



For Such Time as This: Lament as a Herald of Joy • *Barbara A. Holmes*

If in this place, tears are not just tolerated but *required* of us from time to time, it is because the thirst for God that brought each of us to this place has at the same time drawn us into the very center of a sustained conflict. Simply stated, we have been drawn into conflict with everything that is opposed to God—including (and it is much) in ourselves that is opposed to God and God’s way with our lives....

Thirst not yet satisfied, tears not yet dried—those are realities of the life of faith. But the bedrock reality is the beneficence, the incredible generosity of God¹

There is a real difference between being reasonably happy and having joy unspeakable. Without the fulfillment of spiritual joy, our lives tend to veer away from “calling” toward the search for personal satisfaction. In Western societies, that search usually ends in the mall. My call to the next generation is to reclaim the possibility of real joy through the healing practice of lament. I am suggesting that we weep with those who weep, and moan over the harm done on our behalf and by our hands. And given the times, and the state of the world, I’m not sure that a few sniffles will do it!

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Instead, I have in mind torrents of tears and wrenching wails of regret and sympathy, not just for our own concerns but also for the concerns of a broken world. I want to recognize the lament in rap music, in contemplative worship, and in the blues. I want to see our collective confusion danced and sung. Lament may be the only remaining antidote to the bitter mix of arrogance and self-congratulation that Western Christians have adopted.

I realize that the very suggestion of lament in an entertainment-oriented culture is tantamount to unleashing a pit bull in a poodle show. We don't need to see what will happen; we know that it won't be pretty. As a nation, we rejoice when we should weep; we shop when we should examine ourselves; we entertain ourselves into a stupor. In fact, there are few events in our society that can move the national community toward the weeping and fasting referenced in the Book of Esther. Even during the tragedy of September 11, the call was for shopping to jumpstart a flagging economy.

Televised rituals of national mourning after September 11 barely tapped into the communal grief. Within days the task of mourning was turned over to local congregations, synagogues, and mosques. It is not that local faith communities should not be the line of first defense in such catastrophic times; it is that in our culture we spend so much time and effort avoiding death and grief that even worship centers are ill-equipped for times such as these.

When I speak about this avoidance syndrome, I am referring to the fact that our communities are inundated with news of disaster and death, yet even in our compassion, we are distanced and detached from the grit and horror. Some of us respond in the best ways that we can, but within weeks, even the most astonishing events are grist for late-night talk show jokes. We know the healing power of laughter, but do we know when and how to weep?

During Hurricane Katrina, shocking television images held the nation suspended in disbelief for a few days, but then everything returned to "business as usual" as talking points on both sides of the political spectrum drove the sounds and sights of dying people from our consciousness. Survivors were shipped away to find relief in other cities, but because the bodies were not counted for the world to see, there was nothing to weep over. In the war on Iraq, we hear about the deaths but seldom see the coffins. It's hard to lament in the abstract, and without lament there can be no joy.

The idea of weeping for our losses, for our sins (now there's a word we don't care for very much), for our mistakes, is no longer a part of our everyday life. To be perfectly honest, in a culture of strong men and stronger women,

everybody wants to be hard and tough. We teach our sons not to cry and discourage our daughters from displaying emotions.

We don't like tears because they signal vulnerability. As the last superpower on the earth during this era, we have rejected vulnerability as a sign of peace to the world, as a liturgical response to violence, and as a Christ-like example in the midst of a landscape of fear. Instead, we have adopted the electronic smile, the programmed happiness reflected in lives that live vicariously through the fantasies that are relentlessly coming through our television sets.

We follow the shenanigans of movie stars like Michael Jackson and Paris Hilton with great interest as if they were part of our immediate circle of care, and we live vicariously through the fantasy lives of soap opera stars like those on *Desperate Housewives*. But ultimately, we pay very little attention to unbelievable stories of poverty and desperation right within our reach. Why lament? We should lament because we are being driven further and further from the source of our being and because there are tangible benefits that accrue.

Laments Wake Us Up!

It is not easy to sleep when people are wailing. We need the sounds of gnashing teeth, moans, and distress to wake us from our cultural slumber. When we are fully awake, we realize that there is a spiritual dimension to life that we rarely acknowledge. The world is not just DVDs and stuff. The world is a place where the opportunity for great good and astonishing evil are always within reach. The sense you may have that you are struggling with unseen forces is not an illusion; it is real.

But there isn't anything you can do about it while you are asleep. Please understand that this sleep is more like hypnosis than anything else. We are encouraged not to deal with reality; instead, we are urged to live for our own needs. I am a Christian, and that means that Christ is more than an affable talk show host, more than a babe in a manger on a Christmas card, more than the star of a Hollywood crucifixion horror film. If we say that we believe in Christ, then don't we have to take his moral directives seriously? I think so!

Christ calls us to be good stewards of our resources; society tells us that we need to pimp our rides. Christ calls us to love our neighbors, which includes the poor; society pretends that the poor don't exist or that poverty is a failure of character or work ethic. Faith tells us that our lives are about service, self-sacrifice, submission, and salvation; society tells us that life is about ego,

expenditures, excess, and extremes, and needing more and more thrills to feel alive. Whose report will you believe? Will you even hear this report if you are asleep at the switch?

Lament wakes us up, and wakes up our children, who are being seduced by materialism through advertisements that teach them to be dissatisfied with what they have. Statistics five years ago indicated that by the age of five, children are subjected to more than 30,000 advertisements. These ads present a false world, a world that conflicts with most of the things that we believe as people of faith.² But the worst of it is that the architecture of regret and godly sorrow, of lament and repentance, no longer frames our lives.

What is the solution? Anything is possible when the God of all creation is at work; however, although I would prefer a single miraculous event that sets our world in order, I don't expect it. I believe, like Stephen Freitheim does, that God calls us to be co-creators, to order our universe with our commitments and spiritual humility. If we choose to live godly lives, we will live as if we are connected to the earth, the environment, and other people without reference to age, sexuality, gender, race, or ethnicity.

Esther 4:14 is a wake-up call that reminds all of us that survival is a communal event. Esther is not safe if she clings to the myth of radical individualism. Seeking her own personal well-being will only provide an illusory safety net. Ultimately, God will raise up a deliverer whether she chooses to heed the call or not.

We are offered the same choices. It really is up to us. God is counting on Esther and on us to act on behalf of the *basilea* of God, to witness to what is just, and to point a moral compass toward the flourishing of all humankind. This is the ultimate act of worship. We are mistaken when we think that acts of justice are separate from acts of worship. Cynthia Winton-Henry puts it this way: "It now seems to me that we do not become something until others call it forth or draw it out of us."³

Mordecai challenges Esther to become the catalyst for the salvation of her people. Because God remains hidden in the text, humankind must act. It must be the divine spark in Esther and in us that saves the day. Even when the odds of failure seem insurmountable, there is that spark, that opportunity to transcend false boundaries. One heroine won't do. This work requires all of us.

Lament Is Weird, but It Works

If any of you has seen the Matrix movies, you know that when you attack evil in a fight, the powers of evil multiply. You strike one down and more come. When trouble comes, it tends to bring trouble with it. Queen Esther had to use an unlikely weapon to save her people, and the young people of the next generation will have to respond in like manner. Her weird weapon of choice was prayer and fasting. I refer to this weapon as weird because these actions require a turning away from a zombie-like trance induced by our cultural preoccupation with self-concern.

I want you to know today that I have hope for the future because the young prophets and visionaries of another generation are using the weird weapon of lament, but in a different form. They go forth in their baggy jeans or preppy shirts and skirts realizing that they have not been called to the seats of power and that to enter risks everything; yet still they go. The young prophets have gone forth to challenge a slumbering world. They bring news that there are giants living in the land, but that they can be met with the wisdom, grace, and power of a prayerful community.

If you are the young prophets to a dying world, if you are the generation of Esthers, Davids, Miriams, and Joshuas who must go to the politicians who advocate war over peace and who value profit over sustainable ecosystems, how will you prepare? I suggest that you look to the past and learn about faithful generations and people (famous and not) who gave their lives for the betterment of humankind. Then, prayerfully hear the voices of lament in your own generation.

Young people all over the world are coming before “the powers that be” without being summoned. Some of them are outsiders whose lifestyles you may not like, but Esther wasn’t exactly a paragon of virtue. They have something to say whether you agree with them or not. Listen! I offer a few examples, but you can find your own if you look. You may consider my choices weird, but that’s the thing with lament; it is a counterintuitive response to the angst of the world offered by the most unlikely people.

Kanye West, hip-hop artist, called the nation to lament when he said that politicians don’t care about the poor.

Stanley Tookie Williams, the rehabilitated executed founder of the violent Crips street gang, was no longer young when he made the following statements, but he represents the disaffected youth gangs. He said,

I am confident enough to say to all of you today that if the death penalty is objectively investigated, it will be exposed for what it is—a racist, inhumane, and disproportionately allocated system used primarily for poor people. I don't know about any of you, but personally, I can't name one millionaire or billionaire on death row. Can you?

In conclusion, I am fully aware that when I help underprivileged children and speak out against the death penalty, I do so from a vulnerable position. My voice can be silenced by institutional bureaucratic treachery, but the message transcends my life, and it is God's will. Meanwhile, while I breathe, I hope.⁴

These offerings are laments in varied melodies, but also signs of hope.

The hope is that unlikely people using unlikely means of deliverance will still come with a word from the Lord. It is the unexpected that breaks the death grip of warring societies.

Picture it! It's September 12, 2001. Imagine that after the towers fall, the whole nation falls to its knees, weeping for its losses and its enemies, repenting for its failures, submitting its anger to the God that it professes, and imploring the Creator to be its fortress and shield. There will always be enemies. The issue is not the reality of evil or its pervasiveness, but the weapons that we choose for defense and resistance.

Lament is the most powerful declaration of faith even in the midst of siege. The best example that I can think of regarding the redemptive power of lament occurred during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Perpetrators told of horrendous events, including the confession of a participant at a convivial barbecue party, where they grilled steaks and drank beer, while Black South Africans burned on a makeshift pyre a few feet away. Hearing this,

Archbishop Desmond Tutu...laid his head on a table made up of vibrating quantum elements, as he wept in deep sonorous tones that reached beyond the galaxies and into the consciousness of a pathologically dry-eyed people. When he wept, the universe wept with him about a truth that we are unable to face. There is no beast to slay. We are the fire-breathing principalities and powers, the seers and prophets, the giants and faith-filled vanquishers.⁵

Lament Is a Communal Act

The group is within each one of us.... I sense my family, the body of my nation, and sometimes the entire earth in my own body. When my nation suffers, I suffer. We are not independent cogs. The well-being of the group is our own well-being.⁶

Cynthia Winton-Henry, *What the Body Wants*

In a society of individuals who are focused on their own needs, lament requires the shift from the individual whine to the corporate moan, from personal annoyance to collective angst, from egocentric agenda to the spirit and intent of the community. Although public lament requires active and sometimes vocal signs of distress, lament is a contemplative act. Contemplation is usually deemed synonymous with silence, because of our view of monastic or cloistered life. But in ethnic communities, contemplation can be evocative and can be danced and sung as an integral part of the journey toward reunion with God.

In communal lament we hear the tears of the individual amplified to such an extent that all who hear know that such sounds will inevitably lead to action...and to the intent to seek justice and righteousness.

To lament is not simply to grieve or mourn. Biblical lament, faith's outcry to God in the grip of trouble, is a rhetoric that wails and rages, protests and interrogates, and finally whispers its hope.⁷

The whispered hope that echoes through every wail and cry of anguish is that the troubles of this world are not the end of the story. Now we see through a glass darkly, and not face to face. Lament carves pathways toward a different vision of life in community.

It is an action that vocally, physically, or spiritually acknowledges that things are not as they should be. Lament deconstructs the tents of superficial contentment by allowing the hidden sense of abandonment to emerge. In the stillness that follows the wail comes the opportunity for amazement, letting go, and finally healing/resisting through an activism that prioritizes compassion and justice.⁸

When a society hides its tears, its children will suffer. We see this in the increase of teen suicide and depression. The saddest thing that I can think of

in a world beset by war and violence (and I do admit that it is very odd to identify just one thing) is when young people end their lives in suicide because they have lost pathways to joy. It is natural for humankind to wander, even to get lost, but it is not natural for the community to send no rescue teams.

No matter the context, no matter the pain of desolation and rejection, no matter the biogenetic or inherited reasons that people wander from the embrace of the community, we are required as members of the human family to seek the lost, to nurture the God-potential in each and every one of us, to weep with those who weep, and to rejoice with those who rejoice.

If during the worst disasters we continue to behave as if nothing has happened, as if the community is helpless before the forces of destruction that threaten the good within all of us, then when our children become sad and alienated they will believe themselves to be alone. Teen suicide and depression proliferate when societies pretend that there is no reason to lament. In such places, grief will rupture both the spirit and the body of the most vulnerable members of society.

It seems that we are few in number, that we don't have the strength or means to overcome systems of oppression and death. All we have are our prayers, faith, and courage. Yet with this alone and the God who never leaves us alone, we must act. We must act even when the story doesn't end well, and this one doesn't. Haman is hung; the Jewish people arise and not only defend themselves but slay thousands of others.

It is a story that repeats itself in our own history. The violence that was visited upon us is now visited upon others. Sometimes we start the cycle of violence, sometimes we respond, but we always end with tears. Public lament is a way for faithful people to say that some of our communal actions are not providing sources of sustainable joy and that our seemingly righteous acts are becoming grotesque parodies of our original intent.

The tasks seem insurmountable, but we do not face the insurmountable alone. God who is the source of our joy is not just a reflection of our ego desires, but a refining fire that leads us through the dark nights of our souls. For if we do not weep over our inhumanity one to another, if we do not lament because of the lack of love for neighbors and the earth, there will be a consequence.

We can continue to exploit the earth, but inevitably the earth will lament. Its tears in the form of melting polar caps, hurricanes, and tsunamis will inundate our sense of safety. We can exploit the people of the world for cheap labor

and goods, but inevitably, the world's emerging countries will arise; they will not stay in our debt forever while their people wail.

Summary

I call you to lament as Esther did, through prayers and fasting. Utter sounds of grief not because of superficial regret, but because the resonance of your wails will break the cultural spell. Read your paper and weep, watch CNN with tears blurring the pictures of war dead and roadside bombs. Let your prayers become a cry of faith and repentance. Use your music to rap a dirge, rock out the anger that has deep roots, or dare your friends to challenge the prevailing social presumptions about who's in and who's out.

Embrace an outsider in full view of the insiders. When you're done, it may not seem that anything has changed, but at least you will have responded to the call. Just as Mordecai turned to Esther, I turn to a generation of young people on the cusp of adulthood. This is the call: Will you stand with those whose lives are at stake even if you risk your own? Perhaps you have been born into history for such a time as this!

Notes

1. Ellen Davis, "I Thirst" *In Trust: The Magazine for Leaders in Theological Education* (Autumn 2005): 14–15.
2. Brian Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Universe*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996, 2000).
3. Cynthia Winton-Henry with Phil Porter, *What the Body Wants* (Kelowna, Canada: Northstone Publishing, 2004), 52.
4. <http://www.phaseoop.com/foreignprisoners/case-stanley-williams.html>
5. Barbara A. Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press Intl, 2002), 48–49.
6. Cynthia Winton-Henry with Phil Porter, *What the Body Wants* (Kelowna, Canada: Northstone Publishing, 2004), 155.
7. Sally A. Brown, "When Lament Shapes the Sermon," in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 35.
8. Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 77–93.