

The Invisible Pandemic of Grief: Finding Meaning in Our Collective Pain

Illness, Crisis & Loss
0(0) 1–14

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DOI: 10.1177/1054137320963888

journals.sagepub.com/home/icl



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Abstract

Globally, educators approach screens full of faces in a scene becoming more common in daily practice. This harrowing time of pandemic has opened a range of emotions not only for our students, but within ourselves due to physical distancing and the increased use of technology to engage one another. As a result, embracing our vulnerability and recognizing how grief is impacting our lives and our work is necessary at this time. Using an ethnological approach, the authors explore issues of loss, grief, meaning-making, and the benefits of sharing our experience with each other. If we can name it, perhaps we can manage it. Written from the perspective of post-secondary education in the United States, this article is intended for staff, faculty, and administrators who work in post-secondary education.

Keywords

Grief, higher education, remote/distance learning, resiliency, vulnerability, meaning-making

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Each person's grief is as unique as their fingerprint. But what everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed. That doesn't mean needing someone to try to lessen it or reframe it for them. The need is for someone to be fully present to the magnitude of their loss without trying to point out the silver lining.

-David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*

We are, always, poets, exploring possibilities of meaning in a world which is also all the time exploring possibilities.

-Margaret J. Wheatley, *A Simpler Way*

It's 5:00 a.m., and Natasha is up. She sits at the kitchen table, exhausted and restless at the same time, without focus, feeling flat. Images of students race through her mind beginning with her high school senior, her daughter, who Natasha held sobbing in her bedroom last night. Natasha's daughter released the cries, staring at sequins, embedded in a dress overlapping like fish scales, scintillating their reflections across the room for a high school prom she will never attend. Images of college students like Rosalina: a graduating senior, and a first-generation student in Natasha's political science class who dreamed of graduation the first time she set foot on the college campus. Images of the black motorboard carefully decorated with gold lettering reading "*Los sacrificios y apoyo de mis padres, son la razon por la cual lo logre. Si se puede!*" ("*the sacrifices and support from my parents is the reason why I succeeded!*") flood the professor's mind. Through tears and anxious pleas during the Zoom meeting, Rosalina begs her professor to convince the university president to allow graduation to take place, explaining to Natasha how walking across that stage to receive a diploma is not just a rite of passage for her, but for every family member who sacrificed to get her through this journey. As a woman of color and a first-generation student herself, Natasha knows graduation represents the absence of voices of generations of family members whose dream of higher education never manifest as it did for her. The images of pained expression on Rosalina's face allows Natasha to recognize the interconnectedness they share. Natasha blinks her eyes hard, wiping away her own tears only to see images of Michael: a former foster care youth whose voice continued to crack during his virtual advising appointment as he shared with her, he has never felt lonelier; no one has checked on him during this time of social distancing.

It's 6:30 a.m., and the wash of the morning light displays Natasha's despair. The lines of concern shoot from the corners of her eyes and travel up, profoundly embedding themselves into her forehead. Natasha hasn't moved from the kitchen table, holding the coffee she poured herself when she first awoke; the mug contains only sadness and cold caffeine, but she cannot seem to put it

down. It's as if the tighter she holds the cup, the stronger her armor becomes, guarding her against the emotional upheaval of this global pandemic. A rush of heaviness covers her as she thinks about the undergraduate students she teaches struggling with finding reliable wi-fi, consistent access to a computer and securing a space which allows them to study and learn in meaningful ways. Natasha pulls back the kitchen curtain: the sky is clear and the long morning shadows distinct. Soon, the clatter of pots and pans reverberate through the kitchen; the splatter of water hitting the tiles from the shower faucet echoes down the hall, and the voices of her children fill the room as an argument breaks out over who took the last pancake. In addition to teaching her political science students virtually, Natasha assumes the roles of homeroom mom, seventh-grade math teacher, and high school counselor. Of all the complicated emotions she's experienced during the global pandemic, navigating constant weariness, a sadness that has a hold on her seems to be the one she can't escape.

Grounded in an ethnological approach to understanding the experience of educators in the United States (U.S.), the authors offer insight into the impact of the COVID-19 and the consequent feelings of vulnerability, loss, and grief (Hammersley, 2007). The authors also identify meaning-making, authorship of life-stories, and resilience as useful tools to combat the personal and professional effects of COVID-19. Although the first-hand story of Natasha is a single one, it is reflective of a growing and collective experience of educators across the U.S. Her story represents the need to more fully understand these experiences on a greater scale to effectively support each other and find new ways of coping (Atkinson et al., 2001).

COVID-19's Personal and Professional Impact

The COVID-19 global pandemic has created immense upheaval in our personal and professional lives. Students' lives, not just their academic endeavors, have been disrupted. The psychological impact of social distancing is significant and may have lasting impacts. The digital divide has been exposed and persistence rates, particularly those in the most marginalized of our campus communities are likely to diminish. There is no immunity to the pain, fear, and uncertainty caused by this pandemic. None of us receive exemptions for the trauma visited upon us. Some of us have lost a loved one. Others continue to be rocked by the financial instability caused by this virus. The stories of our students' pain also impact many of us: we hear about the fear of turning on the camera for a videoconference because of shame related to conditions of where they live, the difficulties of caring for siblings while being "present" in class, or taking on extra hours at work to provide support for the family because a parent has lost a job. All of us are learning to cope with the loss of our world as it was before the virus. Bernand Golden (2020), in *Psychology Today* writes, "We've lost the routines of our lives that both reflect and support our identity, routines that

anchor us in the familiar and predictable. They provide us security, comfort, and meaning. Instead, we are left with a sense of disorientation—a feeling of being adrift” (p. 36). Our concept of normalcy is modeled by what we see. It’s hard to be what you have not seen, and, as educators, we are experiencing vague visions of what our world will be.

This experience has created cataclysmic global shifts in our lives, leaving many of us and our students struggling with an unnamed internal sadness: our grief. This virus, physical distancing, and isolation disrupt our familiar: our established norms, our routines. Golden (2020) goes on to state:

Our routines draw our attention outward. By contrast, being homebound diminishes our external stimulation, thus creating a vacuum in our minds. However, a vacuum seeks to be filled. We may invariably and unwittingly draw on feelings and thoughts that lie below the radar of our attention—feelings and thoughts that are part of our interior landscape. (p. 38)

Psychologist Harriet Lerner’s two modes of “over-functioning” and “under-functioning” provide a context of our psychological structure during times of unease (as cited in Brown, 2020). Vulnerability researcher/storyteller Brene Brown (2020) in a recent podcast, *Unlocking Us*, contrasted the two modes as “learned behaviors for getting out from underneath fear and uncertainty.” Brown defined Lerner’s concepts as “I won’t *feel*, I *do*; I don’t *need* help, I *help*” or “I won’t *function*, I’ll *fall apart*; I don’t *help*, I *need help*.” In other words, we learned these two modes of behaviors as a way to cope with feelings of fear and the uncertain meaning we attach to them. We are a meaning-making species. We fixate on work and strive to maintain the illusion of control—this allows us to feel as if we are keeping control of our external world and our sense of self within it. However, Brown (2020) believes “the inexorable march of the virus is bringing us face to face with our inherent fragility.” Undoubtedly, the process of reimagining ourselves into an unknown future while we grapple with profound feelings of sadness and loss is a part of the grief process. It will require exploration into our vulnerability and the impact of this pandemic experience. Ultimately, the grief process can strengthen us, adding depth and wisdom to the meaning of our current experience.

Vulnerability

As Margaret Wheatley (2011) reminds us “We can turn away, or we can turn toward. Those are the only two choices we have” (p. 16). We have a choice to turn toward our own grief work so we can effectively support students as they navigate their own set of losses during this time. As educators, how can we turn toward ourselves and each other and mindfully move through the crisis of grief with humanity? A good place to start is with self-reflection and the willingness to

share our learning to assist colleagues and students as they initiate their own grief journeys. Each of these reflections calls us to summon the courage to face our vulnerability and to do the necessary self-work for progress. Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (2003) notes:

The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen. (p. 123)

The real excavation process—digging deep to uncover the underlying issues of the self is where the most powerful and profoundly healing work begins. This work takes a willingness to be vulnerable and a remarkable amount of courage to face our vulnerabilities.

Lessons to Be Learned

Every problem, every situation, every life experience (including a global pandemic) is temporary and provides an opportunity for learning. When a crisis arrives in our lives, our first priority is to secure our health and safety and the health and safety of others who may also be involved in the crisis. Once we have effectively managed the impact of the crisis, there exists an opportunity to gently ask of the crisis, “what are you here to teach me?” By asking this question, we begin to engage in the transformative power of introspection. Holocaust survivor, author, and psychologist Edith Eger (2017) shares the profound last words she heard from her mother, as they arrived at the concentration camp, “We don’t know where we’re going, we don’t know what’s going to happen, but no one can take away from you what you put in your own mind” (p. 18). Engaging introspection allows us to take what control we have during a crisis, control of our thoughts and the meaning we ascribe to the crisis in our lives. This pandemic will not impact our lives forever and we have a choice about the narrative we attach to it: hopefully, five weeks from now, five months from now, five years from now, we will look back at this experience and understand we always have the power to control our thoughts and our outlook. Victor Frankl (1985), a psychiatrist, author, and Auschwitz survivor, in his book, *A Man’s Search for Meaning*, proposed the notion that in every situation we have choice, we have the power to choose how we respond to our circumstances. Frankl wrote of his experience in the concentration camp, “. . .there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you or very self, your inner freedom. . .” (104). We can view every situation from multiple perspectives and know we have the

power to choose the one most useful. This pandemic experience allows us the time to consider our patterns of thinking and feeling and to choose wisely—to use this time to explore the lessons that are presenting themselves. Yet, this process of learning can only be achieved if we are willing to look at the places within ourselves where our feelings lie, where pain and suffering lingers.

Naming Thoughts and Feelings

There is power in naming and normalizing our thoughts and feelings. As Wheatley (2011) teaches us, “To name is to make visible” (p. 32). Naming thoughts and feelings of uncertainty, loss of control, inadequacy, sadness, grief, or any other ponderings and emotion allows us to make meaning beyond the surface level, meaning that has depth and breadth. Weeks into the COVID-19 pandemic, Brown (2020) said, we are all “hitting that moment where we are weary in our bones, we are physically tired. You’re not alone . . . we all are struggling to find our footing.” We are struggling because where we stand is surely unknown and we cannot see exactly where to place our feet to move forward safely. If we can, at the very least, name our internal responses to this pandemic, we can begin the process of meaning making. The meaning we give to our experience can be a guide on an unfamiliar path. Now, how we feel about this global pandemic, day-to-day, will shift and does not have to mirror our colleague’s, neighbor’s or partner’s experience. We must identify our own thoughts, our own feelings, we are where we are for our own reasons, we make our own meaning. Brown (2020) believes some people are struggling with *comparative suffering*, or how their own personal circumstances fit into the wider narrative. “[It’s] this idea that I can’t feel sad about my child’s high school graduation or college commencement, because there are people dying,” she explained. All pain is valid—all pain is real and we are allowed to feel it—to have compassion for the profound suffering of others *and* to acknowledge the depth of our own pain. Brown goes on to share “To be alive is to be vulnerable, to be in this pandemic is to be vulnerable every second of every minute of every day. The thing about vulnerability is it is difficult, but it’s not weakness. It’s the foundation and the birthplace of courage; there is no courage without risk, uncertainty and exposure.” Therefore, we must embrace the inevitable sense of vulnerability that has come with this pandemic and respond with courage to the pain it may have brought to our lives, however we experience, name and define it.

The Process of Meaning Making

Acknowledging and naming our pain is the initial stage of meaning-making. This meaning-making is a process of finding meaning, creating meaning, or reconstructing prior meaning we had attributed to our work, our relationships,

our lives, and our selves (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). Gillies and Neimeyer (2006), proposed a constructivist perspective, suggesting that in grief, meaning making is an “. . . adaptation to a new loss frequently involves constructing a new reality. . .” (36). This reconstruction process includes the process of a) sense making, b) benefit finding, and c) identity change. Sense making is endeavoring to understand why the loss occurred as an effort to restore feelings of safety, stability, and predictability. Benefit finding is the process of reappraising and “mining life lessons” from our experience (Neimeyer & Anderson, 2002, p. 50). It is important to note however, this process may not occur until after some time has passed from the initial loss and is reliant on an individual’s ability to access internal and external resiliency factors. Lastly, identity change is an adaptive process of the reconstruction of self - where individuals “[become] more resilient, independent, and confident” (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006, p. 37).

Constructivist theories often use life stories to help frame the human experience and identify its meaning (Gilbert, 2002). Appraising and mining for life lessons can be achieved in many ways, however engaging in reflecting writing can be a powerful mechanism to literally author a new narrative of one’s life story (Neimeyer, 1999). Like the story of Natasha, there is an opportunity to create a more complete narrative of our experience of the global pandemic; to acknowledge what was lost, make sense of the loss, find potential benefits of new circumstances, and rebuild a sense of self in our new reality. Certainly, this process takes time and a willingness to be introspective, to document the development of our learning. It is our stories that can become a source of strength, guidance, and comfort for ourselves and for others. As Bruner (2004) stated, “In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives that we ‘tell about’ our lives” (p. 694).

Pandemic Related Grief: Sharing Its Meaning

If we are feeling emotional pain during this pandemic, the pain we feel may be grief. Grief is what we feel when we experience loss and “can challenge our deepest sense of who we are” as we process the meaning of our loss (Kumar, 2005, p. viii). In the book, *Grieving Mindfully*, Kumar (2005) goes on to say, “grief offers us an opportunity to pause and look at the deeper questions of life, to find personal meaning and purpose” (pg. 1). Eventually, there comes a point when the pain ceases long enough for us to take hold of this opportunity, if we choose, and turn the wounds of grief into wisdom, the wisdom that only loss can generate—insight that distinctly peers through our darkest hours. Sufi teacher, philosopher, and poet Rumi (as cited in Wheatley, 2011) said, “The wound is the place where the Light enters you” (p. 6) and it is also where it shines through, if you will allow it. Pain, suffering, and difficulties can serve as some of our most extraordinary teachers and can shed gentle light on lessons to be learned that reside deep within our soul. In return, we can share our learning and the wisdom

that comes with the courage to engage our pain. The pain and suffering we encounter challenges us to look inward, drawing upon our reserve of strength to find meaning in our suffering and to initiate the healing that awaits our invitation. A wound also needs a witness to heal, so be willing to share your story the light reveals and if you can do so, use this time to invite others to do the same. Author and grief expert David Kessler (2019) writes, “Having our pain seen and seeing the pain in others is a wonderful medicine for both body and soul” (p. 18). Our stories matter; witnessing and honoring one another’s wounds, another’s sense of loss and grief and sharing its meaning creates healing and deep connections to one another.

Fully Experience Grief to Fully Experience Life

To fully process grief, we must be willing to sit with it when it shows up in our life—to not avoid it or rush its presence; it is necessary to be with grief as it manifests, in its whole expression in our lives. Allow yourself to experience it. Jeffrey Brantley stated, “We can turn away from our own deep pain, seeking relief from distraction, numbing, and denial. Or we can turn toward the pain with compassionate attention and willingness to allow what we are feeling to be just as it is” (as cited in Kumar, 2005, p. viii). Engage in focused or mindful grieving every day, if possible, to honor your feelings and emotions and do so with acceptance and non-judgement. Focused or mindful grieving can help decrease the potential for intrusive thoughts of loss, grief, and anger (Golden, 2020). These thoughts and feelings intrude because we haven’t consciously made room for them—they are calling to be noticed, felt, and experienced and our avoidance can create greater suffering. Eger (2017) declares, “Time doesn’t heal. It’s what you do with the time. Healing is possible when we choose to take responsibility, when we choose to take risks, and finally, when we choose to release the wound, to let go of the past or the grief” (p. 45). We may not be responsible for the cause of our grief, but we are responsible for our reaction. To release the wound, we must be intentional to sit with and “to fully experience the lessons of grief” (Kumar, 2005, p. 9). When we embrace and integrate the lessons of our loss, we can eventually let go of habits of thought and feelings that keep us from experiencing the fullness of our life. Letting go may mean allowing ourselves to realize forgiveness, letting go of the hope that the past could be any different. Put differently but with similar intent, Eger (2017) expands on this notion by stating, “To forgive is to grieve—for what happened, for what didn’t happen—and to give up the need for a different past” (p. 39). Letting go may also mean to release what we hoped for our future and accept what remains. What remains is what we choose the meaning of our experience to be.

Releasing Ourselves

During the global pandemic, releasing ourselves from unrealistic expectations can minimize persistent feelings of dis-satisfaction, unease, disappointment, and fear. Pain comes from expectations not met. Brown (2020) expands on this idea by sharing, when clear communication across expectations does not happen, “expectations are just resentments waiting to happen.” Understand that everything we once did on autopilot (designing meaningful programming, arranging students into breakout groups for discussion, meeting with students for in-person advising appointments, etc.) is likely to take twice as long, be more difficult to implement, and even more challenging to assess during this pandemic. According to Bishop T. D. Jakes (as cited in Berinato, 2020), “We’ve all been marketed this expectation of how long things are supposed to last or how they’re supposed to go. The reality is, what you have is this moment with the people you love, with the air you breathe, with the space you’re in. You must live today and maximize the people in your life” (p. 9). Choosing to recalibrate the lens in which we view expectations of ourselves and others is imperative. In this current state of pervasive and persistent uncertainty, grounding measures of productivity and success with grace and appreciation is needed. Communicating more realistic expectations clearly and often can provide a perspective that allows us to appropriately change how we see our work, ourselves, and our ability to meet the needs of our students; thus, releasing ourselves from expectations that are no longer applicable.

Grief Is a Process: Survival, Empathy, and Compassion

Grief is a process that begins with survival, allows us to transition to surviving, and can lead us to a greater understanding of what it means to thrive and be successful. Success during this reality is putting one foot in front of the other. Kessler (2019) shares, “People often say, ‘I don’t know how you’re doing it.’ I tell them that I’m not. I’m not deciding to wake up in the morning. I just do. Then I put one foot in front of the other because there’s nothing else to do. Whether I like it or not, my life is continuing, and I have decided to be part of it” (p. 26). Putting one foot in front of the other is survival and actually, it is deciding to participate in survival and that is how we begin to survive. Eger (2017) reminds us, “Survivors don’t have time to ask, ‘Why me?’ For survivors, the only relevant question is, ‘What now?’” (p. 61). The truth is, progress and success will look different every day. Resist measuring yourself against what progress and success looked like pre-COVID-19. Real progress requires an authentic way of being, the honesty of where we are at with the moment, deciding to put one foot in front of the other, and above all, doing so with empathy and compassion for ourselves and others.

Make no mistake — these are high-velocity jobs, and what we do or what we fail to do during a crisis has real consequences for the students and communities we serve. We respond to the intersections of complexity, needs, expectations, and demands daily. This crisis only compounds the intensity of this work. Tensions run high as the pressure to act or respond comes with a relentless sense of urgency. Ego attempts to invade our space and muddles the process of decision making and collaborative efforts. Our grief may call out to us for attention at any point of its process and our patience may run short and our ability to see other's pain may be limited. When we reach these intersections, we need to center our humanity at the realization we are not passive participants in our own behavior, we have choice. We can choose to take a breath, be of service to others, be patient and kind with ourselves and one another. Then we can respond more appropriately rather than react out of frustration and in response to the pressure we feel. We can choose to engage our empathy, draw from our compassion and wisdom by paying conscious attention—hearing and heeding to what our lives are speaking to us in this moment and in consideration of others. Wheatley (2011) explains utilizing empathy and compassion in conversation and connection “slows us down to a pace that encourages thinking, [then] we can become wise and courageous actors in our world” (p. 17). When we are faced with the inevitable compounded pain and stress of this time, we can choose empathy over judgement and compassion over self-interest, valuable choices when we are experiencing individual and collective grief.

Grief and Resilience in Action

Grief is powerful emotion that contains profound systems of thoughts and feelings and the process of grieving takes a remarkable amount of time, energy, and intention. The grief process requires a certain type of strength that allows for the cyclical moving in and out of pain without weakening our physical and psychological makeup. Resilience is that strength and serves as the internal factor that promotes recovery. In grief, resilience is what undergirds our process of healing, the acceptance and integration of our loss, the meaning making of our experience, and the becoming our whole self in a new context. In our grief, breaking out of negative thought and feeling cycles, offering empathy and compassion to others, and refocusing energy on giving, volunteering, or supporting the most vulnerable among us can serve as effective resilience-building skills. COVID-19 has unmistakably uncovered vulnerable populations that could benefit from a commitment to see beyond our own pain to help others in need. Moving from a health-science only perspective of COVID-19 to the social and political implications of this disease, accelerates our ability to recognize this pandemic as a diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice issue. This expanded lens magnifies the grave inequities in education and health disparities in the United States and can be a focus of our efforts. Author and ecologist, Charles Eisenstein (2013)

challenges us by questioning “Is it too much to ask, to live in a world where our human gifts go toward the benefit of all? Where our daily activities contribute to the healing of the biosphere and the well-being of other people?” (p. 21).

Acts of volunteering, helping and giving can serve as a very specific resilience-building skill. Helping others has been scientifically proven to be good for your own mental and physical health (Berinato, 2020). Based on the science of resilience-building, York College, in Queens, New York, developed an approach to benefit both faculty and staff along with supporting students’ sense of belonging through an intentional high touch campaign. Indeed, a sense of belonging matters and the lens we approach this work impacts how students connect to our classes and campus community (Strayhorn, 2018). The decision to reach out to each student enrolled in the college and connect to their sense of belonging allowed for the development of emergency success coaches. Over 170 faculty, staff and graduate students volunteered to receive a caseload of York students to call directly and provide a wellness check which included gathering qualitative data about the student’s lived experience with the impact of COVID-19 on their daily life and academic performance. This effort is not only supporting those who the outreach was intended but supports the resilience of those reaching out and their healing process.

Another example of providing intentional support and building resiliency in a college setting is a summer retreat that was held for educators at California State University, Fullerton. The intention of the retreat was to virtually connect with each other and explore the meaning of the global pandemic within the context of their life and work. The curriculum focused on the complex context of the social and political environment in the U.S. that overlapped the ongoing impact of the pandemic, daring leadership in challenging times, and effective strategies to serve students in a virtual world. The retreat provided space for educators to share their stories, and the meaning they told themselves about their stories. The retreat created time and space for the educators to engage in the vulnerability of uncertainty, find new sources of courage, and tap into individual and shared resilience (Brown, 2018).

Our Collective Grief

Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2003) reminded us we will not get over grief; it is here to serve as a teacher: “you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to” (p. 72). Our collective grief allows us to utilize this crisis to reflect on and illuminate our fault lines and the lessons we need to learn as a result of seeing them more clearly. Educators have the opportunity to take a long hard look at the cracks in our system concerning equity, accessibility, and belonging and the environments we create for teaching and learning, community, and care.

Three main equity implications are emerging in this first flush of change brought about by the pandemic: lives have been uprooted and left unmoored; the digital divide exposes the socioeconomic inequity of virtual learning; and there is a disproportionate likelihood that students who are under-served and at-risk will not return when campuses reopen. In her book, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, Wheatley (2011) determines dissolution creates space where “dissipative structures...can be a source of new order, and that growth appears from disequilibrium, not balance” (p. 112). This global pandemic is a crucible of unparalleled proportions that higher education now faces. The details of the narratives emerging from our campuses concerning social distancing and the impact of grief are unique, but their significance is not. These stories are devastating, beautiful and gritty in equal measure. This crucible challenges institutions of higher education across the globe to question who we were, what matters most, and who we aspire to be. Einstein (2019) encourages us to expand our vision by moving beyond a “deficit of identity when we’re shrunk down into these little separate selves” (p. 144). It requires us to examine our values, questions our assumptions, hones our ability to reimagine, casting a broader, more inclusive net around our approach to the academy—and, with each other. And, invariably, we will rise from the crucible resolute in our purpose—transformed in fundamental ways. This is the dark before the dawn. But there is always a dawn. How we choose to make meaning of the dark and the dawn will guide our way forward.


Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Author Biographies

Clint-Michael Reneau (he/him/his), PhD, serves as associate vice president of Student Affairs and is an internationally recognized educator and scholar within higher education. His research focuses on vulnerability and empathy within leadership development, LGBTQ experiences in higher education, men's development including the multiple modes of masculinities, and the intersections of masculinities with other socially constructed identities, and diversity, equity and inclusion in educational contexts. Reneau's concentration on these research areas help shape the direction and development of higher education professionals by assisting in the understanding of various institutional, psychological, and political processes as a means to support development for underrepresented students.

Berenecea Johnson Eanes (she/her/hers), PhD, serves as President of York College, City University of New York. Eanes is a noteworthy scholar, widely published in her field of Social Work and earned more than \$8 million in grants for her research to support student success initiatives. She has taught and/or been an administrator at various institutions including Columbia University, California State University-Fullerton, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Morehouse College, Georgia State University, Clark Atlanta University, Hamilton College and Teach for Africa, Ethiopia.