

## TRAUMA IS NOT AN ADD-ON: ON EMBRACING GRIEF AND TRAUMA IN OUR CLASSROOMS—AND OUR LIVES

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*There is another world, but it is in this one.*

*Paul Éluard*

I began my 1L year three months after losing my longtime boyfriend to tragic and unforeseen circumstances. I walked the halls in a daze, an invisible widow<sup>1</sup> in a sea of fresh and ambitious faces. I felt like an alien.

Three weeks into my first year of legal writing teaching, my family got the news that my mother's breast cancer had spread to her brain. I walked the halls in a daze, a grieving daughter in a sea of fresh and ambitious faces. I felt like an alien.

Grief is one of the most universal emotions there is. And yet to the person experiencing it, it can feel crushingly isolating—not only because each grief experience is unique, but because our society is simply not structured to recognize, to honor, or to make space for each other's grief, trauma, and suffering. As a law student and again as a law professor navigating my own significant losses, I felt again and again like my grief was perceived by others to be an inconvenience, something that needed to be pushed to the edges of my daily experience, little acknowledged and little addressed.

Grief and trauma don't work that way.

It's often said that "everyone grieves in their own way and at their own pace." In my case, grief descends like a thick veil, covering me in a haze so thick that it's hard to see out from under it. It's visceral and deeply physical, enveloping me in swirls of dizziness and fits of deep, cellular exhaustion. Grief is a total-body experience, and more than a full-time job. It's all-consuming—and all-powerful. It takes its time,

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<sup>1</sup> We weren't married, but I've never found a better word than "widow" to describe how I felt after his death.

and can't be rushed simply because there are assignments to complete, exams to take, or classes to teach.

And then 2020 happened.

I spent the first several stressful weeks of lockdown navigating both familiar and totally foreign thoughts, feelings, and emotions. International flights ground to a halt, putting more than just physical distance between me and my family in Oslo, Norway. I'd never felt more disconnected from them in my entire life. And then, one by one, they fell ill: first my brother and then his wife, and then my teenage nephew Storm. Storm's illness lingered for months with strange symptoms no one—and no hospital test—could make sense of.<sup>2</sup> Thousands of miles away, in my own lockdown hellscape, I was a nervous wreck. Not only could I not get on a plane to be with my family, but I couldn't even safely leave the house. My father lost three close friends to COVID-19, one after another. A dear friend lost his father. Countless others lost their jobs. The world had become suddenly unrecognizable from what it had been before.

As we've traversed this surreal time, it's been hard not to compare the reality unfurling before us to the most dramatic science-fiction stories. This passage from Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven*, which depicts the peculiarity of life in the wake of a humanity-collapsing pandemic, captures so much of what it feels like to be alive in this day and time:

At first the people in the Severn City Airport counted time as though they were only temporarily stranded. . . . Day One, Day Two, Day Forty-eight, Day Ninety, any expectation of a return

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<sup>2</sup> Since that time, much has been written about so-called “long COVID” and “long-haulers,” whose COVID-related symptoms persist long after the test comes back negative. See, e.g., Luke Harding, “Weird As Hell”: The COVID-19 Patients Who Have Symptoms For Months, THE GUARDIAN (May 15, 2020), [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/15/weird-hell-professor-advent-calendar-covid-19-symptoms-paul-garner?CMP=share\\_btn\\_fb](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/15/weird-hell-professor-advent-calendar-covid-19-symptoms-paul-garner?CMP=share_btn_fb); Pam Belluck, “I Feel Like I Have Dementia”: Brain Fog Plagues COVID Survivors, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 11, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/11/health/covid-survivors.html>; Natasha Lipman, Long COVID: “My Fatigue Was Like Nothing I’ve Experienced Before,” BBC NEWS (Sept. 21, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-54106272>.

to normalcy long gone by now, then Year One, Year Two, Year Three. Time had been reset by catastrophe. . . .

He'd known for a long time by then that the world's changes wouldn't be reversed, but still, the realization cast his memories in a sharper light. The last time I ate an ice-cream cone in a park in the sunlight. The last time I danced in a club. The last time I saw a moving bus. The last time I boarded an airplane that hadn't been repurposed as living quarters, an airplane that actually took off. The last time I ate an orange.<sup>3</sup>

All the while, the semester trudged on. Classes shifted online; new ways of teaching and learning were born overnight. The student dorm closed abruptly, sending students scrambling to find alternative housing in the middle of the semester in the middle of a pandemic, at a time when we were being told not to leave the house or even touch our groceries. One of my students couldn't get home to China and had nowhere else to go, so I offered her a spot on my couch. She ended up finding another place temporarily, but was forced to move twice more in the weeks that followed.

It felt a bit like the End of Days, but for those of us lucky enough to have our health intact, we were expected to carry on with the tasks of daily living: teaching, learning, cleaning, cooking. It may sound simple enough, but there were moments where it felt impossible.

In late March I came across an article in the Harvard Business Review (HBR) titled *That Discomfort You're Feeling Is Grief*.<sup>4</sup> Everything clicked. Yes, I remember thinking, *that's exactly it*. Grief has been described as "the conflicting feelings caused by the end of or change in a familiar pattern of behavior."<sup>5</sup> If that doesn't describe the

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<sup>3</sup> Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven*, LITERARY HUB (June 24, 2015), <https://lithub.com/station-eleven/> (excerpt).

<sup>4</sup> Scott Berinato, *That Discomfort You're Feeling Is Grief*, HARVARD BUS. REV. (March 23, 2020), [https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief?fbclid=IwAR3SjTpWP4Cx1MWF9Pe\\_PkIHmfUA9BWVWiDZ2yxt1IQXEQ6xyaDnfhsNx8w](https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief?fbclid=IwAR3SjTpWP4Cx1MWF9Pe_PkIHmfUA9BWVWiDZ2yxt1IQXEQ6xyaDnfhsNx8w).

<sup>5</sup> Russel Friedman, *The Best Grief Definition You Will Find*, The Grief Recovery Method (Published June 4, 2013) (Updated Dec. 17, 2019),

lived experience of the entire human species in the first several months of 2020, I'm not sure what does.

David Kessler, the “world’s foremost expert on grief” according to the HBR, explained the human experience in March 2020 as follows:

[W]e’re feeling a number of different griefs. We feel the world has changed, and it has. We know this is temporary, but it doesn’t feel that way and we realize things will be different. . . . things will change and this is the point at which they changed. The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we’re grieving. Collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air. . . . We’re feeling that loss of safety. I don’t think we’ve collectively lost our sense of general safety like this. Individually or as smaller groups, people have felt this. But all together, this is new. We are grieving on a micro and a macro level.<sup>6</sup>

Before March 2020, grief always made me feel like an alien—like I was experiencing something that the rest of the world didn’t have time for and didn’t care to understand. Now, for the first time in my life, it felt like grief was a collective action being undertaken simultaneously by the entire human species. Suddenly there was a certain kind of global community in grief, a commonality of experience that transcended borders and boundaries of all kinds.

It felt comforting somehow—until it didn’t.

As the weeks wore on, I woke up to the painful reality that we were not, in fact, “all in it together.” Yes, the coronavirus crisis affects all of us, but not equally. As *The Guardian* put it, “[j]ust like every emergency, COVID-19 is racist, ageist, classist and sexist.”<sup>7</sup> An Asian student told me about the vicious, hateful, and racist comments lobbed her way as she walked down the street by her apartment in a

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<https://www.griefrecoverymethod.com/blog/2013/06/best-grief-definition-you-will-find>.

<sup>6</sup> Berinato, *supra* note 4.

<sup>7</sup> Helen Pankhurst, *Forget Notions of Coronavirus as a Great Equaliser—Women Are Hardest Hit Yet Again*, THE GUARDIAN (Sept. 30, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/sep/30/forget-notions-of-coronavirus-as-a-great-equaliser-women-are-hardest-hit-yet-again>.

mask. Such experiences are common and widespread,<sup>8</sup> and yet as a white person, I will never experience them. Another Asian student—the one who almost took up residence on my couch—continues to face housing instability and fears of deportation. As a homeowner and U.S. citizen, I have never experienced that, and likely never will.

As the months wear on, the countless ways in which the coronavirus crisis intersects with generations of institutionalized racism and misogyny to disproportionately impact woman and people of color have been put on display.<sup>9</sup> COVID-19 may be a new virus, but the illness of oppression is centuries old and is alive and well in every corner of our lives. In other words, “once overlaid on our existing hierarchies, [COVID-19] returns us to the traditional power imbalances.”<sup>10</sup> While more men have died as a direct result of the virus, the pandemic is more likely to thwart women’s careers and to negatively impact their mental health.<sup>11</sup> And as USA Today aptly put it, when it comes to the COVID-19 crisis, “America’s history of racism was itself a preexisting condition.”<sup>12</sup>

It is too soon yet to look beyond the outer edges of this pandemic. There is so much yet uncertain, but this much is clear: many of the world’s changes are unlikely to be reversed—not fully, anyway. What

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<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Anna Purna Kambhampaty, “I Will Not Stand Silent.” *10 Asian Americans Reflect on Racism During the Pandemic and the Need for Equality*, TIME (June 25, 2020), <https://time.com/5858649/racism-coronavirus/>; Neil G. Ruiz, Juliana Menasce Horowitz & Christine Tamir, *Many Black and Asian Americans Say They Have Experienced Discrimination Amid the COVID-19 Outbreak*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (July 1, 2020), <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/07/01/many-black-and-asian-americans-say-they-have-experienced-discrimination-amid-the-covid-19-outbreak/>.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Pankhurst, *supra* note 7; Alan Gomez, Wyatt Grantham-Philips, Trevor Hughes, Rick Jervis, Rebecca Plevin, Kameel Stanley, Dennis Wagner, Marco della Cava, Deborah Barfield Berry & Mark Nichols, “An Unbelievable Chain of Oppression”: *America’s History of Racism Was a Preexisting Condition for COVID-19*, USA Today (Published Oct. 15, 2020) (Updated Oct. 21, 2020), <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/nation/2020/10/12/coronavirus-deaths-reveal-systemic-racism-united-states/5770952002/>.

<sup>10</sup> Pankhurst, *supra* note 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> Gomez, Grantham-Philips, Hughes, Jervis, Plevin, Stanley, Wagner, della Cava, Barfield Berry & Nichols, *supra* note 9.

the New Normal will look like remains to be seen, but I have some hunches. *The last time I pushed my way through a crowded concert hall to get to the front row. The last time I stood in a packed subway car, my unmasked face mere inches from half a dozen other unmasked faces. The last time I shook a stranger's hand.*

The Before Time is never coming back, and there is much to grieve. And yet I have come to think that this reality presents us with an opportunity we may not have been inclined to see in the Before: the opportunity to radically transform the way we interact with one another—and with ourselves. To make time and space for grief and trauma as welcome guests in our classrooms and in our lives, and to shape our roles as educators accordingly.

Here is what I know to be true: trauma is not an add-on.

Despite all the sourdough bread that was baked in 2020, the truth is that for many of us, the pandemic has not been a time of increased creativity or productivity.<sup>13</sup> Evidence is building that a growing number of people who recover from COVID-19—including even mild or asymptomatic cases—experience debilitating and long-term “brain fog” that can significantly disrupt a person’s ability to function in the normal tasks of daily living.<sup>14</sup> But it’s not just those who have been afflicted with the virus who have been struggling with brain fog and other cognitive impairments as a result of the pandemic. As one psychiatrist put it, “The mental health component of COVID is starting to come like a tsunami.”<sup>15</sup>

As of May 2020, a third of Americans showed signs of clinical anxiety or depression, a “huge jump” from pre- COVID times and “the most definitive and alarming sign yet of the psychological toll exacted by the coronavirus pandemic.”<sup>16</sup> Studies indicate that these numbers

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<sup>13</sup> Molly Colvin, *That “Brain Fog” You’re Feeling Is Perfectly Normal*, WBUR (April 22, 2020), <https://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2020/04/22/cognitive-change-stress-coronavirus-molly-colvin>.

<sup>14</sup> Belluck, *supra* note 2.

<sup>15</sup> Aneri Pattani, *Sleepless Nights, Hair Loss and Cracked Teeth: Pandemic Stress Takes Its Toll*, NPR (Oct. 14, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/10/14/923672884/sleepless-nights-hair-loss-and-cracked-teeth-pandemic-stress-takes-its-toll>.

<sup>16</sup> Alyssa Fowers & William Wan, *A Third of Americans Now Show Signs of Clinical Anxiety or Depression, Census Bureau Finds Amid Coronavirus Pandemic*, WASH. POST (May 26, 2020),

may be even worse among graduate students—including law students.<sup>17</sup> The impact of COVID-related stress isn't only cognitive, but physical, too: “[t]hroughout the pandemic, people who never had the coronavirus have been reporting a host of seemingly unrelated symptoms: excruciating headaches, episodes of hair loss, upset stomach for weeks on end, sudden outbreaks of shingles and flare-ups of autoimmune disorders.”<sup>18</sup>

What should we, as educators, make of this “tsunami” of stress? In one of the most insightful pieces I’ve read about the challenge of being an educator in these times, Professor Cathy Davidson cautioned that any curricular planning for pandemic-era learning must begin “from the premise that our students are learning from a place of dislocation, anxiety, and trauma. So are we. . . . Trauma is not an add on. From everything we know about learning, if the trauma is not addressed, accounted for, and built into the course design, we fail.”<sup>19</sup>

According to Davidson, “[d]istractedness is the single biggest deterrent to learning. Physical and emotional distress are the single biggest causes of distraction we have. Period.”<sup>20</sup> Further, she argues,

In considering what we [educators] assign and how, it means we might, at least as a metaphor, think of the complex of trauma and anxiety as a cognitive burden comparable to a full-time job. We should be building our courses around the reality our students are carrying that emotional workload (even if they are partying, pretending they are invisible, not caring about their future: don’t believe that for a second).<sup>21</sup>

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/05/26/americans-with-depression-anxiety-pandemic/?arc404=true>.

<sup>17</sup> Chris Woolston, *Signs of Depression and Anxiety Soar Among US Graduate Students During Pandemic*, NATURE (Aug. 18, 2020), <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02439-6>.

<sup>18</sup> Pattani, *supra* note 15.

<sup>19</sup> Cathy Davidson, *The Single Most Essential Requirement in Designing a Fall Online Course*, HASTAC (May 11, 2020), <https://www.hastac.org/blogs/cathy-davidson/2020/05/11/single-most-essential-requirement-designing-fall-online-course> (HASTAC is the Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory).

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

When I was a grieving law student back in the Before Time, the fact that I was carrying a cognitive load far heavier than all of my casebooks combined seemed to mean precious little to most of my classmates and professors. When I told a senior administrator in my first year of teaching that the Writing Center I directed needed a budget for Kleenex tissues, he rejected my request and told me that the very notion that students cried to each other about the stress of law school was “pathetic.”

It doesn't have to be that way. We must recognize that our students' stress is real—as is our own. Brain fog, in particular, “is a sign that what we are experiencing is not normal,” explains developmental neuropsychologist Molly Colvin.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, Colvin says, “true creativity and bursts of productivity are [ ] likely to be fleeting while existential threats [like the COVID-19 pandemic] persist.”<sup>23</sup> That said, approached the right way, living inside the space of grief and trauma doesn't have to be all bad: Colvin argues that “[t]he fog also makes space for us to process emotions that often follow fear” and that “[m]aking time and space for these emotions is an act of profound kindness and compassion towards ourselves and others.”<sup>24</sup>

These are dark days. But for too many, they have always been dark, and as educators I believe we have both an opportunity and a responsibility to shine a light on that fact, and to do our small part in creating space for brighter days ahead. I've always felt it my responsibility—mindful of the power dynamics and position of authority I have over the students in my classes—to create space in my classroom to explore manifestations of power and oppression throughout U.S. society and legal history, including within our very own lives. The need has never been more urgent.

It's hard not to feel paralyzed by the crushing weight of oppression and injustice in our legal system and in our society: we are each so small, the systems of power that work to oppress so great: what can we possibly do? To me, that is the ultimate question of our lives, and it is up to each of us to find for ourselves the answer given our own unique constellation of circumstances.

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<sup>22</sup> Colvin, *supra* note 13.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*

As law professor, I feel it is my responsibility to create spaces for students to explore the enormous power and privilege they have as lawyers-in-training, as people with graduate educations and sophisticated critical thinking skills and literacy levels and so much more, and to challenge them to consider with great intentionality how they want to use that power and flex that privilege over the course of their lives and careers. By incorporating exercises and readings on the topics of cultural competency, implicit bias, and diversity and inclusion into our legal writing (and other) courses, we can help our students become not just better, more sophisticated, and more empathetic lawyers, but better people, too.<sup>25</sup>

I also feel it is my responsibility as an educator—and human, and white, highly-educated, cis-gendered, able-bodied woman—to find ways to use my own power and privilege to change the world around me, even if those changes are small, and even if, on their own, they are not nearly enough. That said, I am keenly aware that effectively chipping away at centuries-old systems of power and oppression demands more than mere “book clubs, protest signs, chalk talks or organizational statements.”<sup>26</sup> As writer Tre Johnson explains, it demands our “earnest willingness to dismantle systems that [exist to perpetuate oppression]—be they at your job, in your social network, your neighborhood associations, your family or your home.”<sup>27</sup> It will be uncomfortable, it will be messy, and it will force us to reckon with the ways in which we ourselves may have benefitted from those

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<sup>25</sup> In a climate where the sitting president of the United States has directed all federal agencies to stop anti-bias trainings that rely on critical-race theory or address white privilege, I feel it is even more urgent than ever to find creative ways of bringing these very topics into our classrooms for nuanced and careful reflection and discussion. See, e.g., Cady Lang, *President Trump Has Attacked Critical Race Theory. Here's What to Know About the Intellectual Movement*, TIME (Sept. 29, 2020), <https://time.com/5891138/critical-race-theory-explained/>; see also Pirette McKamey, *What Anti-racist Teachers Do Differently*, THE ATLANTIC (June 17, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2020/06/how-be-anti-racist-teacher/613138/>.

<sup>26</sup> Tre Johnson, *When Black People Are in Pain, White People Just Join Book Clubs*, WASH. POST (June 11, 2020), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/white-antiracist-allyship-book-clubs/2020/06/11/9edcc766-abf5-11ea-94d2-d7bc43b26bf9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/white-antiracist-allyship-book-clubs/2020/06/11/9edcc766-abf5-11ea-94d2-d7bc43b26bf9_story.html).

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

systems and in turn may have harmed others, however inadvertently, too.

In early June, I was heartened to read the open letter signed by 1,288 public health professionals acknowledging that “[w]hite supremacy is a lethal public health issue that predates and contributes to COVID-19” and “advocating for an anti-racist public health response to demonstrations against systemic injustice occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic.”<sup>28</sup> Yes, the letter acknowledged, staying home and social distancing are important, but “[p]rotests against systemic racism, which fosters the disproportionate burden of COVID-19 on Black communities and also perpetuates police violence, must be supported.”<sup>29</sup> I haven’t been on a bus, a train, a plane, or to a party or inside a restaurant in more than nine months. But over several weeks this summer I masked up and took to the streets with thousands of others to protest centuries of injustice and systemic racism. It’s the most alive I’ve felt all year.

Where do we go from here? When she created the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag in 2013, artist and activist Patrisse Cullors wrote that the Black Lives Matter movement was “[r]ooted in grief and rage but pointed towards vision and dreams.”<sup>30</sup> To me this is the perfect blueprint for our lives, in and out of the classroom. As Rebecca Solnit reminds us, this is not a time to hope for things to return to the way they once were: “Ordinary life before the pandemic was already a catastrophe of desperation and exclusion for too many human beings, an environmental and climate catastrophe, an obscenity of inequality. It is too soon to know what will emerge from this emergency, but not too soon to start looking for chances to help decide it.”<sup>31</sup>

As educators, we can chart a different path. Professor Cathy Davidson’s vision helps us point the way:

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<sup>28</sup> *Open letter advocating for an anti-racist public health response to demonstrations against systemic injustice occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic*, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Jyfn4Wd2i6bRi12ePghMHtX3ys1b7K1A/view>.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*

<sup>30</sup> Rebecca Solnit, “*The Impossible Has Already Happened*”: *What Coronavirus Can Teach Us About Hope*, THE GUARDIAN (April 7, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/07/what-coronavirus-can-teach-us-about-hope-rebecca-solnit>.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

We need to be designing ways for students to interact with one another and with us. We need to think about meaningful activities beyond the screen that extend the lessons of the course, building in ways students can be co-teachers as well as co-learners . . . . We need to think about what we all can offer one another—curiosity, imagination, knowledge, power—as antidotes to the present disruption, as tools towards building a future. As educators, we offer ways that help students not just learn content but also how to have a pathway towards accomplishment. We can encourage them not just to learn from us, as experts, but we need to support them in the process of learning how to become experts. “Expertise” is excellent tool in the face of uncertainty.<sup>32</sup>

It’s high time that we as educators not only acknowledge the grief and trauma we and our students bring with us into the classroom, but make them part of the conversation. Stress, grief, and trauma are not unique to this pandemic and will not be eradicated with a vaccine. Neither will systemic racism, sexism, or any other form of oppression. Sometimes we are aware that our students or our colleagues are struggling, but more often they do so invisibly—and alone. This is the perfect time for us to become proficient in the critical skill of “psychological first aid” to offer support to those we interact with—whether in person or on Zoom—every day.<sup>33</sup> And it’s the perfect time to explore making subtle and not-so-subtle changes to the way we teach.

Through thoughtfully designed exercises, discussions, and assignments, we can carve out space to help students feel seen and be heard. To critically examine the world around them and their place within it. To identify ways in which they can use their enormous privilege as lawyers-to-be to shift centuries-long patterns of

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<sup>32</sup> Davidson, *supra* note 19.

<sup>33</sup> Stacey Colino, *The Pandemic Proves We All Should Know “Psychological First Aid.” Here Are the Basics*, WASH. POST (Sept. 22, 2020), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/pandemic-psychological-first-aid-anxiety/2020/09/21/7c68d746-fc23-11ea-9ceb-061d646d9c67\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/pandemic-psychological-first-aid-anxiety/2020/09/21/7c68d746-fc23-11ea-9ceb-061d646d9c67_story.html).

oppression and injustice. To support those who are in the depths of grief, or loss, or illness by acknowledging the enormity of that trauma and working creatively to find ways to lighten their cognitive load—so that no grieving or trauma-afflicted student or colleague needs to feel like an alien for experiencing something so universally human. By practicing and modeling empathy and compassion, by making time and space to ask our students and our colleagues how they're *really* doing and to listen deeply to their response, by incorporating things like mindfulness and active listening exercises into our classrooms, and by being candid with our students when we ourselves may be struggling, we can not only cultivate a different kind of classroom, but also train a different kind of lawyer—and ultimately create a different kind of world.