



The Chaos of Asynchronous Grief

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Spoiler: I hate to say it, but Americans have only begun the five stages of grief, and [we aren't all going through it in the same way and at the same time](#). This can be problematic for cooperation - something we need if we are going to get through a global pandemic.

For the first time in our lived memory, the entire planet has experienced the same horror and the same fear at the same time in a broad and deep way. Yes, many of us have been concerned about climate change, but the immediacy of COVID-19,



and its threat of sudden death, shocked us into compliance with our local health departments and authorities. At the start of the worldwide infection, most of the globe was on the same page for how to stay safe. All over the world, we were scared, and we stayed home as much as we could. This mostly worked in the United States - until recently, when it suddenly didn't, and some people hit the streets to protest, claiming a burning need for, of all things, haircuts.

This action came on the tail of US politicians and the powerfully wealthy [seemingly more concerned about 'The Economy' than human lives](#), publicly urging us to risk infection for the good of commerce, rather than staying home as advised. That didn't play well for those of us who were scared and staying home, and many of us were outraged by this declaration. However, for some people, it sparked something, enough so that the people who liked these new ideas began to organise.

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This organising seemed manufactured, and in many ways it began that way. The websites that posted information about how or where to protest the "lockdowns" were [coordinated efforts](#), with many of the domains registered to the same person. The protest turnouts were eerily similar, and seemed to be occurring in key political states in which voters of either party could be harmed by an increase of COVID-19 cases (pretty much all states, really), or states where the President is against a Governor (nearly all Democratic ones). But it may not just be about the President's preferences. Some have rightly argued that [structural racism has played a huge part in who gets COVID-19](#). Proportionally, the virus is taking a higher toll in lower income, disadvantaged communities, and racism may be part of where the impetus for some to protest comes from: the idea from those protesting the lockdown that the spread of the virus could result in the eradication of certain minority members of society, who are on their lists to remove.

The protests mimic the audience participation portion of Trump's campaign



rallies. Just as the President misses his podium, the crowds miss being there as well. Trump's rallies offered his supporters camaraderie, and the chance to yell and join together against common enemies.

In psychological parlance, a Narcissist like Trump needs both an Apath (an enabler) and an Empath (a victim). Apaths are dangerous because their actions normalise "[the toxic individual and their harmful behaviours towards others](#)." The rallies have provided a place for these dangerous Apath enablers to get support and strokes for pleasing the Narcissist, whilst being able to vent, scapegoat and blame his (their) victims, who do not conform to the Narcissist's whims. With sporting events shut, many people lack the constructive ways to express themselves and their feelings that games and playoffs can provide, and with Trump's campaign rallies currently suspended, his supporters also lack the public space they usually have to get that emotional charge—as well as to scapegoat, blame, and bully others. Trump's Apaths are simultaneously suppressed and powder kegs about to blow. They need a regular outlet, so they've created one: protesting against the lockdown offers them a way to let off steam, please their leader, and get those emotional strokes they rely on from him, and from banding together.

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However, what people are protesting seems odd. They are protesting change, and this is realised by them protesting having to stay home. Cloaked in the label of "Freedom," these gun-toting, flag-waving folk are [crowding together in public](#). Some of these protestors are likely COVID-19 positive but asymptomatic, creating disease vectors, which at best could further imprison them at home or in a ICU hospital ward, and at worst, kill them and their loved ones. That aspect doesn't seem to matter as they chant displeasure towards the rational common sense enacted by health departments and state governments, as well as a dislike for the rest of us who choose to stay home, potentially denying the protestors sources for



the goods and services that they desire and imagine will be accessible to them when things open. It doesn't make sense, as acts of passion rarely do, to those not directly involved.

Perhaps these protests aren't about freedom at all, but are leveraging the concept to validate other, more irrational actions. The protestors aren't for everyone else's freedom, for they don't seem to want some subset of the population ([hairstylists to name one group](#)) to be at home, either, which would be an expression of another's freedom to choose. No, these protests are about something else underneath their chants.

I argue that this new faction of protestors taking action arises from people being at various stages in a grief cycle, combined with different imagined realities of outcomes for the future (Applin 2016). Throughout the 20th century, scholars and psychologists have developed models for understanding and processing the complex human emotions that arise as we are able to extend the human life span. As we live longer, we live with illnesses that can last decades. As a result, we have had to come to terms with slower processes of dying. COVID-19 has created conditions where we are all [Schrödinger's Cat](#): sequestered in our homes, unsure if we are ill or not ill, and lacking ways to get reliable confirmation one way or another.

This produces feelings. Lots of them. One of the more well known volumes on the subject of grieving is Kübler-Ross' 1969 book, [On Death and Dying](#). In it, Kübler-Ross outlines the stages of a grief and/or bereavement as a process and offers a psychological tool for humans to understand and accept terminal illness and death.

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come in stages, her book signified the first time that the ideas within it about grief were more widely distributed. Thanks to the efforts of her publisher, readers, and a general trend towards acceptance of psychology in North American contemporary culture at the time of publishing, many people who read On Death and Dying became familiar with the concept of grief as a process with an organizational structure.

Initially, Kübler-Ross segmented grief as being composed of the stages of Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. In her book, Denial falls within the Information and Communication organisation of the stages, and includes Fear, Shock, Elation, Confusion, and Avoidance. Although there are stages, Kübler-Ross later acknowledged that grieving is not a linear process as she initially thought. However, most of us do start at denial.

If we look at how the stages of grief have played out on the American COVID-19 stage, we can very clearly see early denial, confusion, shock, fear, avoidance, and elation. At the beginning of the lockdown, we might have been elated at 'time off from work' and had imagined things returning to 'normal' after a few weeks. As things progressed, we hoped that perhaps we were spared, or that an "easy cure" could be found. When those were proven to be false, we clung to the suggestion that gradual changes implemented when it was deemed safe to do so, would get us back to "normal." This was also reinforced by the government and health departments, and we stayed inside while we developed with them an alternate reality of this shared future we envisioned (Applin 2016). This provided a goal to sustain us and keep us safe from the terror and fear we were increasingly enmeshed in as we watched fatalities rise worldwide.

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Denial has helped us cope. It has also harmed us. Many of us are still sitting at home, waiting for things to calm down, hoping that a flat curve will reduce our risk, knowing that we will have to change, but hoping and believing that the change can be mitigated, and that we can return to familiar ways.



We are still in denial, but it is a hopeful denial. Let's say we're in "hope".

The anger part of grieving is where people blame others for the cause of grief, feel abandoned (by those who have died and by those who were supposed protect them), and feel that things are unjust. It includes feelings of frustration, irritation, and anxiety. People in the anger phase can become anxious about an uncertain future, too. While the protestors are still partially in denial (this is how grief can be non-linear), they have realised that the alternate reality they have shared with us for several weeks isn't sustainable for them, and they have become angry.

To express this anger, the protestors are rejecting the reality that is shared and was agreed upon between various governments and health departments, since the beginning of the outbreak. This reality included the ideas that we can stay safe (and alive) by staying home, wearing a mask, washing our hands, keeping apart, and avoiding touching our faces. Instead of sticking to this narrative, the protestors ([and now some State governments](#)) are constructing a different reality that contains pieces of the former one (some do wear masks) combined with parts of the beliefs and symbols from the Trump rallies, which resonate more closely with their beliefs.

For example, deep down, most of us complying with the earlier shared reality of beliefs know that [even when our states re-open, they will never be the same](#) or return to what they were. We know that. We wish for that history, but we also see things changing. The protestors are unwilling to realise or accept that. The protestors' different shared reality (Applin 2016) declares the virus a "hoax", reaffirming the President's earliest statements, where he claimed that the virus would "[disappear](#)", and later described COVID19 as "[no worse than a flu](#)".

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amongst themselves are more real to them than the ones the rest of us are sharing. As such, there is a conflict of beliefs. The [protestors believe that staying at home is unnecessary](#), and that they deserve to get haircuts and tattoos and go where they like. Some believe that they don't need to wear a mask. Some wear a mask but in doing so, do not completely cover their faces with it. Many believe that the virus isn't real. The tragedy is that the [protestors' beliefs are actualised through bullying, intimidation, and ignoring medical science](#). This puts the health of many others at risk, including the police officers and other authorities who must face them.

In a viral pandemic, it isn't safe to take such stances as the protestors, when we could all be asymptomatic carriers of a highly contagious disease. Their right to freedom that they claim, squelches everyone else's right to be safe and have their health. It's a terrible situation.

If we are fortunate enough to stay alive in the US during this fragmentation of beliefs and actions in response to COVID-19, we might make it through denial to anger, depression, and finally acceptance.

Acceptance is where we see what is happening for what it is, and like a terminally ill patient, find the joy and happiness in what is before us. Acceptance seems a long way from where we are now in our grief. Some of us may not make it to the next phase. The risks people take, fuelled by anger, could kill them, their families, and those who encounter them (whether willingly or unwillingly). They may take others with them, if they aren't careful—and not being concerned for others, seems to be at the heart of their philosophy.

The rest of us can only hope we will survive long enough to move through the grief cycle, to finally accept how things have changed, and to learn how to emerge with new insights and compassion for life. We will get through this if enough of us share a similar envisioned future at the same time, which is inclusive, respectful, kind, sensible, and cooperative.



References:

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