

THIS TOO SHALL PASS

**Mourning collective loss
in the time of Covid-19**

Alex Evans,
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and Ivor Williams



**THE COLLECTIVE
PSYCHOLOGY PROJECT**

About the authors

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The Collective Psychology Project is a collaborative inquiry into how psychology and politics can be brought together in new, creative ways that help us to become a Larger Us instead of a Them-and-Us. The Project's launch report *A Larger Us* is available [here](#). In addition to working on collective grief, the Project is currently working on mental health resources to support people [during Covid-19](#); on Larger Us campaigning with a range of NGOs and movements; and on prototyping small collective self-help groups that work on both our states of mind and the state of the world.

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Summary

Covid-19 is the first true cataclysm most of us have ever seen. It's a crisis with **multiple layers**. A pandemic that may ultimately lead to a death toll in the **millions**. An economic catastrophe, with the "Great Lockdown" triggering by far the **biggest crisis since the Great Depression**. And a social and cultural shock with impacts that we are only just beginning to understand.

Most of all, though, Covid-19 is a crisis of the mind: one that has been called "**the world's biggest psychological experiment**". The nature of the crisis goes right to the core of how we live as social beings – and also how we die.

This essay is intended as a meditation on collective grieving. We argue that in conditions of such widespread loss as the ones we now face, it's essential that we grieve well – and that this means doing so collectively, not just on our own. But we also note that our society often struggles with grief. Instead we often regard death as a taboo and grief as something embarrassing, to be hidden away or processed as quickly as possible.

Covid-19 forces us to look our unease with death squarely in the face. Suddenly, millions of us find ourselves grieving not just the passing of people we love who have died alone, but the deaths of millions of people worldwide, as well as the passing of a way of life as we realise how many things will not go "back to normal" after the outbreak has ended.

For all that we may feel our situation to be unprecedented, though, humans have faced similar cataclysms many times before. Our ancestors knew all about the challenges we now face, and they have plenty to tell us.

The power of shared stories of loss and hope

In particular, they knew that during cataclysmic crises, the shared stories we use to make sense of the world – myths – become especially important.

Such stories may explain why the disaster has happened – in the process, often telling us truths about ourselves that we might prefer not to face – and tell us how we can move forward. And because the stories we reach for to understand what is happening also affect how we behave, we may well find that our myths often create our reality as much as they describe it.

But our ability to navigate the cataclysm that faces us today is complicated by the fact that we have lost many of the old stories and rituals that used to help us make sense of death and grief. This creates profound dangers, not just of deeper hurt, but also of fragmentation, polarisation, culture wars, and even violence.

So as well as emphasising why we need to grieve collectively, this essay is also about how we do so, drawing in particular on how our forebears used deep shared stories and rituals to make sense of cataclysms – and how we can draw on them again today.

In particular, we look at three kinds of myths that have helped our ancestors to make sense of crisis and that we now find bubbling up once more in numerous works of popular fiction and film:

- **Apocalypse myths** – which, rather than being taken literally as descriptions of the end of the world, need to be understood as depicting an unveiling of things as they really are;
- **Restoration myths** – which tell of how a wound or rupture in the world is healed and things are made whole again; and
- **Emergence myths** – which tell of how the death of the old also leads to the birth of the new, or of how we grow up as a species.

Eight lessons about grief

Using these three sets of myths as inspiration, we set out eight key lessons that can help us to navigate this moment of cataclysm and catharsis.

1. **Embrace grief.** We must move further into grief rather than seeking to avoid it, for if we turn away from it then we increase our pain and fear.
2. **This will get worse before it gets better.** After disasters, an initial “honeymoon” stage of solidarity and hope is often followed by a “disillusionment” stage of exhaustion, stress, and feelings of abandonment. We may well encounter the same.
3. **There is more collective grief to come.** With climate breakdown and mass extinction still gathering pace, Covid-19 is the start of a much deeper process of grieving that will unfold over years to come.
4. **Grief is not an equaliser.** Covid-19 is already creating powerful new forms of inequality, and grief and bereavement are no less prone to the effects of social injustice than anything else.
5. **We need to grieve together.** Grieving for loss is by definition a relational experience, and in most other societies grieving and mourning are far more shared experiences than they are for us in the West.
6. **Learn from how our ancestors grieved.** Every culture has its own rich and deep history of ritual for loss – and ours is like a treasure house waiting to be rediscovered.
7. **Invent new rituals and practices to deal with collective loss.** While myths cannot be designed from scratch, rituals and other communal grieving practices definitely can.

8. **Remember that loss is part of the natural cycle.** If we are able to understand loss as a form of renewal, we can begin to understand and appreciate life as a single natural process, ever in flux, in motion.

Practices to help us come to terms with grief

Finally, we offer five practices for grieving well, each of which can be explored individually or in groups.

- **Writing a Grief Letter or Grief List.** Making an inventory of what we are grieving can be enormously helpful when we feel overwhelmed – either in personal writing or in collective online journaling.
- **Making a Grief Altar or Memorial Corner.** Creating a special place in the house or online to make space for grief – a place for photos of places we cannot go, tickets unused, photos of people we loved who have passed – can help us to say goodbye.
- **A Gratitude Walk.** Physical movement can unlock things in us that thinking alone cannot. Going for walks, alone or with a loved one (whether beside us or on the phone) while focusing on things we are thankful for can be a powerful practice for dealing with loss.
- **Telling Stories.** When someone we love has died, it helps to listen to, and tell, stories about them, just as we do at a wake – and we can find deep comfort in spaces to remember specific losses in our lives, either with one other person, or in online groups.
- **Listening to Music that Helps us Feel.** Music can open a pathway to our emotions in a way that words sometimes cannot, and we can open ourselves up to grief through listening to sad or elegiac music either alone or with others.

Even as we wait impatiently for things to “return to normal”, we know at some level that they will not. The cataclysm through which we are living – not just the virus, but breakdowns in the cycles of our economies, climate, and ecosystems too – is still just in its early stages.

Although grief is painful, we must recognise the importance of honouring it, both individually and collectively, and of allowing it to unfold in its own time rather than holding it to a timetable. Seeking to avoid it only makes things worse.

As our ancestors before us have found, grief also has gifts to offer us, hard as it may be to make them out when we are in the thick of its throes. Our ability to grieve well and discern these gifts is helped enormously when we are able to draw on shared myths, rituals and practices that assist us in making sense of life even as we grapple with loss and despair.

Now

Quick now, here, now, always—

A condition of complete simplicity

(Costing not less than everything)

TS Eliot, Four Quartets

A time of lockdown

As we write these words, 2.6 billion people around the world are under lockdown – **more people than were alive during World War Two**. Governments have instructed us to reduce our lives to the smallest social element: the household. When we leave our homes – **which, in the UK, are the smallest in Western Europe** – we must stay 2 metres apart from everyone else. We have become like magnets with reversed polarities, sliding off pavements onto roads, around cars; anything to avoid close proximity to others.



Even as our interconnection has been made more tangible than ever before, we have come to see it as something to fear.”

The effects on us extend far beyond the immediate shift in behaviour. We are social animals. Our evolution is built upon the ability to communicate and cooperate, not just through words but also through body language, physical contact, and intimacy. There is a reason solitary confinement is seen by psychologists as **tantamount to torture**; social distancing and isolation has deep psychological effects on us.

Now, though, all of us are experiencing some type of confinement, especially with more of us living alone than **ever before**. The impact extends beyond us, to our families, communities and societies.

Never before have we understood so viscerally that one sick person in China can affect billions of people around the world. Billions of us have woken up to the fact that a single touch – via a parcel, a door handle, a credit card terminal – puts us in touch with many others, unseen. Even as our interconnection has been made more tangible than ever before, we have come to see it as something to fear.

A time of grief

And then there is the grief.

The experience of grief is a natural human response to loss. All of us will encounter it throughout the course of our lifetimes. It is part of “the condition of the human spirit,” as Lindsay Prior **puts it**.

More specifically, *grief* is an internal physiological and emotional response to loss. It’s what we think and feel on the inside after someone we love dies. *Mourning*, by contrast, is about what we express on the outside during the period of mental, emotional and personal transition as we learn to live again in the context of loss.

Our society struggles with both. Perhaps because we fear its capacity to overwhelm us, we often see grief as embarrassing, a taboo, something to be

contained and hidden away. The latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* even goes so far as to suggest that any grief that lasts longer than a few weeks is abnormal, a pathology.

Now, it's all around us – and we are having to cope with it in conditions of lockdowns and isolation. People we care about are dying alone. Just as so much of our social lives has migrated onto smartphones and social media, so our dying has also become something we do online. For many, FaceTime calls on iPads have become the **only means** of staying in touch with loved ones not only in sickness, but also at the **end of life**.

Nor can healthcare professionals help as much as they would wish. At a time when human touch and communication is at its most tender and necessary, healthcare professionals – many of whom have been rushed through training or re-trained from other specialties – must necessarily limit their time and exposure to dying patients.

Doctors, nurses, and care workers speak of the lack of preparation for this scale of death, or the relentless pace of it. Few have much training or experience in providing palliative care, the clinical specialism that focuses on the care of terminally ill or dying people. The glaring lack of focus on quality of palliative care has alarmed the medical community, with the leading medical journal *The Lancet* reporting that it urgently “needs to be a key part of the response.”

Nor does the impact of isolation and distancing stop even when people are dead. We are unable to hold funerals, to be close to each other in consolation. Eulogies are transmitted over the internet, via **digital conferencing tools**. This distancing twists our mourning periods into something much more drawn out, complicated, detached, unresolved. The long term impact of this is still not known, but this much is clear: when we cannot grieve and mourn together, we suffer.

The passing of a way of life

Nor is our grief “just” about the deaths of people we know and love. At another level, we are also beginning to grieve for the passing of a way of life, because however much we want things to go “back to normal”, we also recognise at some level that many of them never will.

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Just as epidemiologists speak of “**immunological naivety**”, so we have lost our psychological naivety that pandemics are something that happen “elsewhere”. We saw Swine flu, Ebola, SARS, Marburg, or Zika as things that happened in “other places”. No longer.

At the same time, we are beginning to realise the extent of economic loss that we face, worse than anything **since the 1930s**. Millions of jobs have already gone for good. So too have many people’s savings or homes. When the lockdowns finally end, we will discover how many of the landmarks of our everyday lives – shops, cafes, restaurants – may be gone too.

With 1.5 billion out of school, meanwhile, students everywhere are

graduating without the chance to participate in graduation ceremonies or say goodbye to friends with whom they have spent years. As budget airlines collapse and borders tighten up, conveniences that we took for granted like cheap flights and easy mobility also look set to become a thing of the past.

For the older people who are most at risk, especially the many baby-boomers who may have just started retirements that they expected to be utopian, the futures they imagined are evaporating before their eyes as they face self-isolation that could last for a long time to come. Even before the pandemic, over half of those aged over 65 lived alone, with one in four having **no one at all to confide in and share their problems with**. Now, they have lost even the small daily connections of interactions at the post office, the supermarket, or the doctor's surgery.

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All these losses have the effect of ripping back veils and revealing what was there: in ourselves, in society, in our futures. Often, we feel profound unease at what we see, particularly as Covid-19 brings existential risks like climate change or mass extinction into sharper relief.

As we wander through the collapse of so much of what we thought we could rely on, it's easy to think that our situation is unprecedented. But it's not, as we explore in the next section. Our ancestors had plenty of experience at handling cataclysms – and they have much to tell us.

Learning from our ancestors

In the uncertain hour before the morning

Near the ending of interminable night

TS Eliot, Four Quartets

Cataclysm and the human condition

Cataclysms have always been part of human experience. Whenever we experience them, we find that they change everything – or, perhaps more accurately, that we change everything through how we choose to interpret and respond to them.

Take the 14th century Black Death, which caused the deaths of between one and two thirds of the population of Europe. Wages soared while land values plummeted, leading to both widespread reforestation and the destabilisation of feudalism. Religious piety blossomed, as did fanaticism and anti-semitism.

Or look at the Thirty Years War of the 17th century, which saw eight million die of violence, famine, and plague, together with rape and looting on a continental scale, the peak of witch-hunting in Europe, and the bankruptcies of most of the combatants. From these ashes emerged the idea of national sovereignty, which continues as the basis for international relations to this day.

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Cataclysms change how we mourn, too. In the American civil war, as thousands of soldiers died far from home, the practice of embalming became **widespread** as a popular outcry broke out for the dead to be returned to their families for burial. In the First World War, the deaths of entire adult male populations of towns and villages led to the need for collective forms of memorialisation separate from the deposition of remains, culminating in monoliths such as the Cenotaph in London, or the countless tombs for the **Unknown Soldier** around the **world**.

And cataclysms live on in our psyches long after the physical dust has settled, even in later generations: studies of children and even grandchildren of **Holocaust survivors** and **US Civil War prisoners** find substantially higher levels of stress hormones and incidence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder than for the general population.

Why we need stories to help us make sense of cataclysm

During cataclysmic crises, the shared stories we use to make sense of the world become especially important, as our ancestors well understood. In particular, the deep stories that we call myths are vital: the kind that tell us about where we are, how we got there, where we might be trying to go, and underneath it all, who we are.

Myths provide a compass that becomes vital when everything we thought we knew is falling apart. They explain why the disaster has happened – in the process, often telling us truths about ourselves that we might prefer not to face.

And they also tell us how we can move forward, whether by awakening our sense of duty or solidarity, or – as in Winston Churchill’s “finest hour” speech – by making us aware of capacities that lie within us.

At the same time, cataclysms offer fertile moments for the renewal or reinterpretation of our myths. China’s Warring States Period from 475–221 BCE provided the soil from which Taoism and Confucianism grew. The Babylonian Exile of the Jews marked a high point for prophetic literature including Ezekiel and Daniel, and the birth of Rabbinic Judaism as we know it today. The Black Death not only led to social and political changes, but also laid the ground for the Renaissance and Reformation.

By the same token, though, crises can also create the conditions for the wrong kinds of story to take hold: stories that divide us rather than bring us together. Conditions of widespread uncertainty and want can provide the perfect Petri dish for powerful stories of “Them-and-Us” to flourish, most obviously with the rise of Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists in 1930s Germany, but also in how years of austerity in the 2010s set the stage for a resurgence of authoritarian populism all over the world.



Our myths create our reality as much as they describe it.”

The danger of our reaching for the wrong kind of myths is especially important because the stories that we reach during catastrophes can so easily become self-fulfilling prophecies. Consider what happens in a bank run, or when panic buying takes hold and supermarket shelves are emptied – something that **happened** early in the Covid-19 pandemic. Both kinds of event begin with a story that there is not enough to go around, and once enough of us begin to believe the story and act accordingly, we make the story come true.

As the novelist Terry Pratchett **understood**, “People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact it’s the other way around.” Our myths create our reality as much as they describe it. And in this sense, the only true litmus test for any myth is, as the writer Karen Armstrong **observes**, whether or not it prompts us to act with compassion, kindness, and love.

Covid-19 and the myth gap

Now, as we face Covid-19, the question of whether we reach for stories of Them-and-Us or a Larger Us is one on which **tens of millions of lives may depend**. We are poised between **two futures**: a breakdown, where infections and deaths are very high, economic impacts are savage, and we turn on each other just when we most need to combine our efforts; or a breakthrough, where the toll of the pandemic is still heavy, but our capacity for acting together grows.

Grief has a vital place in this question, for as much as it hurts, grief has deep potential to help take us into a Larger Us. As James Stanescu **puts it**, “grief and mourning have ‘we-creating’ capacities, exposing our known, unknown and unacknowledged connections to others, and allowing for opportunities to reach across differences to connect with others”.

But to realise this potential, we must grieve well – and our ability to do so is

entangled by the loss of so many of our traditional guides.

Historically, religions have played a central role in helping us navigate and make sense of cataclysms. Today, though, religious observance is at an **all time low** in countries on both sides of the Atlantic, implying the loss not only of the deep shared stories that religions have traditionally offered, but also of congregational spaces in which we can gather to make sense of the deeper aspects of life.

And while some might see psychology as a contemporary alternative to myth or religion, it too has its limitations. In particular, it is focused overwhelmingly on individuals rather than on the collective, making it less well placed to help us to deal together with a shared crisis like Covid-19. (It can often be burdened by outdated models, too – including, in the grief context, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’s idea that grief is a linear process that can be broken into five neatly compartmentalised **stages** that end in “acceptance”.)

All this creates real dangers. Writing nearly a century ago, Carl Jung **noted** that “the man who thinks he can live without myth is like one uprooted, having no true link either with the past, or the ancestral life within him or yet with contemporary society”.

As Jung understood, when we lack shared myths to bind societies together and instead find ourselves in a “**myth gap**”, the risks of fragmentation, polarisation, culture wars, and violence increase dramatically – especially in conditions of crisis and uncertainty as far-reaching as those that surround us today. So where do we go from here?

Where to look for myths

We must start by recognising that we cannot simply invent myths from scratch. Myths are not rational things that we can sit down and design as though they were psychological plug-and-play software.



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Neither can we simply import myths from elsewhere: such cultural appropriation risks nullifying the very things that make us different from one another, replacing our cultural biodiversity with commodified, Disney-like replicas – as for instance with the mass commercialisation of the Aztec, and later Mexican Catholic, practice of *Día de Los Muertos* (Day of the Dead).

Instead, we need to understand that myths are organic, living things that are particular to places and peoples. As Walter Brueggemann **puts it**, the “prophetic imagination” must always “move back into the deepest memories of this community ... symbols of hope cannot be general and universal but must be those that have been known concretely in this particular history”.

Of course, much hinges on what is meant by “this community” or “this history”. In Britain, as in many other countries, part of our common wealth is the diversity of ancestral experience on which we can draw. Some of our collective experience is shared; other aspects of it are particular to individuals and their

families. Both kinds are valuable, and to explore this ground, we need to be able to speak to both the personal and the universal.

For us as authors, our ancestors were rooted in a western, Christian, and Celtic worldview – and so those are the myths that we talk about below. But it’s important to be clear that we do not think this means these myths are ‘the right ones’. On the contrary, we think that part of the process of mythical renewal that needs to happen now is a deeper dialogue between traditions and heritages, because we have so much to learn from and offer to each other.

We also want to be clear that although we think these myths have continuing meaning and relevance today, we do not think this means that they must necessarily be honoured through the religious bodies that have lasted up to now.

On the contrary, as we explore in the next part of the paper, we think that many religious institutions are failing badly in the current moment – and that, like many generations before us, we need to be ready to reinterpret our oldest stories anew, and be prepared to strike out in creating new ways of honouring our deepest mysteries.

With those caveats stated, here are three closely linked kinds of myths that our ancestors have used to make sense of cataclysms in the past, each of which we think has continuing relevance today as we embark on the work of collective grief.

Apocalypse

We often think of “apocalypse” as a synonym for the end of the world, and it’s not hard to see why we might think that. The Book of Revelation is full of hunger, death, locusts, fire, smoke, and brimstone before the last judgment takes place. Over the centuries since it was written, numerous reformers and visionaries have used these images in their writings and speech: from Martin Luther to John Calvin, John Wesley, and even Isaac Newton.



One of the most powerful effects of Covid-19 is its ability to hold up a mirror to our society.”

In our own times, an entire **genre** of fiction and movies is devoted to imagining post-apocalyptic futures: *World War Z*, *The Road*, *I Am Legend*, *28 Days Later*, *The Day of the Triffids* and **dozens** more. Meanwhile, fundamentalists in all the world’s major religions eagerly await the end of history when they will be saved even as everyone else is damned, ignoring the profound **dangers** of taking scripture as literal truth.

In reality, though, apocalypse means something far more subtle and interesting than the end of the world. Instead it refers to the idea of an unveiling of things as they really are, of a *revelation*. It’s an idea that has powerful relevance to our current crisis, for one of the most powerful effects of Covid-19 is its ability to hold up a mirror to our society.

Covid-19 has shown us, for example, who the real key workers are in our economy, and how they are often the lowest paid, least visible, and most vulnerable of us. It has shown us the vulnerabilities that come with our interdependence in a globalised world: as the evolutionary biologist Carl Bergstrom **puts it**, “We may not act like we’re all in this together, but in a pandemic, like it or not, we are.”

The virus has also forced us to look at “forgotten places” like prisons, shanty towns, and refugee camps: the kinds of places that we often look away from, but which all of us are now forced to focus on because of their vulnerability to becoming incubators of new infections – and because the death rates there could dwarf any previously seen for the virus.

At the same time, this moment of revelation is also showing us things in ourselves that we might prefer not to see. The psychologist Carl Jung wrote at length about the idea of the *Shadow* in our psyche, which includes all the aspects of our personality that we repress from conscious awareness into our unconscious.

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We are realising that what we all want most is connection, relationship, belonging, and love.”

Plenty of Shadow material is being surfaced in this moment: *violence, crime, wilful ignorance, scapegoating, racism, and protests* against lockdowns. Amid the enforced solitude and rest of the lockdown, meanwhile, it becomes harder to ignore the essential emptiness of much of what we spend our lives zoning out on – consumerism, achievement, the regard of others. Above all, we are realising that what we all want most is connection, relationship, belonging, and love.

Just as Jung saw the aim of Shadow work as integrating what is unconscious into conscious awareness, so the process of apocalypse can be cathartic and restorative even as it is also dramatic, frightening, and often painful.

The American writer Rebecca Solnit explores this idea in her book *A Paradise Built in Hell*, which looks at the communities that form in the wake of natural disasters. Whilst popular beliefs about what happens after disasters involve looting, rapes, and the breakdown of law and order, Solnit finds that the reality is much more often characterized by extraordinary selflessness, solidarity, and sense of purpose. During cataclysms, people are often astonished by how much more alive they feel than they do during the fragmentation and disconnectedness of ordinary life. She writes,

“If I am not my brother’s keeper, then we have been expelled from paradise, a paradise of unbroken solidarities. Thus does everyday life become a social disaster. Sometimes disaster intensifies this; sometimes it provides a remarkable reprieve from it, a view into another world for our other selves.

“When all the ordinary divides and patterns are shattered, people step up – not all, but the great preponderance – to become their brothers’ keepers. And that purposefulness and connectedness brings joy even amid death, chaos, fear, and loss.”

Restoration

A second mythological tradition that has deep relevance to our current moment is that of stories about restoration, that tell of a world made whole again. In these myths, something fundamental has gone wrong. Society, the world, or even the entire cosmos has suffered a wound or a rupture in the natural order of things. Often, the wound has been caused by our own greed or folly. And unless we can heal it, we risk losing everything.

This is the story arc of the whole Bible: an epic that begins with humanity expelled from a garden that has the Tree of Life at its centre, and closes with the same Tree restored to its rightful place at the heart of the new Jerusalem in the final chapter of the Book of Revelation. And it's also the basis of many of the most popular works of fiction and film of all time, including the Star Wars films, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the *Harry Potter* saga, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Frozen* and *His Dark Materials*.

All of these stories derive from ancient myths that tell of a covenant formed at the very beginning of time, when the cosmos was first created. The purpose of this covenant – the Everlasting Covenant or Creation Covenant – was to hold creation together, with the sea in its proper place, the climate in balance, and the stars in their orbits. (*Star Wars* fans will spot the similarity with the Force, which, as Obi-Wan Kenobi observes, “surrounds us and penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together”.)

Crucially, though, the covenant can be broken, in particular through ignorance, injustice, or idolatry (the worship of inanimate things made by human hand). What may at first appear to be a form of liberation rapidly becomes clear for what it is: a catastrophe. As WB Yeats put it,

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The Ceremony of innocence is drowned.”

In theological texts, the results of a broken covenant are often depicted in explicitly environmental terms. The Book of Hosea, for instance, describes a time in which “the land dries up, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea are swept away”. Similar imagery abounds in images of the land of Mordor or Saruman’s despoilation of Isengard in *Lord of the Rings*. Winters that never end, like the ones in *Frozen* or *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, are another sign of a broken covenant; so too are the spectres in *His Dark Materials*.

In all of these cases, the remedy for healing the breach and restoring the cosmos to its rightful state is the process known as atonement, which centres on an act of self-sacrifice. This is the role of the high priest in Judaism in the First Temple period (who would symbolically take society’s sins on to himself), and of Jesus in the New Testament.



The effect of self-sacrifice is to bring things back into balance and make the world whole again”

In fiction, too, we see the self-sacrifice of Harry in *The Deathly Hallows*; of Obi-Wan in *Star Wars* (as well as Darth Vader in *Return of the Jedi*); of both Gandalf and Frodo in *Lord of the Rings*; of Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and Anna at the end of *Frozen*; and of Will and Lyra entering the land of the dead to liberate those that are held there (and, later, sacrificing their love to heal the final rift between worlds) in *His Dark Materials*.

In all cases, the effect of self-sacrifice is to bring things back into balance and make the world whole again. The powers that imprison or bewitch us are destroyed or defeated; images of winter or environmental catastrophe are re-

placed by ones of flourishing and plenty. And in all cases, the one that made the self-sacrifice – Gandalf, Harry Potter, Anna, Obi-Wan, Aslan, Lyra, Will and Jesus – are resurrected.

The idea of self-sacrifice that leads to rebirth found its concrete application in the ancient concept of Jubilee. In the original biblical context, every seventh year was a Sabbatical year: a time of “solemn rest for the land”. No crops were sown. Instead, people lived off what the land produced naturally, with the soil given time to lie fallow so as to maintain its fertility. Then, every seventh Sabbatical year was a Jubilee, when in addition to normal Sabbatical year observances, land ownership would be reset to prevent inequalities building up, debts cancelled, prisoners freed, and everyone would return home.

In effect, Sabbath and Jubilee years were the socio-political version of atonement: a set of concrete procedures for how to correct economic, social and environmental imbalances through resting, slowing down, halting economic activity, and ‘sacrificing’ the grasping ego that always demands more, in order to protect the covenant.

These principles turn out to be profoundly relevant to our own crisis today. Countries all over the world have released prisoners. Low income countries have seen \$12 billion of debt payments suspended. Some governments are moving to find homes for all rough sleepers. Proposals for a Universal Basic Income look closer to being implemented than ever before. With the world economy on lockdown, carbon emissions and air travel are in freefall while air quality has improved dramatically; in many cities, people can hear birds sing or see stars at night for the first time.

2,500 years after the rules for Jubilees were codified in the Book of Leviticus, they have bubbled up from our ancestral memory once more.

Emergence

While self-sacrifice leads to rebirth, it does not mean that everything goes back to exactly the same as it was before. Those that are resurrected come back changed, for these are stories of emergence as well as restoration. When Jesus is resurrected, he initially goes unrecognised by both Mary Magdalene and his disciples. When Obi-Wan returns in *Star Wars*, it is not in his corporeal body. When Gandalf reappears in *Lord of the Rings*, it is as Gandalf the White, not Gandalf the Grey.

This has parallels with trauma psychology in our own times, which emphasises that healing from trauma is more subtle than simply being ‘fixed’ back to how we were before. Instead, people who have survived trauma come back changed by the experience, but in a position to see how it has made them more resilient rather than more vulnerable, with the ability to live in the present rather than being overwhelmed by the past.

In Covid-19 terms, myths of rebirth suggest that beyond the passing of the old way of life, there is hope for the birth of the new – but that we cannot expect life simply to go back to how it was before. Instead, it may be more helpful to

imagine futures in which our wounds are still there, but in a form that both reconnects us and makes us wiser. This was also the central idea in Carl Jung's concept of the 'wounded healer', which drew on the Greek myth of Chiron, a centaur whose extraordinary ability to heal derived from having been incurably wounded by a poisoned arrow.

Emergence myths can also be a helpful complement to Restoration myths because of their ability to offset the latter's often unhelpful focus on guilt or sin. The myth of the Fall, for example, blames humans – and especially women – for an original sin which led to everything going wrong, thereby creating the “massive burden of human guilt upon which the Churches have fed for so long”, as the theologian Margaret Barker *writes*.

Emergence, on the other hand, invites us to think of ourselves as being in our adolescent years: a time in which we test the limits, rebel against them, make mistakes, and learn from the consequences as part of growing up. As the writer Duane Elgin *observes*, people in different cultures all over the world seem to share an intuitive sense that we have been living through the adolescent years

of our species. For years, Elgin has undertaken informal straw polls on the question, “When you look at human behaviour around the world and then imagine our species as an individual, how old would that person be – a toddler, a teenager, a young adult, or an elder?” Wherever he has asked the question around the world, he continues, at least two thirds say we are in our teenage years.

Against that backdrop, Covid-19 can, like other defining crises of our time such as climate change and mass extinction, be understood as an initiatory threshold that marks a potential transition to our species's adulthood.

As Robert Wright observes in his book *NonZero*, the whole story arc of human history is about how we have kept cooperating at ever larger and more complex levels: from survival bands to chiefdoms, kingdoms, city states, nation states, and most recently today's globalised society. Now, finally, we are living right on the cusp of an 'Us' that includes not just all 7.8 billion of the world's people but also generations not yet born and other species besides our own.

But it is not a given that we will make the transition to our species' adulthood successfully. In indigenous societies all over the world, initiatory rites of passage often take the form of a trial by ordeal that involves the possibility of death, the probability of wounding, but also the prospect of coming through the fire into maturity as an adult – *if* we have internalised the lesson that we are part of a Larger Us, not a them-and-us or an atomised 'I'.

Now, we face our own initiatory test. In the next section, we offer eight lessons from the past that can help us to make it safely to the other side.

“

Covid-19 can, like other defining crises of our time such as climate change and mass extinction, be understood as an initiatory threshold that marks a potential transition to our species's adulthood.”

This too shall pass

All shall be well

And all shall be well

And all manner of thing shall be well

Julian of Norwich

This too shall pass. All crises must end. But the combined effects of lockdown, of so many deaths, of the passing of so much of the familiar, will leave long lasting scars. The question of how we mourn and grieve for our loss, as well as how we look ahead to the future, will play a powerful role in shaping our future. So what are some lessons that can help us in this moment of cataclysm and catharsis?

Lesson 1: Embrace grief



As much as it pains us, we must move further into grief rather than seeking to avoid it. Grief and mourning are not ‘stages’ to pass through as quickly as possible. Instead, it may be more helpful to think of them as ‘tasks’ to be completed in their own time and at their own pace, in a course that may meander rather than following a straight line.



We must move further into grief rather than seeking to avoid it.”

William Worden provides us with **four tasks of mourning**: to accept the reality of the loss, to work through the pain and grief, to adjust to the new environment, and to find enduring connection with the deceased while moving forward with life. We may need to grapple with each of these tasks multiple times.

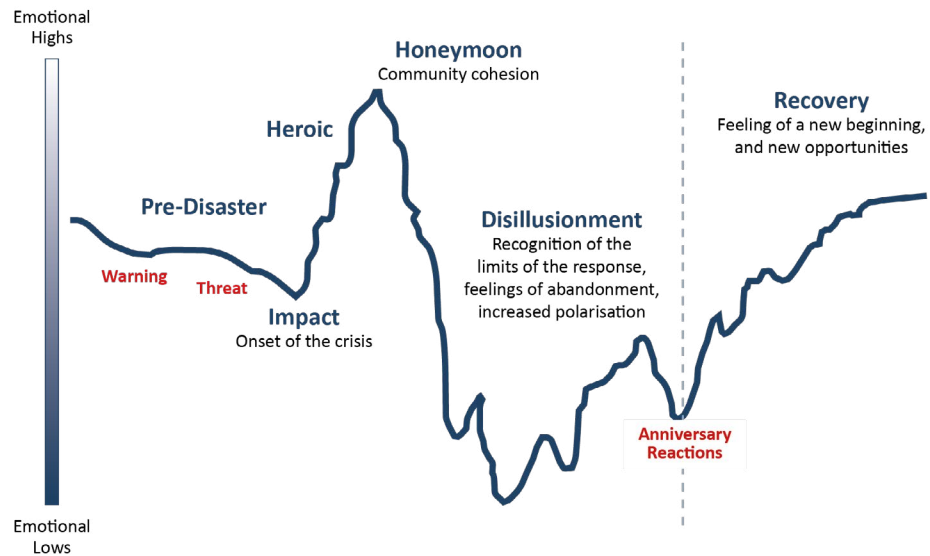
If we fail to do so, and instead “choose to deal with our fear by turning away from its source” as Colin Murray Parkes **puts it**, then the end result is to increase our pain: for “each time we do this we only add to the fear, perpetuate the problems, and miss an opportunity to prepare ourselves for the changes that are inevitable in a changing world”.

Lesson 2: This will get worse before it gets better



If we steer into grief rather than away from it, then we can steel ourselves for the real possibility that things may well get worse before they get better. This is one of the key lessons from the field of disaster sociology, which studies how people feel and behave in the **aftermath** of major crises and natural disasters. In the immediate wake of disasters, a “heroic” stage characterised by high altruism is often succeeded by a “honeymoon” phase of community bonding and optimism that things will soon return to normal.

But these early stages are typically followed by a long stage of “disillusionment”. In this phase, communities and individuals realise the limits of disaster assistance. Exhaustion, financial stresses, poor health, and lack of time all add to the toll. Feelings of abandonment may emerge. And while disillusionment is ultimately followed by a “recovery” phase with greater feelings of agency and purpose, it can take months or years before this happens.



Source: US Dept of Health and Human Services

This is something our ancestors well understood. As the theologian Walter Brueggemann *observes*, times of cataclysm entail the need for three “prophetic tasks”: facing reality, embracing grief, and finding hope. Crucially, though, the three belong together. It is only by really grieving for what we have lost that we can begin to hope for the emergence of the new.

Lesson 3: There is more collective grief to come



Long before the virus took hold in China, we were already facing other, deep forms of grief. Our natural world is suffering huge losses as we live through the planet’s sixth mass extinction, with around a million plant and animal species now at *risk* of being wiped out. At the *North Pole*, in *Greenland*, in the *Himalayas* and in *Antarctica*, ice is melting fast. Every year the wildfires are *worse*.



Long before the virus took hold in China, we were already facing other, deep forms of grief.”

All this has profound emotional impacts, starting with indigenous people whose very identity rests on their relationship to the natural environment. The Sami herders of Sweden *speak of* “a sense of grief for the future” as they confront declining food supply, changing weather, and the loss of their homeland. The feeling that they may be the last generation of herders amplifies their sense of loss.

Now, this sense of loss and grief is becoming globalised as climate impacts move inexorably from the future to the present – whether in wildfires in Australia or the Amazon, floods in Europe, or the melting ice at each of the world’s poles. The funerals held for the *Ok* and *Pizol* glaciers in Iceland and Switzerland represent the incarnation of this knowledge. A plaque at Ok reminds everyone that this is just the first glacier to disappear in Iceland. It will not be the last.

Lesson 4: Grief is *not* an equaliser



We have already seen how Covid-19 has created its own forms of inequality. People who can work from home or have outside space on their doorsteps, who have free high quality healthcare or strong social safety nets available for when they cannot work, are having a very different experience of the pandemic from those who do not. All these disparities are even starker in lower income countries.



Grief and bereavement are no less prone to the effects of social injustice than anything else.”

Grief and bereavement are no less prone to the effects of social injustice than anything else. Some people can afford to take time off to grieve, or have people around them to support them; others are not so fortunate, and face a higher risk of long term trauma as a result. In many countries, people are campaigning to change the law to recognise that, just as parents need maternity or paternity leave after a birth, so people also need time to grieve after a death; in some cases, like the UK, these campaigns are starting to **bear fruit**.

There are also particular inequalities specific to collective grief, as for instance when emotions of guilt and culpability are present as well. We can see this most clearly on issues like climate change, where those of us in the developed world are disproportionately responsible yet least exposed to climate impacts. But the same also applies to Covid-19, where some of us refuse to observe lockdowns even as others, like healthcare workers and the elderly, face the increased risks.

Lesson 5: We need to grieve together



There is no right or wrong way to grieve, but it is worth being aware that our society's approach to grieving is unusual for being so individualised. Just as with our approach to mental health more broadly, we tend to hide bereavement away and see it as a burden that individuals must grapple with alone and in private rather than together and in public.

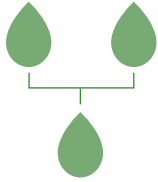
Yet grieving for a loss is by definition a relational experience, and all the more so when we are grappling with a vast collective experience of loss like the one that confronts us today. In most other societies, grieving and mourning are far more shared experiences than they are for us in our modern Western society, and we may have much to learn from them. In particular, we should not underestimate the power of ritual as a way of grieving together.

In particular, rituals and practices for our dead and lost are as old as mankind. A site considered by many to be the oldest man-made structure in the world – Göbekli Tepe, in what is now Turkey – is posited by its discoverer to be an **ancient burial ground**, a home for the dead before humans even began to create their first villages.

When we do grieve together, we find some of the gifts that grief has to offer: in particular its capacity to remind us that relationships are what matters most in life. **Joanna Macy**, a Buddhist, ecologist and systems theorist as well as a pioneer in collective grieving, called her approach ‘**The Work that Reconnects**’ – with

the aim of “transforming despair and overwhelm into inspired, collaborative action”.

Lesson 6: Learn from how our ancestors grieved



Each culture, society and ethnic group has their own rich and deep history of ritual for loss and death. Our capacity for accepting, processing and living with loss is measured by our cultural capabilities to do so. And even if we have lost many of the practices that our ancestors used for centuries, they are waiting as a treasure to be unearthed and put to use once more.

The Celtic tradition of **keening** – a “skilled ritual artform at the meeting point between life and death”, performed by women at the wake or graveside in mourning of the dead – is a **fine example**. The songs, or keens, would be made up of “raw unearthly emotion, spontaneous word, repeated motifs, crying and elements of song.” It is a tradition that died out in the middle of the 20th century in Ireland, but was common across Scotland in centuries before. It conjures images of wailing women, hunched over graves, eliciting emotion that could not perhaps be evoked by the close family members of the dead. It may seem dramatic or theatrical but it was above all, a social, collective experience: it was shared, and it was public.

Another example in the Western tradition was the *Dies irae*, a poem about the end of days written in the Middle Ages, which was set to music and used as part of the Requiem Mass for hundreds of years, but removed by the Catholic Church in 1969. Yet while this collective tradition has been lost, its emotional power lives on: the Georgian melody of the *Dies irae* has come to define our **musical response** to dread, and figures in moments of loss in **countless movies**. Here too, our collective rituals are a treasure house waiting to be rediscovered.

Lesson 7: Invent new rituals and practices to deal with collective loss



While myths cannot be designed from scratch, rituals and other communal grieving practices definitely can – and we have a wealth of examples to draw on. In 1987, the **AIDS Memorial Quilt** was made of over 200,000 individual quilt sections, capturing the story of nearly 100,000 people affected by the disease. Regarded as the “largest community art project in history” it stands as a testimony to the power of communities to own a collective experience, affirming life and living memory in stark contrast to the typically solemn, chiseled stone of state-generated monuments.



While myths cannot be designed from scratch, rituals and other communal grieving practices definitely can.”

After the Three Mile Island nuclear reactor meltdown in Pennsylvania in 1979, a new ritual emerged in ecological activism, created by social activist Chellis Glendinning. The **Despair Ritual**, which invites people to confess not their sins but their sorrows and offers “the opportunity to ‘touch bottom’ in experiencing and expressing their pain for the world”. The ritual was itself inspired by the **Speaking Bitterness** practices of Chinese farmers

during the land redistribution of China in the 1950s, providing them “opportunity to express their anger and sorrow about old injustices”.

For the people of the Bottrop in the Ruhr valley in Germany, finally, the closure of the last black coal mine in Germany was the setting for a **collective act of mourning**. On Friday 21st December 2018, the last miner to leave brought a final piece of coal and presented it to German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier as the traditional coal mining choir played a eulogy to their industry. As miners, politicians and assembled guests sang along, a way of life – long known to have to die, in the face of climate change and changing economics – was laid to rest.

Lesson 8: Remember that loss is part of the natural cycle



If we are able to understand loss as a form of renewal, we can begin to understand and appreciate life as a single natural process, ever in flux, in motion. This can be seen in the rise of the **natural burial movement**, which emphasises burial in biodegradable coffins and also avoids demarcation of individual graves or permanent memorials to individuals. People are commemorated not by individual graves but by the site as a whole, which is intended as a habitat for wildlife rather than being visually definable as a burial ground. The approach deliberately mimics dynamics **found in nature**, where new life grows on the remains of what has lived before.

“

Even amid the ashes of the old, we should also look for the seeds of the new.”

The appreciation of a ‘natural death’ is at the centre of many religions. Impermanence is essential to Vajrayana Buddhism, and **sky burials** are a reflection of these virtues. **Charnel grounds** – above-ground sites where bodies decompose – are cited in the **Satipatthana Sutta**, an early Buddhist text in which the Buddha encourages his followers to reflect on impermanence by observing dead bodies undergo various stages of decomposition.

And more broadly, all of the world’s great religions have emphasised the cyclicity of life. Even as they point to the necessity of death and grief, they also invite us into hope. Whether in the promise of life after death or in describing cycles of death and rebirth, our oldest and deepest traditions have all taught that even amid the ashes of the old, we should also look for the seeds of the new.

Ways to grieve

Because our expressions of grief are so fundamentally shaped by our cultural context, each of us will experience grief differently. However, if you feel called to grieve but don't know where to start, here are five practices you can explore – either individually, or together with others.

Writing: Grief Letter or Grief List

When the filmmaker Nora Ephron was diagnosed with terminal cancer, she created two lists which she included in her memoir *I Remember Nothing*. The first – “What I Won't Miss” – included a conservative Supreme Court judge, bills, dead flowers, and bras. The second, “What I Will Miss”, listed reading in bed, Paris, walking in the park, and her children.

Making an inventory of what you're grieving can be enormously helpful if you're feeling overwhelmed. Try to name the specific people, places and experiences you're missing – big and small. As you're writing, don't edit yourself – let the words tumble onto the page. And if you're inspired by Nora Ephron, you can also create the second list with the things that you're glad are gone.

This is also a practice that can be done in groups, in real time. The Collective Psychology Project runs small online groups designed to give participants a space in which they can reflect on their state of mind, the state of the world, and the links between the two. One of the practices sometimes used is a shared google doc with a question to invite reflection, in which we spend ten or fifteen minutes journalling together (with all participants logged in anonymously) on different lines of the same page before coming back together to talk, share, and reflect.

Making: Grief Altar or Memorial Corner

Often we're able to grieve best when we have real people and objects that bring forth our emotions. This is one of the reasons why some cultures encourage the body of a loved one to be kept in the house for some time before a burial. The presence of the person who has passed enables the process of saying goodbye.

In the same way, don't be in a hurry to throw out the objects that remind you of things lost. Instead, create a special place in the house in which you can make space for grief – for example posting pictures of places to which you had planned to travel, tickets unused, or photos of people you had hoped to see. You can also print photos of loved ones or people you admired who have passed. If you have kids at home, this can be a great activity to work on together, crafting decorations to make the altar space beautiful and rich with color.

Again, this is also something we can do together, online. In time, whole countries may create a national **Day of Remembrance for victims of coronavirus** in a form of shared ritual, which could for instance be celebrated on the anniversary of the day that countries went into lockdown. At a smaller scale and in the nearer term, **online memorials on social media** can be deeply helpful for people who are grieving loss.

Walking: Gratitude Walk

Our bodies and minds are not separate, so physical movement can unlock things in us that thinking alone cannot. If you're safely able to go out for a walk, try practicing a gratitude walk. Instead of listening to music or a podcast, practice walking mindfully and try to list as many things that you're grateful for as possible. You might focus specifically on the joys that you experienced thanks to the people or places that you miss. Instead of feeling worse when we bring these past joys to mind, often we can feel lighter having acknowledged them to ourselves.

This practice can be done alone, especially in nature, but it can also be the basis for a shared intention with a loved one. If you're sheltering in place together, you can walk together, or you can speak to them on the phone while you both walk through your local neighborhood. Keep in mind that you want to remain focused on listing gratitudes, rather than having a general chat.

At a larger scale, public expressions of gratitude for particular people or groups can be hugely powerful not just for those being thanked, but also for the people participating. The phenomenon of public **cheering and applause for healthcare workers** at the front line of Covid-19 began in Wuhan, China in mid-January, but since then has swept around the world from France and the UK to India and Turkey.

Talking: Tell Stories

When someone we love has died, it helps to listen to, and tell, stories about them – just as we do at a wake. It reminds us of their life and the many ways in which they meant something to us and the others who loved them. The same is true with the 'normal world' that now seems so distant. Telling stories about what we've lost helps us affirm the depth of loss we're experiencing

For this practice, set up a time to reminisce and remember specific losses you're experiencing with someone in your life. This can be face-to-face, on the phone, or even via text or letters. If you're getting together over a video call, you might want to wear something special to mark the time – perhaps choosing a traditional color of mourning, for example.

This is also something that you can do in small online groups, taking turns to share stories of remembrance, perhaps about particular people or themes. And there are also much larger circles like the ones organised by the **Storytellers Project** in the US in which thousands of people submit stories online and moderators choose a few to be read aloud on a large group call.

Listening: Music That Helps You Feel

Music can open a pathway to our emotions in a way that words sometimes cannot. So, if you feel numb and aren't able to give shape to the grief you feel is bottled up, choose some of your favourite sad songs and sit down to listen to them. Try to keep the experience free of distraction by leaving your phone in another room, and make yourself as physically comfortable as you can.

If you're able to cry, embrace that. It can feel confusing to feel such emotion without knowing exactly why, so you might gently say to yourself "It's okay to feel this way for now" or "I'm glad I am able to make space for this grief." Keep listening to the music until you feel ready to change it, or turn it off.

Listening to music with others can be hugely helpful as well. Some of our most intense moments of collective joy arise through shared experiences of music at festivals or concerts; many of which are now moving [online](#). Similar collective experiences for online mourning through music – for instance through live-streamed Requiems – may soon emerge too.

Conclusion

Even as we wait impatiently for things to “return to normal”, we know at some level that they will not. The cataclysm through which we are living – not just the virus, but breakdowns in the cycles of our economies, climate, and ecosystems too – is still just in its early stages. “Grief will be our companion on this journey”, as Lesley Head [writes](#).

Although grief is painful, we must recognise the importance of honouring it, both individually and collectively, and of allowing it to unfold in its own time rather than holding it to a timetable. Seeking to avoid it only makes things worse.

As our ancestors before us have found, grief also has gifts to offer us, hard as it may be to make them out when we are in the thick of its throes. Our ability to grieve well and discern these gifts is helped enormously when we are able to draw on shared myths, rituals and practices that assist us in making sense of life even as we grapple with overwhelm and despair.

Acknowledgements

We'd like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to this project through interviews, conversations, and advice, and to acknowledge our debt to some of the people whose ideas have inspired us or who have helped shape our thinking, including:

Indra Adnan, Jon Alexander, Chris Bache, Rachel Bailey, Tom Baker, Margaret Barker, Mike Barrett, Nadia Bolz-Weber, Georgie Burr, Colin Butfield, Matt Carmichael, Richard Chartres, Charly Cox, Sarah Cutler, Matthew d'Ancona, Jules Evans, Marco Ferarri, Lennon Flowers, Claire Foster-Gilbert, Diana Fox Carney, Paul Francis, Sam Gandy, Rabbi Laura Geller, Sunčica Getter, Alex Glennie, Andrew Goodhead, James Goodman, Rich Gower, Dr. Graham Harvey, Clare Hedin, David Heinemann, Clover Hogan, Jennifer Hollis, Pat Kane, Hugh Knowles, Iona Lawrence, Anthea Lawson, Graham Leicester, Stephanie Leonard, Alastair McIntosh, Kirsty McNeill, Florence Miller, Jennifer Nadel, Kate Norgrove, Elizabeth Oldfield, Jeremy Oppenheim, Jules Peck, Rev. Dr. Matthew Potts, Kathryn Perera, Amy Pollard, Ben Pollard, Kate Pumphrey, Skeena Rathor, Christabel Reed, Ruby Reed, John Richards, Gibrán Rivera, Cassie Robinson, Lyla Rothschild, Alasdair Roxburgh, Alice Sachrajda, Ella Saltmarshe, Cynthia Scharf, Liz Slade, Will Somerville, Vincent Stanley, David Steven, Dr. Anna Sun, Rachel Surtees, Peter Tavernise, Phoebe Tickell, Louisa Tomlinson, Miriam Turner, Chris Venables, Bert Wander, Rosalind Watts, Louis Weinstock, Katie White, Rev. Dr. Gloria White-Hammond MD, and Artie Wu.

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