constant need for gratification at the increasing peril of the biosphere. A pain-aversion cycle gets formed: mindless consumption destabilizes the biosphere, which creates painful feelings of loss that we mask with further consumption.

In addition to supporting defenses and behaviors like addiction, numbing out, and retail therapy, such consumption runs unaware of—and disconnected from—our deep reliance on earth's rhythms and bounty. Nature provides ample opportunity to grieve, but from artificial snow to off-season fruit on grocery shelves, we don't like missing the things we feel entitled to. We can't even accept that we have feelings about a dead bird in the workplace. This also makes sense: the corporate workplace has industrialized our consciousness. We perform increasingly mechanized tasks at work that comply with constructed ideas of productivity in order to meet organizational parameters of growth. In such environments, there isn't room for any feeling other than forced optimism. We sublimate any other feelings into loathing the boss or planning a hostile takeover.

There's another layer of grief to contend with—one more personal and perhaps more painful: the realization that any one of us can only do so much. This offends both our personal and social experiences of omnipotence. From the infant who cries and gets fed to the notion that money can make us immortal, we have a primal relationship with omnipotence that's hard to overcome. There are so many broken behaviors and failing systems to fix, so many injustices to acknowledge—let alone repair—that motivation wilts before the list can even be completed. In the face of truly examining temperature anomalies, rising sea levels, extremes in precipitation (including both drought and flood), and threats to our food and water supplies, is it even possible to avoid being overwhelmed, let alone to allow grief to guide us?

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and if we poison our air, we poison our human relationships.” In Palestine, I began to see that it is possible to cultivate a creative intelligence that no longer denies the imperative of our interdependence; that chooses to tear down the outdated walls of our interior and exterior landscapes, the apartheid walls of our own making—how we each do this will surely be unique to the contours of our individual lives.

Yeh’s response is to run straight into humanity’s suffering—the broken, dark, and devastating places that demand intense vulnerability yet hold the greatest potential for transformation and wholeness. “Here there is no separation. It is for another but, even more, it is for my soul.” Thirteen years since the founding of Barefoot Artists and now in her seventies, Yeh is still a force to be reckoned with. She climbs up and

down scaffoldings as if her energy were boundless; her laughter is infectious, and her praise of any creative contribution feels genuine. What is most notable, perhaps, is the way her exuberance and passion excludes no one. It wraps itself around all in her presence until there is a collective experience of the possibilities that appear when we dare to imagine. ■

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We would be much more buoyant if death and loss were honored—or at least acknowledged—instead of scrubbed clean from our cultural symbols and practices. Grieving that we don’t possess the power to solve climate change by ourselves would change the conversation. Such honesty might empower us to plant a garden, ride a bicycle, limit air travel, or become vegetarian instead of numbing the pain and burying the grief.

Occasionally we unite in grief for the big losses we readily agree to recognize: organizing to create the AIDS quilt and the Vietnam War Memorial, spontaneously placing flowers and handwritten notes at the World Trade Center site after 9/11 and at Kensington Palace after Princess Diana’s death. But the less sensational losses we’ve been conditioned to overlook—the friendships faded and leaves fallen—are the ones that offer us a chance to fulfill our

highest promise. Humans are the ones for whom loss matters so much—it’s our duty to acknowledge, digest, and integrate all the loss we encounter. It is grief that truly roots us in the world. Grieving in this way takes us on the same existential journey that is offered through being born: defining purpose in life, finding the strength to remain in pain when the impulse is to flee it, making a spiritual intention, and creating meaning. The gifts that are available as the result of grieving include wisdom, life-affirmation, richer love, and courage.

When I pass one of the numerous lumps of fur and bone on the road that society neatly labels “road kill”—a cost of modern life often treated with humor, and even commoditized in “road kill café” tee shirts—I allow my heart to speak. Sometimes I turn off the radio and offer silent contemplation. I almost always say aloud, “I’m sorry, friend.” Occasionally, I cry. When I’m riding my bicycle past an animal

that’s been crushed under the wheels of a car, I make the sign of the cross. Not because I’m steeped in Christianity, but because it’s the most easily recognizable visual act of drawing upon faith and grace that I’m aware of. I want others to see me, not out of piousness, but because I want to communicate that there’s been a loss here and that it deserves to be marked.

Could capitalism survive grief? If it’s centered on resource depletion or exploitation, surely not. If, however, while driving to work one morning in a solar-powered vehicle and hitting a possum, I can stop and acknowledge the loss and contemplate my action and initiate a ritual that allows me communion with this precious, sentient creature, then even capitalism has a chance. And if the climate crisis begets a sustainable and humane capitalism that allows us time to grieve—and therefore to fully know the privilege of living—then maybe we all have a chance. ■

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had a right to hate me. Atonement was out of reach.

#### Decades Later

I was approaching fifty years old. The accident was ancient history, except it didn’t feel that way. I had stopped talking about it long before, but I still

thought about it every day. More than that, actually: every time I got in my car; when I was around kids; if I did something careless. *Watch yourself, you know what can happen.* My husband Glen and I had decided against having children. We both came from troubled families, and we were both deeply involved in our careers. “I don’t think I’d be a good mother,” I would say, but

what I secretly meant was, “I’m afraid my child would get run over. I don’t trust myself.” Glen was a non-practicing Lutheran and I was a non-practicing Jew, and that was fine with both of us.

In July 2003, an out of control car plowed through the Santa Monica Farmers’ Market, killing ten people and injuring over sixty. I lived and worked nearby, and the buzz of helicopters