

One of America's foremost writers, Joan Didion, in a memoir reflecting on the death of her husband (*The Year of Magical Thinking*), quotes the English anthropologist, Geoffrey Gorer's words in his book, *Death, Grief and Mourning*. In that book he writes that Americans (and the British) were pressured by "an ethical duty to enjoy oneself...to treat mourning as morbid self-indulgence, and to give social admiration to the bereaved who hide their grief so fully that no one would guess anything had happened."

It is a trend that has been taken to its extreme in this country where not only are the bereaved not expected to mourn publicly, but their public burials are sometimes beset by rabid groups who disrupt the restrained funereal proceedings by shouting slogans that denounce the dead, a strange custom that was recently approved as a "fundamental right" (<http://www.politicsdaily.com/2011/03/02/supreme-court-rules-in-favor-of-churchs-anti-gay-protests-at-fu/>) by none other than the Supreme Court of the United States.

For an immigrant American such as myself, whose cultural attitude toward death is clothed not only in deep respect and centuries old traditions but also a communal approach to grief - that this death is not mine alone to bear - it has often been disturbing to be present at the American tradition of memorial services, held long after the funeral is over, where the focus is on a joyful remembrance of the life lived and then a moving on to other business as if that life had never been, all sorrow hidden deep inside the individual. It is as though death is unique and uniquely mourned, that the only expression of emotion that would make the mourner acceptable to society is equanimity if not outright happiness.

How is it, then, that the youth in a country so uncomfortable with death could gather itself together to cheer the death of Osama bin Laden? Is there something about the American conscience, or lack thereof, that makes it impossible for an American to mourn their dead but make it not only possible but, by some accounts lighting up the blogosphere (<http://www.npr.org/2011/05/03/135957207/cheering-the-end-of-bin-laden-let-the-kids-yell>), positively commendable to cheer the death of someone whose crimes they barely remember? And if, as the American media has repeatedly emphasized, particularly during these last few days, Osama bin Laden was American's Public Enemy #1, could it be that these kids know nothing of how their obscene celebrations might be perceived abroad, or of the people who might support bin Laden and even less as to the reasons why? Here's a quick list that I paraphrase from a blog post (<http://arafiqui.wordpress.com/2011/05/03/the-dead-cant-dance-and-i-refuse-to-either-or>

[why-i-insist-on-remembering-while-others-insist-on-drinking-to-forget/](#) by Asim Rafiqi, an American photographer:

We have invaded two nations because we were told that we must. Both illegally and in violation of all known international law.

We have murdered possibly over a million Afghans and Iraqis and Pakistanis and others in the process. And continue to kill them at will in Afghanistan and Iraq.

We have displaced and dislocated from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan other millions, forever ruining their lives and humanity. And forever consigning them to the void of suspicion, fear and prejudice.

We constructed hundreds of millions of dollars worth of military bases and detention centers in Afghanistan and Iraq. And now use them for 'forward projection' in the so-called war against a noun.

We continue to occupy Iraq and Afghanistan and use massive military force to retain our jack boots over their necks while funding and supporting illegal and completely illegitimate governments that we described as 'democratic' and 'parliamentary'.

We have invited private militia and corporate mercenaries to the party and given out contracts worth billions to make it appealing for them.

We have detained innocents, including American citizens, indefinitely and still refuse to give them appropriate justice.

We have tortured them relentlessly (oh, sorry, we have enhanced interrogated them!) and strong armed our civilized courts and bureaucratic apparatchiks to justify our actions.

We have renditioned them and sent them off to our 'allies' in other parts of the world to be tortured, maimed and killed. And there is no end to this program.

Chances are, yes, they do not know and worse, do not care. Chances are that when the kids took to the streets in Washington, DC, in Camden, DE and in Chicago, IL, those kids weren't thinking. Or if they were, their thoughts were on being swept up in the euphoria of groups. How telling that America's teenagers spill out into the streets to celebrate death while the teenagers of Egypt and Tunisia spill out to claim freedom and justice.

And what of the parents who look on with a smile? What of my friend and fellow-writer, a mother of four who wrote, "Don't shame the young for releasing their pent-up fear... Let them remember that they raised their voices, loudly, together. It's a good skill to learn because maybe before the next war starts, they'll be the ones who learned to take to the streets, chanting; maybe next time it will be in protest against war. They were claiming their voices. Let them remember it proudly."

In what order of the universe does a child that learns to whoop with joy over death, destruction and war learn to lift their voice for peace? It seems to me to be a chilling reminder of the social reality within this country, a reality where while this nation is waging two wars of invasion and occupation, most of America's elite don't know anybody fighting in it. Perhaps it is because these unjust wars are being fought by the poor - those people who are routinely excluded from the so-called "American dream" even as they are asked to fight and die to preserve other people's right to pursue that dream. It is a war that the educated elite of Georgetown chanting *Yes We Did!* outside the White House have never met. And it is a war that, thanks to their blindness may very well come here to meet them.

I do not expect the appropriate response from a nation that has never been predisposed to learn the cultural sensibilities of other nations or other faiths, or to express circumspection in its group activities. It is a sad fact of American life that the nuance and sobriety exhibited by President Obama (of whom it can at least be said that he asked for the burial at sea after funereal rites that followed the customs of Islam unlike a previous president who paraded his old friend suddenly turned enemy, Saddam Hussein, for the TV cameras), does not seem to have permeated the minds of the country he leads. Americans are so fond of describing other people's customs, the Burkha, for example, as barbaric and yet I can find nothing more barbaric than dancing over

the death of another human being, nothing more macabre than teaching children that this is a good thing. Then again, what more should we expect of a country whose national sport was, at one time, the public lynching of people based on the color of their skin?

In this historic moment I feel that the only hope that still remains for America rests in her immigrant and minority populations. The ones who know what it is to mourn, loud and clear and without protest, what it is to absorb someone else's grief as their own. The ones who raise their children to live by a different set of rules, one that can acknowledge tragedy with humaneness.

My daughter was six months old when the twin towers fell. I did not go to work in New York City that day. She is now ten. This is what she had to say on Monday: "Kids at school were saying how happy they were about bin Laden being killed. Seth and I disagreed. I said it doesn't seem right to be happy about death. Whatever he did, he was somebody's son." Those are the hearts, my daughter's, her friend's, that will learn the ways of other cultures, that will be able to associate crime with cause, who will be able to see that there can be no two sets of rules, one for "us" and another for "them." The ones who can understand the madness of claiming the right to nuclear arms for "us" but no nuclear power for "them." The ones who know that the leaders they cherish and revere, like President Obama, and on whose behest they march off to die, are not that far removed from the leaders cherished by other people in other lands. And in realizing these parallels, theirs are the voices that will be raised for peace.

And though this country has done so little to deserve it, we can only hope that the rest of the world will wait patiently for *those* children to grow up. God knows that billions around the world have seen enough of the other kind.