



# Responding to grief and loss in the context of COVID 19: A story from India

by Maya Sen with Anwesha



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## Abstract

For many, COVID-19 disrupted practices of end-of-life care and made it impossible to carry out rituals of mourning and acknowledgement after the death of a loved one. This paper describes a series of conversations with a woman who was plagued by guilt after not being able to give her aunt 'a proper send-off'. It offers questions that were useful in shifting our conversations from individual self-blame to the shared social context of the pandemic. It considers ideas about a 'good death' and suggests ways to invite exploration of alternative ways to honour loved ones who have died. This paper is accompanied by responses from narrative practitioners in Rwanda and India.

**Key words:** *grief; bereavement; death; COVID-19; India; re-membering; narrative practice*

Anwasha, a woman in her late twenties, started sessions with me to discuss intense feelings of grief and loss following the death of her father and aunt.

Re-membering conversations proved helpful in responding to her father's death, and we worked on finding ways to honour his legacy (see Denborough, 2014, pp. 245–270; Russell & Carey, 2002; White, 2007). Anwasha made a lot of progress in processing this loss.

However, in relation to her aunt, who had COVID-19, feelings of intense guilt made it hard for Anwasha to come to terms with the death. A lot of this guilt was associated with feeling that she could have done more to save her aunt, and with not being able to give her aunt 'a proper send-off'.

Exploring the actions that Anwasha had taken and the ways in which she had cared for her aunt helped to alleviate some of the guilt; however, not being able to give her aunt a proper send-off was something that still plagued Anwasha. Her aunt had died in hospital, and most of her loved ones had not been able to see her or say goodbye properly. Anwasha spoke of how this was unacceptable and how her aunt deserved better.

### *Working on making the context visible*

The guilt about not being able to give her aunt a proper send-off had Anwasha feeling that she was to blame. I wondered whether drawing attention to the context of the pandemic would help shift the conversation from a story of personal capability to one of navigating a very difficult social situation. I asked a series of questions to shift the gaze from self-blame to the effects of the pandemic on our ability to care for our dying loved ones:

- What got in the way of being able to give your aunt a proper send-off?
- Have you been in touch with or heard about other people who have had similar experiences?
- What might be the reason for these things happening right now?

These questions helped frame the problem as a collective issue, as distinct from something Anwasha was facing alone. It also helped to shift the way in which we were looking at the problem from a sense

of guilt to a sense of outrage at the general situation. This helped to reduce the power of guilt to some extent; however, guilt often made a reappearance and sought to undermine these developments.

### *Unpacking ideas about a good death*

Looking for ways to respond, I came across the article 'Death care practices in the shadow of the pandemic' (Sanders, 2020). What stood out to me was its reflection on the many discourses around death. It got me thinking about who we should grieve and how we should grieve them, and about what a 'good death' means to different people. In my explorations with Anwasha we uncovered that the idea of a 'proper send-off' was central to her ideas around a good death. This included being able to perform the last rites surrounded by loved ones. I wondered if it would be helpful to explore this further and learn more about why this is important.

I was also interested in hearing about the role cultural understandings played in Anwasha's definitions of a good death and a proper send-off. I wondered whether we might expand on this idea of a good death and make some more space in it to accommodate the current situation. Perhaps we might discover some alternative ways to enable a proper send-off for her aunt.

I asked Anwasha:

- What does a proper send-off mean to you?
- Why is it important?

It was important to Anwasha to arrange certain rituals for her aunt because she wanted her aunt to feel loved and appreciated. The importance of these rituals did not have specific cultural or religious connotations for Anwasha, she just wanted her aunt to know how much she was cared for.

### *Exploring and richly describing alternative ways to honour loved ones*

I asked Anwasha if there had been ways in which she had tried to show her aunt that she was loved and cared for, even though Anwasha couldn't perform her last rites.

When Anwasha was very young, her aunt had very casually told her about the kind of send-off she wanted. She had described some of the things she wanted to take with her and her preferred arrangements for her last rites. With the memory of this conversation in mind, Anwasha had taken a pair of gold earrings and a pair of her aunt's favourite bangles and had thrown them into the Ganges. This would enable these items to be with her aunt as she moved into the next stage.

Anwasha also spoke about how her aunt loved feeding people. Anwasha had always been interested in charity work, and she had recently decided to become more directly involved. In honour of her aunt, she had started working on feeding young children who did not have access to nutritious food. This also connected her to her father as he had always been involved in such initiatives. Being able to help others reconnected Anwasha with a sense of meaning in spite of the grief. She wanted this work to be a lifelong commitment, not just a temporary exercise.

Throughout our conversations, I attempted to zoom into these actions and to find ways to richly describe them (Carey & Russell, 2003; White, 2007). Some questions that helped were:

- What got you thinking about taking this action?
- What hopes and intentions informed these steps?
- What enabled you to move forward with this?
- What did it make possible?

We discussed how, in the context of the pandemic, practices of enabling care and dignity in death could be characterised as acts of resistance to the systemic disregard for the lives that were being lost.

### *Bringing in the voices of loved ones: peopling the room*

After we had explored these actions in detail, re-remembering and witnessing practices enabled us to bring the voice of Anwasha's aunt into the room. Initially, re-remembering questions were used to bring forward a rich story of connection and reciprocity (Dolman, 2011) between Anwasha and her aunt. Questions included:

- Why do you think your aunt told you these things about her wishes for her last rites?

- What was it about you that made her feel she could trust you with this information?
- What were some of the contributions you made to her life?

After discussing Anwasha's story of contribution to her aunt, the conversation shifted to what her aunt would have said on witnessing some of Anwasha's recent actions. The following questions enabled us to highlight the continuing nature of Anwasha's contributions to her aunt:

- How do you think your aunt would feel if she were to witness some of these actions you have taken up? What do you think she would say?
- What do you think it would mean to her to know that you had taken so seriously something she said in passing to you when you were so young?
- What do you think it would mean to her that you kept your commitment to honour her wishes about her final send-off even after so many years?

In response to these questions, Anwasha said that perhaps her aunt would feel loved and appreciated after all, and that perhaps her aunt realised that Anwasha did care very deeply for her.

Double listening was helpful throughout the conversations, and it really helped structure these latter questions. Highlighting the nuances in the way she cared for her aunt opened up many possibilities in the conversation.

### *Documents*

Documenting these developments helped to consolidate them (Fox, 2003). After our session I captured some of these key points and sent a letter to Anwasha. I thought it would be especially important to highlight Anwasha's multiple acts of care in the letter and this helped Anwasha to stay connected to these ideas even when the guilt revisited. Anwasha shared that she had re-read the letter quite a few times and that it brought a sense of peace. Although guilt was still present, its visits were less intense and less frequent.

### *A dedication from Anwasha*

With the passage of time, his wonderful character comes to my mind: an unparalleled father who taught his daughter to rise above her contemporaries; a man

sensitive to even smallest needs and desires. To the world, he was a sincere, honest, helpful person with highest integrity. But to me and my family, he is larger than life and a true hero who nurtured every life he touched. He was a great orator, and I am proud that I am carrying his genes in me and his soul in my heart. He will always be the best man I ever met and my mentor for life.

For my aunt, she is more than a friend. Our relationship was lucid and pure. A woman with deep values and full of life. I will remember her as my first friend who loved me like a mother. I grew up listening to her lullabies. We shared secrets and discussed life. She was whole as a person: bold, beautiful and talented. Pishi, you will continue to live through me and so will your values.

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## *A message from Rwandan counsellors Adelite Mukamana and Joseph Kalisa*

Adelite Mukamana is the manager of the psychotherapy and healing unit at Never Again Rwanda, and a founder of PsyRwanda, a nonprofit organisation that contributes to psychological wellbeing in Rwanda. In a previous role she was the coordinator of the counselling team of Ibuka – the national genocide survivors' association. Adelite can be contacted by email: [madelite06@gmail.com](mailto:madelite06@gmail.com)

Joseph Kalisa (aka Joe) works as a therapist in Rwanda. He is interested in intergenerational transmission of the survival skills and resistance of Rwandan people after genocide. He also works part-time for Dulwich Centre and coordinates the year-long narrative therapy and community work course in Rwanda. Joseph can be contacted by email: [josephka300@gmail.com](mailto:josephka300@gmail.com)

To our Indian friends and colleagues,

During these hard times, as the darkness of COVID-19 is overshadowing your communities and cities, our thoughts are with you and all your loved ones. It is our hope that this shadow shall pass sooner and light will shine throughout your communities. We send you a dove of hope.

We've been moved by how much some of you are trying to support one another, and the incredible work you're doing with some of those going through this darkness, especially those who have lost loved ones to the pandemic.

We're from Rwanda. In our country, there was a genocide against the Tutsi in 1994. Some of the people we have met have felt guilt and powerlessness. Some feel they should have done at least something to save their loved ones, and others feel the guilt of surviving and wish they had gone with their loved ones.

Some of the people we meet were not able to properly bury their loved ones because they didn't know their whereabouts. Some had been thrown into the river, washed away by the waters. Not being able to properly 'send-off' a loved one makes the living feel a sense of having been unable to accomplish their duty to do the final rituals for their loved ones.

Some have found it meaningful to do the cultural rituals by taking flowers every year on the day their loved ones were killed. Taking flowers enables some of them to connect with their loved ones. Your phrase 'peopling the room' fits here: perhaps there is a 'peopling' of the river shores, the churches, etc. whenever this is done.

For some other people, it is useful to write letters to their loved ones, and take the letters to the memorial sites. They update their loved ones about their life – the child they have given birth to, the woman they have fallen in love with, the degree they have accomplished and many other events. Writing letters to our loved ones ensures that they're gone but never forgotten.

Others hold on to the hope that one day they'll be able to meet their loved ones again. During the time I (Adelite) was working with Ibuka, an association that cares for survivors of genocide, there were many people whose stories were close to Anwasha's and we still meet them. People who come to meet us have experienced trauma and are haunted by nightmares that stop them from sleeping. Hopeless and worthiness becomes their daily visitors. Their lives are overshadowed with anger and worry, and some don't know whether they want to live or die.

All these responses are understandable. It's unimaginable to lose your loved ones in such moments as genocide and COVID-19 – times when we're not allowed to 'send-off' our loved ones in the ways we used to and would want to.

Friends, we would like to include a few of the things that have sustained us through difficulties when we have lost loved ones:

- learning from the lives of others
- listening to meaningful music and dances
- new ways of continuing our culture
- games and Sports
- building a family/community
- having time alone
- crying as well as engaging in conversations with others
- remembering the good things about our loved ones
- sharing our feelings with those close to us
- knowing that we're not in this alone and that others have lost people too

- respecting the ancestors
- working hard and continuing the family legacy
- finding time to rest and refresh
- being with friends.

Throughout this journey, one thing we've learnt is that however much one undergoes tremendous suffering and trauma, there is always something that remains inside them. It is like a lamp that has been coated with smoke so its light can't pass through, but whenever there is someone to clear the soot off, light shines through again.

In Kinyarwanda, they say *Nta joro ridatya*, loosely meaning 'There is no night that never ends': this too shall pass.

Our thoughts are with you all during these difficult times. We hope to meet some of you sooner and we will sing songs of survival.

With warmth and love,  
Adelite and Joe  
Kigali, Rwanda

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## A response to Rwanda from Shelja Sen

Shelja Sen is a narrative therapist, writer and co-founder of Children First Institute of Child and Adolescent Mental Health, New Delhi, India.  
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Dear Adelite and Joseph,

That letter of comfort did just that: it brought so much comfort, warmth and hope. I loved the words in Kinyarwanda: *Nta joro ridatya* – 'There is no night that never ends'!

This night is dark, very dark, and your letter was like a sparkling flame of the lamp that gives us company till the night is ready to end.

Thank you for sharing with us what helps you clear the smoke as we find ways to clear ours.

I will share this letter with all my colleagues who I know will value the spirit of this solidarity across continents.

With warmth and respect,  
Shelja  
Delhi, India