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Mama! I hear your silence: Grief and COVID-19 on the Global North and South disparity

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Abstract

In this conversation with Mama, I use my mother's voice as a reflexive mirror to explore the social work silences that the COVID-19 pandemic expresses so eloquently in my own life and work. I seek to highlight the intimate link between Mama's silence and social work silence.

Keywords

Bereavement, family, reflexivity, Global South, Global North

In this conversation with Mama, I use my mother's voice as a reflexive mirror to explore the social work silences that the COVID-19 pandemic expresses so eloquently in my own life and work. I seek to highlight the intimate link between Mama's silence and social work silence.

Pandemic disruptions

Hello Mama! Is everyone OK, old and young? Mama, are you OK? Is everything OK with family and community?

Meba Yaw! (My son, Yaw) (Yaw – traditional name for a Ghanaian male born on a Thursday)

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I see the march of the pandemic. It's turning upside down everything in its devastating path. It's wreaking havoc around the world. First it was out there, in Wuhan, China; then South Korea; Iran, Italy and Spain. We were numbed here but OK as long as it was at a distance, as long as it wasn't us. What was out there is now here, Mama. I worry about you too, Mama. And I worry about Ghana . . . I worry about Mother Africa, the Continent. . .

My dearest Yaw. This talk of 'not-me' and 'it's out there' is alien to me. Where did you learn that? Did you forget that we only have one world, that we breathe the same air? When I was growing up, folks were still talking about the Spanish flu a generation later. It wiped entire families and communities. It reached Mother Africa in a latter wave and the devastation was unbelievable. Yet folks survived. Pandemics come and go but people still live on this continent. People remember they are one in such times. They come together, work together and heal together.

Mama, you've always been my purest social work conscience. You give me insight into the dictum that the world is a global village: what happens to one part of the world affects other parts. You put things in perspective for me. Yet my life and work are disrupted here. I can't help but deal with this *me* and this *here* as well. My classes are disrupted. Students are at a loss. Social work agencies are torn apart between closing their doors to the most vulnerable in order to protect their staff and keeping those doors open to provide services, now more needed than ever. It is chaotic! Yet, social workers are embroiled in ensuring the provision of counselling support to frontline health workers, families, and loved ones coping with the demise of patients and family members.

I'm scrambling to take my disrupted courses online to continue the lessons we started in class. Can you imagine social work virtually? I can work from home and students can learn from home, away from the deadly virus. But where do our homeless clients go to protect themselves? My mental health research in Ghana is disrupted too, Mama. You inspired it; you prepared the grounds for it. I'm doing this research for you, Mama; it's yours . . .

Suddenly, there is silence in Ghana. A disruption in communication. Is it my phone? Is it Mama's? Sorry for calling this late, Mama. It's after midnight at your end; you must have fallen asleep . . . Mama, do you hear me?

Grief and mourning

Brethren, our mother is gone. That was my sister's text from Ghana. It was curt, matter of fact, and blunt. But *gone where?* That was my instant reaction. Mama, I am confused. The thought of your passing hit me like a ton of bricks. It turned my world upside down. We're talking about *you*, Mama. No, Mama can't be dead. She was not ill; she had no condition to precipitate

her demise. So, my knee-jerk response was denial. Mama is so full of life; how can she die?

I hear you, Son. Remember our pep talks – teachings and values about the collective whole Now look around you. You think you're hurting alone but you're not alone. Do you see the news? They are steeped with families grieving the loss of loved ones. So many hearts are broken when the lives of thousands are truncated by the pandemic. Did you forget what I told you about the whole, love and service to all?

Mama, thanks for that reminder. You'd be happy to notice that even in Western social work there are many who call on us to go back to our fundamental moral values of collective responsibility and caring for the vulnerable among us (Bisman, 2004). Even as you lie silent, your best social work values shine. You inspired my very choice of professional social work by your own service to all, your poise, graciousness, and love. Even at 81, you nurtured, counseled, supported, enabled, and took care of people. You were the anchor in the storm for many, the rock on which folks leaned, a brilliant light that illuminated your family and community. Yet you died without saying adieu to your loved ones, not even to my father whose 90th birthday you were planning to celebrate.

There are many who plan life and celebrations . . . Yet they . . . and many die in isolation. Can't you see? None of us is assured of tomorrow so we make the best of what each day brings . . .

But how could this happen to you, Mama, you the mother of all? You don't deserve this, after all your sacrifices. Why in the thick of a pandemic where we can't be by your bedside, where we can't gather for our elaborate mourning ceremonies? Mama, it hurts deeply that you should wait alone in that cold morgue and we don't even know when we can put you to rest.

Hold my hand, Son. Here, get up Stand upright and be very strong . . . There is a lot of work ahead. Can you see the thousands of people succumbing to the virus every single day? Each of them meets their end alone . . . Remember thousands are lying in cold morgues right now and thousands more . . . So I'm not alone here either. But remember we are with our Creator . . .

I cannot bear long-distance suffering, Mama. More than anything else in the world right now, running back home to you towers over all my desires. Pandemic or not, I will fly home to Ghana. But I couldn't even book a flight, Mama. On March 16, the same day you passed, Canada announced the closure of its international borders to contain the spread of COVID-19.

Oh borders! Where is your humanity? The virus pandemic knows no borders; it attacks all humans, rich and poor, old and young, black and white, near and far. It shows

humanity is one! Ancestors have always moved freely since the beginning of time; they knew no borders. It's the human pandemic that erects walls and borders...

Yes Mama, borders isolate; they disconnect me here so I can't even fly home to you. I dream of a superhuman feat to walk the whole 5408 miles and be home with you. Nations and national borders! Was it Davidson (1992) who called it a curse? Nation-states enclose us as if we were a herd of animals.

Remember son, life is not a bed of roses, remember our neglected ancestors?

I know the inevitability of death. Of course, everyone dies. I just wish someone would tell me it is a dream that will end in no time. I am in a daze, not knowing what to do. But, Mama, your passing is so real, though I still talk with you. I know the five stages of grief almost verbatim: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, 2014). I also know these feelings do not come in linear timelines. Yet, I found it hard to bear when these stages went topsy-turvy on me. One minute I accept, the next I deny. One minute, I'm in rage, the next I'm in depression. One minute I'm bargaining, the next I'm back denying. Torn apart by strong conflicting emotions.

Oh my son, Yaw. What came over you? How is it that you have become so obsessed with yourself, with this all-consuming individual? Is that what they teach you? What about shared grief, what about collective mourning? Remember, it's not about you, neither is it about me.

This can't be happening to me, Mama. You groomed me to be professional. I support others. I'm a social work professor; I teach students how to support clients through these processes of grief. No, this can't be happening to me, but my haze of denial lifted, and it all sank in when I called home, Mama, and your lovely voice in flesh would not say hello to me from the other end. *Is she really gone?* It dawned on me, only when tears started to fall and roll down my cheeks, when the strong man broke down and succumbed to his own grief process. Struggling with acceptance, I still periodically think that you are still in flesh.

You have certainly forgotten your teachings, Yaw...they gave you other teachings out there...I did not groom you to be a professional. Professional is another border and disconnecter...Trouble starts when social work loses its humility and becomes professional...Where is your humility?

No, Mama, I do have my humility. I know this massive death brings enormous grief and heartache to so many. In the depth of my own grief, I feel a new gift of empathy for what people go through in times like this. The very thought of COVID-19 and its havoc makes me grieve for the loss of lives and its impact

on families around the world. I mourn with countless grieving families and communities.

Yet, even in this bargaining phase of grief, I kept plunging into guilt, wondering if I had done enough for you while you were still in flesh, Mama. Was I close enough to you despite the distance and even during the intermittent visits? Guilt torments me, Mama. But the pain of your departure still gnaws at the very fiber of my being and that makes my heart ache.

You know my wish for you, dear Yaw . . .

I do take solace in knowing that you want me to keep pressing on, but what is moving on, Mama? What is closure? In my teaching I emphasize your own teaching that the notion of closure is western and individualistic. So, to practice what I preach, I renegotiate my relationship with you, Mama, in different spaces and times. There is too much dream and vision left in your silence, Mama, in your sense of justice and equity that I will strive to fulfill. No, there is no closure, Mama. I will check with you every step of my way.

Now we're in synch, Son; now we embrace . . .

Change is gonna come!

The world is heaving for change, Mama! This pandemic has exposed the fault lines of the volcanic eruption waiting to happen.

The pandemic lays bare the Global North/South disparity. If it had the power to ravage through the richest and most powerful nations, what would it do to the poorest and weakest nations of the Mother Continent, Mama? How can our folks physically distance themselves when ten or so people live in a tiny room? How can they wash hands when there is no soap? When there is no clean water? How do people eat if they are unable to fend for themselves? How can lockdown work when folks must earn their daily bread by working outside every day? When they must choose death by starvation or death by the pandemic? How do the homeless or those who live in unsafe and unhealthy conditions survive the carnage of the virus?

The inequalities in global North/South relationship is not just between nations. It is happening within nations too. Yes Mama, as you said it well, the pandemic is an equalizer in that it attacks everyone, poor and the rich, white and Black, near and far. But it is also discriminatory. Its victims are disproportionately Blacks and Indigenous peoples, the elderly, people with economic insecurity.

Son, you must see the link between the suffering in Africa and the suffering of Africans in the New World and the suffering of Indigenous peoples everywhere. And the suffering of all the vulnerable people you mention here . . . The root of their suffering is the same . . .

You're right, Mama. Racism is rampant here and it is linked with Capitalism. When profit is the bottom line, something precious falls off our social work plate. Collective responsibility for the vulnerable becomes a casualty and social work is protesting this (Stark, 2010). Mama, you meant to send your son to a safe country, but I did share with you that anti-black racism is rampant here (Kuwee Kumsa et al., 2014). I am a professor in the social work classroom but the moment I'm out in the street, I'm just another Black man hunted down and subjected to police brutality. Africans are not just suffering in Africa but in the New World too. The son plucked from the womb of the Mother Continent is suffering here too. Right now, as you and I talk, in the thick of the pandemic, a White policeman kneeled on the neck of a Black man, George Floyd, and snuffed life out of him in broad daylight. With the last breath left in him, George died calling out for Mama, Mama . . .

My womb trembles, Son, and my heart aches . . . the slave ship that docked at the coasts of West Africa, hunted down Africa's young and strong to make them work the plantations . . . Now they are being hunted down in the Americas and killed . . . This time it's not to make them work, it's to make them disappear . . .

Mama, George's death has unleashed a revolution. People have said enough is enough! Despite the pandemic restrictions, people around the world are taking to the streets in record numbers to protest racism and police brutality. What is amazing is that White folks came out in record numbers and joined the protests. There is a general understanding that what's troubling our world is White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). That White knee on a Black man's neck is not strength but utter fragility.

You said it right, son . . . Strong men . . . my spirit is appeased . . .

Till then, Mama dear, know that I will work diligently to ensure your social work visions are realized. Know that I will fly home to pay my final respects to you the moment the pandemic restrictions ease.

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