



Rethinking the Purposes of Schooling in a Global Pandemic: From Learning Loss to a Renewed Appreciation for Mourning and Human Excellence

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Abstract

A main goal of this paper is to complicate “learning loss” as the only, or even the main, thing schools should be concerned about as they respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. While schools have a responsibility to make sure students who are enrolled in school are learning, this cannot come at the cost of ignoring the other substantial losses students are also contending with. Following the work of Jonathan Lear, I make the case that schools should engage students in a process of learning how to mourn for their individual and our collective losses, while also considering ways that school can move beyond narrow conceptions of the purposes of school and to a deeper appreciation for the ways that an education can promote human excellence. As this pandemic wears on, it becomes harder and harder to do anything but endure. One goal of this paper is to serve as a reminder that schools can do more than endure: they can envision new possibilities for schooling that promote conceptions of wellbeing that go beyond fear of learning loss.

Keywords Jonathan Lear · Covid-19 · Learning loss · Excellence and education · Virtue

When the Covid-19 pandemic initially closed schools, the response was, more often than not, triage. School leaders, teachers, parents, and communities did their best to keep schooling going. This meant attempting to cover the same material that was planned for the year, but in new modalities. Where I live (in rural upstate New York not far from the Canadian border), many families do not have regular computer or internet access, so laptops and wireless hotspots were distributed, along with textbooks and analog lessons. Teachers, parents, and students attempted to complete the 2019–2020 schoolyear as planned. Students with reliable internet and parents who were available and able to teach the assigned material were better positioned to complete the required assignments, while others found it nearly impossible to do so.

Even in the spring of 2020, early in the Covid pandemic, a concern emerged: learning loss. It became clear that a gap would emerge, and grow, between students who were able

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to continue completing assignments, and students who—for a variety of reasons—would not be able to complete the assignments. As the pandemic continues, concern over learning loss has grown, often crowding out other concerns. My goal, in this paper, is to complicate learning loss. While students have lost a great deal due to the pandemic, the way we frame that loss matters, and I will suggest our current ways of conceptualizing learning loss is limited.

At the heart of my analysis are two main ideas. In the first section I discuss problems that emerge when we think about learning loss in comparative terms. I will argue that measuring learning loss runs the risk of unjustly harming the very students who need the most support. In the second section I expand this analysis by suggesting that failure to mourn will unduly limit our thinking on what schooling can be post-pandemic. Though there will be extreme pressure to make up for lost learning—where loss is measured in content covered and assessed—I will suggest that we take a sabbath from this pressure and think deeply about the purposes of schooling and education before we jump into remediating students for their lost learning.¹

In the second and third sections I argue that if schools continue to use pre-pandemic measures of success like standardized test scores, then they will all but ensure that we won't learn larger lessons from Covid while also exacerbating divides between students who had support throughout the pandemic and those who did not. As an alternative, we can think together about what types of schooling might demonstrate a deeper acknowledgment of all that our students experienced, thereby opening new possibilities for mourning and radical hope (Lear 2006; Boss 2022). The pandemic clarified what I value, and when I think about the things I hope for my own children and my students, I want them to engage in deeper learning and not just covering content (Metha and Fine 2019), and I want them to be prepared for active and informed citizenship, or what Allen (2016) calls “participatory readiness,” but—ultimately—I hope they learn to appreciate human excellence in its broad diversity, and I hope they find one or more forms of human excellence to devote themselves to (Homiak 1985, 2004). For example, when we think about the fear and uncertainty that overwhelmed us at the beginning of the pandemic, we might also remember the ways that the beauty of music brought comfort and hope, the ways that medical breakthroughs saved lives, and the ways that new forms of human connection reminded us of our agency in the most challenging of circumstances. While school often feels like a game, it can be a place that gathers human excellence and inspires students to pursue forms of excellence worthy of their aspiration (Callard 2018). While there is no doubt that fundamental skills missed during the pandemic need to be gained, we can be creative about how those skills are developed.

I conclude the paper by considering resistance to mourning and what schools might do to address this resistance and so open opportunities for collective mourning that leads to new ways of thinking about how students might experience excellence.

¹ The language of sabbath comes from the work of Jonathan Lear. He uses this term in essays on a wide variety of topics. For two striking examples, see Lear (1998, 2018). For an application of his thinking on the sabbath to the debates over how to think about Civil War monuments, see Frank (2019b).

From Learning Loss to Education Debt

Talk of learning loss often pathologizes the very students—along with their schools, teachers, communities and families—we claim to want to help. It should be obvious that a student without internet access is more likely to fall behind when all their instruction and assessment happens online. To describe this student's experience as one of learning loss can make it seem like there is something the student, their teacher, or their caregivers might have done to help the child "keep up." Framing the issue this way causes us to ignore injustice and the ways that the pandemic builds on and compounds injustices. Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that this is what often happens when policymakers and politicians talk about the "achievement gap" that exists when we use comparative measures to evaluate student and school performance. Schools where students achieve high test scores are framed as high-performing, and schools where students achieve low, if not failing, test scores are deemed low-performing. Unreflectively, this way of framing the issue makes sense. It can be useful for policymakers and politicians to understand patterns of performance in different schools. At the same time, comparing schools based solely on test scores often causes us to ignore and look away from the ways schools are embedded within, and perpetuate, structural issues and injustices that make it easier and harder for students to succeed on standardized tests. Instead of looking at school performance holistically and ecologically, we begin to pathologize students and their teachers. We look at classroom-level practices—like lesson plans and behavioral management techniques—instead of also considering the broader social, economic, and political contexts of schooling.

In the United States teachers were assessed and ranked based on how their students performed on standardized tests, without considering contextual information like a student's family income and historical injustices that influence communities and their schools. And when this happens, it becomes far too easy to blame teachers and students for poor performance. For this reason, Ladson-Billings (2006) suggests the language of "education debt" supplant talk of the "achievement gap." Instead of primarily focusing on rewards and sanctions that will increase student performance on standardized tests, we should instead think about debts owed to communities that were subjected to injustices like chronically underfunded schools, and schools that suffer because of the continuing effects of redlining, environmental pollution, and other forms of historical and structural harms. To take a prominent example from the United States, students in Flint, Michigan were subjected to toxic levels of lead in their drinking water. In this case, lead poisoning may explain far more about a student's test scores than anything the teacher or a student does. As such, talking about a debt owed to these students, and not comparing test scores in Flint to scores across the state and nation, just makes sense. While Flint is an extreme example, it helps us see how using performance on standardized tests as a judgment on teaching and student learning, without accounting for the social and political contexts of schools, can give a distorted and harmful picture of what we *owe* students. Efforts that aim to address a decontextualized "achievement gap," will often do more harm than good. Instead, we need to think more about debts owed to children, schools and communities subjected to historic and ongoing injustices.

I hope we apply this same line of thinking in response to the Covid pandemic, though I worry that talk of learning loss can very easily get in the way of seeing debts owed to students and the unequal harms caused by the pandemic. While it may make sense to assess what students were able to learn when schools were forced to close, these assessments should be diagnostic and not punitive. The reality will be that some students

thrived during the time of Covid (Schroeder 2020), while others experienced the traumas of losing loved ones, the traumas of witnessing and experiencing abuse, and the traumas of wondering if their lives would ever get back on track. To frame these traumas as a learning loss seems both wrong and unjust, especially because it also often imputes virtue to the child fortunate enough to have countless social supports and deficit to the child who experienced untold harms. Again—and to be clear—we should be concerned about what students were able to learn when schools closed, but we must resist policies and practices that unintentionally penalize and stigmatize children who—for any number of reasons—struggled to cover material that students in more fortunate circumstances were able to cover.

One main way to do this is to be extremely cautious when using comparative measures of learning or measuring a student's learning against an external standard. Though it is easy and seemingly useful to subject students to diagnostic testing, what matters most is using data to support a student and not penalize them for things they had no way of effectively managing (Lampert 1985). We will want to make sure that we find the most humane and efficient ways to help students get back up to speed, but we must be careful when using the language of learning loss as we get there. Clearly, students will need to develop the key knowledge, skills, and concepts they missed while schools offered remote instruction. But there is a big difference between giving students the most engaging and imaginative pathways to this learning and sorting these students into the category of troublemaker in need of remediation and extra surveillance and discipline (Shalaby 2017).

It is worth remembering a distinction political theorist Shklar (1990) draws between a natural disaster and an injustice. In many ways the Covid pandemic is a natural disaster. Though there is still speculation about where the virus originated, what we know is that communities across the world were forced to contend with a virus that they did not create and that spread rapidly. This, according to Shklar, would qualify it as a natural disaster. But once we were made aware of what this virus was and how it spread, it became a problem that we were forced to contend with, thus raising questions of justice and injustice. I bring this up to call into question the early Covid slogan, “We are all in this together.” While indeed we all had to confront the challenge of Covid, some of us did it with far more support and resources than others. The way we frame learning loss can further exacerbate injustices, or it can work to mitigate them. This is the main point I want to emphasize in this first section. While there is nothing wrong with taking an interest in what students learned while schools were closed, what we do with what we learn can compound injustice. Before we group students into the category of learning losers and provide them a curriculum aimed at remediating that loss, we need to consider the broad impacts of this decision.

In this next section I suggest that we might fundamentally rethink whether covering material and completing assignments is the best way to conceptualize learning, or if we might set students on a different course. Instead of making traumatized students make up lost work, might we think about ways to offer social and emotional support coupled with more meaningful learning goals that keep children on track without remediation? Or, instead of focusing so much on getting students back on track, might we fundamentally rethink the tracks we've normalized in school (Oakes 2005)? As will be clear in the following section, I am not suggesting that we lower standards or ignore student struggles. Rather, I ask what it would mean to show respect for the traumas students have experienced because of Covid, and I suggest that mourning might be far more appropriate in this time than mere remediation (Lear 2021a).

From Covering Content to Mourning

During normal years it can be difficult for students to tolerate the game of school (Frank 2019a). In the opening section of this paper, I very intentionally described the triage-mode that most schools went into in the spring of 2020 as requiring students to complete assigned work. For many students, the experience of school is the experience of completing work, often guided only by the thought: how can I expend the least amount of effort for the highest possible grade. Though this may be too cynical or at least too simply put, I worry that too many classrooms are so guided by the drive to cover as much content as possible that they don't allow enough space or time for a consideration of the purposes of schooling (Damon 2020). While it is undeniable that standards-based education constrains classroom practice—especially in countries like the United States where these standards are tied to high-stakes exams that have very real consequences for students, teachers, and schools—there is still always room to move away from mere coverage of content and to the pursuit of deeper learning (Mehta and Fine 2019; Rodgers 2020) and democratic engagement (Block 2020). As curriculum designers Wiggins and McTighe (2005) have argued for quite some time now, teachers need support to design lessons that move away from covering information that is often forgotten at the end of a test, and to a model where lessons help students uncover big ideas and central themes that are then more easily transferred across subject areas and from one year of schooling into the next and then into life after school.

I worry that talk of learning loss will cause us to narrow schooling to coverage, where students who struggled during school closures are forced to cover the content they missed. If educators like Wiggins and McTighe (2005) are correct, though, even students who successfully covered content—during Covid or a normal academic year—often forget that content as soon as they are done being tested on that content. And if this is the case, then why would we force students to quickly learn material that—ultimately—won't be remembered and is only necessary as a hurdle; it is not truly something that students need in order to do more advanced work? Of course, parents will talk of fairness—why did *my* children go through the trouble of covering material—and of course going down this path will cause us to ask questions about how much of what is taught in school is necessary. But instead of avoiding these questions, we need to address them.

Something as monumentally disruptive as the Covid-19 pandemic should cause us to see this crisis as an opportunity to enact changes we've put off for too long (Solnit 2010). We need to ask better questions about the quality of education students are receiving and whether we have the will to fundamentally rethink the grammar of schooling (Tyack 1995). As Kitcher (2016) very interestingly argues, if we want to address issues like climate crisis with the seriousness it deserves, then education needs to help students develop a sense of what matters and what is meaningful. Without an anchor in the meaningful, it is far too easy to get manipulated by popular media funded by special interest groups who profit from the destruction of the world. Simply continuing to play the game of school—rewarding those with the supports to keep up, punishing those who cannot complete work (even while expressing our concern for their “learning loss”)—will all but guarantee that we remain unprepared for the next crisis and the one after that. And though I cannot explore this point in the detail it deserves, after a year spent teaching themselves, I believe students will have less and less patience for ineffective lectures and what they perceive to be mere busywork. If we trusted students to watch

short videos as a substitute for thirty minutes of direct instruction, I expect that many students will want instruction that acknowledges this reality, and this will call on teachers and schools to fundamentally rethink how time is spent in schools.

Time is one of the most precious resources in schools, and how time is spent expresses what we value. If we value the sacrifices children and adolescents made and continue to make because of the pandemic, then I think we should consider what role mourning might play in how we think about the purpose of post-Covid education. The compulsion to keep up with covering content, and the compulsion to reward those who can keep up and punish those who cannot, will often keep schools and communities from even asking the question of mourning. So much energy will be spent “returning to normal,” and so much energy will be spent worried about “learning loss,” that the pain and trauma students bring to school will likely be repressed. One needn’t be a Freudian to realize that the effects of something as profoundly impactful as Covid-19 will not simply disappear; what is repressed will refuse to go away. Though time spent mourning may feel like time wasted, taking away from making up for lost time and lost learning, it is absolutely necessary, for at least two reasons.

First, it is a reality that teachers and school leaders died from Covid. It is also a reality that children lost loved ones, parents, caregivers. These are experiences that shape a life and that shouldn’t be ignored, hidden, or repressed. Before Covid it was possible for schools to place responsibility for mourning on children and their families—treating it as a private an individual matter—but even before the pandemic there were many teachers and schools that realized the cruelty of treating trauma as something outside of a school’s responsibility (Ginwright 2018). Though Covid had a differential impact on communities and individuals, it is impossible to pretend that the pandemic didn’t have a profound effect on young people. For this reason, we must create spaces in schools where children can learn how to mourn, or—at the least—we must respect the fact that children will need space to mourn and think through the ways that their lives have been impacted by the pandemic. Again, there will be profound pressure to make up missed work and get back on track, but—following the analysis above—we have to wonder about the quality of the work we are asking students to do, and we also have to appreciate that though ignoring mourning may give the appearance of progress, a solid future of well-being cannot be built on the shaky foundation of repression.

As Lear (2021a) very helpfully reminds us, mourning is an art central to being human, and it is an art we can learn together given that the pandemic impacted all of us. Schools can model mourning, both because we will all mourn again in the future, and because mourning opens new possibilities for living. Collective mourning can be powerful, while an inability to mourn can have negative impacts that are difficult to anticipate (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1975; Mitscherlich 1971). Mourning is a powerful life skill, and schools can—for example—use literature to demonstrate the power of mourning (Doerries 2015) and can teach explicit strategies that allow for the processing of loss, especially ambiguous losses (Boss 2022). It is clearly not the case that every student will want to mourn or feel the need to mourn. Part of this is because of our understanding that, comparatively, losing a junior prom or a season of a favorite sport, or a field trip is nothing compared to losing a loved one. But it is important for schools to validate and acknowledge that something was taken away from children because of the pandemic, and that it is okay for children to want strategies to conceptualize and work through that loss. Taking a few minutes each day to teach simple tools, like naming your emotions to get a better handle on them, can have many benefits (Siegel 2013). As well, choosing literature where characters effectively face trauma, or teaching moments

in history where collective action brought positive change can help our students in ways that making up worksheets cannot.

This brings me to my second reason in support of mourning: it can lead to radical hope (Lear 2006). Lear (2021a), through a close reading of an essay where Freud discusses mourning as it relates to the devastation of World War I, suggests that an avoidance of mourning blocks the possibilities of creating a better future from the wreckage of the present. One must sit with devastation and face it squarely; it is this confrontation, it is this undergoing of mourning, that will lead to insight into how to move forward. When working with children and adolescents there is always the counter-urge to shield them from difficult truths, believing that this will protect them. But Lear persuasively argues that what children often learn from this protective move is that adults lie, and that adults are—more often than not—far more concerned with their own self-protection than they are with the well-being of the next generation.

When it comes to Covid-19, it is hard to hide things from children, and so the best path forward may be to trust that they can handle a hard look at what they lost to Covid, and what forces continue to conspire against their collective well-being as young people. For example, children and adolescents need to understand that things like vaccine misinformation are not victimless; it unfairly impacts children who are unable to receive vaccines but who are put at risk when vaccines are refused based on untruths and lies (Buchanan 2018). It may be hard to discuss an issue like this with children and adolescents, but I believe the only way forward is to talk more openly about misinformation and manipulation by media outlets so that we can revive a commitment to truthfulness (Williams 2002). Instead of fearing that mourning will throw children off track, we might more truthfully wonder if it is fear for children that keeps us from mourning, or fear for our own self-image that keeps us from mourning. It is hard for us adults to acknowledge that our children missed so much socialization, or that our young adults missed so many central rituals of transition, and *they will never get these back*. This can make us adults feel powerless, angry, hurt and helpless. It suggests that we too must mourn, instead of fighting to “protect” our children from mourning. As well, it will be very difficult for teachers and schools to acknowledge that they will have students who lost both of their parents, or who experienced tremendous abuse when schools were closed. We will want to deflect these difficulties into things we know how to do—like planning lessons and getting back on track—but the devastations of the pandemic cannot be ignored or willed away (Diamond 2003; Farrell and Mahon 2021). Though we need to plan and hope for normalcy, we also need to mourn and hope more radically for deeper transformations.

Covid-19 calls on teachers and schools to newfound purpose; it would be a loss if we were to just fall back into old routines. At the very least, and this will be the focus of the final section, our mourning can remind us of just how fragile human life and human excellence is (Lear 2021b), causing us to consider how we might help our students experience human excellence in its diversity while finding the form of excellence they want to aspire to. The game of school can make teachers feel like they are role-playing, and students feel unseen: just a number, one of many other students who aren't getting what they need from school. Mourning can remind us of the preciousness of each student and the preciousness of each moment in a young person's life (Gaita 2000). Covid took these away from us. Why be so quick to return to our roles and the game of school when we might awaken to new ways of living and being with students that are alive to the fragility of life and the fragility of those things that bring value and meaning to life (Frank 2021)? Mourning teaches fragility and preciousness, and through this education in mourning we can imagine new possibilities for teaching and schools (Butler 2004; Honig 2013; Wilson 2019).

Human Excellence in Times of Crisis

I was fortunate enough to teach all my college courses in person beginning in the fall of 2020. And because I work at a small liberal arts college, there were many opportunities over the course of the year to have discussions with my students about the impact of Covid on their lives, and there were many opportunities to learn what my students were fearful of and hopeful about. A consistent theme that emerged from our discussions was that many of my students didn't want the pandemic to be a wasted opportunity for growth, and they were not so sure they wanted life to go back to normal when the pandemic was over. I don't think their experience and way of thinking are uncommon; many people had moments over the course of the pandemic when their values were clarified. Long-term relationships came to an end, new passions and hobbies were generated, projects that once gave life meaning felt empty (Calhoun 2018; Wolf 2010).

In an utterly fascinating essay, Lear (2021b) reflects on one way of responding to climate crisis, the feeling that humans won't be missed. Lear understands that this response is often made half-jokingly, but he takes the joke seriously. The feeling that humans should feel guilt over all they've done as a species to destroy the planet and life on it is powerful, but it can also mask the fact that human excellence cannot be laughed away with the expression that we won't—or shouldn't—be missed if humanity were to go extinct. Lear's argument is too complex to go into here, but I bring it up because the pandemic is also clearly on Lear's mind in these reflections. The pandemic also forces us to confront mortality: our individual mortality, the mortality of people we love, and the mortality of our species. In the face of mortality, we can joke, we can deflect, or—suggests Lear—we can mourn, and through mourning realize that our world is suffused with value. If we didn't value, if people and things in our life weren't valuable, there would be no reason to mourn. But value does exist, we do value people, places, books, ideas, and much else (Bilgrami 2016). Lear (2021b), drawing on Aristotle, suggests that mourning teaches the continuing significance of the *kalon*, a word that can be translated as noble, or beautiful, or fine (Lear 2021c). One thing the pandemic can teach us to appreciate is that there are things in the world that are beautiful, noble, fine, and that our life before the pandemic may have been lived without enough appreciation of this reality. Surviving the pandemic, we have a chance to devote ourselves to *kalon*, turning away from things that are cruel, or pointless, or expected and merely habitual.

Talk of human excellence can make us on guard against snobbishness and explicit and implicit bias, but what I take Lear to suggest is that the *kalon* is widespread and can be found in diverse activities and finds countless expressions in human life. What is important, according to Lear, is that we undergo the process of mourning so that we learn what is of genuine value to us. Here I want to return to the main point I've been attempting to make in this paper. School can feel like a waste of time, a game, a going through the motions (Frank 2019a). This is, in large part, because students are engaged in work that doesn't matter to them. And this also explains why young people were so upset when athletic contests, art shows, and performances were canceled because of Covid. They found meaning and excellence in these extracurricular activities, while schooling felt like a chore.

As educators, we too can think about what it is we missed when schools were forced to close. If it was student interactions or interactions with our colleagues, then these must be foregrounded when schools open again. As important, we can remember what it is that called us to teach in the first place (Hansen 2021). For many teachers, it was a desire to share a passion, or a hope that students would find meaning and interest in a subject-area

that we devoted ourselves to. The grind of life in classrooms can cause us to forget this initial calling, and maybe we too started going through the motions of schooling instead of making each day an opportunity to introduce our students to the *kalon* in some form. But we can change this. And once our students regularly experience the variety of human excellence found in every subject-area taught in schools, we might also do more to encourage students to pursue this excellence in their daily schoolwork and in their longer-term life plans. Doing this, I expect, might also help build resilience in the event that schools are forced to close again, either due to a next pandemic or because of the impacts of climate crisis. If students are pursuing excellence that they themselves are committed to, it will be easier for them to continue pursuing that work. Athletes found ways to train, performers found ways to practice: if students were pursuing work they found meaningful, they would find ways to continue studying and learning.

This is, no doubt, a hopeful vision. But it isn't an impossible one. One small thing we can do, as teachers, is to think even more intentionally about what we assign. We can ask: If students weren't forced to do this work, would they willingly do it? Put more positively: Do I think my students will find meaning and interest in the work I am assigning? Because of the pandemic, I have even less patience for wasted time and going through the motions. I want the readings I assign to students to be interesting to them. I want my feedback to inspire them to find and develop passions. I missed my students and the conversations we were able to have when we went to remote learning; I want to hold on to this loss, especially on those days when my students didn't do the reading as carefully as I would've liked them to, or when we are at a lull in the semester where everyone feels disengaged. Instead of succumbing to frustration, I want to call on my feelings of loss from the spring of 2020, when I worried that an entire way of being together with students threatened to collapse.² Living in acknowledgement of that deep fragility, I feel called to promote the excellence that drew me to the study of education in the first place and to share the excellences of studying education with students.

The loss I am concerned about is not captured by learning loss as measured by incomplete assignments. The loss I care most about when it comes to schooling is the lost opportunities to engage students with work that matters. Though we all know that there are countless institutional constraints on good work (Santoro 2018), the pandemic also teaches how close we were to losing the very possibilities of experiencing entire fields of human excellence. Remembering this, mourning all the excellence that was lost and that still could be lost, is one way to fundamentally rethink the purposes of schooling and the potentials for education in our time. I hope we can resist the shallow narrative of learning loss and engage with these more fundamental purposes and possibilities of schooling that are always waiting, just beneath the surface, to be cultivated and brought to light. Doing this is one way of making sure that all our sacrifices and losses were not in vain. It may also do what countless school reforms have failed to do: make school matter, and through mattering, engage students in deeper ways that thus more fully prepare them for countless highly disruptive challenges—like Covid—that we will be forced to contend with in the future.

² I worry I may be too allusive here. I teach at a small liberal arts college and my life was changed by attending a small liberal arts college. Before the pandemic there was concern that many of these colleges would fail and go away. The pandemic made this concern even worse, and colleges closed. In mourning the closure of these colleges and the possibilities that more might close, I feel even more aware of the significance of these colleges and what they offer students.

Conclusions: Overcoming Resistance to Mourning?

As the pandemic continues into a third school year, fatigue and exhaustion threaten hope and collective action. Simply making school lunches and managing to make it through a school day become an accomplishment for many parents and teachers. The call to excellence can ring hollow if not downright cruel in this context. As well, mourning means facing difficulty, and why stay with the trouble when one can float away in amnesia? In the United States, these past years have not only brought a pandemic, but our nation's Capital also was also violently attacked, and we've yet to fully confront this reality. Worse still, attempts to understand the attack will always remain partial unless Americans are willing to mourn the countless ways America continues to fail to live up to its ideals. Failure to mourn dooms us to nostalgia for a time when America was great, or to the empty promise that yes, we can, will our way to a better future without going through a painful process of remembering. There are too many reasons not to mourn and very little reason to undergo its difficulties, even if it is a way into a better future.

Speaking as a teacher addressing other teachers, there is already so much on our plates. It will be tempting, and often necessary, to refer our students who are visibly unable to manage life because of Covid and its broad impacts to professional therapists and school counselors. But doing this shouldn't keep us from appreciating the ways that almost all our students will feel Covid's impact and how each of them should be given opportunities to mourn. As I allude to at the beginning of this paper, schools often treat a student's difficulties with mental health as a personal and an individual problem. Covid teaches that our collective mental health has been tested, and that though we've been differentially impacted by the pandemic, it has touched most of us in some way. Teachers, and schools, are then called to support students in whatever ways they can and to seek opportunities to make their curriculums responsive to the importance of mourning as a way of helping students find ways of moving forward as individuals and as a part of the communities they belong to.

Recently I listened to Bryan Doerries talk about the ways that he brings Greek tragedies to American soldiers. Learning about his work, I was reminded of the ways that it is too easy not to know that: "An estimated 7,057 service members have died during military operations since 9/11, while suicides among active duty personnel and veterans of those conflicts have reached 30,177" (Hernandez 2021). According to Doerries, Sophocles speaks to the contemporary soldier, because Sophocles himself was a general in the Athenian army, and part of the function of his plays was to open a space for collective grieving. Just as Doerries brings out the capacities of Greek tragedy to facilitate mourning that can open possibilities for radical hope, teachers can also think about ways to help students process—together—what they've experienced in these past few years. With luck, remembering the losses associated with Covid might help a generation become versed in the arts of difficult remembering, and this might allow them to more fully confront horrors like the attack on the US Capital and climate crisis. Teachers and schools, of course, cannot do this work alone. But parents and communities can be supportive of mourning and can creatively come together to help facilitate this work. Even attempting it will kindle new possibilities for excellence, and I will close by suggesting just how important it is to make this attempt and support the flickers of excellence we might discern along our way.

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