

PRAYING IN THE LANGUAGE OF LAMENT

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Introduction

Spiritual care recognizes the need for congruence in the relationship between care provider and patient/client as well as the integration of thoughts, feelings and behaviour. When people find themselves in circumstances of crisis and profound suffering, spiritual care providers have both the responsibility to hear others' pain and the opportunity to facilitate their praying in a language that expresses their disequilibrium – the language of lament. This collaborative encounter of honest speaking and hearing provides a way out of the isolation that characterizes suffering and opens the way for hope and healing.

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under heaven:
A time to be born and a time to die,
A time to plant and a time to uproot,
A time to kill and a time to heal,
A time to tear down and a time to build,
A time to weep and a time to laugh,
A time to mourn and a time to dance,
A time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
A time to embrace and a time to refrain,
A time to search and a time to give up,
A time to keep and a time to throw away,
A time to tear and a time to mend,
A time to be silent and a time to speak,
A time to love and a time to hate,
A time for war and a time for peace.
(Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

Discerning the “time”

As surely as life is filled with both joys and sorrows, gifts and losses, we are people of elation and despair, of praising and lamenting. Our task, the art of spiritual care and counselling, involves asking ourselves the question, “What time is it?” Is it a time to speak words of hope or to be silent in the face of numbing pain? Is it a time to weep with those who weep or a time to rejoice with those who rejoice? Is it a time to revisit the past, look to the future or remain in the moment? We are faced with many choices in our spiritual accompaniment of others and it is incumbent upon us to discern the time.

The optimistic flavour of post-modern therapies, with their focus on clients' strengths and resources and on the expanding of pain-filled stories has been welcomed and embraced by spiritual care providers. Majoring in hope has been effective in bolstering health and restoring lost equilibrium and for this we are all grateful. At the same time, we must ask ourselves if this is always appropriate? Perhaps we need to take a step back and ask first, "What time is it?" Is it a time to *mend* or a time to *tear*? Are we, in our enthusiasm, attempting to bandage an abscess that first needs to be lanced? Are we trying to create an Easter Sunday experience for someone in a Good Friday place?

In our practice of spiritual care, we speak much of congruence and genuineness and acceptance within our therapeutic relationships. We uphold values of affirmation and validation and responsiveness in our relating. Yet, we might well have cause to reflect on how we subtly and not so subtly participate in the relentless optimism of Western culture, on what theologian Douglas John Hall has termed the "virtual incomprehensibility of a theology of the cross" (Billman & Migliore, 1999, p.15). Even in the very vortex of human suffering - the hospital, the long term care facility and the counselling centre – we are often reluctant to address with candour the realities of failure, powerlessness and loss.

Do we have the courage to fully experience our own suffering and to accompany others with that same integrity? If so, is there a language we can use, one that includes a vocabulary that gives voice to the realities of pain and loss?

Discussion Questions:

- Do you find yourself taking "detours" from the expression of pain and suffering?
- Is giving voice to others' suffering a practice that you would find difficult to do or not?

Lament in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures: The Human Experience

The biblical literature, being a very real and human account of life, is replete with voices of lament. The Hebrew books of Job, of Lamentations, as well as fully a third of the Psalms freely express the anguish of experiences of deep suffering and the distress of disequilibrium. The Passion narratives in the Christian Scriptures are poignant accounts of life at the boundaries, of the mystery and paradox of the "theology of the cross." The Jesus who rose on Easter Sunday is the Jesus who prayed, sweating drops of blood in the garden of Gethsemane and who cried from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

A lament is a passionate expression of distress. To lament is to wail and to complain and to "sing the blues" – of loneliness, hopelessness, helplessness, grief, exhaustion and absence of meaning. It is the voice and the record of a person in turmoil. Finding this voice for ourselves and learning a vocabulary with which we can honestly engage our

clients and patients in a way that does not deny or dishonour their very real anguish, is vital to a ministry of balanced spiritual care. We are called to weep with those who weep, uncomfortable as that might be. Availing ourselves of the language of lament is the alternative to disengagement. Without a vocabulary of pain, there is no vehicle for connecting with God or with others from within our world of suffering. “The prayer of lament is the language of the painful incongruity between lived experience and the promises of God. Without it we would be left speechless and hopeless in the midst of affliction” (Billman & Migliore p. 107). New meanings are waiting to be made in the place of suffering.

It is important to recognize that lament is very different from the encouragement of an attitude of self-pity or the inducement of gratuitous anger. Lament is the cry of a pain-wracked soul that has no other honest words to speak. It is an anguished prayer from a place of crisis and the voicing of thoughts and emotions that cannot be otherwise. The only alternative is muteness and repression.

Through lament we hold onto faith that God is mysteriously in the mix of our disequilibrium, whether experienced as present or absent. The Psalms are rich sources of this theology and have been used by many through the ages to express their own feelings of sadness, disappointment, fear of abandonment and anger. We will look at how they are relevant in the contexts of crisis, grief and depression.

Discussion Questions:

- What does this manner of praying say about the writers and their relationship with God?
 - What obstacles can you identify in your life and in the lives of others to this kind of expression?
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Lament in Crisis

*Save me O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in the miry depths,
where there is no foothold.
I have come into the deep waters;
the floods engulf me.
I am worn out calling for help;
my throat is parched.
My eyes fail, looking for my God.*

(Psalm 69:1-3)

A sense of profound disorientation prevails in the midst of crisis. Shock and confusion override the sense of security and groundedness that previously characterized life. This sense of losing one's footing and feeling lost is beautifully articulated in the psalmist's cry to God. Had David remained silent in his distress, his relationship with God would have been suspended in the crisis. Lament allowed David, as it allows us, to remain rooted in the belief that we are not left to ourselves until such time as we can get it together and somehow make ourselves more presentable to God. Catherine LaCugna writes, "lamentation reactivates our relationship with God and enables us to resituate ourselves within, not outside the history of that relationship" (quoted by Billman & Migliore, p.127).

Lament in Depression

*Hear my prayer, O Lord;
let my cry for help come to you.
Do not hide your face from me
when I am in distress.
Turn your ear to me;
when I call, answer me quickly.*

*For my days vanish like smoke;
my bones burn like glowing embers.
My heart is blighted and withered like grass;
I forget to eat my food.
Because of my loud groaning
I am reduced to skin and bones.
I am like a desert owl,
like an owl among the ruins.
I lie awake; I have become
like a bird alone on a housetop.
All day long my enemies taunt me;
Those who rail against me use my name as a curse.
For I eat ashes as my food
And mingle my drink with tears
because of your great wrath,
for you have taken me up and thrown me aside.
My days are like the evening shadow;
I wither away like grass.*

(Psalm 102:1-11)

In his article "Parallels Between Depression and Lament" Randall M. Christenson notes that both Psalm 31 and Psalm 102 can be read as experiences of what we now understand as clinical depression. The emotions and thought processes expressed are consistent with those of someone suffering from depression. Rather than using such laments to focus on the negative, which would be counterproductive in this case, patients or clients can be

encouraged to realize “that God understands their mood and thoughts” (Christenson, 2007, p.306) and that they need not be separated from a Divine source of hope of comfort.

Lament in Grief

It is perhaps in spiritual care that seeks to support the bereaved that many will see the place of lament most clearly. As feelings of sorrow, anxiety, anger and guilt surface and often become overwhelming, prayers rooted in a sense of orientation seem foreign and hollow and a new language is necessary to remain engaged in a vital relationship with God. It is well established that repressing such feelings is detrimental to the healing process and prayers of lament can facilitate emotional expression and catharsis, opening the way for a new reality.

The function of such lament speech is to create a situation that did not exist before the speech, to create an external event that matches the internal sensitivities. It is the work of such speech to give shape, power, visibility, authenticity to the experience. The speaker now says, “It is really like that. That is my situation.” The listener knows, “Now I understand your actual situation in which you are at work dying to the old equilibrium that is slipping from you.” (Brueggemann, 1982, p. 30)

It is in this way that lament can become an important part of the work of grief, a process that requires reorientation, rather than a return to a former state of orientation which is no more.

A Case Scenario

A woman who has recently been diagnosed with cancer talks with you about the circumstances of her husband’s death a few years ago. It is apparent that she is experiencing ongoing grief over this loss and fears about being alone in her own dying.

- What are some ways that you as a spiritual care provider can facilitate her grieving as a bereaved spouse?
- Do you see lament as a means of articulating her feelings about death (fear of isolation, protest etc.)?

Hope in Lament

The psalms of lament, with the exception of one such as Psalm 88, are not prayers devoid of hope. “These cries out of the depths of distress are motivated by a deep confidence that Yhwh is the compassionate God – the God who hears, who is concerned, and who is

involved with the people” (Anderson, 2000, p. 65). Otherwise there would be little point in raising one’s cry at all.

The movement from “How long?” to a reiteration of God’s *hesed* (covenant loyalty) in Psalm 13 is the overall pattern of the lament (Anderson).

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and every day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?*

*Look on me and answer, O Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;
my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,”
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.*

*But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
for he has been good to me.*

There is a deep underlying hope in lament, what could be called a defiant hope. It denotes a resilience that does not give up in spite of adverse circumstances, one that rests on the confidence that a season of new equilibrium will follow the present time of distress, that resurrection will follow crucifixion.

A Defiant Hope

The film “Paradise Road” is based on the true story of a group of diverse women held captive by the Japanese in a P.O.W. camp in Sumatra during World War II. The women form a vocal orchestra, rehearsing and performing symphonic scores, singing music of hope. Throughout their captivity, they bear the bodies of their friends along Paradise Road to their final resting place. In a moving scene just prior to liberation, the Japanese commander taunts the depleted women about the silence now characterizing their journey of lamentation. In an act of spirited defiance, the women pick up stones and clap out a staccato rhythm as they make their way along the road. They can no longer sing but neither will they resign themselves to muteness. This new language of resilience recalls Jesus’ words in Luke 19:40, “I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

For reflection:

What do you think of the terms “hopeful defiance” or “defiant hope”? Do they have a place in the life of faith?

Lament and Self Care

Tending to our own personal distress and experiences of suffering is important for two reasons. As we were reminded by Rabbi Bonita E. Taylor at a Summit '09 Workshop entitled "Lamenting with Lamentations: Exploring Healing for Ourselves and Others through Sorrow-Filled Stories," we as spiritual care providers are not simply a means to an end. We are also an end. We are also to be recipients of compassion and care, not merely dispensers. Just as patients and clients become ill, experience deep losses, and run into roadblocks in life, so do we. Lamenting in the midst of our own pain and suffering is a way of showing this same compassion and care to ourselves.

On a professional level we need to appreciate the personal impact of times of intense ministry. I am reminded of the account of Elijah after his both harrowing and victorious experience on Mount Carmel in the book of 1 Kings. When he is subsequently threatened by Jezebel the prophet's depletion is nothing short of astonishing.

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. (19:3-5)

There is a cost to ministry. We should not be surprised at our fatigue and our need for replenishment through various means in the course of the provision of spiritual care. One of those means is granting ourselves permission to experience our own feelings and what needs to be lamented in our own lives, including disenfranchised grief.

A second reason is that we cannot be available to others in a responsible manner when we are not tending to ourselves in an ongoing way. We will either fall into the valley of suffering with them, losing our ability to be self-differentiated and therefore effective, or we will remain at arm's length, unable to risk identifying with their pain in any meaningful way and thereby be unavailable to accompany them in their journey of suffering. Both of these extreme positions will eventually disqualify us from the practice of spiritual care.

Exercise:

Write your own personal lament. This may be an expression of a past grief that you have experienced. It might be a cry of pain and distress over current circumstances beyond your control. You may want to open with a particular verse from a psalm or the book of Lamentations as a theme or starting point. Another alternative is beginning with the question *'ekah*, Hebrew for "How."

Lamenting with Patients/Clients

During an encounter in which a sorrow-filled story is shared and raw emotions have been exposed, we can be tempted to pray in a manner that attempts to seal off the wound and leaves no room for continued processing of the emotions expressed. This is often out of anxiety on the part of the spiritual care provider rather than a conscious choice of its value for the patient or client. Praying in a way that honours the sharing that has taken place and allows the other to continue to accomplish the work of this very stage of the healing process is what is called for. Elements of hope and hints of reorientation can certainly be part of such a prayer but it is important not to attempt to rush someone to an incongruous place. This is particularly important if we are functioning out of our own need to rescue or discomfort.

Exercise:

Compose a prayer you might pray with a patient after a conversation involving elements of confusion, deep sorrow or anger in the midst of distressful circumstances.

Summary

Lament is a language of prayer for a particular time - a time of disorientation and disequilibrium. It is a congruent form of communication with God along the journey toward reorientation and a renewed sense of equilibrium. Lament is an acknowledgement that God is with us and hears us at all times and an expression of faith that there is no essential separation, even in times of deep crisis and suffering.

A BRIEF ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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