

Consecrating a Memorial for Covid Victims

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December 2020

How to remember the greatest epidemic in history? How to provide a place where people can express unimaginable grief? How to create a symbol of loss that seems impossible to calculate?

A Bethesda artist Suzanne Firstenberg had an idea. A flag for each person lost. A small 4x4 inch flag. An art installation in a 4-acre field in front of the DC armory and RFK stadium to honor those that have died from covid -- Field of Flags.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/this-rippling-field-of-flags-in-dc-shows-covid-19s-scale/2020/10/22/915f59aa-147d-11eb-bc10-40b25382f1be_story.html



Photo by Evy Mages

Her goal was to represent the incredible scope of the tragedy by placing a flag for each of the victims. Each of the victims.

Sometimes there are tragedies, there is sorrow where words simply fail us. We can write endlessly about the tragedy, but those words get lost in the mind, and only begin to touch the heart.

Or there are numbers. We look endlessly at a group of six digits. The digits change daily, we are transfixed, The number seems larger than anything we could ever imagined. But they are only digits. We become numb looking at the number; six changing digits.

Sometimes words and numbers alone cannot describe a loss we cannot fathom.

So, starting in Mid-October the artist and others came to place flags on this unknown field. An initial placement of 150,000, with plenty of room to spare. Imagine, how could you ever fill 4 acres?

I went to the field and placed flags three times. When we started there were vast areas empty. I could not imagine the field could ever be filled.

And then.

Week by week those empty areas disappeared. Eventually every inch of the 4 acres was filled. And then, like an invading army, the flags invaded new territory. It extended to traffic islands nearby. Those were filled with flags. They were approaching RFK Stadium.

When you pass by you see an endless vista of white on the ground (it looks like snow), and as you come close you begin to see it is not snow it is flags, thousands of flags as far as you can see. Some in clear rows, some a bit more haphazard. Many with names or prayers written on the flag. ("My dearest" "Your smile will always be treasured" "We miss you so much" "You were the light of our lives"). Then the sorrow begins to touch the depths of the heart.

And you see the people walking around placing flags. Each flag cradled the way a mother cradles her newborn. Each flag represents a brother, sister, parent, child, a friend, an acquaintance. You see the person holding the flag so dearly because it represents that loved one who they have had to let go of. And then with words of love, affection, words of sadness and prayers they place the small flag in the ground. It represents their sorrow, their unimaginable loss.

And for many, for most, they place flags not for anyone they knew, just to place a flag. So, they could feel the loss. So, they could make a statement that the loss of any life is wrong, but the loss of so many is so awful we can only act, we can't describe it.

Thousands of people placed flags. Thousands of people took the time to visit, remember, open their hearts, acknowledge the loss, feel the sorrow, try to fathom the unimaginable loss. Thousands of people expressed the grief by the simple act of placing a flag into the ground.

At the front of the field a billboard "In America How Could this Happen?" And the number of victims. Each day at 11 AM the artist changed the number. We stand in grim silence. More senseless deaths. On the last day, November 30 it was 267,080. Over 267,000 flags.

The field was closed at the end of November. I chose to consecrate the space before the flags were removed and I led the closing ceremony.

Why consecrate the space?

Although the flags were being removed, I wanted to recognize that sacred space was created and continues to exist. The artist, dozens of volunteers, and thousands of people came to the space and placed flags to remember those who were lost. Thousands of people passed on the road each day and saw the memorial. Even after the flags are gone this space will be sacred to all of those who participated and observed.

Part of the profound challenge we face is being unable to express our grief from the pandemic. Many of us have lost loved ones far away. When the losses occur, we cannot gather together, console, touch, hug, just feel the comfort from having others present. Our suffering is made worse, more profound, because we cannot publicly acknowledge or mourn. For so many whose loved ones are distant this provided the space for them to acknowledge their loved one, their grief. The memorial provided thousands of people the tool to deal with the disenfranchised grief they suffer from.

I was reminded of Jacob's burial of Rachel. You can see how his burial of her "on the road," that unexpressed grief, was a painful loadstone on his heart. When he is on his death bed, one of the first things he mentions is that

"Rachel died, to my sorrow, while I was journeying in the land of Canaan, when still some distance short of Ephrath; and I buried her there on the road to Ephrath—now Bethlehem." Genesis 48:7.

The image of Rachel's tomb is so sad. No Cave of Machpelah, no gathering together with ancestors, she is alone. Jacob's sorrow. He could not bring her to the proper resting place

He buried her by the road. This is a memorial by the road.

What We did

I decided to consecrate the space the same way one consecrates a Jewish cemetery. There are many traditions to consecrate a cemetery but in almost all of them you walk around the circumference of the space seven times and recite Psalm 91. That's what I did, joined by Father John Entzler of Catholic Charities of DC.

Psalm 91 is particularly appropriate. It is the Psalm we recite when Jews carry the coffin of the loved one to the grave. We stop 7 times on the walk to reflect our pain from the loss: "(1) For G-d, (2) will give you G-d's angels, (3) charge, (3) concerning you, (5) to guard you, (6) in all, (7) your ways." And so, I would stop seven times on each circumference while reciting it.

As I walked, I feel the pain of those who placed flags for their loved ones. The pain of letting go. The pain of not being able to be there to bury their beloved, of watching a burial through a screen. The pain of senseless loss.

Psalm 91 struck home for another reason. It deals directly with protection from a plague.

"You will not be afraid of the terror by night, or of the arrow that flies by day; of the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or of the destruction that lays waste at noon. A thousand may fall at your side and ten thousand at your right hand, but it shall not approach you." (Ps. 91:5-7)

"For you have made the LORD, my refuge, even the Most High, your dwelling place. No evil will befall you, nor will any plague come near your tent. (Ps. 91:9-10)"

The Lord does not ask much of us

"Because he loves me, I will deliver him: I will set him on high, because he knows my name."

And if we do the Lord declares

"He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.

With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation."

Not surprisingly there are a wealth of sermons dealing with Psalm 91 and the pandemic.

While I am walking the flags speak to me. Each flag represents a person, a soul, filled with wishes, desires, hopes, affection, fear, uncertainty. Each flag represents the potential for so much, a person who died too soon. Each flag representing the scores of people touched by a life, families, friends, neighbors. There are scores of spirits around each flag.

I think of the person placing the flag and what was in their heart when they placed it in the ground. Perhaps they found words to try to express what they felt. Perhaps there were words the heart could not reveal to the lips. And as I walk around my heart hears the voices of people, people opening up to their sorrow, expressing their love, wanting to cry out.

A chorus of sorrow.

And as I walk I chant the first line of the Psalm “Whoever sits in the secret of the Highest will abide in the shade of the Almighty” a chant by Rabbi Shefa Gold <https://www.rabbishefagold.com/sitting-in-the-secret/>. It’s a chant that expresses my prayer that all of these souls are embraced by the Almighty, that they reside complete and whole, protected and loved by the Lord.

As I turn the corner to finish, I again reflect on those who are suffering, those in grief, those inflicted with the disease, those that care for them and love them, and their need for healing. Those who have suffered loss, their broken hearts. All of the overwhelming brokenness. Psalm 147 comes to my lips and I chant: “Oh Healer to the Broken-hearted, you bind up our wounds.” (Psalm 147:3) https://www.rabbishefagold.com/healer_to_broken-hearted/

I finish in the middle of the field. No matter which direction I look I see an endless vista of flags. I decide to conclude with Psalm 30 because it is a Psalm of dedication. The Psalm ends optimistically (“you turn my sackcloth into dancing”) but the words that my heart cries out, that I chant

“To you G-d, I cried out, to you I made supplication. Hear me G-d and be gracious to me, G-d be a help to me.” Ps 30: 9,11.

In the chant by Rabbi Gold of this verse, we chant out our emotional energy as far as we can see and receive back divine energy. <https://www.rabbishefagold.com/expanding-inner-space/> As I chant, I see an endless field of white with flags flowing like ocean waves. As I chant out my plea to G-d, the plea of sorrow, the flags are waves, ocean waves, a cacophony of sorrow, a chorus of grief of those who placed flags, their anguish, their sorrow. I plea oh G-d please be gracious and provide comfort. And flowing back is G-d’s comfort, like the words of Isaiah, “Nachamu, nachamu ami,” “comfort, comfort my people.”

The flags are now removed. The field is empty. But it is now sacred space because of the expressions of love and grief, of sorrow, and prayers for comfort that will always reside there. It is a memorial for anyone who was touched by one of the countless lives so tragically lost.

Perhaps the souls that are remembered will be like Rachel by the road. Hearing our prayer, interceding with the Almighty, asking for mercy.

May the memorial always touch our hearts, provide comfort, and bring us closer to the ones we love.

And may all their memories be for a blessing.

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In honor of our friend Bradley Fields.

