

Lament as a Path to Healing¹

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Glennon Doyle Melton says: “Here’s the truth I’ve learned: you are not supposed to be happy all the time. Life hurts and it’s hard. Not because you’re doing it wrong, because it hurts for everybody.”² Sometimes the only path to healing is to acknowledge the broken places in our hearts, to weep, to mourn.

Readings:

Excerpt from *Traveling Mercies*

Anne Lamott³

Broken things have been on my mind as the year lurches to an end, because so much broke and broke down this year in my life, and in the lives of the people I love. Lives broke, hearts broke, health broke, minds broke. On the first Sunday of Advent our preacher, Veronica, said that this is life’s nature, that lives and hearts get broken, those of people we love, those of people we’ll never meet. She said the world sometimes feels like the waiting room of the emergency ward, and that we, who are more or less OK for now, need to take the tenderest possible care of the more wounded people in the waiting room, until the healer comes. You sit with people, she said, you bring them juice and graham crackers.

When there's a fresh wound

Victoria Erickson⁴

When there's a fresh wound in your heart, keep it open until it heals. Air it out. Understand it. Dive into it. Be fierce enough to become it. If you ignore it, it won't be able to breathe. If you ignore it, it will merely deepen, spread and resurface later, wanting to release. And when later happens, it will hurt even more, because when later happens, you won't know what you're bleeding for. Remain with it until it clears, and watch the beauty pour into your openness. Remain open to feel lightness. Remain open to feel free.

Sermon

How many times has someone told you, Don't complain! Don't whine. We live in a culture that prefers and emphasizes the “positive” individual emotions: joy, pride, boldness, calm. So-called negative emotions like grief or fear or anger are less welcome, and often expected to be kept hidden. All human beings have emotions like sadness or grief, but how we express them is shaped by cultural and gender expectations.

Many years ago, my then-partner Gary told me a story from his family. When his grandmother died, her sons cried and wept loudly and had to be restrained from throwing themselves into the grave after her coffin. In their Italian-American family, such expression of grief was considered totally normal, a sign of the great love and affection they held for their mother.

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2 <https://www.facebook.com/glennondoylemelton/videos/10154459419004710/>

3 Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, (Anchor Books, 2000)

4 Posted at <https://www.facebook.com/VictoriaEricksonwriter/>

In my German-American family, funerals were a more sober affair. Even if your heart felt like wailing, it was considered more “dignified” to be quiet, and holding up without crying was considered a successful outcome to the funeral. Expressing emotions was seen as a weakness: that was the lesson I learned, in so many spoken and unspoken ways. This was true especially for men and boys—who were never supposed to cry. But I also observed that when my mother cried, my father was not always tender in response. It was as if emotions were a kind of beast that should be tamed by willpower and thought.

On the contrary, I had experienced moments of healing when I could talk about pain I might be feeling in my heart. I had experienced relief when I was able to shed tears in the company of a caring companion. Eventually I became a psychotherapist, to offer that compassionate listening to others, to make room for people to express the grief or fear or anger they carried hidden inside.

But I knew it was also something I needed myself. I needed to learn how to more easily express the pain I carried in my own heart. As expressed in our song today, “learning how to cry is the hardest part.”⁵ And so I gravitated to forms of psychotherapy that included methods for unlocking feelings. Gestalt, psychodrama, hakomi. I didn't change my basic cultural nature, but I became more aware of how I held feelings in my body, and gave myself more permission to express them.

The word “lament” is not a common one in our vocabulary today. Lament is defined as “the passionate expression of grief or sorrow.” Some of the earliest poetry and songs of religion take the form of lament. Lament was a way of giving voice to what people were holding inside. The shepherd king David of ancient Israel is considered the author of the Psalms in the Hebrew Bible. David was not afraid to weep, to mourn, to cry out. Several of the Psalms are songs of lament and grief for painful experiences in his life. Psalm 13 is one such song-prayer.

He cries:

How long, Adonai?
Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I keep asking myself what to do,
with sorrow in my heart every day?
How long must my enemy dominate me?
Look, and answer me, Adonai my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death.
Then my enemy would say, “I was able to beat him”;
and my adversaries would rejoice at my downfall.
But I trust in your grace,
my heart rejoices as you bring me to safety.
I will sing to Adonai, because he gives me
even more than I need.⁶

In the lament poems of David, his expressions of grief and sorrow are always accompanied by an expression of trust in God, and an expectation of help from God. A big reason why he can express his grief so deeply is that he knows that there is a larger love in whose presence he can break down, a stronger space where he can be vulnerable and be held.

5 Ruth Moody, “Beautiful Dawn” (*The Wailin' Jennys*)

6 From the translation, *The Complete Jewish Bible*, by David Stern.

I think each of us needs to feel some sort of compassionate presence, in order for lamenting to be a path to healing. Not everyone will resonate with the idea of God, or the presence of a divine being. But that compassionate presence might be found in another human being, or in a beloved animal, or even in the large impersonal benevolence of the earth itself. At one moment of great pain in my life, I found myself lying face down on the ground outside, as if I could pour all my grief into the soil beneath my heart. And I was comforted.

When we are infants, crying is the only way we have to express our needs. We are completely vulnerable. It is the response from our parents or caregivers that teaches us that we are safe and that we are lovable. Even as adults, feelings of grief and sorrow are linked to vulnerability, the awareness that we are at the mercy of forces beyond our control. Compassion becomes a gentle and necessary container in which to hold that vulnerability, to find comfort and assurance.

When we have experienced a compassionate presence in our larger world, we can also bring that compassion to our own emotions, we can be that presence for ourselves. We learn that everyone has pain, that it is human to experience sorrow and grief, fear and anger. Our culture sometimes treats emotional pain as a kind of failure—as if we should always “keep a stiff upper lip,” and “have an optimistic outlook,” and “hope for the best.” We are quick to blame ourselves and others for the tragedies that beset us, as if we had brought them upon ourselves. While there may be a few such events that are our own fault, mostly we don't have that kind of power.

Glennon Doyle Melton writes:

Here's the truth I've learned: you are not supposed to be happy all the time. Life hurts and it's hard. Not because you're doing it wrong, because it hurts for everybody.

Don't avoid the pain. Don't numb it, don't run from it. Pain is not a hot potato. Pain is traveling professor.

All the wisdom and courage you need to become the person you are meant to be is inside your pain. Be still with it, let the pain come, let it go, let it leave you with the fuel you'll burn to get your work done on this earth.⁷

What might change for us if we imagined our pain to be our teacher, rather than a source of guilt or blame? Pain in the human body is meant to call our attention to something that is wrong, something that needs our attention. That is true for emotional pain as well. But we can't learn from it if we run from it, if we deny ourselves the chance to sit with it, experience it, express it.

There is no one right way to be with our pain. Perhaps for you, grief comes with great sobbing tears. Perhaps it is more like a dull tightness in the chest. Perhaps it is gray and numb. Perhaps it is thrashing and desperate. We don't have to conform to some kind of set program. Because we hold even our emotional pain in our bodies, expressing our pain can also take the form of bodily movement. I remember one day, I was alone in the house and I played a sad, sad song and just danced the sadness I was feeling. Lamentation of the body.

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/glennondoylemelton/videos/10154459419004710/>

Lamenting is a way of being present to our pain, expressing it to ourselves or to another person, with compassion. We make a choice not to judge ourselves for suffering, but to accept it with self-compassion. One of the things that really helped me to stay present to pain was the practice of breathing into the pain.

I remember a time when I was grieving the loss of someone I had loved. Some part of my brain was working furiously trying to figure out what to do, how to escape from this horrible pain. Should I call a friend? Who could I call? Should I go for a walk, should I go back to bed? Should I try to read a book or watch TV? But then, I couldn't stand doing that either.

In the middle of this frantic attempt to escape, I remembered something a therapist had told me: feel the feelings. Just keep breathing and feel the feelings. To do this, I sat down and began to notice my breathing, to feel the air coming in to fill my body, and then to flow back out again. I called to mind where in my body I felt the grief, the painful feelings I was feeling. I could feel a tightness in the middle of my chest, in the place of my physical heart. Then I imagined my breath filling that part of my body, filling it full, and then passing through and out again. Just that. Breathing into the pain, breathing out from the pain. Not trying to change it, not trying to fix it, just breathing into it, and breathing out from it.

Once there was a young prince whose family sought to protect him from all suffering. And it worked for awhile. But one day, as a young man, he goes outside the castle walls, and sees people dealing with poverty, sickness, and death. He is deeply disturbed by what what he sees, and abandons his life of luxury, seeking to understand suffering. For a time, he follows the path of the ascetic monks, of fasting and deprivation, but that path doesn't give him the answers he needs. Finally, he sits beneath a tree, until he wakes up. He becomes the Buddha.

Pema Chodron says, “The first noble truth of the Buddha is that when we feel suffering, it doesn't mean that something is wrong... Suffering is part of life, and we don't have to feel it's happening because we personally made the wrong move.”⁸ She goes on to say, however, that when we are suffering we usually do think that we've done something wrong. We think we need to fix something or change something. We can become caught in a panic about trying to make things better.

We naturally want to run away from difficult feelings, and cling to pleasurable feelings. But if we can relax, if we can stay present to them, if we can express them, all of the feelings can be our teachers. Pema Chodron called it “leaning into the feelings.” She tells the story of her teacher, Trungpa Rinpoche, who was walking with a group of his students into an unfamiliar monastery one day. They encountered a vicious dog that was barking wildly at the end of his chain. They walked around him, but then, suddenly, the chain came undone, and he lunged at them. The students froze, but Rinpoche ran as fast as he could, directly toward the dog. The dog was so surprised that he turned around and fled.⁹ In the same way, if we run toward difficult feelings, if we embrace them, something unexpected can happen.

⁸ Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, p. 40.

⁹ Chodron, p. 14-15.

I remember that poem of Rumi's called "The Guest House."¹⁰

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

To embrace our feelings as our teachers and guides, we must let go of labeling them as right or wrong. I know that most of us are very used to making judgments about ourselves. I imagine that I should be hopeful, or peaceful, or happy, even if I am dealing with a difficulty. But suffering makes me humble, because I must acknowledge what I really am, right in this moment.

One purpose of the practice of meditation is to help us be present to what we are experiencing. We can notice when we feel pleasure, and when we feel pain. We can notice our patterns. We can notice when we hide, and when we feel ready to welcome in our fears. We can breathe deeply, and lean in, with compassion. Pema Chodron says, "In practicing meditation, we're not trying to live up to some kind of ideal... We're just being with our experience whatever it is... If sometimes we can approach what scares us, and sometimes we absolutely can't, then that's our experience."¹¹

I think meditation might be likened to an internal form of lamentation. In meditation, we are offering to ourself a compassionate listening ear, just as we might offer such compassion to a friend who is suffering. We sit with our heart, listening to all the feelings and thoughts that are expressed within. We don't have any advice or answers, just presence. And with such compassionate permission, our hearts express themselves to us.

10 From *The Essential Rumi*, versions by Coleman Barks

11 Chodron, p. 17.

I invite you now, to take this time of quiet meditation to listen to your own heart, to be present to the feelings you carry today. Breathe into the feelings, and breathe out from the feelings. Hold your heart in compassion. When our silence is ended, we will express the feelings of our hearts through singing the song, *Comfort Me*.¹²

Meditation

Closing Words

Louise Erdrich tells us:

Life will break you. Nobody can protect you from that, and living alone won't either, for solitude will also break you with its yearning. You have to love. You have to feel. It is the reason you are here on earth. You are here to risk your heart. You are here to be swallowed up. And when it happens that you are broken, or betrayed, or left, or hurt, or death brushes near, let yourself sit by an apple tree and listen to the apples falling all around you in heaps, wasting their sweetness. Tell yourself that you tasted as many as you could.¹³

12 Mimi Bornstein-Doble, 1995., #1002 in *Singing the Journey* (UUA)

13 *The Painted Drum*, (HarperCollins: 2005) p. 274.