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What to do about Thai coup?

## Army must act wisely to restore Thailand

A REPEAT cycle of military takeover and suspended liberties in Thailand will deepen its class cleavage, making it plausible that rule enforced by the gun could become its default condition. How this will save democracy for those who want to practise and honour it is an open question. Army chief Prayuth Chan-ocha's justification for assuming control was to reform the country's political system, its economy and society. But how this is to be done to everyone's liking remains an open question.

Months of stand-still when the Puea Thai government was made a prisoner of its own mandate by an unmolested insurrection cried out for decisive action to be taken. A brief period of military

rule might even be welcomed by sections of the population tired of the carnival-style theatrics. Thailand was not just hurting, it was going down. The economy is tipping into recession, after a steep first-quarter contraction. Subversives given free rein by state organs, including the judiciary, made a non-sense of the law. Significant, therefore, was General Prayuth's warning to agitators of all political stripes not to stoke tensions, after he received the king's imprimatur for his mission.

But the army must never overstay its welcome. Elections should be called as soon as conditions are stabilised and the suspended constitution is reworked in a non-partisan consultation. Sponta-

neous protests despite a ban are a sign of a new political consciousness among young people unaffiliated to any constituency. In the north of the country, seething resentments over the removal of a government the rural people consider to be fair are a powder keg. The gun is not a solution in these circumstances.

Above all, the junta has to be impartial. Certain acts taken in the first days have been troubling. The leadership of the Puea Thai party and its "red shirts" grassroots network appear to have been neutered. Critics of the palace-leaning elites are being read the riot act. Promising rice farmers their unpaid accounts with the Yingluck Shinawatra government will be settled soon is the right

thing to do, but cynics wonder if it is not intended also to undercut Puea Thai's support base.

The junta should avoid the impression it is out to eradicate what it thinks is the malevolent influence of the Shinawatra family in the country's business and political life. Excising them and their political vehicles will be as undemocratic and self-defeating as the Democrat Party diminishing democracy by refusing to contest the most recent elections. The army has it within its power to set Thailand on a course which will do justice to its standing as the land of free people and an integral part of the Asean family. It should discharge its warrant wisely.



BY  
INVITATION

By CHONG SIOW ANN  
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

ONE of the worst and most unimaginable things for any parent befell Mr Richard Martinez last Friday evening. "Our son Christopher and six others are dead," he cried with anguish. His 20-year-old son was killed in the shooting rampage in California earlier that day. "You don't think it'll happen to your child until it does."

I have before me a copy of the second edition of *Farewell, My Child* – which is a collection of short memoirs of bereavement from parents whose children had died. This was published by the Child Bereavement Support (Singapore), a voluntary group that renders support to parents who have lost a child.

The preface of the book issues this portentous warning: "Such stories can tear you apart. They can be exhausting, consuming and fill you with fear."

Together these 39 stories are a flood of laments; each a visceral account of the turmoil of emotions following a child's death (the image of the child that accompanies each piece gives it a haunting poignancy). One after another, they are as relentless and jarring as the onslaught of grief that the writers have experienced.

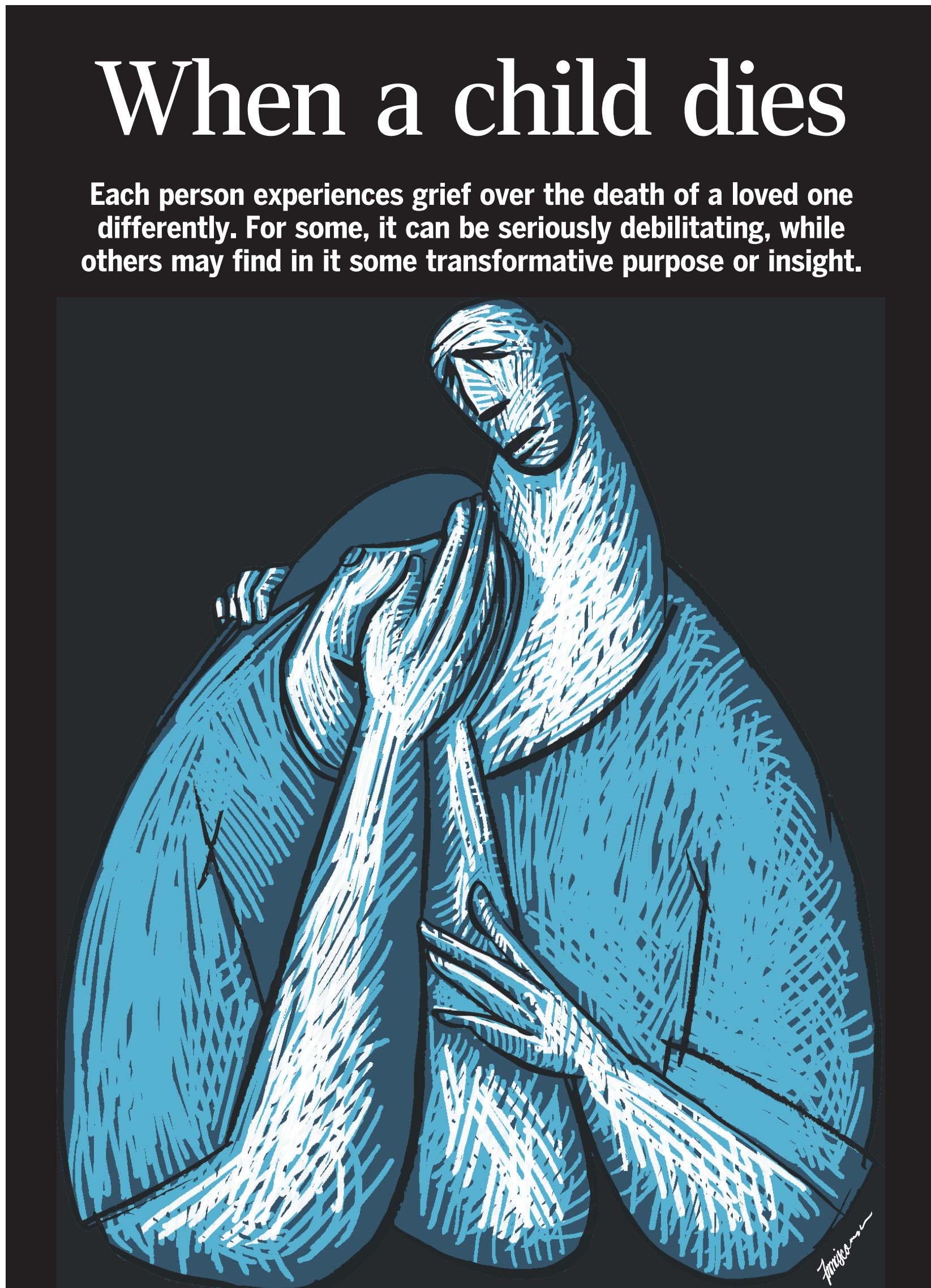
### Similar, yet unique

IN MOST, there was that initial frantic involvement of medical specialists and other health-care professionals who seemed to withdraw just as abruptly following the death – leaving the grieving parents to cope as best as they can. While some of these professionals were "wonderful in their compassionate understanding", as recalled by one grateful parent, others were found to be wincingly maladroit and even callous. (Another aim of the Child Bereavement Support is to work with the medical and care professions to provide sensitive and compassionate care to bereaved families).

In the immediate aftermath of these deaths, there was "shock, grief, rage, horror, disbelief", as described by one mother who lost her 23-month-old son, and which was "heart-breaking, soul-wrenching, spirit-breaking". Then there was that headlong plunge into a world for which there can be no preparation.

"Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it... We might expect if the death is sudden to feel shock. We do not expect the shock to be obliterative, dislocating to both body and mind," wrote the American novelist and essayist, Joan Didion, following the sudden death of her husband of 40 years in her book, *The Year Of Magical Thinking*. Twenty months later, Didion's daughter died at the age of 39 after an extended illness.

In a subsequent book *Blue Nights*, she chronicled the events that led to this second blow which "cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory,



## When a child dies

Each person experiences grief over the death of a loved one differently. For some, it can be seriously debilitating, while others may find in it some transformative purpose or insight.

about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself".

In this period of grieving, relationships with others are often tested; some may hold true, others may be found wanting, while others need recalibrating. The bereaved survivors would have to put up with the awkwardness of friends and associates who may have difficulty finding the right words or else offer clumsy hackneyed expressions of condolence. Often the bereaved might feel

that they would be judged by others and held responsible in some ways for the tragedy or that it is something that no one else would like to talk about, so they suffer in silence.

### Grief: Price we pay for love

"THE pain of grief is as much part of life as the joy of love: it is perhaps the price we pay for love, the cost of commitment," wrote psychiatrist Colin Parkes in *Bereavement: Studies Of Grief In Adult Life*. The manifestation of this sort of grief varies from person to

person, and the intensity fluctuates from moment to moment. The specific features and their trajectory over time are unique for each person. They may be overwhelming immediately after the loss; they may occur in searing pangs or come on as heart-aching bouts of grief – often evoked by some internal or external reminders of the deceased.

For most bereaved individuals, acute grief symptoms lessened as the reality of the loss is assimilated into their life. They are able to pick up the pieces and carry on with life and savour whatever

good and opportunities it offers.

### Complicated grief

BUT there is a small proportion of the population – studies indicate about 10 per cent of bereaved people overall – who can't seem to recover, and continue experiencing intense acute grief. Those who lost loved ones through disaster or violent death, and parents who had lost their children are particularly vulnerable.

In this situation, the bereaved person continues to have strong pining for the loved one. Some-

times the yearning is so profound that thoughts turn to finding ways to be closer to the deceased – even to the extent of contemplating suicide. There are frequent thoughts or images of that person coupled with either an almost obsessive preoccupation with, or a phobic avoidance of, anything associated with the loss.

The bereaved is buffeted by bouts of disbelief or anger about the death, and consumed with feelings of emptiness and a nihilistic view of the world. There might be this endless loop of rumination about the circumstances or consequences of the death. Mental health-care professionals call this "complicated grief" and view it as a form of disorder. Without professional intervention and treatment, complicated grief can be chronic and persistently disabling. It can lead to severe depression, alcohol abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide.

Intriguingly, brain imaging studies reported in 2008 by Dr Mary-Frances O'Connor and her co-workers at the University of California at Los Angeles, showed that in those with complicated grief, a region of the brain called the nucleus accumbens is activated when shown images of the deceased. On the other hand, those who adapted well to their loss showed no activation of the nucleus accumbens, even though they may continue to feel sad.

As the nucleus accumbens is the brain-reward processing centre, the researchers postulated that the "pleasure" – if it can be called that – that the individual gets from keeping the memories of the loved one alive and the craving reinforce the habits that prevent the resolution of the grief.

In *Blue Nights*, Didion wrote of wanting to cling on to some reminders of her daughter – hoping that these would evoke some cherished memories. But she abandoned them when she realised that it wasn't healthy. "In fact, I no longer value this kind of memento. I no longer want reminders of what was, what got broken, what got lost, what got wasted. There was a period, a long period, dating from my childhood until quite recently, when I thought I did. A period during which I believed that I could keep people fully present, keep them with me, by preserving their mementos, their 'things,' their totems."

### Grief and redemption

SUFFERING and loss are inevitable in life, and our brain seems wired to deal with these terrible events without incapacitating us so grievously or permanently.

Indeed for some, that painful loss could have some epiphanic or redemptive value. Emerging from that dark nether territory, some transformative insight might be gleaned, wisdom might be acquired, unrecognised strengths discovered, and relationships redefined and deepened. And some would even be inspired to do something positive in the wake of suffering – like the five bereaved mothers who came together to start Child Bereavement Support.

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For more information, please visit Child Bereavement Support (Singapore) at <http://www.cbss.sg>