

LOSS AND GRIEF IN THE TIME OF COVID

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Like so many during this worldwide pandemic I have been binge watching TV series from home. One series I binged was *The Leftovers*. It originally aired for three seasons from 2014 to 2017 on HBO and stars Justin Theroux, Amy Brenneman, Christopher Eccleston, Liv Tyler, Carrie Coon, Ann Dowd, Regina King and Scott Glenn. Executive Producer Damon Lindelof (*Lost*, *Watchmen*) adapted Tom Perotta's 2011 novel about the repercussions of a rapture-like event in which 2% of the world's population suddenly vanish without explanation.

The Leftovers has been named one of the best TV series of the past decade, but I hesitated to investigate it while we were in our current crisis because the subject matter just seemed to cut a little too close to the bone. *The Leftovers* is a sensitive and dramatic portrayal of how people react to sudden loss. The disappearance of loved ones in a mass worldwide event with no explanations has various characters responding with every stage of grief, sometimes all at once.

Some turn to religion for comfort and answers. Some reject religion as they can't understand why a higher power would be so cruel. Others join a nihilistic cult. Some are angry. Some are sad. Some have mental health breakdowns. Many are lost and in a constant fog while simply trying to survive and go through the motions of living. It all felt painfully familiar.

While we have been enduring this pandemic our usual rituals of grief and loss have been cut off from us. We haven't been able to sit at the bedsides of dying loved ones and hold their hands in their final moments. We haven't been able to gather together as communities to grieve and comfort each other while we remember those we lost. No more singing songs together at their celebration of life. No more

sharing stories and laughing and crying together as we recall moments of joy and sorrow. Then those intimate moments one on one after the service during the reception where you nibble on an egg salad sandwich on white bread with the crusts cut off as you give a friend a hug and wipe away each other's tears.

I have taken part in quite a few online memorials during this pandemic. They have provided some comfort and closure, but I miss those tactile moments that help ground me in the reality of the loss of a loved one. The lack of the tangible makes these moments feel almost otherworldly and unreal. Although the wider use of video streaming technology is helping to make these rituals more accessible, especially for those who live far away who would find it a struggle to attend in person even if there wasn't a pandemic.

In *The Leftovers* the sudden departure of 2% of the world's population is never explained. This makes the grief even harder for everyone to process. Humans don't like living in ambiguity. We crave certainty. Since March 2020 when the world as we knew it here in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada came to a crashing halt we have been living in a state of limbo. Hoping for the best. Preparing for the worst. Floating in a mire of isolation and fear. Constantly changing our ways of going about our lives in order to survive. Getting a surge of hope as vaccines are distributed only for a new wave of despair to take over as talk of variants take over our social media feeds.

Much like the characters in *The Leftovers*, many who have experienced the loss of a loved one due to COVID-19 have survivor's guilt. Why them and not me? It often seems so arbitrary who were able to survive this disease and who were not. With the constant existential dread of the unknown forever looming it can be hard to find joy in simply being alive because it keeps seeming that even that fleeting positive moment may be tarnished or stolen.

We have been existing in a state of collective grief and mourning for nearly a year and half. We aren't just mourning the loss of our loved ones, but our own sense of reality and purpose. This pandemic has also exposed the truth that normal wasn't all that great for far too many of us and our world needs some major societal changes if humanity is to endure.

Life feels more overwhelming than ever.

This makes the final words of the show's two main characters, Nora and Kevin, from The Leftovers series finale even more poignant.

NORA: And I knew that if I told you what happened that you would never believe me.

KEVIN: I believe you.

NORA: You do?

KEVIN: Why wouldn't I believe you? You're here.

NORA: I'm here.

We are here.

We, us leftovers, are here.