

# Anticipatory Grief

**T**wo months since COVID-19 became a reality in our lives, the picture of what awaits us is coming into stark relief. Many of us will die. Many will most certainly be infected with the coronavirus and those of us who recover will know many others who will die. The wave is poised above our heads and its collapse is inevitable. It has fallen with a thunderous crash in Italy and the United States and we watch the devastation left in the wake of the fall. South Africa and other African countries have been praised for their responses to the pandemic. But now public health experts are telling us that our efforts amount to a delay in the inevitable.

Our governments are working around the clock to prepare for the mass sickness and the dying that awaits us. When South African president Ramaphosa outlined measures to secure the services of approximately 73 000 soldiers towards the end of the extended lockdown, many were surprised. Why more soldiers than were used during the actual lockdown period?

Perhaps to prepare for the impending labour of bearing the sick to hospital, carrying those who die to the morgue and then directly to the grave. Soldiers are on standby to dig mass graves and bury our dead. Ordinarily one would describe this as a tad dramatic. However, after seeing the countless images of mass graves and burials without any witnesses, we may want to more closely consider what awaits. A friend whose mother is a nurse in New York City tells me that her mother is haunted by the mounting piles of bodies now kept in mass cold rooms.

As African governments plan for the worst, ordinary people are not being asked to prepare for the coming pain of grief. How do we deal with anticipatory grief? If social media is an indication of people's feelings, we appear to be suspended between hysterical laughter and a growing numbness. These are suggestions that something is amiss. A disbelief that this is where we are. A reckoning with suspended dreams. We worry if we will ever see our parents who live in distant provinces. With borders closed, will we ever see our loved ones in Malawi and Zimbabwe?

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## **Paying attention to the small things**

The reality is dawning on us. Our phone conversations take on a new level of intensity and now we pay attention to the small things. Many of us who live far away from our families know we will not be allowed to travel home to see the sick. We may be able to travel to their funerals if we can get a permit to move between provinces. We are unlikely to see their faces because whispers suggest that the corpses of those killed by COVID-19 are dressed in airtight plastic bags and placed in sealed coffins. Forwarded Whatsapp voice notes suggest that soldiers or morgue employees will bury our dead because we are forbidden from touching the coffin. The sacred rites of our cultures must cease. The body cannot be brought home for one last farewell. We will bury our dead as diseased bodies to be treated with suspicion of contamination.

With this abrupt change to the customary, how do we grieve? When our deaths happen in the context of mass dying, our grief becomes unexceptional. If we are all lost in our grief, who will comfort us? What happens to community networks when we cannot visit each other? How do we embrace and acknowledge each other's cries? How do we gear ourselves towards anticipatory grief?

Perhaps this is the time to open spaces for remote connections where family and friends come together to hold each other. But this is only possible for the middle classes tethered to fibre networks. Perhaps all we have is the aftermath of dying on the other side of COVID-19.

Maybe, then, families, communities and governments need to make space for communal and national mourning. In these spaces, maybe we will be able to finally grieve and hold each other through our wailing. And then afterwards, if we will ever have an afterwards, we can visit grave sites to say goodbye.

The world has changed irreversibly. With this change we should not lose sight of the value and need to grieve and mourn our losses. We have to brace ourselves for the coming wave of loss. Governments have bought us time. Will we call our loved ones in the remaining time? How will we prepare ourselves? ☀