

# The liberating power of grief

## An African perspective on how surrendering to your sorrow heals you

I was in my late teens when my grandmother died. I was overcome with so much devastating grief and rage that I was unable to release it. Though I could not join in with those grieving around me, they made a space for me. Everyone took turns caring for each other as they broke down. Luckily, the 72 hours of usual grieving time were extended to more than five days. When everyone was finished, I still had much to grieve, and they were still there for me. I never felt disapproval from those around me. When we share grief as part of a collective community, an individual doesn't need to bear all the weight of the suffering.

Throughout life, we lose loved ones, illnesses occur, dreams never manifest, relationships break up, conflicts flare up and unexpected natural disasters happen. It is so important to have ways to release those pains so we can clear ourselves. Hanging onto old pain just allows it to grow until it smothers our creativity, our joy and our ability to connect with others. It may even kill us.

My people—the Dagara tribe of Burkina Faso in West Africa—believe that in life it is necessary to grieve those things that no longer serve us and let them go. When I grieve, I am surrounded by family reassuring me that the grieving is worthwhile and I can grieve as much as I want.

I thought this was how everybody naturally dealt with grief until I moved to the U.S. I was staying with a friend who was having a conflict with her family and I knew the situation was not easy for her. But one day I heard her alone in the bathroom crying! I said through the door, "Are you okay?" She said, "Yes, I am fine!" I said to myself, "Oh my God, something is not right here." The people who were supposed to support her were not there.

In the modern world, most people carry heavy amounts of grief and do not even know it. In the West, children are taught at a very young age how not to feel, and are often taught that to be good girls and boys they have to "be brave" and "get over it." The consequence of this is a deeply ingrained isolation.

Even among the most intimate friends, grief is often not shared. We've been trained that if we share our grief, we are burdening friends and family. Crying becomes a forbidden fruit. We learn to compartmentalize our grief because expressing it in an unwelcoming place will only lead to more grief. We are taught that people who are closest to us have no way of holding us when we fall apart.

There is a price for not expressing our grief. Imagine if you never washed your clothes or showered. The toxins that your body produces just from everyday living would build up until it became intolerable. That is how it is with emotional and spiritual toxins too. We must remember that as these toxins rise, we tend to blame or hurt others around us. People do not harm others out of joy. They inflict emotional or even physical pain because they, too, are hurting.

The pain sustained by our souls when we're not allowed to feel and express grief is directly linked to the general sense of spiritual drought, emotional confusion and many illnesses we experience in our lives. We can be filled with so much grief that we grow numb from the unfelt and unexpressed emotions we carry in our bodies.

Many of us suffer from medical conditions that are grief-related. Whether we let out our grief privately or as part of a community, grieving has many scientifically proven health benefits, including lowering blood pressure and the risk of heart attack.

Yet we are born fully knowing how to grieve. As children, we cried naturally to feel better, to unburden ourselves, to take a weight off our shoulders and souls. That is important to notice, because we need to begin to see grief not as an enemy to be held down or caged up, but as something natural. As the recipient of someone's grief, we also must understand that it is okay for someone to express pain.

If we can find a way for everyone to grieve openly, I believe it would also diminish the blaming and shaming that goes on between nations and races. When we are in the presence of someone grieving, we don't see them as different anymore. Grief is a universal language. We all feel pain. There is no need to blame others when we feel hurt.

Positive expressions of grief help heal us. The lack of this expression fuels people's unhappiness and

BY SOBONFU SOMÉ  
ILLUSTRATION:  
MARC KOLLE

depression, which leads eventually to violence and crimes.

There are things we can do as a society to promote healing. This begins with accepting our grief and the grief of others. We can have grief rooms and shrines in public spaces where people can go to express their feelings of pain and loss. Churches, synagogues and temples can also have rooms for people to grieve.

Communal grieving offers something that we cannot get when we grieve by ourselves. Through

## Creating your own grief ritual

Rituals have their own flavours. The people involved are the only ones who can determine exactly what elements are needed. It is best to look at each situation with care, then determine what is needed. The intimacy comes when everyone adds an ingredient here and there. But these steps are useful in nearly all public expressions of grief.

**2. Prepare sacred space and build a shrine** Be sure to ask permission from the land on which you are grieving before you build the shrine. The shrine can take any form. You can use fabric; blue or black colors are best. Bring water into your shrine.

**3. Invite spirits and guides** Ask spirits to come and support you in going to the root of your grief and releasing it. Usually if you ask one spirit to come, it will not come alone. It gathers its friends, its relatives, friends of its friends and so on. You don't need a Ph.D. or to suffer severe pain and contortions to attract them. All you need is the sincerity of your heart and a willing ear.

**4. Begin the grieving** There are no limitations. Scream, cry, moan, groan, beat the ground, be silent. Do whatever you need to do. You may experience many stages of grief. Some people are numb, some enraged, some indifferent and some in fear. Allow all your emotions to be. The people who are with you can sing if they wish, or if they are moved by your grief, they can join you. Think about your grief like the ocean waves. The waves come and go. Allow yourself to forgive yourself and the people or things that brought about the pain.

**5. Close** Thank the spirits and

everyone around. Take the water out and pour it under a tree. You can create a permanent shrine if you wish, either indoors or in nature such as by a river or by the ocean. If it is on land, I recommend the northern part of the land. The only place I don't recommend you keep a permanent grief shrine is in your bedroom, because the grief can get stuck there.

SOBONFU SOMÉ

MARCH 2006 ODE 65



acknowledgement, validation and witnessing, communal grieving allows us to experience a level of healing that is deeply and profoundly freeing.

Taken and adapted with kind permission from *World Pulse* (issue 2, 2005), a new American magazine that wants to see the world "through the eyes of women" and "with the wonder and possibility of a child," [www.worldpulsemagazine.com](http://www.worldpulsemagazine.com).



Sobonfu Somé is one of the foremost voices of African spirituality. She travels the world sharing the rich spiritual lessons and culture of her native land, Burkina Faso. More information: [www.sobonfu.com](http://www.sobonfu.com)

**1. Gather your community** You will need the support of your community. This is why some grief never seems to go away—we don't believe our community will hold us in our grief. Some people grieve more easily when they are held, some people don't. It is good to know which you prefer so you can let people know if you don't want to be touched.