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# The Manchester Briefing COVID-19

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# Commemorating COVID: Opportunities for Community Recovery and Resilience

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## Introduction

Commemoration offers individuals and communities the opportunity to collectively remember tragic events. While some commemorations memorialize losses of people and places themselves, others seek to honour or thank helpers, including first responders and volunteers. These collective remembrances vary not only in topic but in form and timing (Foote 1997; Eyre 2007). Commemorations may take the form of physical objects, such as monuments, plaques, or memento-covered fences. They may also be performances, like moments of silence, ceremonies, or anniversary observances. Timing varies considerably, with some commemorations emerging in the initial days of a tragedy, while others are created years afterward. Regardless of their form, topic, or time of emergence, commemorations can aid in the emotional, psychological, and physical recoveries of impacted communities. This briefing considers *where*, *when*, and the fundamental principles of *how* we might commemorate COVID as a critical aspect of recovery and building the resilience of communities.

Although remembrances following disasters, crises, and tragedies are common across the world, the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic presents three unique challenges for communities seeking to commemorate. First, environmental disasters like floods, wildfires, or cyclones tend to be geographically bound and leave behind physical scars on the landscape marking their path. By contrast, pandemic diseases like COVID-19 are everywhere. Apart from the absence of loved ones themselves and the storefronts that may be temporarily shuttered during lockdowns, COVID-19 leaves few visual cues on the landscape to indicate the full extent of the loss felt in affected communities. This is especially problematic as commemoration is frequently tied to the place, or site, where a tragedy has occurred. In a placeless, global pandemic, local leaders and organisations/groups who support communities may ask: **where** should we commemorate COVID-19?

Second, the prolonged time frame of the COVID-19 pandemic further complicates commemoration. Environmental disasters like those named above are generally sudden in nature, with a well-defined beginning and end. Since **commemoration forms part of the long-term recovery process**, it typically begins after a disaster has ended (Kates and Pijawka 1977; Zavar and Schumann 2019). As communities resume normal routines and reconstruct damaged infrastructure, commemoration enables a collective sense of closure and moving beyond the tragedy. On one hand, the prolonged, uncertain duration of the COVID-19 pandemic makes it difficult to pinpoint the end of the disaster and the start of recovery. On the other hand, unlike most other disasters, with COVID-19, communities have not waited for recovery's end to initiate their commemorations. In fact, communities have organized commemorations since the pandemic's earliest days. Recall, for instance, the first lockdowns across Europe, when coordinated applause, toasts, and musical performances for embattled hospital workers echoed nightly from balconies and open windows. Given the agonizing persistence of the pandemic, with its evolving variants and fluctuating outbreaks, local leaders and organisations/groups who support communities may wonder: **when** should we commemorate COVID-19?

Beyond the confounding questions of where and when to appropriately remember COVID-19, the question of **how** to best remember COVID-19 presents its own challenges. Yet this question also offers an array of opportunities to **promote collective recovery and to enhance community resilience**. Drawing from examples of past commemorations from our own fieldwork, we spotlight five vignettes of remembrances. These can serve as both inspiration and guidance to identify best practices for how to commemorate the COVID-19 in ways that meet the needs of the community.

## Public Art

Public art serves as an important medium for collective remembrance as it simultaneously records past tragic events for the public at large and engages individual audience members to interpret meanings based on their own experiences and perspectives. In this way, public art **can serve as an inclusive form of material commemoration that captures multiple perspectives from those affected by loss**. We observe this in the community of Joplin, Missouri, where the downtown is decorated with several public murals that simultaneously remember those who perished in one of the deadliest tornadoes in modern U.S. history while honoring the subsequent strength of the community to recover and rebuild (Visit Joplin 2021). One mural, *The Butterfly Effect* by Dave Loewenstein, spotlights the hope and rebirth of the community using a meaningful local symbol, the butterfly:



Figure 1: *The Butterfly Effect* by Dave Loewenstein is a public mural commemorating the violent EF-5 Tornado that struck Joplin, Missouri, in 2011. Photo credit: Elyse Zavar.

Following the tornado, many child survivors reported that butterfly people protected them from the effects of the tornado (Rowland 2021). When Loewenstein asked local children to draw pictures to be included in the mural, many drew butterflies, which he incorporated into the design. In this way, **the mural honours and preserves the collective memory, especially the experiences of children affected by the tornado**, while also allowing individuals to interpret the meaning based on personal systems of belief. For some, the butterfly people represent Christian depictions of angels while for others they serve as a non-religious reminder of the strength of the community. Public art may act as an important medium for COVID-19 remembrances as it allows for the collective remembering of the shared tragedy while also accommodating individual and personal experiences of loss.

## Memory Walls

Similar shows of artistry can be seen in the memory walls erected in public or private settings during disaster recovery. These nostalgic collages of cherished belongings and/or photographs can be assembled to remember specific people, social communities, or vibrant gathering places lost to tragedy. Whether ephemeral or long-lived, these displays facilitate grief work for individuals while also supporting community healing and unification on a collective level. After Hurricane Katrina, we observed a memory wall emerge in a Gulfport, Mississippi, nightclub that was destroyed and later rebuilt. This memory wall contained several guitars, cracked plates, faded record covers, old photos, and a damaged sign salvaged from amid the hurricane debris:



Figure 2: Section of a memory wall in a privately-owned Gulfport, Mississippi, nightclub. The wall was created to aid recovery from Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the region in 2005. Photo Credit: Sonya (Hurricane Katrina survivor).

Above the nightclub's stage and adjacent to the memory wall, a new sign proclaimed the venue's post-storm name, "[The Club] II." This sign alluded to the memory wall's transcendent role in reincarnating the former club's sense of place within the rebuilt venue. The memory wall was assembled by the club's longtime owner, and conversations with her revealed layers of meaning behind the collage. For her, the wall represented fondness for the old club, yearning for "easier days" before the storm, testimony to the hard work she and dedicated patrons undertook to rebuild, and symbolism of the club's rebirth as a neighborhood institution. She also revealed that creating the memory wall was a cathartic process in her personal psychological recovery from Katrina (Schumann 2015). Much like the public art produced in the wake of the Joplin tornado, this post-Katrina memory wall contained no direct reference to the focal disaster. Such omissions are common and often preferable when informal displays are created by individuals or communities with the intent of self-healing. On the other hand, when formal displays are created by institutions, explicit references to the focal event are necessary to prevent feelings of insensitivity and to contribute positively to the community's ongoing grief work (Logan 2015; Xu 2018; Simpson and de Alwis 2008). We expect that some COVID-19 memorials will similarly utilize artifacts like memory walls to invoke the spirit of cherished people or places lost so they may live on beyond the pandemic. When constructed in a sensitive fashion that supports healing, these emergent and planned works of art may even spark joy among future onlookers unacquainted with the pandemic's tragic inspiration.

## Collective Performances

While physical remembrances like murals and memory walls allow for commemoration to occur spontaneously, collective performances, especially related to anniversaries, **allow for larger groups to gather together at a set time and date to remember**. In many instances, these collective events raise donations that help advance recovery or resilience activities. Returning to the community of Joplin, Missouri, a local marathon, the Joplin Memorial Run (JMR), is held each year to remember the lives lost, thank volunteers, and celebrate the progress the town has made towards recovery (Nelán, Zavar, and Ray 2020). To meet each of these remembrance goals, two coordinated events are held across the Memorial Run weekend. First, a somber, reflective Walk of Remembrance occurs the evening before the main race events where local community members walk the last mile of the race course passing flags with the names of those who died in the tornado near the finish line. During this emotional event, families and friends gather at their loved one's flag to honor their memory. The next morning, the atmosphere of the JMR shifts from somber to celebratory as runners and volunteers from near and far participate in the race festivities (Figure 3.). As part of the JMR, donations are made to local organizations to help the on-going recovery efforts.



Figure 3: The annual Joplin Memorial Run remembers lives lost to the tornado, thanks volunteers, and celebrates the town's recovery progress. Photo Credit: Elyse Zavar.

Commemoration marathons like the JMR may be a model for COVID-19 remembrances, especially given the precedent of medical-related marathons like Relay for Life, the St. Jude Memphis Marathon, and the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure. These race events serve as fundraisers that simultaneously seek to advance medical research, raise awareness, and support those affected by cancer and other life-threatening diseases. Similar honour models could be used for COVID-19 commemorations that seek to generate financial support for affected families, advance medical research, thank frontline workers, and remember those we lost.

## Social Media

Moving beyond material artifacts and physical gatherings, social media **can provide a digital and interactive medium for collectively remembering losses from tragic events** (Recuber 2012). Two community Facebook pages illustrate this potential. The first page centers on the community of Wakenda, Missouri, which was devastated by the 1993 Missouri River floods. Residents of the town were relocated through a federal property acquisition program and the town was subsequently unincorporated (Zavar 2019). This public page encourages

former town residents and descendants to (re)connect and remember the disbanded community. Posts include school yearbook photos, local newspaper articles, and snapshots of women’s auxiliary members. The second page, “Gone But Not Forgotten on the Mississippi Coast,” has a regional focus. Established after Hurricane Katrina, this private page enables members to reminisce with others about landmarks lost to time or to disasters. Beyond old photographs of landmarks themselves, interspersed postings compare Hurricane Katrina’s impacts to those from 1969’s Category 5 Hurricane Camille. Such posts initiate flurries of shared survivor experiences and offer a means of coping with long-term, residual anxiety. These pages demonstrate how digital objects may be used to articulate and share a collective sense of loss among survivors. Significantly, these **virtual commemorations can connect people across vast distances and multiple tragedies**. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many have turned to social media as a way to connect with the outside world amid quarantines, travel restrictions, and bans against in-person gatherings. Digital commemoration has the potential to deepen those connections by serving as a mode for celebration, mourning, emotional healing, and cross-disaster learning in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Intergenerational Resilience Stories

So far our vignettes have primarily described ways that commemorations can benefit community members in the present, but more significantly, **remembrances can shape the ethos of a community well into the future**. Commemorations draw throughlines from events in the past to future trajectories, and in doing so, they may support social learning, adaptation, activism, and identity formation across multiple generations and traumas (Mileti 1999; Zavar and Schumann 2019; Schumann et al. 2021). To illustrate this, we travel to Princeville, North Carolina, the first town chartered by freed African Americans following the American Civil War. Educational signs at a schoolhouse-turned-museum (Figure 4), one of the only historic structures, chronicle the town’s collective journey “From Slavery to Freedom Hill.” Although the signage identifies losses from 1999’s Hurricane Floyd and subsequent repetitive flood events as tragedies, these are not the commemorative focal points. Instead, the signs remember the spirit of resilience against forces threatening to undermine the community’s hard-won independence:

“After the war, former slaves sought refuge at a U.S. Army camp located here on the plantations of John Lloyd and Lafayette Dancy. The freedmen called their settlement of huts and shanties on the Tar River floodplain Freedom Hill. [...] The town struggled to survive during the Jim Crow Era, defeating efforts early in the twentieth century to annex it to Tarboro.”

Local context is important here. In contrast to majority black Princeville, the much larger neighboring town of Tarboro lies outside the floodplain and is majority white. Therefore, the historical links made in the signs publicly acknowledge how racial and other social inequities have perpetuated losses in the community. In doing so, they legitimize the collective minority experience for present and future generations.



Figure 4: A historic schoolhouse-turned-museum (above) and educational signage (below) scaffold an intergenerational story of resilience retold by community members in Princeville, North Carolina. The town has been severely impacted by flooding from Hurricanes Floyd (1999), Matthew (2016), and Florence (2018), plus seven other floods before 1965. Photo credit: Ronald Schumann.

This vignette is instructive for COVID-19 commemorations in three ways. First, due to the ravages of time and repeated disasters, "Freedom Hill" is a place where few material remnants remain. Instead, the stories of resilience shared among community members form the basis of the town's commemoration, and these stories are what bind citizens together. In similar fashion, the COVID-19 pandemic has left few material artifacts to support remembering, thus necessitating commemoration through storytelling. Second, the educational signs and historic school-turned-museum are far from Princeville's only commemorations. These elements work in tandem with commemorative performances (e.g., community dinners, citizen meetings, religious and holiday celebrations) to retell and reaffirm stories of resilience. In the context of COVID-19, multiple commemorations will and must emerge to adequately tell the full story of loss and resilience. Third, this vignette implores us to acknowledge COVID-19's disproportionately heavy toll on minority communities, particularly Communities of Color, and the need for memorials to recognize the voices and experiences of marginalized groups. Generations of compounding injustices have created the combination of factors responsible for these staggering losses: greater workplace exposure to the virus, chronic health conditions that exacerbate symptoms, vaccine hesitancy stemming from mistrust of a historically exploitative medical sector, lack of available financial and social safety nets, and ethnic violence arising from stigmatization over the disease's spread. **Only by openly recounting the injustices that shaped the pandemic's toll will COVID-19 commemorations avoid inciting resentment among affected communities and instead help transform collective loss into collective resilience.**

## Key Takeaway Points

We encourage all local leaders and organisations/groups who support communities to embrace commemoration as a cornerstone of their recovery efforts in helping community members process the collective emotional trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing lessons from previous tragedies, COVID-19 **commemorations can offer communities a crucial opportunity to memorialize persons lost to the disease, honor frontline workers, and amplify the diverse lived experiences** of those impacted. Although the details of *where* and *when* to remember COVID-19 should be tailored to locally salient experiences, fundamental principles of *how* to best commemorate COVID-19 are largely universal:

1. Commemoration can *and should* take many forms, tangible and intangible, depending on the community's wants and needs.
2. Given that memory is a continuous and collective story, effective commemorations should link to other historical events and lost places that are significant to community members.
3. To be restorative in healing emotional wounds, commemorations *must* acknowledge previous injustices.
4. One size does *not* fit all when it comes to commemoration. Instead, people's unique, localized experiences should guide the types of commemorations that occur.
5. Commemoration does not have to be officially sanctioned to perform memory work. Often grassroots commemorations spearheaded by community members in a bottom-up fashion prove more meaningful than efforts organized in a top-down manner.

Using these best practices to facilitate and champion COVID-19 commemorations, local leaders and organisations/groups who support communities can assuage the collective trauma experienced during the global pandemic. Effective and meaningful commemorations will help communities preserve the memory of the pandemic, weave it into their collective identities, inspire disaster-resilient cultural practices among future generations, and further progress toward a more just society.

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