

# If we're brave, COVID-19 can teach us to grieve and grow simultaneously

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AH *By Andrew Huff / CONTRIBUTOR*

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When I worked at **Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program**, part of my role involved outreach at **Common Cathedral**, a homeless street ministry that gathered weekly on the Boston Commons.

At the end of every service, all those in attendance, including some who just happened to be passing by, clasped hands and sang “[We Shall Overcome](#).” Joining that community in song was one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life. I still think about it.

In that particular context, the lyrics became more than a song. We weren't gathered together singing, “Maybe, hopefully, we'll overcome.” No — we sang “We Shall Overcome” because we meant it, or at least we wanted to, because to varying degrees we all needed it, and singing it together somehow made us feel certain of it. That's what a song can do. That's what community can do.

I remember the Sunday when we learned about the meningitis outbreak. A guest in one of Boston's shelters had died suddenly. **The Boston Public Health Commission** confirmed the diagnosis and issued an alert. Shelters and clinics collaborated to screen and vaccinate homeless patients. **The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** sent a team of epidemiologists to begin contact tracing—what shelter did the first patient sleep in? Which bed? Who slept near him? Where did he eat lunch the day he died, and who else ate at his table? Who washed his dishes? It was

breathhtaking to see this work unfold and observe how rapidly the outbreak was contained. We almost didn't even have enough time to feel afraid.

But that Sunday on the Commons, we were definitely afraid.

As I stood there taking in the news of the outbreak, I also wondered to myself: "Do I really want to gather so close to these people right now? Do I really want to hold their hands? Is it even safe to be here at all?" Ultimately, I decided that no, it probably wasn't completely safe to be there, but I still wanted to be there. I still wanted to gather with the people that had become my community.

So I stayed, and so did they — accepting the reality of what was happening, taking the precautions that we could, but without surrendering our lives to the fear. I look back on that experience with gratitude, knowing that I've grown braver because of it. That's what fear can do. That's what an outbreak can do.

FROM OUR PARTNERS

Of course, COVID-19 is a very different kind of outbreak, one that is raising a different kind of fear, and yet it's also reminding me of what I learned back in Boston: that bravery is a purposeful choice, sometimes a day-by-day choice.

WHEN

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PEMA CHÖDRÖN

APART



In her book **When Things Fall Apart**, **Pema Chödrön** says: “When I was first married, my husband said I was one of the bravest people he knew. When I asked him why, he said because I was a complete coward but went ahead and did things anyhow.”

Most of the time, that’s how I feel as a frontline worker in emergency shelter during this pandemic.

There have been days where I’ve called my supervisor and said, “Where do you need me? What can I do to help?” and days where I’ve said, “I feel overwhelmed and I don’t think I can do this anymore.”

And in either case, I eventually hang up the phone, gather my things, and go into work, knowing that what I’m doing matters, and knowing that bravery is a process. Most of the time, I feel like a coward who wants to be brave, so I’m leaning into it and finding bits and pieces of bravery as I go along.

I trust I’m not the only one feeling this way.

The COVID-19 pandemic is our latest — and for some, perhaps the most extreme — opportunity for growth, change, and transformation. Some might say it’s too early to begin thinking of COVID-19 in these terms, but I would disagree. Foresight matters before an outbreak happens, and it also matters before it ends. What I’m talking about is the experience of being fully present to the ways the pandemic is pushing us — and pushing us hard and fast — to grow. What I’m also talking about is having the foresight to begin to make meaning of COVID-19 so we can thoughtfully consider how we will rebuild our lives, institutions, and society when it subsides.

I think we start by recognizing that this shit isn’t just scary, it’s traumatic.