



The Voices of the Dead

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Abstract During the pandemic, relatives and friends were not able to visit the dying in hospitals or assemble for funerals. The dead were lost in nothingness. But the dead do not disappear. They continue to address us, appeal to us, guide us, direct us, console us.

Keywords Pandemic · Isolation · Voices

As the pandemic surged, people who were hospitalized with COVID-19 were isolated as much as possible from patients and staff in the hospital. Relatives were not allowed access to patients; they had only telephone calls and zoom visits, which ended if patients had to undergo incubators. They were not able to accompany and embrace dying patients, a dying that was often long and painful.

The dead were cremated or buried in the absence of relatives and friends, sometimes buried in mass graves. Relatives and friends were not able to assemble in funeral gatherings where the life of the deceased was recalled, shared with gratitude. When the deceased had lived a reckless, heedless, or brutal life, wreaking harm on a partner, child, or neighbours and strangers, relatives, and acquaintances were not

able to gather to find understanding of what he had wrought and to find release and to forgive.

The support and sympathy friends and acquaintances give to a person who has suffered the death of a spouse, parent, or child was altered in the pandemic. If the deceased was older, chronically ill, his or her death was taken as expected. If the deceased was unvaccinated and went to public gatherings, he or she was seen to have courted death. Sympathy is diminished for people whose loved ones bought into COVID-19 disinformation, however rampant it may have been in their social circle, media access, and elected leaders they trusted.

Indeed the grief of the person whose lover, parent, or child died is darkened with stabs of guilt—why did I not bring her out of that nursing home? Why did I not really insist he get vaccinated? Could it have been me who gave her COVID?

The grief is not only of those who knew and loved the one who died. Doctors, nurses, and healthcare workers may have known him or her only a little and for a short time, but they witnessed the lonely and long dying again and again.

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Grief is pain and suffering. But mourning brings into relief the things that were important to the one who has perished—the pristine landscapes of the child, the devotion to the sick of the nurse we know, the devotion to dance of the friend we knew, the passion for justice so strong in our parent.

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And the one who is now absent is not silent, continues to address us.

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The people who present themselves to us address us, call for our attention, call for a response. They appeal to us for light, for support, they address us in their vulnerability and need. They direct our attention, they lead us to paths and over obstacles, they order our movements and actions, they warn and prohibit. They comfort and console.

They continue to do so when they are no longer visible and tangible before us. “Be a man!” your father told you. He meant don’t let anyone put his shit on you. And don’t let him put his shit on anybody else. Your father is living now on the other side of the continent; you visit him every other year. In the bar that night, confronting the racist bully, that voice came to you from the outside, from him, and you heard it and acted. When you got home, there was a phone call that he had died in a car crash that morning. His presence, his voice had been no less real.

The dead address us, appeal to us, guide us, direct us. They instruct, authorize, mobilize us. They encourage and console us, they invite us to embrace life again.

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Some ancient cultures visualized the dead person as alive, his or her decomposed body intact in another place, another dimension. Clothing, utensils, foodstuffs, perhaps pets or slaves were buried with the dead person. Some ancient cultures reserved this kind of afterlife for the ruling elite. Some cultures visualized the dead person alive again as a lion, dog, or insect. These visualizations and theoretical elaborations are separate from the experience of the voice that may come from afar and from long ago.

There is in modern Western culture the conception that to exist is either to exist as a material thing or as a mental representation, a memory or an image. We do vaguely realize that there are other kinds of existence, that of symphonies, portraits, scientific facts. There are the voices of people we see and no longer see.

Recognizing only existence as material things and existence as mental representations, we are told to take the voice of our deceased lover, parent, or child to be a projection of our own mind, a phantasm, belief, or hallucination. It then follows that we are enjoined to accept the fact that the person we lost is nothingness, and take up again our own lives.

Mourning, Sigmund Freud explained, is a work of progressively disconnecting our libidinal attachments to our representation of a person who no longer exists and connecting them to a new object, to another person or persons. It is something the living have to do in order to reconnect with reality. In order to take up our own life, we need closure; we have to see the parent dead in the coffin and then buried. If our parent or child has been murdered, we have to see the murderer arrested and executed. Then the story of that life is finished.

But in our grief we do not want to terminate our relationship with a departed parent, child, or friend. We want to hear their voices that address, guide, and embolden us.

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It is cruelty to darken our grief by silencing the voice of the dead. Cruelty to ourselves, thrusting us before a silent abyss of nothingness. Cruelty to the dead, who continue to address us and direct us.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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