

On the Disciplining of Grief: The Affective Aftermath of Newtown

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To live in a body is to be continually confronted with the ever-present fact of one's vulnerability. It is to exist in a world of permeable boundaries and in-between spaces, a world marked by intensities and lulls, of sacred pleasure and of destructive violence. Vulnerability, then, is double-sided—it opens us to ineffable experiences of transcendent quality, even as it exposes us to the kind of horror that threatens to consign meaning itself to an inescapable abyss. This past Friday (12/14/2012) in Newtown, CT, many witnessed, and some brutally experienced, the unholy dramatizing of this basic vulnerability of embodied life in what amounted to an apocalyptic display of carnage. Worlds were unmade. Despair felt as an all-consuming force. Life as vaporous.

While I have no familial connections to those Newtown citizens directly victimized by a representative of a culture of violence, upon hearing the unraveling yet fluid story mid-day that Friday, I was overwhelmed by soul-shaking grief. In that moment, and others since then, the only identity capacious enough to hold deep sorrow that defies crude individualism was and remains "human being." Granted I live less than an hour away from Newtown and spend a fair amount of time tutoring young children, but the grief I felt exceeded this occupational and regional affiliation. Whatever space I regularly assumed to exist between self and other momentarily collapsed as my body began to exhibit physiological responses typical of secondhand trauma. At times, separation and harsh boundaries are more the workings of ideology than they are reflective of actual lived experience, one often causing the other. I could have tried to resist this identification and its attendant mourning yet it felt more natural, more holy to give into it. I did not want to reproduce in my grieving the very exclusionary dynamics that engendered a wicked scenario that elicited my grieving in the first place. We need more, not less, empathetic and moral imaginations that critically refuse to be constrained by parochial politics and unhelpfully constructed boundaries. I weep for Newtown—for those slain, including the white male domestic terrorist, and for their remaining families, friends, and city co-inhabitants left to gather the pieces of a shattered reality.

Who is worthy of grief?

Over the last few days, we've seen a variety of attempts at making sense of this tragedy and others inviting us to meditate on its apparent senselessness. All of them in different ways have reminded us of the significance of words in the immediate aftermath of tragedy—for good and for bad. Some words, however well-intentioned, compound tragedy, reproducing it through harmful theology and swift, undiscerning judgments, rooted in unprocessed and uninterrogated affect. Others offer consolation even if—sometimes, because—they don't provide explanations or propose causations. Some words, somewhat ironically, invite us into the hopefully healing and soul-searching space of silence. What interests me most about these diverse responses are the different relationships to grief on which they appear

to be based. I am particularly concerned with and about those responses that seem to embody a refusal to grieve, but even that is not precise enough. More to the point, I am trying to understand responses to (this particular) tragedy that rely on a disciplined grief: grieving chastened by narrow and ultimately life-denying politics of race, class, nation, and inattention.

Every time horror is visited upon a community there is a genre of ethical questions related to grief that needs addressing. The following questions have universal resonance yet arise in a specific socio-historical context and therefore reflect dynamics peculiar to it. What happens when the condition of one's grief is erasure—of histories, realities, and people? Is willful amnesia? What happens when an implicit glorification of white, U.S. American, suburban children, and a rhetoric of innocence and protectionism, determines the political possibilities of grief? Who is worthy of public grief and therefore who is not? Who warrants our tears and therefore who does not? Who preoccupies our media's attention, our presidential administration's focus, at what times, and in what ways? Who and how we grieve is often indicative of who and what we value. In effect, as Judith Butler reminds us in *Precarious Life*, the question of "what [for us] makes for a grievable life?" is intimately connected to the question of "who counts as human?" (p. 20)

In the immediate hours following the atrocious attack on Sandy Hook Elementary School, I found myself grappling with these questions, drawing from my training as a researcher of religion, feminist ethics, politics, and democratic life. If seriously entertained, I knew these questions would have the potential to transform how we U.S. Americans interact with one another and with other members of the international community. If avoided, I knew we would see business as usual, and with more violent consequences. It was with these concerns that I reposted on my mostly public Facebook wall a short, heartfelt, and astute comment by a dear white feminist friend. If we needed more proof than the tragedy itself that our national life is deeply fractured, we received an abundance of it through reading responses to the tragedy that were at once responses to our perspective on it. In a few hours' time my Facebook wall became an archive of irresponsibly policed grief in itself a display of grief, rooted, as my friend pointed out, in defense mechanisms triggered by trauma and aggrieved entitlement. When one is convinced that "these things do not happen here," when one's white, middle-class, U.S. American life shields one from the inordinate vulnerability to destructive violence (often carried out in one's own name) regularly experienced by members of other demographics and countries, the shock can be destabilizing, in addition to common denominator human grief. These anxieties can bubble up barely beneath the surface of one's reactions to a challenge in the midst of one's grief to widen one's moral sphere of altruism and identification.

In her post, my friend named the terrorism inflicted on Newtown as "an absolute tragedy . . . particular in its horror." However, she reminded us that it was not disconnected from the equally tragic violence plaguing teenagers in New Haven, Bridgeport, Chicago, and a 1980s' Atlanta, children killed in Iraq and Afghanistan by U.S. military endeavors, and children enslaved and raped in the colonization of the Americas and the establishment of the U.S. nation-state. A holistic feminist framework had attuned her to the interconnectivity of all forms of destructive violence and the very real need to lament and begin to imagine and

build “a much different world in which every child is valued.” In short, hers was a call to grieve—to grieve in such a way that the loss of any life would not be rendered invisible and that we would be catalyzed to create social structures not beholden to a politics of death. For her, as for Cornel West, truth is contingent on allowing suffering—all of it—to speak. She sought to hold together in one frame a variety of historical and contemporary violences that are conditioned by similar, though differently expressed, forces and that ultimately produce similar results. My friend refused and simultaneously called attention to the kind of hypocrisy that often attends public displays of mourning in the U.S.—tears for Newtown, drones for Pakistan. All life is valuable. All life is worthy of grief. No narrow definition of species membership here. In effect, my friend called for more grieving, not less, but a few, deeply hurting individuals thought otherwise and said so in no uncertain, and rather offensive, terms. Uninterrogated grief produces more grief even as it seeks to mask itself, to go by other names.

Disciplined Grief

Framed as a loving intervention for the severely misguided, black male Christian and former student of her husband, a white woman (who I will call Susan) I once knew well chided me for what she assumed was my own disciplined or circumscribed grief and hardened heart toward the (white) U.S. American Newtown victims. How could I re-post a status update like this on a day like this? She told me that that Friday was a day to grieve and pray, not to politicize tragedy in such a shameful display of selfish callousness. She said that my “compassion for your fellow man, regardless of race, has been dulled,” and recalled a mostly white, though multiracial, contingent of loved ones we held in common, apparently as a way to resensitize me to the plight of Newtown citizens who could have been counted among my loved ones save for an accident of history and place. In effect, she beckoned me to come back to a humanity she imagined me to have abandoned. My feminist friend responded to Susan with affectively infused but sharp rhetoric, pointing once more to the fact that effectively reducing violence is predicated first upon recognition of the inter-dependence of all forms of death-dealing violence. I followed with explaining that the grief or grieving process my feminist friend and I advocate seeks to dethrone the same basic misanthropic sensibility that precipitates and undergirds all systems of destructive violence. Our definition is spacious, enabling us to grieve the loss of life here, elsewhere, and everywhere concurrently. No need to be exclusivist. We can draw on enough spiritual resources to expand our capacity to grieve so that we won’t succumb to a capitalist, zero-sum model of grief in which grieving for one loss necessarily prevents one from grieving for another. And what is this talk of not politicizing tragedy, as if politics—in both the broad and narrow senses—are not always already at work, even in—especially in—trauma?

Susan exhibited anxieties suggestive of unexamined fears. She may have feared that grief was a finite non-renewable resource and so sought to goad us into using it sparingly. In effect, she asked us to discipline our grief, erecting boundaries around it, to grieve only the lives lost in Newtown’s massacre on that day. It was as if grieving domestic, primarily white suburban life had to exist in opposition to grieving foreign *and* domestic black and brown life (urban and otherwise). An implicit white nationalism rooted in evangelical fervor

structured Susan's logic and prevented her from holding in a single frame the terrors all of our children have experienced, globally speaking—she appeared to be offended at the very notion. By misreading my words and the words of my feminist friend, Susan was able to flip the script, accusing us of embodying a grief too disciplined. But this was precisely the critique we mobilized against her framework. Susan seemed unable to grasp the fact that we sought to undiscipline grief, to remind as many who would listen that all life is sacred and that sitting with the pain of its loss can give rise to forms of political life that engender and sustain robust Life for all. Sitting with our pain and the pain of others—rather than rushing out of either—might generate less violent, more compassionate models of selfhood and community.

After hearing our reiteration, Susan's rhetorical strategy shifted: now she said, "save the analysis for later." Her voice was amplified by her husband who argued that "now is not the time" regardless of the certitude or veracity of our assertions. But, as my feminist friend said, the idea that "now is not the time" has a long, sordid genealogy in histories of liberation movements—the ideas of gradual emancipation and desegregation being particularly poignant examples. Having ostensibly limited affective repertoires, Susan and her husband apparently believed that the only appropriate response to this magnitude of trauma is prayer, not analysis (yet they both saw fit to engage in extensive Facebook dialogues and critique). Both of them seemed to imagine the how of grief only to look like one thing—their model of grief to be singularly righteous and righteously singular. They interpreted our perspectives to be overly intellectualized and inattentive to the emotive dimensions of human experience, as if heart and head cannot be held in the same frame, as if our very bodies, which do just this, are impossible. Their either/or logic disabled them from realizing that one can pray *and* analyze, that grief does not always mean paralysis, that thinking, writing, speaking, and silence are all gifts that can enable the healing process, that different people grieve differently. This recognition of the diversity of grieving practices is not an apology for unethical grieving—as, I have suggested, there is such a thing—but it is a recognition of the variety of *ethical* forms of grieving that honor the interdependence of all life and relationality as the fundamental condition of being. There are many appropriate ways to grieve just as there are many inappropriate ways to grieve (or to refuse to grieve). Expansive grief, expansive altruism, and expansive identity are all inter-related ethical concepts and practices.

Conclusion

This particular example of grief disciplined by parochialism is indicative of a wider mood in U.S. American political life. It is conditioned by an exceptionalism that finds expression in supremacism and isolationism. It is rooted in a compassion that is not compassionate, an altruism that is restricted, and an empathy that is contained. As a U.S. black American from the working class, I felt as though I had to prove my patriotic loyalty, my Christianity, and my very humanity, by only grieving white life as though it were the only form of life (which, for some, is sadly true). Were I to buy into this narrative, I would be aiding it in becoming a reality. For my capacious grieving to be legitimate in Susan's eyes, I would have had to discipline it, consigning it to serve one tragic reality instead of many interconnected ones, effectively suppressing histories and realities that vie for public attention. Grief thus

construed abets dominant power rather than subverts it. It becomes complicit in maintaining the status quo; its (and it's) life made possible by so many deaths rendered invisible. Selective grieving is a tool of and a slave to empire—always has been—and therefore grieving must be emancipated.

The disciplining of grief presents us with desperate ethical questions and the possibility of new ethical communities invested in Life. Can we grieve all of our children? Can we humanize them all? Can we privilege them all and abolish narratives of superiority/inferiority? Can we recognize how loss binds us all together in some way? How might doing so enable us to account for the interlocking forces that threaten the eventual death of us all? Can we come to face ourselves in others and others in ourselves? Let us work to grieve in ways that won't solidify exclusions on which violent tragedies rely in the first place. Perhaps more and fuller grieving will produce less grief for us all.