

Complaining to God

**“In the open mindedness of not knowing enough about anything.
It was beautiful.**

...

How quietly, and not with any assignment from us, or even a small hint of understanding, everything that needs to be done is done.”

Mary Oliver, “Luna”

There is one strong form of Biblical prayer that has been almost completely overlooked by the Christian tradition, maybe because it feels more like *pre-prayer* than what we usually think of as prayer at all. Let’s call it lamentation or grief work, and it is almost perfectly described in the Mary Oliver epigraph above.

Lamentation prayer is when we sit and speak out to God and one another--without even knowing what to pray for-- stunned, sad, and silenced by the tragedy and absurdity of human events. It might actually be the most honest form of prayer. It takes great trust and patience to remain in this state, so I think it is actually profound prayer, but most of us have not been told that we could, or even should, “complain” to God. The Jews were very good at it. I suspect we *must* complain like Job, Judith, and Jeremiah, or we do not even know what to pray for—or how to pray. Or we do not suffer the necessary pain of this world, the necessary sadness of being human.

Walter Brueggemann, my favorite Scripture teacher, points out that about one third of the Psalms are psalms of “lament”, but they have been the least used by Catholic and Protestant liturgies. We think, perhaps, they express sinful anger or negativity, when grief and loss are actually something quite different. We think they make us appear weak, helpless, and vulnerable, and most of us don’t want to go there. We think, perhaps, they show a lack of faith, whereas they are probably the summit of faith. So we quickly resort to praise and thanksgiving, even when it is often dishonest emotion. We forget that Jesus called weeping a “blessed” state (Matthew 5:5). We forget that only one book of the Bible is named after an emotion: Jeremiah’s book of “Lamentation”.

Until I did my research for **Adam’s Return**, the book on male initiation, I did not realize that grief work was a key element in many, if not most, male initiation rites. “A young man who could not cry was a savage”, incapable of empathy and solidarity with the larger world. If he did not learn sympathy early in life, he would be damaged goods by the end of life, incapable of smiling— because “an old man who cannot laugh is a fool”. A man incapable of tears would be a toxic member of any social unit. How different from our modern world which considers weeping in males to be weakness.

One of the central rites in our Men’s Rites of Passage is a grief ritual that very often is the central event that moves men into liminal space and a readiness for transformation. Robert Bly insists that grief work is the privileged and powerful entrance way for most men—out of their controlling heads and finally into their bodies and hearts. Remember Pat Conroy’s book and movie “Prince of Tides”? Until the tidal wave of loss is felt and suffered by most men (and women), they quite simply do not understand the reality of the spiritual world or their own inner world.

I remember my own unsettled and shapeless state after the death of both of my parents. I felt I was living in a different world for some months. Everything looked and felt very, very strange. I felt emotionally askew for a long time, and I was ready for almost anything to fall apart and

disappoint me. It did not make me angry or isolated, as much as humble, open, ready for help, so appreciative of the kindness of strangers and friends. Very small things actually delighted me, although I was afraid to smile or really enjoy them. I lived in a “holy tentativeness”, which made the listening and learning curve very high during that time. It was the same after I received my own temporary death sentence from malignant melanoma in 1991. My ego structures were very permeable, very open to both deep darkness and lovely light.

The entire Afterword to the book **Quest for the Grail** was written in the weeks following my Mother’s death in early January of 1994. There I had to resort to haiku and poetry, but even my prose became more poetic. It was all coming from a much deeper and truer place. It was the gleaming and generous state called lamentation, even though it did not feel very “gleaming” at the time:

“Her dying, crooked body taught me sacrament,
Built a swinging bridge
Between mud and mysticism
On which I will henceforth walk
And weep—and wonder” (Jan 11)

“Back in the air,
On the road,
But more under the earth
With her (with Christ?)” (Jan 23)

I hope in the year ahead to write a small booklet on this subject, offering perhaps what I think could be a very new and needed liturgical style. A prayer form for people longing for peace and justice in church and country, but without any need to blame, accuse, or give answers. We need a liturgical setting that could be lay led, circular, and without closure, or even final “blessing”. It will take practice, but then we can be sent back into our world honest and shared, emotionally cleansed, heartfelt and soulful, out of our controlling heads, and ready for guidance, and not even *needing* to know the shape or the when of resurrection. Again I resort to always-with-the-right-word, Mary Oliver, and this time from her poem, “At Black River”:

“Then I remember, death comes *before* the rolling away of the stone”

I think perhaps we have rolled away the stone too quickly—with our happy alleluias and too easy appreciations—as a result we are neither softened nor solidified by all of our losses. Our pain, sadness, and tragedies are not teaching us but only deafening us and blinding us. And they are our greatest teachers, even though we are never quite sure what it is that they have taught us. We only know we are larger, deeper, and ready to live without the stone.

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