

May 28, 2020

Last night David Muir on ABC News marked the deaths of over 100,000 souls from Covid 19 in this country with a montage of just a few of the victims which offered just brief summaries of their lives.

You can still watch it, but it is not easy watching, but you should.

The sadness, the incredible sadness, represented in those deaths is something most of us have avoided thus far but we should acknowledge and remember, as suffering is something that none of us seek.

We should try to understand their suffering from the inside not as onlookers or, worse, voyeurs. Sitting with this montage of human life could be very prayerful in ways that we cannot imagine.

I think it is important for us to resonate with the deaths and the grief and not just focus on the return to what we may think is normal.

Some years ago, I discovered the Nigerian-American, Kalamazoo born (1975), author/photographer/art historian, Teju Cole, and I would reference him and some of his ideas from time to time. For several years he was the photography editor of the New York Times Magazine and currently he teaches creative writing at Harvard.

Last Sunday, May 24, that magazine published an article that Teju wrote from quarantine in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a short journal that covered just one week in mid-April. The article title is, We Just Can't Comprehend This Much Sorrow.

The heart of his daily diary entries for that week centers on the daily death toll in New York City, which he reflects on along with the very ordinary details of just a moment or two of his day at that same time and makes this observation:

“If journalism is the first rough draft of history, perhaps a journal is the first rough draft of literature. But grief makes me sour. I feel as though I've read the same piece of white writing 30 times in the past month.

Much of it is concerned with inconveniences, and some of it is jokey.

I understand these collective attempts at lightness, but I quarrel with them, because I know that in the United States there is no “collective.” Levity in the midst of sorrow can be a consolation if the sorrow is shared to begin with. But here, where everything is divided, where the unscathed can’t quite believe the wounded, the levity sounds like anything but solidarity.”

I offer his words not to further the divide, my wish is that we think about this, this concern, that many of us have to get back to normal in the context of a bigger picture.

Guilt may be an appropriate feeling in this instance, as our guilt may lead us to deeper places in our soul where our real self might be encountered.

Humility may be an appropriate feeling here, not a groveling shame but a sense of awe at the circumstances of our lives in contrast with many others so far in this pandemic.

There is a celebratory sense that it is over, that we are through the woods, but what is it that we celebrate?

What has become of the religious faith we profess?

What is it we believe?

What is patriotism in 2020?

Perhaps, John Donne’s poem, For Whom the Bell Tolls, might be helpful:

No man (sic) is an island,
Entire of itself.
Each is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe (America) is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thine own

Or of thine friend's were.
Each man's (sic) death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind (sic).
Therefore, send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.