

## 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.

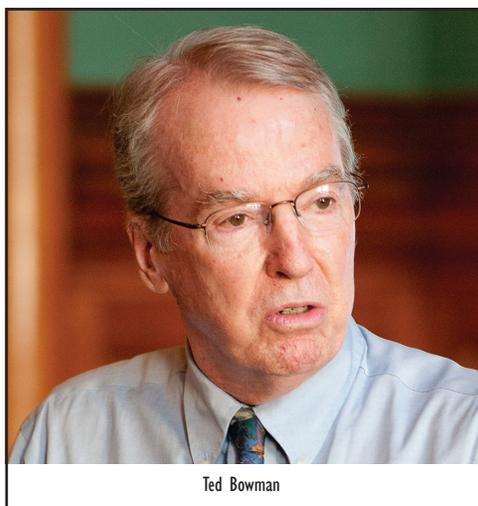
What is your experience of "Great" grief? What words or phrases best describe what I have tried to outline here? Are there resources you know of that address these losses that MCDES might include in future publications? Send any response to me at [tedbowman71@gmail.com](mailto:tedbowman71@gmail.com).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



Ted Bowman

## The GREAT Grief: Responding to Existential Losses

by Ted Bowman

The old adage—if something is unmentionable, it can also be unmanageable—is common folk wisdom. Giving grief words, even metaphorical words, is often seen as integral to effective grieving processes.

During the past year, differing persons receiving support for individual or family losses, have voiced that if they wake in the middle of the night or persevere during the day about loss, it is not the personal, but the state of the world that is distressing. Some have asked if there are words or phrases for their experiences. To be clear, there was often a sub-theme for the grief they voiced: the planet itself could be in danger; divisive world leaders; disparities between the haves and have-nots; despair about the treatment of refugees; and growing racism. Still, the over-arching sadness was the state of the world.

For much of the past year, I have been attempting to address this request for words. As I have done so, a related request emerged – how does one respond when grieving the state of the world? I first wrote about this subject in the September 2019 issue of *Coalition News*. See the article at <https://www.mcdes.org/TBowmanGreatGriefarticle.html>. This is a follow-up to that article.

Here are some phrases or words I have found that may be useful when talking about losses related to the current state of the world.

- ◆ **The GREAT Grief**—Stoknes, P. (2015) “The Great Grief: How to Cope with Losing our World.” *The Guardian*. Thursday, May 14, 2015.
- ◆ **Grieving the Ineffable**—dictionary – incapable of being expressed or described in words, see also *Effing the Ineffable: Existential Mumbblings at the Limits of Language* (2018) by Wesley Wildman, SUNY Press.
- ◆ **Solastalgia**—definition: derived from nostalgia. Solastalgia is a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at home, but the environment has been altered and feels unfamiliar.
- ◆ **Collective Near-Death Experience**—referred to me by an English colleague and based on writing by Richard Tarnas who suggests that like with a personal near-death experience, you now know anything can happen.

Other phrases were heard including: ongoing grief, psychic instability, existential grief, and polarization anxiety.

This sort of list can and will grow. You can also now find commentary such as an article in the January 2, 2020 *New York Times* entitled “Why is America So Depressed?” In a different, but related vein, Beret Guidera in the August 11, 2019 *Star Tribune* wrote:

“If Your Words are Public, Improve Them,” advocating for fewer hurtful, hateful, demeaning and condemning words as we grieve the state of the world.

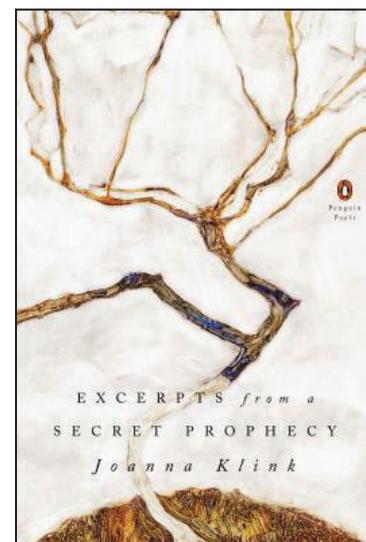
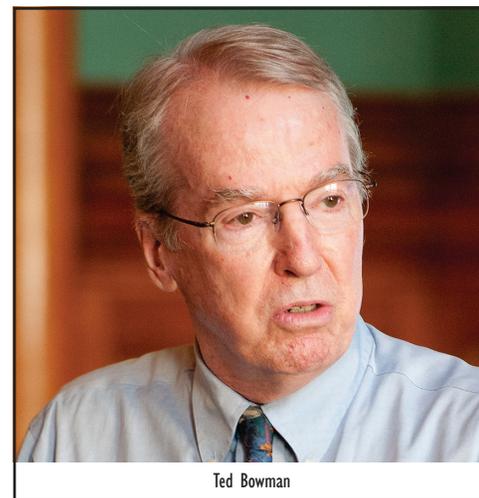
Whatever these losses are called, how do we as grief practitioners respond, what can we say or do? Here are some words I find provocative as I consider my options, found in poetry, research, and the Talmud. Joanna Klink advocates for presence, not abandonment, for grieving persons.

If you are fierce, if you are cynical, halfhearted, pained – I would sit with you awhile, or walk next to you...

From *Excerpts From a Secret Prophecy* (2015) by Joanna Klink. New York: Penguin Books.

Mary Baures collated resiliency factors for individuals facing tragic circumstances. Her interviews reveal these two and more attributes of what she called portraits of recovery.

1. They accepted what they could not change and they attempted to change what they could.



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2. All of them went through such an awful ordeal that had they immediately faced the whole catastrophe head on, they probably would have burned out in no time...Recovery is a slow, step-by-step process in which one must move from one stepping stone to the next in order to cross the river and gain the other shore.

From *Undaunted Spirits: Portraits of Recovery From Trauma* (1994) by Mary Baures. Philadelphia: The Charles Press.

Poet Wendell Berry provocatively wrote a questionnaire about being immobilized when dealing with collective losses and their resulting grief. He seems to be crying out: do something, however small or large to live your values. Do not be silent; talk with others.

What sacrifices are you prepared to make for culture and civilization? Please list the monuments, shrines, and works of art you would most willingly destroy in the name of patriotism and the flag.

“Questionnaire” from *Leavings* (2010) by Wendell Berry. Counterpoint

From the Talmud, this wisdom:

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

This quote is from Pirkei Avot (literally “Chapters of the Fathers,” but often called “Ethics of the Fathers”). It is included in the Mishnah, oral traditions, that are part of the Talmud. The quote is attributed to Rabbi Tarfon.

This inspiration from Mary Oliver:

What I want to say is  
the past is the past,  
and the present is what your life is,  
and you are capable  
of choosing what that will be,  
darling citizen.

So come to the pond  
or the river of your imagination  
or the harbor of your longing,  
and put your lips to the world.  
And live  
your life.

From “Mornings at Blackwater,” *Red Bird: Poems* (2008) by Mary Oliver. Boston: Beacon Press

And, finally, this from Kim Stafford:  
Ask about your enemy’s wounds and scars.  
Seek his hidden cause of trouble.  
Feed your enemy’s children.  
Learn their word for home.

Repair their wall.  
Learn their sorrow’s history.  
Trace their lineage of the good.  
Ask them for a song.  
Make tea. Break bread.

“Champion the Enemy’s Need,” from *Wild Honey, Tough Salt: Poems* (2019) by Kim Stafford. Pasadena, CA: Red Hen Press.

