

# Voices: Justice looks like leaning in to grief

September 20, 2021

*EDITOR'S NOTE: "Justice looks like ..." is a special series in the Voices column. Readers will have the opportunity to consider justice from numerous viewpoints. The series is based on each writer's understanding of Scripture and relationship with Jesus Christ. Writers present their own views independent of any institution, unless otherwise noted in their bios.*

*You are encouraged to listen to each writer without prejudgment. Then, engage in conversation with others around you about what justice looks like to you.*

*[Click here](#) for more information about the series. [Click here](#) to read the full "Justice looks like..." series.*

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*"The grief of what it means to be Black in this country founded on white supremacist ideals and being a witness to mass Black death, compounded due to a highly contagious virus we still don't fully understand and state violence at the hands of police, is beyond what many of us could've expected to weather in our lifetime."—Nneka Okona, ["We're in a New Age of Black Grief"](#)*

Grief expresses itself in many different ways. Some people cry; others get angry. Some deflect uncomfortable feelings of vulnerability with busy work or humor.

Similarly, it is difficult to respond well to another person's grief. Far too often, and in the absence of knowing what to do with another person's

suffering, we are content with indifference. We easily can convince ourselves the grieving person—or people—would rather be alone. We avoid getting involved with a “not-my-fight, not-my-problem” mentality.

Is our response to such great mourning to be squeamish and back away?

Perhaps we pick apart the things a person says in their grief until there's nothing left to take seriously. Perhaps witnessing another person's mourning makes us uncomfortable, especially when we are complicit to the system that oppresses.

What is the best way to respond to an individual's grief? How do we respond to collective grief?

The process is messy and uncomfortable, but helping professionals and pastors can attest to this truth: Leaning in toward someone who is suffering is a gift.

It is a sacred thing to be let into another person's pain. Perhaps, culturally speaking, we don't know what to do with it. But it is holy.

## Gaslighting

As a therapist, a common response I see to grief is a practice called gaslighting. [Gaslighting](#) is a manipulative tactic people who are abusive use to control another person. The person in power not only systematically lies, but makes the vulnerable person feel crazy for questioning them.

They will shift blame for their abuse to the victim instead of owning their responsibility. This, in turn, causes a victim not to trust themselves, to feel responsible for the suffering and, often, to apologize to the abuser.

Healing from psychological manipulation takes time, often years and decades. Gaslighting is beyond insensitive. It's cruel.

Watching the nation's events unfold over the last many months, I've been thinking a lot about gaslighting. It's hard to bear witness to ways in which white evangelicals have behaved with indifference to the suffering of Black people and people of color in America. It's been centuries.

It has been painful to see the ways gaslighting shows up to silence people our societies have oppressed for years.

I think about the pure strength it takes each time a client in my office chooses to believe truth when faced with years of being lied to and belittled. I can't help but think about this when I read and listen to Black voices and people of color who are sharing their experiences willingly after the death of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and so many more.

People are mourning the sin and abuse of racism on a national scale.

## **Lean in and listen**

There is so much that encompasses justice and action. I confess I am no expert. But one clear aspect is for white people to lean in toward the pain, loss and frustrations of many in Black communities and communities of color.

This is the time to listen humbly and appreciate the holiness of these moments, the privilege it is to be let into someone's pain and suffering, and take it seriously.

Justice does not end with privileged people listening, but it does begin with it.

I never will forget the first time I held a counseling session—the smell of coffee wafting in the air, tissues within reach, framed encouragements on the wall to warm the room, and most importantly, the brave woman sitting

before me. She cried as she shared her story of abuse.

Her story was heart wrenching and grave, and I remember becoming even more aware of the gravity of the situation. There was stillness in the air between us. I was nervous and deeply grateful she let me into her world. I still feel that way when I think of her.

In her book *Be the Bridge*, Latasha Morrison encourages Christians to empathize and mourn. “Acknowledgement should lead us toward lament, toward seeking mercy, toward a collective conviction that we can and must do better,” she writes.

Perhaps we don’t know where grief belongs in our world. But Jesus did. The kingdom of heaven is for those who mourn.

*Ali Corona is a therapist in Marble Falls. She has experience working with clients dealing with mental illness, sexual assault, domestic violence and other forms of trauma. Ali attends First Baptist Church of Marble Falls with her husband Jordan and sons, Nate and Brazos. The views expressed are those solely of the author.*

[Click here](#) to read the full “Justice looks like...” series.