

We need a bigger forum for mourning victims of corona

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Over fifty thousand people have died from or with Covid-19 during the first year since the outbreak of the pandemic in Germany. Over fifty thousand people who will not see their next birthday. Over fifty thousand people of whom many died alone on an intensive care ward. Since December 2020, more people have died every day than would fit in an Airbus A380, the world's largest passenger aircraft.

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A single plane crash usually dominates the headlines for days: when so many people die, it merits our attention. After an isolated disaster there is scope for this, but the pandemic is not yet over. We have to absorb today's death rates without even being able to digest those of yesterday, let alone mourn the dead.

MOURNING MUST BECOME GREATER, MORE PUBLIC

And yet, the victims of corona nevertheless deserve our attention. Mourning for them must become greater, more public, so that their relatives do not feel abandoned. Because the pandemic makes everything difficult for them. They are often unable to say goodbye, and are frequently forced to cope with their grief without their loved ones around them. In the initial days of bereavement, many wish for distractions to take their mind off things, but this is practically impossible when one is alone at home. Alone at home, no-one is able to take their best friend in their arms, or grieve together with their parents. In normal times, rituals such as funerals help. They provide direction, an opportunity for relatives to remember the deceased together, to feel less alone. But those who themselves

fear falling ill with covid may refrain from attending funeral services. It would be easy for the virus to spread there – at least, it wouldn't be the first time it had. Across society, the majority of people have too little compassion for relatives. This is, in part, due to the fact that most of them prefer not to engage with the topic in any way. It is a very human response: those who themselves are unaffected seek to push any thoughts of death entirely away. Studies have even shown how the brain can block such thoughts. And when the media reduce bereavements to mere numbers, they are far easier to ignore.

SYMBOLS GIVE CORONA VICTIMS A PLACE IN PUBLIC

For this very reason, a church in Schwäbisch Gmünd has an installation where each corona victim is represented by a nail. This happens to be a Christian symbol, but grief does not have to be religious: thousands of candles burn in Stephansplatz (St Stephen's Square), Vienna, just as they do in several squares across Berlin. These symbols help, as they make the victims of covid visible and bring them into the public eye. But isolated initiatives in individual locations only ever reach a few people at a particular moment in time.

In January, Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier introduced the '#lichtfenster' initiative, calling on people to place a light in their windows each evening as an act of remembrance. But how would it be if there were a more conspicuous minute's silence for the deceased on a regular basis? Not every day, we humans would become hardened to it too quickly. But every Sunday perhaps, on the television after the daily news, before the start of the Germans' favourite crime drama Tatort? One minute of silence. Perhaps all broadcasters would take part, public and private alike. Because the more people who have their everyday lives interrupted by such a moment of silence, the greater the effect.

GERMANY IS GRIEVING, EUROPE IS GRIEVING

For, although small, local initiatives do help the grieving, a regular, Germany-wide minute of silence would act as a signal to society as a whole. This likewise includes the official memorial ceremony organised by Frank-Walter Steinmeier in April. With more initiatives of this kind, mourners feel they are not only recognised within their own sphere, but by everyone, even politicians. For this to happen, the motto needs to be “Germany is grieving” or even “Europe is grieving”.

Of course, there is no candle or minute of silence that can take away the grief or mental suffering of those who have lost loved ones. Yet, they can act as symbols of solidarity, sending out the message: “You are not alone”. This is particularly important in a society where people are limiting their social contact and sometimes spend weeks or even months alone at home.

Human togetherness and interaction are not at all self-evident in such a society. Gestures are needed for those who feel abandoned, and an initial gesture could indeed be a minute’s silence to remember those who have died. Then, they would no longer be mere statistics. Instead, we would think about them as individuals, mourn them together.

Moreover, it would send a strong message to those who deny the seriousness of the virus. Hundreds of people are dying every day. This fact must become so visible that it is no longer possible for anyone to ignore it.



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