

Sep 27

Let Us Grieve

TW - mention of sexual assault, suicide

The prevailing question on campus, after the publication of Nancy Jo Sales' *Vanity Fair* article, overheard from Exonians walking back to class and teachers noticing more and more bleary, red eyes at the table, is "How are you doing?"

When asked, I've been responding with a shaky smile and a half-joking, half-missing-the-words-to-describe-my-feelings, "I'm doing."

When asked to elaborate, I've also been responding with a less light-hearted, "I'm just going from one thing to the next." I say that because I'm afraid of what will happen when I stop. I'm afraid that if my productivity dwindles, that if my hands aren't sending emails and flipping flashcards and sorting laundry, that I will have to rest. And I dread when I have to rest, because then I know that I will have to grieve.

At the quiet moments in my days, when Williams House is asleep, when I lie in bed and stare at my white ceiling, I close my eyes. I close my eyes, and I see everything I relegated to the confines of my memories. I hear words I can never forget, replay scenes in my head I can't pause, and feel things I never wanted to feel again.

And then I wake up and repeat yesterday. "How are you doing?" a well-meaning teacher asks. "I'm doing."

I'm afraid of what will happen when I stop saying those words, because I'm not yet ready for business as usual. So I stay in my limbo of toiling away, dreading those late nights where I stare at my white ceiling and close my eyes. I'm doing, but I'm not feeling.

Grief is a counter-productive emotion. I mean that literally, not negatively. Grief is a barrier to the productivity that sustains a capitalist and white supremacist system. Grief stops me from working. It holds me tight, rendering each word of this op-ed sluggishly difficult to type, until I turn around and finally confront my grief. Though it can be good that we channel our grief to imagine and implement transformative solutions while abolishing conditions that exploit our labor and our bodies, we shouldn't just dismiss the inherent counter-productivity of grief. In my time at Exeter, my grieving has earned judgemental statements from students and dismissive emails from faculty. I've learned that grief at Exeter occupies a space that is more logistical and administrative than anything: grief becomes a matter of how many emails I must send to leave class, how many matter-of-fact conversations I need to have with others to explain myself over and over again, and how many times I can hold back my tears from spilling over as I tell a teacher that I'm really not doing okay and I'm so sorry but if I could please just not come to class today I would finally get a chance to rest. For better or for worse, I've learned to get better at holding these tears back.

In a capitalist system that prioritizes productivity over people, I can't take another day to rest, I can't skip meetings, and I certainly can't miss class to grieve. Even at an

space to grieve is not a normative function of our classroom or education. I cannot stop in my tracks, sit down, and cry. I can't utilize the processing spaces offered by this school to their fullest extent because it always feels like there are deadlines to meet, essays to write, emails to open. I can't pretend that my grief is linear, an administrative task to be delegated and checked off once I finally say I'm doing better. To do so would be to resume business as usual, and there is nothing usual about the exhaustion I feel.

My grief is the late nights crying huddled in the corner of my room, the too-tight hugs, the radical act of feeling hurt in a system that prioritizes production and deadlines over our humanity. When I am hurt, I cannot work—I *refuse* to work when I am hurt. Grieving is an act of protest, inherently radical in its refusal of the status quo. As the AIDS activist group ACT UP! would say at their protests, “NO MORE BUSINESS AS USUAL.”

Instead of returning to the status quo in these coming weeks, I urge teachers to forego or alter their curriculum to benefit both student and teacher well-being. From small practices such as including trigger and/or content warnings before traumatizing readings, to larger changes such as moving tests back in favor of starting a unit early or turning individual labs into class collaborative labs to save time and build community, the classroom can become a space for us to feel safe and process our emotions. I know students who find each class difficult recently because their recent readings discuss topics of suicide and sexual assault. Going to class each day is a retraumatizing experience for them, and without the option to opt-out of these readings or sit out of class for a day, their process of grieving and healing is continually disrupted by the lack of safety in their learning environments. Lastly, I urge teachers to stop marking students absent as rigidly or frequently, and to alter their late policies or remove them entirely. I've noticed that conversations with tardy students frequently identify emotional, physical, or psychological issues, and during this period of grief, many of my friends have found it hard to get to classes on time when waking up each morning and going to classes with unrecognized trauma feels like a Sisyphean challenge. Most students I know would love to miss a class or spend a day in the safety of their rooms, or with a trusted adult, just to have a moment to truly talk with someone who cares about them and release the dam of emotions many of us have been holding in. Absence policies and tardy policies deter students (especially new students) from advocating for themselves, a skill we already encourage on this campus.

For students: please rest. There are so many of you I know and care deeply about that are continuing to stretch yourselves beyond your emotional limits. Set boundaries for yourself. Hug your friends closely. Hug yourself. Run into the woods and scream until your throat is hoarse (and then drink warm tea afterwards in the comfort of your room). Lift heavy things and put them down and lift them again until you reach an arbitrary number. Hold yourself until you fall asleep. Rest in unconventional ways. Apologize; demand apologies. Don't go to class if you can't; one absence is worth infinitely less than your soul and body. If you feel yourself changing, lean into it. Grief changes people. This sh*t is traumatizing.

One common narrative I've heard in response to these calls for radical empathy is that there are always those out to misuse our empathy, those with ill will who plan to exploit the “easier” version of Exeter during our time of grieving. To these naysayers, I warn them of their parallels in mindset with other traditionalists too inflexible to accept transformation: the conservatives who disparaged expansions in social security through the racialized stereotype of the “welfare queen,” NIMBYs (an acronym standing for “Not in My Backyard”) gathering to complain of undocumented immigrants because “there are always the bad ones,” and police apologists who defend continually-expanding carceral systems on the basis that “there are always unchangeable evils out there.” Each one of these arguments relies on the assumption that a solution or proposed change will be exploited by a group of evil-doers, all inherently unable to change. I recognize the validity of the response, one rooted in the myriad experiences of being hurt by an unchanging institution over and over again. But I also hope to problematize the justification of this response. If we do not give others the grace of our ability to radicalize them, or understand them beyond their performance, then we leave behind the solidarity needed to give a movement momentum. Especially for my white, cisgender, or non misogyny-affected friends: use your labor to change those “unchangeable evils.” Speak with the people we do not have the emotional labor or capacity to speak with. We may find solidarity in the most unexpected places, and that may be a reason for us to challenge our expectations.

Similarly, I find that there exists a narrative of how to “grieve correctly.” That to grieve in the wrong places with the wrong people, to grieve too loudly, to grieve in an unorganized manner, is to grieve wrongly. These narratives warn that if we do not portray the delicate, silent conditional grief we associate with grieving at Exeter, that our demands generated by our grief will be delegitimized. That those dominant powers in place will ignore our grief. I find this narrative disparaging and self-defeating. To apply respectability politics to grief, especially grief as a form of radical refusal and protest, is an ahistorical statement that runs counter to the tactics and organizing structures utilized by queer and trans* Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian organizers from college campuses to the New York Stock Exchange. In policing others' grief, in willingly delegitimizing others' grief to prop up the “right way to grieve,” we reproduce white supremacist hierarchies of grief that silence voices at the margin in a way that representation politics might never check back for. What does it matter if, for every instance of queer and trans* melancholia I see platformed, that 20 others are silenced and

At the class strike held on September 17, I spoke with people who I'd wrongly assumed didn't have stories of their own to share, or didn't plan on staying to show solidarity with those demanding their emotional space be respected by the school's rigid schedules. I learned about grief as it manifests in each facet of our diverse community, and the openness the students at this school have to learning and unlearning their own relationships to grieving.

I find, after all my reflection on grief, that I know little more about grieving than I did before writing this piece. We are conditioned to think and act in certain ways, we can also be conditioned to love and become in new transformations yet unimaginable. We all grieve, in different ways. In manners that are less visible than others. We laugh, we cry, we burn metaphorical bridges, we burn literal bridges, we shout. At our core, we all grieve. We grieve differently, as part of a greater movement under the control of no one student or faculty or administrative member. Our solidarity comes first from the fundamental recognition that you are feeling the same way I am, though for potentially-different reasons and in a potentially-different form. So, I say to this school: let me grieve in the way I want. Let *us* grieve.

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