

An Apology for the Future Loss of Sadness

Jordan Babando

Abstract: This writing stems from my dissertation research into the emotions that exist in medical interaction. In my research and literary undertakings, I have come to notice a cultural, political, and pathological shift concerning sadness. What I have aimed to provide is a creative and reflective interpretation of my readings and personal research experiences of a possible future without the emotion of sadness.

Keywords: sadness, sociology of medicine, emotions, reflexivity, qualitative

This writing stems from my dissertation research into the emotions that exist in medical interaction. In my research and literary undertakings, I have come to notice a cultural, political, and pathological shift concerning sadness.

I agree with sociologists Horowitz and Wakefield (2007) in their indication that sadness is an emotion that is essential and useful, and yet many are suppressing it, avoiding it, and medicinally treating even its mildest or non-pathological forms. When we fail to see the usefulness of sadness, we further fail to see the beauty in its presence, the teachings that it brings, and the impact of feeling for the losses of others. In North America, sadness is currently being posed as a barrier to our happiness—an emotion tied to capitalism and commodity marketing (Wilson, 2008). Pharmaceuticals also play a role in this, since anti-depression medications have become the highest-selling drugs globally (Horowitz & Wakefield, 2007), and countries that have never known the term “depression” are being lobbied by pharmaceutical companies to recognize it (Watters, 2010). This is not to say that there are not people suffering from depression, but instead that I agree with Horowitz and Wakefield: There needs to be greater scrutiny around how clinicians diagnose depression and how the world views sadness.

My previous research on emotions in healthcare interactions between social workers, nurses, physicians, and patients illustrated some of the unfortunate outcomes of discriminating against sadness at a clinical level, such as increased levels of compassion fatigue, burnout, and negative emotional workplace experiences that carry over into the personal lives of healthcare workers (Babando, 2020). Furthermore, the suppression of sadness among healthcare workers can have negative effects on their judgment and ability to provide adequate care for their patients (Ofri, 2013). How we understand our own emotions has consequences for how clinicians and healthcare workers engage with service users, and for our future society generally. In my literary reflections, I have developed a concern for society’s trajectory towards the elimination of sadness. What I wish to provide here is not an argument to support my own personal bias or judgement of a possible bleak future. Instead, I simply wish to give my poetic reflection that might provide some perspective on a possible future without sadness.

I apologize. Although, how does one apologize to those who no longer experience sadness? If there is only happiness in this world, then does it not limit what emotional response we can expect to receive? Furthermore, would it not further limit what we would feel necessary to apologize for? What is the point of an apology without remorse or sympathy? Why would

anyone unmoved by the death of a recent loved one say sorry or offer any condolences? Why apologize for breaking someone's heart if it is cast in an unbreakable shell? Our hearts were the metaphorical core of our happiness and sadness. We used to follow our hearts to find happiness, and when we experienced loss or failure, our hearts were said to be broken. Although, it is this misunderstood brokenness that foreshadowed the eventual loss of sadness. Our hearts may hurt, although they do not break. Our hearts beat, and they have a rhythm. Observing a cardiogram, we see the line repeatedly going up and down.

Happiness is at the top end of this rhythm and sadness is at the lower end, and together they form the rhythm of life and energy flowing through our bodies. Unfortunately, somewhere along the way sadness was lost and only a solid straight line of happiness remained. While we were convinced that this was the ideal way to live, we hopeful happy types were deceived. A straight line on a cardiogram is a flatline—clinical death. If we are moving, drinking, eating, and breathing in death, then how are we anything more than zombies? The apocalypse in this case did not come at the hands of some biological disease. Indeed, it did largely derive from the hands of the pharmaceutical industry in the name of profit. The world was fed a hefty plate of lies where marketers, politicians, industry, and capitalism were shoveling their version of a happy life down our throats. Our gluttony and greed provided enough appetite for dessert—a tiny pill that would rid us of sadness indefinitely. Politicians wanted us to smile as they taxed away our future and allowed the majority to suffer for the sake of the wealthy few. Capitalism wanted us to believe that happiness existed in wealth and through the purchase of “things.” Marketing moguls worked tirelessly to convince us that televisions, cars, iPads, or the next “as seen on TV” item could solve all our woes. Perhaps such commodities could make us happy if only sadness would just get out of the way.

With the loss of sadness, we experienced the loss of caring. This compounded loss meant that we no longer wanted anything more for ourselves beyond “things.” No longer sad for your terrible job or the lack of recognition you receive. No longer sad for the time with family and friends that your work steals away from you. No longer sad for your failing health from the mass consumption of cigarettes, drugs, alcohol, or “safe” FDA-approved consumer products that may one day kill you. Unable to process emotions related to those we have loved and lost, where we give up our children without shedding a tear or remembering them in the years that follow. Sadness informs us of what we have lost and what we are truly missing. Sadness informs the happy ignorance of our daily lives. Can ignorance be bliss? This is especially true if we no longer know sadness, but at what cost? If you have never known love then you may not miss it, want it, or care much for it. Although, having experienced love, I could never imagine regretting its experience. I would rather experience a single day of love's joy, bliss, embrace, conversation, passion, and happiness, and lose it, rather than never experience that single day of love at all. Sadness was once the risk we were all willing to take on—the gamble of one day feeling love.

All you can do now is read about it in the history books and use your diluted imagination to attempt envisioning what such an emotion would be like—yearning to know how it feels to touch with the hands we have never had or the desire to see from the person who was born blind. Such tasks seem incredibly daunting, and for this I am sorry. I am sorry that you emotionlessly bear witness to the artistic relics of a not-so-distant past. I am sorry that you now stand in front

of paintings, witnessing them as if they were merely windows into an otherwise obscene alternate reality. I am sorry that you meet Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with unshakable indifference. I am sorry that the dwellings in which you live are designed solely for functionality and offer nothing to enhance the beautiful surrounding landscapes. I am sorry that you will no longer have a future Mozart or Rembrandt. I am sorry that you will never miss the dying light of the evening sun. But most of all, I am sorry that the world will only be able to experience a fraction of what we once defined as love. Without knowing what this will ever mean I still say, for this, and you, that I am truly sad.

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About the Author: Jordan Babando, PhD, is Instructor, Institute of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada (babandoj@live.com).