


Grieving in the Age of Zoom

Category: Stories

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Finding community
in isolating
times...

Oncologists like myself are no strangers to death. It is all too familiar. We give our patients the best that medicine has to offer; we cure them if we can. When our efforts fail, we relieve their pain and ease their suffering. And when they pass away, we grieve. With their friends, colleagues, family members, partners and spouses, we grieve.

Almost by definition, a time of mourning is a time of gathering. Both to grieve and to console, we must be present with one another. I try to be there for my patients and their families and to answer all of their questions with candor and concern.

This means as much to me as I hope it does to them. When a bereft family member asks, "Did she suffer?" I'm able to answer, "We controlled her pain, but you helped us to lessen her suffering."

But how can I be present with my patients and their families in the midst of this pandemic, when we must stay apart? This goes against everything I learned in medical school about caring for patients. How do you stay close to others in a time of social distancing?

How do you grieve in the age of Zoom?

One unexpected insight came to me while I was attending my first virtual funeral. The ceremony celebrated the life of a revered professor who was also my close friend and collaborator. A gifted diagnostician, and a medical sleuth who would have made Sherlock Holmes envious, he cast a long shadow in

his chosen field, pathology.

It was hard to fathom the loss of a dear colleague. Did a lifetime of hard-won knowledge simply vanish? One answer came from those whose lives he'd touched.

At the funeral, my friend's trainees and colleagues joined many others who'd assembled online to say what he'd meant to them. It felt odd being connected to everyone online while also knowing that we were spread out across the globe.

It was only thanks to Zoom, that technological marvel, that we could meet in such numbers. But our group's large size, coupled with the fact that everyone was using their video cameras in order to be visible onscreen, made the internet access erratic.

During two separate eulogies, the person speaking suddenly froze—then dropped off the screen for good. It seemed an ironic metaphor for the event that had brought us there.

No one seemed to be familiar with the etiquette appropriate to the occasion; it was just too new. We spent more time answering the various speakers' entreaty, "Can you hear me?" than we did listening to their eulogies.

Whenever the audio went down, the Chat box would light up as we all sought to carry on with the ceremony. We spent more time trying to manage the connection than we did on connecting. "Go on mute," some urged. "Turn off your video," insisted others. Nothing helped—until we finally all left the meeting, then logged back on.

Fear of COVID-19 was of course the main force keeping us apart from one another. Among us all, there was already a large reservoir of loss. Many had experienced pandemic-related complications that went beyond health concerns: job loss, financial stress and social isolation. Others felt a heavy burden of worry about childcare or eldercare needs. They wondered how much more difficult the future would be if schools remained virtual. Everyone was longing for a cure or a vaccine.

All of this strain seemed too much to bear.

Despite the ceremony's shortcomings, we did finally come together as one community. I felt this especially strongly when the deceased man's family members spoke. Making no mention of the technological glitches, they described instead how they felt buoyed by our virtual presence: "Coming together comforted our family."

Hearing their words bolstered me, too.

We are social animals, I reminded myself, and we are resilient. This way of grieving is only temporary. Someday soon, we will be physically together again. We will gather in person to bid farewell to someone we cared about.

Day by day, that reality draws closer as COVID-19 vaccines become more widely

available. Fewer lives will be lost—and when such a sad loss does occur, it will bring us together and into each other's arms for comfort and consolation.

This is ample reason for hope.