

What do we believe are the real causes of unhappiness in life? Why do some losses keep us in a “funk” for long periods of time? Can mourning play a positive function in our lives? Have you ever experienced a sense of well-being while you were grieving? Have you ever found comfort in the midst of your mourning? There is a Jewish saying that “tears are soap for the soul.” Have you ever found this to be true?

Breathe. Be present to this moment. Allow the presence of the Spirit to take up residence within you. Take another deep breath.

Grief is an invitation into the mystery of death and resurrection. The death of those we love – as well as other kinds of loss – the sorts of losses that come upon us every day - are occasions of a dying within us. As we grieve, we are simultaneously nurturing the coming to life of a new sense of self and of God. We do not know when that resurrection life will be born. Its development is often hidden from us. In the meantime, while darkness seems to be our only friend, we offer our lament to God, we try to stay open, and we wait together. Grieving is a spiritual practice that we work at and that works on us, opening us to the possibility that we can give voice to our loss without giving it the final word. It is literally heartbreaking work that opens us to a deeper encounter with the divine compassion in which all things are held.

Mary was bereft. Her brother Lazarus had just died and she was beside herself with sadness. She cried out - “if you had been here my brother would not have died.” If only .. we know the “if onlys” very well. If only a procedure, a test, a drug, had been given. If only the illness had been handled another way - if the treatment had somehow been different , then perhaps...just maybe...

Mary collapsed at Jesus feet weeping. Jesus saw her tears and heard her friends also wailing. This would be the type of overt and public grieving that we have recently seen in Egypt and is common in the Middle East. He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled - at least that is what most of the translations of this passage tell us he did. On closer examination - the verb translated moved in spirit and troubled - actually means - moved with indignation or outrage. Which puts his response in a very different light. Jesus’ response was “to groan”, “to sigh”, and even “to thunder”. He was angry. This is puzzling- and frankly my first response is that I want to argue with Jesus. What is it that caused his outrage? Why is he angry in the face of my grief?

When I pull back and look again - I recall the anger that welled up in me over my father's death in November, 2004. I was angry that I did not have more time with my Dad. Angry because of the if onlys. And angry at myself that I didn't take more advantage of the time I did have.

Yet Jesus' outrage is of a different sort. When he sees Lazarus in the tomb, Jesus himself weeps. This is the nature of Jesus' compassion. He weeps with us. His compassion was not only mutual sorrow in the loss of a friend. It includes outrage on our behalf - at anything that keeps us from the freedom and resurrection life that God intends for all of us. We might call the raising of Lazarus the story of coaxing Martha and Mary into the Light of the Resurrection'. Jesus' raising of Lazarus is an invitation to see the world, including the natural world of death, altogether differently. It is an invitation to look away from our fascination with death, an invitation to contemplate with Jesus the freedom and liberation from all that binds us, which is resurrection life.

Jesus is outraged by the death itself and by the unbelief that characterizes everyone's response to it. He was outraged by the power that death has over people because for Jesus living in God's realm, the Kingdom of God, as we do, means that even death does not hold, bind, or keep people from the reality of God's love. Rendering the word for Jesus' response as outrage sheds a completely different light on the passage. As we consider Jesus coming upon this funerary scene with the clamor, noise, and weeping typical of that time we get a picture of our Lord not just mourning the loss of His friend but as the savior of the world confronting the ultimate enemy, death, and preparing to demonstrate His power over it by raising Lazarus. Grief and loss connect us with Jesus' outrage at the power of death to stymie us and keep us from living the life God intends for us to live.

This is one side of divine compassion. It comes to us as outrage at death itself with the understanding that Jesus stands with us against the power that death has over us. He wants us to grieve but not succumb to it. Rather to see death and grieving in the light of God's bigger orientation - which is to life and living. And not give in to the power of death to stymie us - to keep us from the life God intends for us to live.

There is another side of divine compassion. This side is represented also by Jesus when he says "blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." This blessing carries a deep identification and the strong sense of God being

with us in our grief and loss. Here Jesus speaks directly to everyone who is grieving. It is an audacious word - because it carries a promise. Not just that we are not alone in our grieving but that comfort will come.

Speaking to this move down into what the Psalms say is the pit of grief and then back up again, Cynthia Bourgeault writes:

When we mourn . . . we are in state of free-fall, our heart reaching out toward what we have seemingly lost but cannot help loving anyway. . . . Mourning is indeed a brutal form of emptiness. But in this emptiness, if we can remain open, we discover that a mysterious "something" does indeed reach back to comfort us; the tendrils of our grief trailing out into the unknown become intertwined in a greater love that holds all things together. To mourn is to touch directly the substance of divine compassion. And just as ice must melt before it can flow, we, too, must become liquid before we can flow into God's comfort. Tears have been a classic way of doing this.

Staying open in the midst of grief while being in the "pit," is not easy. The temptation in the pit is to become silent, to close in on ourselves and cut ourselves off from the very connections that can sustain us in the darkness. We want to run, to hide, to deny, and to ignore. Yet when we embrace our tears and our grief, when we name it and offer it to God, we find that invisible reach and release that pulls us up and sets us on solid ground again. This movement to the bottom and then back up again has been witnessed to over and over again. It indeed takes place when we allow ourselves to go to the dark place, rather than skipping over it or being so ashamed of it that we never speak it - even to ourselves. The language of grief from a faith perspective calls upon God by name and expects a response. It takes a great faith to be so candid. It would be simplistic to suppose that once the lament has been prayed the person's complaint was immediately answered and life was restored. We do not know how many weeks, months, or even years passed before the psalmist could utter those words of thanks signaling the end of the lament. Yet, in faith, in God, mourning is indeed followed by dancing.

There is another saying of the rabbis recorded in the Talmud: "The deeper the sorrow, the less tongue it has." The biblical language of lament that we find in the psalms help us give voice to the unspeakable, and thereby to reconnect with God and with one another. About one-third of the psalms are songs of lament. They reflect the disorientation we feel when things fall apart. They honestly, poignantly express the feelings of abandonment, isolation, confusion, doubt, and anger that

we experience in the “pit.” Here, at the very heart of the biblical tradition, the psalms allow us to acknowledge the reality of loss and pain before God and one another. By giving “tongue” to our sorrow, the lament psalms validate and normalize the difficult, sometimes overwhelming feelings that accompany the grief process. Lament psalms are communal hymns that reduce our sense of isolation and place us in the very human company of all who suffer loss. They invite us to listen to the anguish of another without judgment or explanations. They keep us open to the possibility that in the midst of despair, the tendrils of our grief eventually will become intertwined with the divine compassion.

The Lament Psalms are collective prayers of a people in pain. They are not magical, however; praying these psalms will not make everything better. But unless they are spoken, we run the risk of trivializing our relationship with God. Then concluding with a prayer of thanksgiving reflects our faith that God will rescue us and brings us up from the depths.