Fintan O'Toole: We must not allow coronavirus pandemic to rob us of grief

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There is no such thing as mass death – people die one by one and each is unique

My grandfather died of an infectious disease, tuberculosis, in 1932 when he was in his early 30s. My mother's little sister Frances died in 1939 when she was three years old, from diphtheria, an acute bacterial infection. My little brother Colm died in the Coombe hospital in 1965 when a gastric infection swept through a neonatal unit. This is what happened in families before mass vaccination and medical breakthroughs made death from airborne viruses and bacteria rare.

The cruel capriciousness of infection receded to the margins of experience. The terror of germs was forgotten. But the dead were not. I never knew my grandfather or little Frances or baby Colm. But I knew the grief they left behind. My father was two when his father died and he had no memory of him. But once, when we were on the bus to Bray, we passed the old Crinken sanatorium. He shuddered involuntarily. An image from the deep past had come to him: he was walking up the driveway to that building holding his mother's hand. His father died there, leaving five children

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And my mother would still cry when she remembered her little sister. She was nine when Frances died and she had doted on her. For my part, I remember, when I was seven, how my mother's beautiful face became haggard and gaunt in those weeks when Colm died. I can picture it precisely as I write.

Burden of grief

These deaths shaped the feelings of my parents and therefore they shaped mine. We may think we travel light, but whether we know it or not, we all carry some of the burden of grief from the generation that lived – and died – before us. This imprinted sorrow is a big part of what makes us human. Our conscious brains may forget – may, indeed, never have

known in the first place – but there is a deeper layer of memory, a subsoil of emotion, in which the dead are still with us.

And so, there are children not yet born who will, though this subterranean kind of recollection, remember the dead of the pandemic of 2020. Many of us, in the months we are now facing, will lose someone to the arbitrary malice of an infectious disease. In the way we will have to record these losses in the public realm, they will be charts and graphs, shifting percentages and mortality rates, numbers rising and (we hope) falling.

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We are about to experience a time of mass death. But in the other reality – the micro-reality of love and affection – we all know that there is no such thing as mass death. We die one by one. And because each of us is inimitable, we leave our own emotional signature at the bottom of the page, a unique identifier of specific connections and associations, each one made more potent in the act of being broken. That signature is grief. We must treasure it.

The mass murderer Josef Stalin said that one death is a tragedy but a million deaths is a statistic. The statistics generated by Covid-19 will be of great importance to scientists and public health managers and government ministers. They will need to be cold, rational, maybe at times ruthless.
But for our society to survive, the rest of us must continue to feel the tragedies one by one. Each of us will most probably lose a family member or a neighbour or a co-worker or a friend. We must find a way to feel the pain of every loss.

Absence of pain

Civilisation is defeated when grief has become impossible. The darkest times and the darkest places are characterised by numbness. People survive by anaesthetising themselves. Death is happening on a scale that overwhelms the uniqueness of each life. When there are only numbers, there is only numbness. This is the paradox: the worst thing is not the pain, it is its absence.

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This won't happen to us in the coming months, but we cannot let any hint of it seep into our collective consciousness. We cannot even begin to tolerate the attitude that is already creeping furtively around the edges: that it is "only" an old person who has died. No life is "only" anything. Each has its specific gravity, its own irreplaceable weight in the world. We don't just lose a member of the community – if we do not pause to feel that weight, we lose, bit by bit, the community itself. We must not let that happen. We will be, in the coming months, sadly depleted. But we must not allow ourselves to be diminished.

This will be especially hard, not just because the statistics will dominate, but because the great vindictiveness of the virus is that it robs us of the rituals of grieving: no wakes, no big funeral Masses or secular celebrations, no queueing up to shake a hand and mutter "I'm sorry for your troubles". Ours is a funerary culture – we are good at collective grieving. We will have to find ways to reinvent that culture. For the real proof that we have not been defeated by this thing is that, 50 years from now, our grandchildren will carry in their blood a small strain of our specific, intimate sorrows.