

Many Attend Weekend Grief Ritual Retreat to Help Deal with Pain, Grief and Loss

By Edith Billups
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For almost 25 years, Marcia, a NY writer, had put aside the terrifying event that had changed her life: The gun the men put to her head while she was asleep on the backseat of a car in Jamaica; The two men who sped off into the night and who raped her before throwing her into the locked car trunk.

She had put aside the memory of being taken to another site where a gang of men raped her repeatedly as she lay there trying to block out the horror. She had even put aside the memory of being thrown out of the car and shot at, but somehow, mercifully, being able to escape into the dark night.

Last October, after reading about a similar event that had happened to another person, the memories came flooding back, leaving the normally outgoing woman bedridden for three days.

So, it was with resolve that Marcia, 52, found herself at a Grief Ritual Retreat in Maryland last week led by African ritual teacher Sobonfu Somé. The intent? To finally put behind her the memory of that shameful and life-altering night.

According to Marcia, a soft-spoken woman, with an easy smile and attractive locks, “There are some great things going on in my life, but there is this undercurrent of sadness. After it happened, my father, who was cop, never talked to me about it, and my mother and I talked around it, but never talked about it, although I know she was devastated by it.”

Marcia said that she had been wanting to come to a Grief Ritual to deal with her mother’s and grandmother’s death, “but I didn’t come before. This time, I want to dump as much as I can.”

With about 35 other people, Marcia came to clear the grief and blockages that have been holding her back in her life, as Somé, a noted author and lecturer, assisted them with breaking through depression, anger, loss and pain.

According to Somé, grief can be personal or collective, such as a community that has to deal with the loss of an entire village due to a tsunami. “In the Dagara tradition of my people in Burkina Faso, if one doesn’t grieve, it can cause more problems. You need to get it out because it can cause incidents where people will explode.”

Somé said that the most difficult kind of grief “is not the grief that people can see. If a person cuts his face, people can see the wound. However, the most difficult grief is that which is unseen.

“That is the kind of grief that causes depression,” she noted, explaining that grief also can “be simple or complex.”

Somé said that simple grief can be a child crying because she is hungry or a person grieving over

the loss of a favorite piece of jewelry. “However, complex grief is grief that cannot be dealt with in one straight shot.

“An example is a homicide, a suicide, or something like the German holocaust or the Africans who died in the Middle Passage. That kind of grief is very complex and needs the entire community, or collective.”

Gaye Shelley, a 45-year-old Frederick, MD psychotherapist attending the retreat, noted that in Frederick, a father recently committed suicide and his three children were found dead in their beds. This is an example where the community can be supportive by collectively grieving, said Shelley. However, Shelley, who works with kids K-12, said that, “In western culture, grieving openly is not accepted. Men, particularly, look at it as being weak. They get shot down, so they don’t give themselves permission to grieve.”

In the West, Somé said, “People should not be made to feel wounded for their woundedness. They should not be made to feel guilty for their pain.” In many cases, Somé said, grief that has not been dealt with can manifest itself in a variety of ways, “like a person cutting you off on the freeway, or we dump our grief on other people.”

Somé gave several examples of how grief and loss can be dealt with. “In the Dagara tradition, if someone has been violent to you, and now they are an ancestor, you can go to their grave and ask them to heal you. The person owes it to you to make it right.”

In the case of many veterans who have come back from war and suffering from depression and anxiety, Somé said, “We should welcome them back and help them to grieve.” Regarding the Middle East with its complex years-long war, Somé said, “People should go to Iraq and do a massive grieving.”

The ritual teacher also suggested that “everyone should be given the gift of seeing a death, because it would prevent you from killing someone else. Just viewing the death process and seeing the immensity of the grief of the people that it affects would have a tremendous impact.”

During the retreat, participants broke into small groups and supported each other by each sharing their story of grief and then having the other group members sing a song of grief to help them with their pain. The participants also built a grief shrine where they took bundles that represented their grief, loss, or pain, and left it for their ancestors to take away.

At the end of the retreat, Marcia said, she was still processing the experience, “But I hope that this helps me to work through the pain. It’s been buried for 25 years, and I hope this helps to open up the wound so that I can clear it and finally put this behind me.”