

The logo for 'Hungryhearts' features a stylized flame icon in yellow and orange to the left of the text. The word 'Hungry' is in a dark grey, sans-serif font, and 'hearts' is in a yellow, rounded, sans-serif font.

Hungryhearts

Prayers of Lament

By David Crowley

When death claims a child, we may feel abandoned, forsaken by God. The sheer weight of grief is hard for others to witness, and again the mourner feels abandoned by family and friends. The very communication of prayer gives lie to that feeling. Prayer gives voice to, and the sense of, being listened to and attended with care. Prayer may help us wrestle with this deep pain. Think of what we hear, “your child is in a better place; God needed the child now; God never gives us more than we can carry.” In our anxiety, we find ourselves mute or spitting out religious platitudes. In response to loss, weeping itself may be seen as an enacted prayer. Prayers of lament for an unrealized future puts weeping into words, or perhaps better put, make prayers weep.

Grief is chaotic, formless, and void. We require some structure and framing. In a time when grief is disenfranchised, we could consider looking to grieving as a spiritual practice or discipline. Unable to pray, as we would wish, we may find solace in going through the prayers of others. In the Jewish tradition, mourners recite the kaddish for a year.

The Bible uses laments to form prayers in the face of an attack on the way things are supposed to go. Notice its usual glimmer of hope (Psalm 88 being a notable exception) after a catharsis helps us weep for our own children and the children of others. Praying

laments together moves us past presenting grief bona fides of personal loss into a community of those who are with those who have lost children to death. In a grief-denying culture, the lament gives Biblical permission to voice the reality of death. An acrostic form gives a sense of having one's full say, of moving from A to Z. It's even tripled in ch.3 of Lamentations. It gives structure to the formless nature of inchoate feelings, so the pattern of the prayer can put a frame around the grief. When we reach the final letter, we may sense that we have come to a stop, and so the intensity of grief may ebb in time. (See ch.3 of Eugene Peterson's Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work.)

That form counters an unhealthy facet of baby boomer culture to rush through grief. Tears are forbidden in the rush to celebrate a life. Its fragility is exposed when a future has been cut short in the loss of a child, especially if a young child has little time here. Grief presents us with spiritual crisis. Grief is a spiritual roller coaster. I would rather not dare to compare levels of grief, but it does seem that the loss of a child is particularly heart-rending. We resist the knowledge, but we expect to bury our parents, but to reverse the course of generations is tragic. Active grieving goes on and on.

When faced with the isolation that emerges from a reversal of expectations, reading the Bible provides connection through a number of examples concerning the death of children. Adam and Eve lost their son Abel to murder. Jacob thought that Joseph was gone, and he knew that he would go to his death in sorrow. David's infant died, even after his fervent prayer and fasting, and Absalom was killed in battle but not before he killed Amnon in revenge. Naomi knew both being a widow and her sons died as well. Jephthah sacrificed his daughter in an ill-considered vow; the priests Aaron and Eli both lose sons to death. Jesus is so moved by the sight of the widow of Nain in Luke that he

raises him. At Calvary, Mary saw her son on the cross. So, it puts us in a community of the grieving; we know we are not the only ones to so suffer. With conflicts over the world as a constant state of affairs, we grieve the families of children in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kenya, or the killing fields of some of our own urban areas. The infancy narrative of Jesus is in tandem with the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem. Today we would call that collateral damage or ethnic cleansing.

Not only does Bible reading connect us to others who suffer loss, we become parties to a centuries-old dialogue. After all, condole's roots mean to be sad together. As Patricia Tull writes in Remember the Former Things, different sections of scripture are in active conversation with one another, such as Isaiah and Lamentations. Isaiah's figure of Zion is based on being widowed and having children die, or being unable to bear children. The deep personal pain of loss is used for public purposes in the face of the exile and its aftermath. "Who will grieve with you...who will comfort you?" (Isaiah 51:19) The book of Lamentations is a meditation on the horrors in Jerusalem in the face of the death of so many children. No one is there to comfort or condole (1:2,17,21); any comfort is far away (1:16). "Is there any sorrow like my sorrow?" (1:12) Indeed, even the Spirit "sighs with sighs too deep for words." (Romans 8:26)

Pain does not receive the last word. Hope arises. Comfort comes (Isaiah 51:12). Lamentation one day will turn into the song of celebration. In the center of Lamentations, in the midst of so much weeping, a realization comes of the God's love never ceasing and mercies never ending (3:23). "God does not willing afflict or grieve anyone" (3:33). Instead of abandonment: "you came near when I called on you, you said, "Do not fear." (3:57).

Grief is a spiritual crisis as it attacks our image of God. The theodicy issue will arise, and if the model carried no longer serves, companions may point to other means of addressing it. Usually we respect people's cry of why, and we know that it is hardly the time for any in-depth theological discussion. We rarely, if ever, get to the point of having that discussion. In social psychology terror threat management (TMT) can provide some guidance in aftermath of grief as threat to meaning system and self-concept. Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski, In the Wake of 9/11, see the threat of mortality as undercutting self-esteem and our ordering of the world. In its wake, we build up our defenses and become less tolerant of threats to our perceptions and more punitive. Sometimes, we grow more rigid in our commitment to a particular image of God, such as God being in control. In other people, a complete reversal may occur toward the previous image, with just as much force. For instance we may move toward a more vulnerable image, such as God as suffering with us.

We may grieve in character, or we may find our self-structure under assault. Perhaps we can consider using a typology like that of Corrine Ware in Discovering Your Spiritual Type and approach mourning through head, heart, interior, and action. In a recent article in *Christian Century* (12/11/07) by a bereaved father, Harold K. Bush mentions the public action of creating a foundation in honor of his son, Daniel, which supports urban youth activities. Elizabeth Edwards turned to the fledgling Internet and found community with other grieving people. Those of a more mystical bent may be able to imagine continuing interaction with their love done in heaven. The act of writing a lament by rewriting a psalm may be of interest to those of a more cognitive bent, while the opportunity for the lament to open up veins of feeling may help a heart-oriented person cope.

Grief over the death of children never comes to closure, of course. The hearts and souls of the bereaved are less restless and hungry than broken. Spiritual experience will be reflected in a mirror of loss. We don't get over it; don't reach closure, as much as we reform our lives in the presence of a constant absence. That is not cutting off the memory or continuing attachment. It is a major adjustment in our uneven walk with God, until we meet at table once again in a new time and place.