

## Seeking Words for GREAT Grief

by Ted Bowman

I'm a word-nerd; especially so for losses. Having or finding words facilitates my grieving. And having words for losses seems to be liberating for many, if not most, griever.

I think of Karla Holloway, a grieving parent, who yearned for a word to describe who she had become after her child's death. She wanted a word like widow, from Sanskrit and means "empty." She searched through many languages and traditions and found nothing that contained a name for her grief. She turned then to Sanskrit and found "vilomah," which means "against a natural order." When one's child precedes parents in death, we are vilomahed.

Recently, I have been searching for a word to fully describe my losses related to the current state of our world. One of the few writers I have found that addresses this is psychotherapist Francis Weller. In his book, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, he asserts there are five gates to grief. The first gate is the one most familiar because of its emphasis in grief and bereavement care: the loss of someone or something that we

come to love. It is his third gate that I wish to address here; called the sorrows of the world. Weller asserts that the grief we carry is not personal but shared, communal losses.

Only recently in my long career as a grief educator have I heard, often at the end of a session addressing personal losses, someone to speak first timidly but with growing strength that they do not stay awake in the middle of the night or perseverate during the day about their personal loss. Rather, the grief that threatens their emotional well-being and resiliency is the state of the world. And this has happened too often for me to not notice. A writer in *The Guardian*, a British newspaper, called this the "Great Grief"—a feeling that rises in us as if from the Earth itself.

Across different populations, psychological researchers have documented a long list of mental health consequences of climate change, incessant wars, and lack of leadership by world leaders: trauma, shock, stress, anxiety, depression, complicated grief, strains on social relationships, substance abuse, sense of hopelessness, fatalism, resignation, loss of autonomy and sense of control, as well as a loss of personal and occupational identity.

My purpose in writing this brief piece is not to offer a full discussion. Rather, this is an advocacy article for grief and bereavement carers that we listen and allow registrants, patients, clients or members to give voice to this "Great" loss. Failure to do so may compromise the ability of those living with personal losses to understand that their overwhelming loss may contain this communal sorrow. Attention must

be paid to losses related to the state of the world.

Yes, you may be saying, we do have words for communal losses: historical trauma, moral distress, post-traumatic stress related to war experiences, even compassion fatigue are examples. The issue raised here is that there appears to be a growing collective loss that is greater than too many personal losses and one or more communal losses. My search for a phrase or word to describe such losses is related to the challenge to griever when words are not easily found, available or used. As Ken Hardy asserted, It's one thing to lose something that was important to you, but it is far worse when no one in your universe recognizes that you lost it. In this case, many people do recognize the loss. They experience the loss and grieve it either currently and or with heavy anticipatory grief...but without an easily accessible vocabulary or validation with words to name their loss.

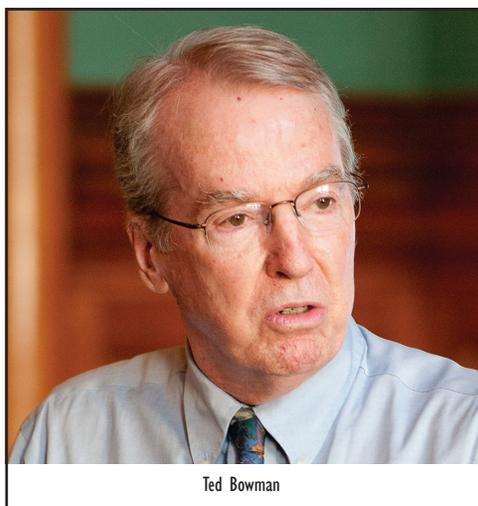
What is your experience of "Great" grief? What words or phrases best describe what I have tried to outline here? Are there resources you know of that address these losses that MCDES might include in future publications? Send any response to me at [tedbowman71@gmail.com](mailto:tedbowman71@gmail.com). I will gather, collate and share responses in future newsletters.

### Resources

Hardy, K. and Laszloffy, T.(2005) *Teens who hurt: clinical interventions to break the cycle of adolescent violence*. New York: Guilford Press.

Stoknes, P. (2015) "The Great Grief: How to Cope with Losing Our World." *The Guardian*. Thursday, May 14, 2015.

Weller, F. (2015) *The wild edge of sorrow*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.



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