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Teaching Drenched in Grief--Mourning as a Political Gesture of Resistance

Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Union Theological Seminary, NY*

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I am consumed by grief. At home in Brazil, the situation is horrendous and bodies are piling up, as it was here in the US last year. We will soon surpass 3 million deaths around the world due to COVID-19. People who lived their lives in so many ways. So many people have been taken from us, dear friends that left us before their time. Just this week, the mother of a dear friend, Rosevarte, left us. His pain and mourning are raging rivers whose strength he does not yet fully understand. And David, who lost his entire family one by one, just like that. First it was his mother, then his sister, and then another sister. All in less than two weeks. His grief silenced him and today he struggles to find words that might stubbornly bring him back to life in the midst of death.

We are a world mourning because of a virus. But more than that, we are a world mourning governments that deliberately seek out, create, and cause death. A world whose governance takes the form of genocide and whose ruler is the primary cause of death.

We are a world mourning because of a virus. But more than that, for many the virus is just another wave of well-known histories of colonization. Everywhere, we hear about the death of poor people, everywhere.

While we feel like this pandemic is subsiding in the US, it's not the same around the world. I hear 85 countries don't have access to vaccines or money to buy them. This is a third of the world and at least half of the world's population! Unless the whole world is vaccinated, we will continue to wrestle with an endemic situation. In Latin America there are estimated 231 million people living in poverty due to COVID, without access to clean water or food security, who will become refugees in the coming winter.

We are a world in mourning because of a virus. But more than that, we have lived fully into many forms of dominium over people, the earth, animals, and oceans. Dominion brought us COVID.

Our mourning is our perpetual banishment and our historic undoing. In our grief we learn that we are not what we thought we were and know that we will not be what we want to be. Our desires are trapped in our interdictions and are sabotaged by stories that we did not want to read, an economic system that both alienates us and intensifies our desires until they're impotent.

We destroy the earth with myriad forms of extractivism depleting so many forms of life, while financial markets skyrocket. No coincidence: the growth of financial markets demands extinguishing jobs, exploitation of people, erasure of social welfare, extinction of animals, mountains, and human lives.

Grief is undoing our social fabric of relationality, solidarity, and mutual sustenance. COVID-19 has taken away our rituals of death and mourning. We feel more alone, feeling that there's no one else to see us, hear us, or feel our pain. Our cry is simultaneously trapped in our throats and also released, like the sound of a cannon inside our chest, metastasizing our spirit, causing necrosis of life tissues that used to animate us. With each daily announcement of the number of deaths we need a defibrillator to start feeling life pulsing in us again.

When we teach, we are drenched by many forms of grief. The loss is too much. How do we keep our heads up? So many people have lost their jobs, universities and colleges cutting positions by the thousands, tenured positions dismantled, and adjunct faculty teach eight classes a semester to survive. How can we not worry about losing jobs? How can we support our students when we ourselves are eroding inside? How can we have necessary discussions in the classroom when the world is falling apart and our students' worlds are discretely crumbling?

Capitalism has made us think individually, just as Social Darwinism made us think our cells were essentially selfish, fighting to survive. However, as we now know, our cells work together to sustain the whole body. If we could think and act like them, we could care for each other, instead of feeding a culture of merit and rank. Perhaps we could start thinking how absurd it is for a president of any school to get so much more money than teachers. Or for tenured teachers to get more money than adjuncts. I just heard from an adjunct professor who on top of teaching sells his blood every week to make ends meet. I am reminded of how my school, Union, once thought differently and its faculty donated 10 percent of their salaries to support

an unknown scholar from Germany named Paul Tillich. To think like this today is absurd. We are taught to fend for only ourselves: I care for me and you care for you! Perhaps I have COVID-19 and it is affecting my brain.

In the same way that our mourning is a political act of resistance, as Judith Butler told us, our living together in mutual care could also be a collective act of political resistance. Our mourning is a gesture of continuity in the war against death in the midst of death itself! Our mourning is the refusal to accept what the governments want: that we forget about our dead, and our social structures. On the contrary, our mourning is a constant reminder, an announcement that, once and for all, we will not surrender to death and the neglect and normalization of sick and dying people! It is a reminder that we must care for each other somewhat somehow. It is good to say out loud that death will not kill us! At least not all of us!

As my beloved Mercedes Sosa sings in *Como la Cigarra*

So many times, they killed me

So many times, I died

And yet here I am coming back to life

Thank you for your disgrace

And your fisted hand

Because you killed me so heartlessly

And I kept singing

Singing in the sun like the cicada

After a year under the earth

Just like survivor

What a war

As we walk around dead bodies, may we make mourning the death of our people our most subversive act! Even in our teaching! For we fight for ourselves and also for our dead. If we lose, they lose too!

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2021/04/grief-as-undoing-and-as-a-political-gesture-of-resistance/>