



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the central event in memory of the victims
of the COVID-19 pandemic
in Berlin
on 18 April 2021**

Whom can I cry out to,

Who feels with me?

Whom can I tell

What is churning within me?

Questions that the writer Erich Mühsam grappled with at a time of bitterness and desperation. Questions that are on many people's minds today.

The pandemic descended upon us more than one year ago. It has opened up deep wounds and torn holes in a terrible way – in our country, in Europe, throughout the world. And we know that it is still not over yet.

We are worn down by the burden of the pandemic and sore from the wrangling over the right course of action. This is another reason why we need a moment to pause and reflect, a moment beyond day-to-day politics, a moment that allows us, collectively, to consider the human tragedy of the pandemic.

We want to and we must remember the people who have died since the pandemic began. Today, we want, as a society, to remember those who died a lonely and often painful death at this dark time.

Eighty thousand people have fallen victim to the virus in our country to date. Around the world, the victims number more than three million. Each and every day, further people are dying after getting infected. People are fighting for their lives in intensive care units as we speak.

But we are not only commemorating those who have died of coronavirus. Many others who were not infected with the virus were alone against the backdrop of the pandemic; they died without succour or a proper farewell.

Since this disaster started, we have been obsessing over infection rates and the number of deaths each day, have followed lines of curves and made comparisons and assessments. That is understandable. However, I have the impression that we, as a society, have not reminded ourselves often enough that individual destinies, human lives, are behind all of these numbers. Their suffering and death have often remained invisible in the public eye. A society that ignores this suffering will suffer as a whole.

So our focus today is not on numbers and statistics, but on the people that we have lost. Women and men from all regions of our country. The very elderly, but also people of all ages. We call to mind their names, faces and stories. For all of their differences and the different ways in which they lived, they are all missed – they are missed by their families and friends, by their neighbours and their colleagues, by our society.

They will not come back – but they remain in our memories. We will not forget them.

We are also commemorating those who have died in Europe and around the world since the beginning of this global disaster. We are united in mourning them across borders. And the experience of sharing in sorrow encourages us to take joint action, in Europe and around the world.

Fellow citizens, let us not forget the unique circumstances under which people have died during this time in our country. Dying in the pandemic was and is often a death without succour, without a proper farewell.

Sometimes even relatives were not allowed to visit their loved ones in hospitals, care homes or hospices. Many people have died without their relatives and friends being able to say goodbye to them.

We call to mind all those who, at the moment of their death, were unable to hear a familiar voice or see a familiar face. Who had to die without hearing a final gentle word, a final loving look, a final squeeze of their hand.

The knowledge of this breaks our hearts. And it fills us with infinite sadness.

We also call to mind today the doctors and nurses who are fighting at this time day and night to save each and every life, often to the point of complete exhaustion and, in many cases, even beyond.

We call to mind all those who tend to the dying in hospitals, care homes, in pastoral care and in hospices to the last, who have endeavoured, in spite of everything, to enable them to die in dignity.

We are grateful for their care, for their compassion. All of them put their health on the line to be there for others. Many have, while going about their work, also been infected with the virus, and some have died.

We want to honour them today and bow with respect before their selfless dedication.

We are commemorating the dead today, and we also want to remember the living who mourn them. We share in the suffering of those left behind, who seek solace at this difficult time, who feel lonely in their grief and often do not know what to do next.

Many of you, esteemed fellow citizens, have feared for and shed tears over their loved ones in the past months. Some were able to pick them up from clinics following their recovery; but many stood outside barred hospital doors, begging to be allowed to see their wife or their husband, their mother, their father, their daughter or son, one last time.

There are no words for your pain. But we hear your cries. We understand your bitterness.

Many of you have written to me, and I have had, in some cases, an opportunity to hold personal conversations. I heard stories of desperation. I know that some people are tormented by the fact that they were not able to accompany their dying loved ones on their final journey; that they even accuse themselves of having abandoned their nearest and dearest.

Some find their loss twice as hard to bear because they were denied the chance to see or touch the dying one last time. The fact that they were not able to bury their relatives as they and, above all, the departed themselves would have liked weighs heavily on others.

Many are overwhelmed and brought to the brink of despair as they, at a time of the greatest mourning, when they are still paralysed by the pain of hearing the news of their loved one's death, cannot, precisely then, allow relatives, friends and acquaintances to attend the funeral.

Rituals of mourning give us comfort and solace as well as a sense of meaning. During the pandemic, such rituals often could not take place as we are accustomed, or sometimes even had to be dispensed with entirely. Many mourners have found funerals that can only take place with the very smallest number of attendees to be a bleak and bitter experience. They missed the act of mourning together, of saying goodbye by the open grave. They missed other people, someone to give them a hug or to weep with them.

Many mourners fear that, in the absence of this joint act of remembrance, their dead might disappear without so much as a word,

that they will not live on in the collective memory of their families, friends and neighbours. They long for assurance that the dead can take their rightful place in the community with their life stories. May today give all those who mourn an opportunity to speak about their loss.

A small number of those left behind are with us here today. We want to hear their voices, on behalf of the many others who mourn loved ones at this time.

In many other places in our country today, people are likewise commemorating the dead and sharing in the fate of those left behind. They are lighting candles, laying flowers, planting trees and leaving poems or prayers at memorials.

Especially now, during the pandemic, we need such places where we can show with small gestures that we are there for each other, we are close to each other, even if we still have to keep our distance from one another.

Today, we want to express our condolences to all those who mourn, up and down our country. We want to tell them that they are not alone in their suffering, not alone in mourning.

When we pause and reflect for a moment today, then we become aware of the fact that the virus has shaken and wounded our society more deeply than we might admit in our daily lives. And we are aware of how profoundly this affects us all.

All of us feel a sense of concern, a sense of uncertainty. All of us are suffering under the restrictions that we have had to and continue to impose on ourselves in order to contain the pandemic.

But we have also long been aware of the fact that the virus does not threaten everyone in equal measure and that these restrictions do not burden everyone to the same degree. Today, we therefore think in particular of those who have been especially hard hit by this crisis. Of the people who are suffering from long-term effects of COVID. Of those who suffer from psychological ailments in the wake of loneliness and cramped conditions. Of people who have suffered violence.

We think of those who face economic hardship and whose livelihoods are on the line. Of children who are unable to go to school or see their friends. Of young people who are held back just as they were about to get started in life.

All of them are shouldering an immense burden.

I am fully aware, fellow citizens, that some of those who mourn may also feel bitterness and anger.

Many who have written to me ask themselves whether certain restrictions that were adopted in order to contain the pandemic have taken away too much of our freedom. They ask themselves whether, in

the attempt to save human lives, humanity has sometimes fallen by the wayside.

I understand these questions, I understand this bitterness.

And yes, it is true that we have made people lonely in order to protect others from sickness and death. We have had to impose restrictions on our lives in order to save lives.

This is a conflict that is beset with contradictions. I know that the restrictions required in the emergency situation that is the pandemic have unintentionally caused suffering and hardship. That is the bitter truth.

But I also know that politicians had to take difficult, sometimes tragic decisions in order to prevent an even greater disaster. All of us, including politicians, have had to learn, have made progress. And we will have to get to the bottom of whatever mistakes or shortcomings there have been. But not on this day. Not today.

What I am asking you today is this: let us talk about pain and suffering and anger. But let us avoid getting caught up in apportioning blame, in looking back, but instead gather the strength once again for the way ahead, the way out of the pandemic that we want to and we will tread if we go down this path together.

Let us ensure that the pandemic, which forces us to keep our distance from one another as human beings, does not drive us apart as a society.

Fellow citizens, the pandemic reminds us of a fact of life that we are all too keen to suppress, namely that we are vulnerable and mortal beings. Not everything can be planned, quantified, safeguarded or controlled. We do not have a firm grip on everything, least of all death.

Even though medical science is able to heal ever more diseases and save ever more lives, all of us are powerless and forlorn in the face of death at the end of the day, even if we find this difficult to accept. The pandemic teaches us humility in the face of the inaccessible.

This experience may be a big disappointment, an affront to our zeitgeist, which is so strongly geared to self-improvement. But I believe that this experience can also be healing in nature. Faced with sickness and death, we ask ourselves what is genuinely important in life. And we acknowledge that what matters is not only our concern about our own wellbeing, but also our concern for the lives and health of others.

We have experienced this together since day one of the pandemic. From day one, we have seen how much community spirit, how much compassion is inherent to this society. In all parts of our country, people were there for each other – and they continue to be so to this day. Many are working tirelessly in their jobs and voluntary work, in their

neighbourhoods and families, to help those whom the crisis has hit with full force.

This humanity is a beacon of light in dark times. And I believe that the existential, enduring experience of the pandemic is this: we depend on others when the chips are down – and others depend on us.

We will carry this lesson with us going forward; it will shape each and every one of us. And I believe that it can also shape the society in which we will live and the future that we will embark upon.

We will be marked by this pandemic, but will also grow as a result of it. We will leave this pandemic behind us. We will breathe again and live more freely once more.

And we are on the way to achieving this. Scientists have developed vaccines in record time, and, day by day, more people are reaching the shores of salvation thanks to being vaccinated. We will be close to one another as fellow human beings once more, and united as a society.

The fact that this is possible, that we are connected to each other, also in the midst of the pandemic, is something that we sense especially today, right now, in the act of pausing and reflecting together.

We see the wounds that the pandemic has inflicted. We remember those who have died. And we feel with the living who mourn them.

Let us stick together and look out for one another.