

Faith, Race, and Grief

By Bishop Joey Johnson and Dr. Marilyn S. Mobley, PhD

Many people would not put the words faith, race, and grief together, but in the Black community, they are never far from one another. Given our unique history on American soil, many of us experience our humanity in ways that, when not acknowledged, affect our ability to address other losses that we seek to grieve. This reality has never been more apparent to us than it is today as we deal, not only with the pandemic of COVID-19, but also with the over 400-year pandemic of systemic racism.

We speak from our social location, not only as a Black woman and a Black man, but also as ministers and certified grief specialists. Based on our own experiences as griever, and our work with other people of color who are griever, we have come to believe there is value in bringing racial, cultural, and ethnic specificity to the grieving process for Black people, in particular. As we bear witness to corporations, organizations, and institutions attempting to address these concerns with integrity, we believe there is an opportunity to address this topic from our unique perspectives as faith leaders at the intersection of faith and social justice. We recognize that many in America attempt to speak as if they have no social location—i.e., they attempt to speak objectively, as if they were born nowhere, have no social background, no political position, and so on, but we have come to understand such thinking to be problematic forms of denial. Based on our reading, teaching, and experience in ministry, we know that this perspective or those who claim universality overlook the ways in which many of us are dealing with routine assaults on our humanity that are connected to the racial assault on Black bodies which began in 1619. These historical assaults have not disappeared; instead, they have morphed or mutated from one decade to the next, from one generation to the next to the forms of systemic racism that we are confronting today.

We were all born at a specific place, at a specific time, in a specific culture, to specific parents, and were socialized in specific ways. Those who would have us ignore our uniqueness to help them feel more comfortable ignore the various dimensions of our lives and our culture that we deploy as resources to help us navigate all aspects of our lives, including grieving. Black American parents have to engage in racial socialization of our children that other parents never have to discuss. This reality affects how Black people show up in our lived lives, how others hear our experiences and life stories, and how we navigate various interactions with others in our communities, classrooms, and workplaces.

The Black American perspective is more collectivistic or group-oriented than that of white Americans and it exposes us to a different set of circumstances. We understand that we are interconnected and that what affects our sister or brother today could easily affect us tomorrow. Therefore, we cannot separate faith, race, and grief recovery. They are also interconnected and intersectional in ways that matter. Faith is an essential and central component of our lives. It is the faith of our ancestors that empowered them to resist enslavement and struggle for freedom in a foreign land. Even after they were emancipated, their struggle continued for human rights that other citizens already enjoyed. Our racial and ethnic background are simultaneously a source of pride, prejudice, persecution, poverty, and pain. Using the words of the prophet Isaiah about the suffering servant, “we are acquainted with grief” and we find in Scripture and our prayers, praise, and worship the inspiration to speak the truth about our experience.

We raise these concerns because, in the wake of the death of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, among too many others for us to even name, we seek to be hearts with ears, sensitive to the profound grief that many people of color bring to us. We know that racial inequities have created inequities of death and dying among us because of COVID-19. We know their grief because it is our own. We are not looking on as spectators with sympathy, but with an empathic understanding that makes us mourn with them for the grief and trauma they have experienced, and are experiencing even now. We know how long they've been waiting, as the prophet Amos said, and as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. so often wished, for "justice to roll down like waters, and for righteousness like a mighty stream." We are not referring to loss as much as an absence. We are not referring to loss as much as the trauma that we carry in our bodies and in our spirit that produces melancholy—that feeling that is almost beyond sad. We are not referring to loss as much as we are referring to a human need that others have enjoyed, and others have yet to even experience. So, we write out of a need to identify an absence that shows up in the statements of many who do not share our social location nor understand the need to acknowledge it.

We believe in walking alongside those who are grieving in our community informed by who we are, what our history is, and how we connect to show we care for one another. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis that contains within it an opportunity to acknowledge how it has exposed and exacerbated many of the health, social, political, economic, and educational inequities that have been longstanding realities for people of color in the United States. Black people, therefore, routinely speak of coping with two pandemics at once—the pandemic of longstanding racial injustice and the pandemic of COVID-19. While many consider the enslavement of African people on American soil and elsewhere as moments from a distant past, the aftermath, consequences, and implications of that horrific moment of American history continue to show up decade after decade in our laws, public policy, institutions, schools, organizations, places of worship, and communities on a daily basis in the present. Many scholars have acknowledged the history of enslavement, lynching, Jim Crow segregation, and even recent incidents in American life of racial terrorism as examples of trauma that are ongoing realities of our lives in the workplace, in our communities, and even in our neighborhoods. Author Toni Morrison referred to these and related realities as "unspeakable things unspoken." We know that what we cannot acknowledge, we cannot address. And like our foremothers and forefathers before us who gave voice to their suffering in the songs they sang and the words they spoke, we must also find a way to lament the suffering that others have not acknowledged or addressed.

The implications of our historical reality are that whether we are well-educated or not, financially successful or not, or have completed the grieving process over a relative or loved one or not, we still have to deal with ongoing, everyday reactions to our identity over skin color and ethnic differences. The loss of innocence, dignity, and respect that Black people endure through microaggressions, slights, implicit bias, and unconscious bias, as well as explicit forms of bias, constitute dimensions of grieving that are often not acknowledged, mentioned, or taken seriously. We raise these issues, at this moment in American history of intense grieving, in the hopes that those who work with grievers will be mindful of this culturally specific form of grieving and be sensitive to how it can show up and needs to be attended to empathetically and with care. Like those in the medical profession who are taught to "do no harm," those who attempt to practice being a "heart with ears" for grievers would benefit from a recognition that some of the brokenness that comes before us is from the very society in which we live, which has not yet acknowledged or fully addressed the harm it has done to those who have not been regarded as though we matter.

As a result of our social location and the historical realities that produced them, we are mindful that Black people have a rich tradition of dealing with ongoing trauma, religious persecution, and unparalleled loss. Enslavement was cruel, inhumane, and relentless. When the enslaved were taught to read and write, the first text used to give them access to literacy was the Bible. The struggle for freedom was a dual struggle—for freedom from chattel slavery and for access to literacy. Enslaved and free Africans on American soil embraced Christianity at the same time that they looked beyond what slave masters taught to what they understood was the truth of their humanity as revealed through the Bible. The evidence of their belief in divine providence is represented in the spirituals, many of which were songs of lament, or what W. E. B. Du Bois called “sorrow songs,” that they produced as they labored in the fields. While there is insufficient space to rehearse all of Black history here, the point is Black American people have a history of connecting our faith to our lived lives to cope with loss and assaults on our humanity. We were often persecuted for even attempting to assemble to worship, which meant we were the first group of persecuted Christians on American soil. And even after Emancipation, the robust attempts at Reconstruction resulted in the emergence of groups such as the Ku Klux Klan which were determined that the formerly enslaved should not have access to the pursuit of happiness to the same measure as their white counterparts.

The re-emergence of racial terrorism in the 21st century in familiar and new forms, and the ongoing inequities in education, housing, employment, healthcare, and safety, mean that African Americans are still experiencing poor outcomes to our attempts to enjoy the American Dream. Inequities in treatment under the law, state violence against our people in the form of racial profiling, and mass incarceration, mean that many Black American families are not only grieving the loss of loved ones, but also grieving the inability to have access to the dream that was promised. Black churches, in particular, have always been a source of refuge for Black people as we have dealt with these losses. The losses accumulate, nevertheless, and require attention as we work with griever to complete their grieving. In other words, Black Americans’ sense of loss is not only individual, but collective, so an understanding of how the two are interconnected is critical to assisting them with navigating through the grief process.

Our perspective is not naïve. We understand that not all Black American people are Christian. Some are also Muslim, some are also Jewish, and some may adhere to other traditions, or have no faith tradition at all. But, as two Christian ministers whose lived lives bear witness to the realities of our church members, neighbors, and friends, we are seeking to remind those who care about and work with griever that there is information about an unacknowledged level of grieving that we can draw on to assist those who find themselves broken with grief. We believe attention to these realities enhances and strengthens our work and fills an important gap in addressing the emotional needs of Black griever and those who attempt to assist them, regardless of their racial or ethnic background.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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