

Grief Unites Us

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While the bombing of Gaza and the resulting loss of civilians continues, I urge the international community to stop the war now, protect civilians (including health-care workers), lift the 16-year blockade on Gaza immediately, and allow international aid to enter Gaza to support the health-care system that has already collapsed.

I dedicate this simple article to the brave health workers in the Gaza strip. I share with you bereavement for doctors who devoted themselves to the patients and even more they gave their lives. I know you are comrades, brodie's and fathers to those wounded and dying children, women and old men. I can see everyone of you hovering over sores and festering wounds, witnessing amputations, standing by vomit and diarrhea. When necessary you held and kiss the poor, poor children. I know for sure how your presence has saved many lives, that the magnetic flood of sympathy and friendship provide more benefits than all the medicine in the world. I know you loved die rank and file , their individual stories were death stories that mattered most, death stories that captured the essence of the war. Though you know words could never convey the experience in hospitals of the dying, could never convey multiple meanings in a wounded soldier's smile. The voices touches of thousands of children live inside you, their words and agonies all are yours .You will carry them to your graves and beyond. I know all because I am an Iraqi physician.

I just cannot see myself living like this anymore. I peek at the breaking news on my phone fearing the worst with each breaking news. I read headlines on the television screen and watch the collective punishment of Palestinians of the Gaza strip every minute with disappointment and slowly sinking to the floor. It is nearly two months and the huge toll of deaths among children ground us to a nub and it is still unclear whether there will be a ceasefire. But what is definitively gone is the hope that I clung to, that the crisis will slow down. By a cruel twist of fate the suffering of the civilians in Gaza is progressing shockingly fast. Civilians find themselves barely able to stay alive. They have to fight so hard to live only a version of life which is worse than death.

Moreover, the long-standing blockade of Gaza and repeated cycles of violence over the years have led to a critical nutritional crisis among Palestine refugees in Gaza, particularly affecting vulnerable groups, including children, women, and older people. Anaemia rates have become alarming despite preventive and curative measures. Even before the current conflict, Gaza was grappling with a dire

need for mental health and psychosocial support services. In 2022, 26•4% of the population required such assistance, the highest among all areas of UNRWA operation.

Children have inherent rights, regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, geography, or any other aspect of identity. Silence kills. History will judge us for how we respond today—and the world's children are watching.

Globally, armed conflict has been repeatedly shown to cause pervasive harm to children directly and indirectly, causing physical injury, a range of illnesses and infections, malnutrition, psychological distress, disability, and death. Conflict has even been shown to harm children living far from the areas where combat is taking place. Both direct and indirect exposure to conflict are associated with multiple forms of severe adversity, which in turn is known to cause altered stress physiology, altered development, multiple physical and psychological morbidities, and early mortality. In short, exposure to armed conflict greatly alters a child's life course. That is what happened to my people in Iraq, does anyone remember?

What is happening now reminds me about the American Bison tragedy because of the same brutal mentality leading the world. In 1860,an estimated 60 million bison roamed the American West. Two decades later the Bison population plunged to fewer than 300. Palestinians are not disposable, they are Human Beings and it is ironic that if the news came out that 7000 whales were killed the world would stand still!

When we entered the field of medicine, little did we know how prevalent grief would be, or the toll it can take—both professionally and personally. Medical education spends little time normalizing grief as part of practicing medicine. There are programs addressing suffering in all its dimensions for patients and patient's families, but not for physicians or other members of care teams.

Since the mass displacement and dispossession of Palestinians (also referred to as the Nakba) in 1948, health-care workers have been killed, and health-care facilities have been destroyed. Since October 7, 2023,

Israeli military bombing of the Gaza Strip (or Gaza) has resulted in 73 health-care workers being killed, with 57 health-care facilities attacked as of Oct 24, 2023. Of these healthcare workers, 16 were killed while on duty. Some of the prominent healthcare workers who were killed include Omar Ferwana, former Dean of the Islamic University of Gaza School of Medicine, and Medhat Sedim, one of the very few board-certified plastic and burn surgeons in Gaza. Other health-care workers killed include nurses, paramedics, and others, many of whom were killed with their families while asleep at home. On Oct 17, 2023, the world witnessed the targeting of Al Ahli Arab hospital (the only Anglican mission hospital in Gaza and the oldest in Palestine) by a strike that is still under investigation. At that time, the hospital was partially operational, with patients, health-care workers, and hundreds of internally displaced civilians sheltering there.

The mounting losses and the unprocessed grief can contribute to emotional exhaustion and ultimately burnout.

Grief is the anguish experienced after significant loss (the loss of a loved one, a relationship, a self-image, or a dream) and in Palestine and many Middle East countries all the above!

This experience includes physiological distress, separation anxiety, confusion, yearning, obsessive dwelling on the past, and apprehension about the future.

Grief can manifest in multiple ways:

- Acute grief is defined as tearfulness, sadness, and insomnia as a response to loss, and typically lasts for less than a year,
- Anticipatory grief involves feelings of loss experienced prior to the expected loss.
- Complicated or prolonged grief manifests as intense and persistent grief that causes problems and interferes with daily life.
- Ambiguous grief refers to loss that does not allow for the possibility of closure (many of us experienced this during the pandemic).
- Disenfranchised grief involves a loss that is not openly acknowledged as legitimate by society and is often accompanied by feelings of shame, guilt, and further isolation (this can be a contributing factor to physician burnout).

Many of us are familiar with the five stages of grief — denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance — which psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross introduced in 1969.

Her work marked a shift in how we communicated with patients nearing the end of their lives. In 2004, she and counselor David Kessler proposed that the five stages of grief can also apply to those who have lost a loved one, though the stages are not inherently linear nor all necessary for healthy grieving.

In 2019, Kessler suggested that moving beyond the five stages and finding meaning in our losses can be transformative.

Finally I quote what Hazel Grace said when August died in the novel titled *The Fault in our stars* by Gohn Green *“and then I realized there was no one else to call, which was the saddest thing. The only person I really wanted to talk to about Augustus Water’s death was Augustus Water.” I realized then that funerals are not held for the dead, but for the living”*

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