



By Invitation

On collective grief

The death of someone close, and the cruel separation it brings, is one of the most affecting experiences any of us can ever have, but why do we also grieve for someone whom we have never met in person?



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For *The Straits Times*

When Princess Diana died unexpectedly in a car crash in Paris in August 1997, it unleashed an extraordinary and unprecedented display of emotion in Britain: the mountains of flowers outside town halls across the country, the avalanche of letters, the seemingly endless queues to sign one of the forty books of condolence, and the visible distress and grief in multitudes of people.

Gallup conducted a poll at the time to ask Britons to indicate just how upset they were. Half of all respondents (the majority were women) said they were saddened, as if a personal friend had died. Although no definite causal link was established with the untimely death of the "People's Princess", the suicide rates in England and Wales – particularly among young

women – were found to be 17 per cent higher in the first month after her funeral, while the rates of self-harm rose by 44 per cent in the first week.

Twenty-five years later, Britain is in mourning again and on a more epic scale, following the death of Queen Elizabeth II. Once again there were mounds of flowers, poems and hand-written cards outside palaces in the United Kingdom and embassies worldwide, outpouring of tributes and grief in the social media, and an 8km-long queue to view the Queen's body lying in state in Westminster Hall.

COLLECTIVE GRIEF

The death of someone close, and the cruel separation it brings, is one of the most affecting experiences any of us can ever have. Grief – as the Queen said in the aftermath of the Sept 11 attacks – is the price we pay for love. Grieving is often accompanied by various rituals: The wake with all the expressions of condolences, the funeral rituals, the earth burial and the scattering of the ashes are ways of acknowledging and accepting the death. Grieving opens a space for the reflection of

the fragility and meaning of our existence and the retrospection of that extinguished life and turns loss into remembrance.

That is to be expected for someone whom we knew well and even loved, but why do we also grieve for someone whom we have never met in person – as do the vast majority of those grieving the Queen's passing?

Speaking in the House of Commons, former British prime minister Boris Johnson tried to sum up the shared experience of the Queen's subjects with this bit of elegy: "Millions of us are trying to understand why we are feeling this deep and personal and almost familial sense of loss... Perhaps it's partly because she's always been there. A changeless human reference point in British life, so unvarying in her Pole Star radiance that we have perhaps been lulled into thinking she might be somehow eternal."

Perhaps, what the collective psyche most fears is chaos; what it most dreams of are stability and continuity, and what it most dreads are uncertainty and the lack of control. The Queen was a constant, a fixture of stability that had seemed reliably unchanging in a tumultuous world, and that is gone now.

In the case of any public figure who has long been in the public eye and consciousness – rendered even more vivid and intimate in our media-saturated world – people often feel like they know this individual and form some sort of relationship with him or her – albeit a one-sided one – that is part fantasy and part imagination. That does not, however, make it feel any

less real.

The Queen's death would evoke different emotions, memories and thoughts in people. Some are undoubtedly experiencing that authentic sense of grief, but they may also be having feelings they do not even fully understand, which may be related to their own experiences of other deaths. The Queen might not have been part of their immediate family, but many Britons would feel that they have "grown up" with her, given the longevity of her reign. She was woven into the fabric of not just their lives, but also the lives of their parents and grandparents, and those royal events of which she had been at the centre would have been linked to their own commonplace life and embedded into their own personal memories that spanned across generations. Her death left mourners to think about losing their parents and even grandparents, and they grieve for time passing and for lives that are no longer.

UNCOMMON VIRTUE

We had that parallel instance of collective grief when Singapore's first prime minister Lee Kuan Yew died in March 2015. During that week of national mourning with his body lying in state at Parliament House, the public queued for as long as eight hours to pay their respects. Viewing hours were extended to the whole day. Eighteen community "tribute centres" were opened across the island for those who could not make it to Parliament House and wanted to pen personal messages: Some 1.2 million did so over the

course of the week, leaving not just notes of gratitude, but also craftwork and – inexplicably – soft toys. On the day of the state funeral, people stood six-deep in the torrential rain along some stretches of the 15.4km route for the cortege. "It was a last homage in a week of homages and an intense outpouring of national grief," Malaysian novelist Tash Aw wrote in an opinion piece in *The New York Times*.

Mr Lee was prime minister when Singapore became independent – rather reluctantly and with trepidation – after being expelled from Malaysia. Cast adrift and expected to totter and end up as a failed state, the fledgling and precarious country instead transformed itself into a hitherto unimaginably modern city and one of the world's most prosperous societies on the back of decades of peace, stability and economic growth. It did so under the iron-willed, muscular and pugilistic leadership of Mr Lee. (He had famously written in his 1998 book *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man And His Ideas*: "Because of my posture, my response has been such that nobody doubts that if you take me on, I will put on knuckle-dusters and catch you in a cul-de-sac... Anybody who decides to take me on needs to put on knuckle-dusters. If you think you can hurt me more than I can hurt you, try. There is no other way you can govern a Chinese society.")

My father was an immigrant from southern China who arrived by boat in Singapore – then still a British colony – where he married my mother and had five children, of whom I am the youngest, born at a time when the island was seeking to no longer be a colony. We were far from rich but at no time in my childhood did I feel deprived. Life within and outside the home was stable and safe.

Politics was never discussed, and my upbringing was decidedly apolitical, but there was an assumption and keeping of faith in a system that was based not on class, caste or wealth but on that cornerstone of meritocracy that Mr Lee had promulgated. It gave the assurance that by dint of application, diligence and honest hard work, someone from a relatively humble background could achieve a measure of material success and security. As an immigrant with no exploitable connections, my father embraced that, and as a Chinese with traditional values and outlook, he also had a deference to hierarchy, respect and order – and some of that probably rubbed off on me in my younger self. So, I kept my head down, focused on my studies, worked hard and realised some of that success. I do feel grateful for that – a sense of gratitude that extended to the man whom many would still call the founding father of Singapore and whom I had never met in person.

When I heard of his death, I was surprised by the deep emotional heave within me, an inchoate grief of some sort. I did mourn – and perhaps, like many of those who did for the Queen – it was for the loss of a unique individual who was the embodiment of a remarkable and unswerving lifelong commitment and service to the country, a virtue that is so uncommon not only in our time but for all time.

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