

The Place of Grief in the Spiritual Life

Tricia de Beer March 26, 2022

The atrocities in our racial history were mostly committed by Christians – the 300 years of chattel slavery, the Middle Passage, the separation of families, the abandonment of Reconstruction and the Freedman’s Bureau, the Black Codes and Jim Crow laws which made ordinary people into criminals, the push back against the progress of Civil Rights and the establishment of a system of mass incarceration. Most of this took place at the hands of people who were Christians. All of this was at the hands of Christians who held their faith in one part of their being and their treatment of Black people in another part. Emmanuel Katongole, a Ugandan Catholic priest and theologian reflecting on the Rwandan genocide said that “The resurrection of the church begins with lament.” What he was pointing to is that there is an amazing transformation of the heart that can happen when we allow ourselves to feel the pain of what is lost, whether that be on a personal level or a corporate one. Francis Weller in his book *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, said: “There is some strange intimacy between grief and aliveness, some sacred exchange between what seems unbearable and what is most exquisitely alive. Grief is subversive, undermining our white society’s quiet agreement that we behave and stay in control of our emotions at all times. Our broken heart has the potential to open us to a wider sense of identity, one capable of seeing through the partitions that have segregated self and world.”

What I have observed in facilitating groups learning about our racial history is how difficult it is for us to stay with our grief – or even to name the grief. There is a tendency to skip to a desire to “fix it” and we want to jump immediately to what we can do. Or there can be another response that is just as unhelpful, and that is to cling to guilt and shame. I believe that guilt is a natural reaction when we see that we have hurt another. Personally, I have found guilt to be part of my journey in recognizing what has been done in my name and how I have directly contributed to the suffering of People of Color. However, it is unhelpful to get stuck there, and ultimately it can keep us from responding to the need to challenge injustice and work for equity.

I have come to believe that it is crucial to allow ourselves simply to be in the pain and to do this in community before God so that we are transformed. This is the soul’s work in learning about our racial history. This is not easy, because everything in our Western culture teaches us that we should be happy and if we are not, we are probably doing something wrong. It lifts up triumphalism, progress, and success. The only time we allow grief is perhaps at a funeral. Even then, we laud those “who carried themselves so well” which often means they did not cry. We have made grief a private thing we do in a clinical setting. We are a culture that focuses on the future and we don’t want to think much about the past. Witness what is happening around the country with those who are trying to make Critical Race Theory, and any teaching which looks at systemic racism in our history, a boogeyman that threatens our children’s well-being. And the church has gone along with this western allergy to grief and pain. It used to be that the body would be laid out in the church and people would come to mourn together before the funeral. People said the psalms together out loud, sometimes in procession. General Confession was

something for which people prepared and many would avail themselves of the sacrament of reconciliation. Today few people make use of this option, even though it is in the prayerbook. I have had people tell me that they never come to Good Friday services “because they make me sad.”

Yet as Kim/Hill say in Healing Our Broken Humanity “Scripture teaches us that we can’t move toward hope, peace, transformation, and reconciliation without going through sorrow, mourning, regret, and lament.” More than a third of the Psalms are laments, like Ps. 142 “I cry aloud to the Lord, I lift up my voice to the God of mercy...” Ps. 51 says “Wash me thoroughly from my sin... restore to me the joy of your salvation”, Ps. 61 “from the depths of my being I call to you for my heart is faint.” Francis Weller, says he believes that we need to undertake an “apprenticeship in sorrow.”

We need to learn again the lost skills and ritual ways of holding our grief in the context of our community of faith. He is not suggesting that we fixate on grief but that when it comes, we welcome it and give it the time and space it needs to be metabolized into our life. My husband and I have come to see that sometimes what we are witnessing on TV news is so painful or outrageous it does violence to our souls to simply turn off the TV and pretend we are not feeling a great weight on our hearts. We have learned to sometimes stop and pray together, do some journaling, chant, or go for a walk and talk about what we are feeling. This is just one example of what an apprenticeship to sorrow may look like. Another option is to write your own lament when your heart is particularly sorrowful. Below is an outline of a lament. A lament is crying out to God with our grief and pain. The Kim/Hill book speaks of 9 components that make up a psalm of lament. For simplicity’s sake, we might focus today on 5 elements:

- The Invocation: We address ourselves and our complaints to God.
- The Complaint: We describe in as much specificity and with as much concrete detail as we can, articulating what is wrong in our world.
- The Confession: We connect the situation to our part in it, and ask for forgiveness
- The Petition: We call on God to show up and save us.
- The Thanksgiving: Having poured out our anguish, we can turn towards God in trust and thanksgiving.

Grief, properly attended to, both acknowledges what has been lost and ensures that we won’t forget what must be remembered. Here is a meditation, which could form yet another practice in our apprenticeship. For the moment just let yourself rest, breathe... As you breathe in, imagine yourself sitting in a room meditating. Let the image come to you however it comes. Let the image fully emerge. See yourself in a chair or on a cushion, simply noticing your breath. As you settle into the image, you hear someone open the door to the room, walk in, and sit in front of you. You open your eyes and see it is you sitting there in front of you. Somehow, in an instant, the entire story of this person is known to you. You know all the ways he or she has suffered, has been betrayed, has betrayed others. You know all the moments of despair and loneliness. You know all the places of shame and neglect, loss and death. And you say to yourself, “this person knows suffering.” At this moment, sensing this person’s sorrows in your heart, simply

radiate lovingkindness to the one sitting in front of you. Distracting thoughts will naturally arise, but just come back to your heart and extend your compassion to this person. Let this flow happen for several minutes if you can. When you feel ready, offer a blessing such as “May you know God’s love. May you be free of suffering. May you be at peace.”

And now, let this image fade and allow one person to emerge who touched your heart in the readings and viewings for Sacred Ground, or picture an ancestor and the harm they suffered, or the harm they caused, or picture who they harmed. Let someone real or imagined float into your awareness and repeat the process, visualizing that one in the chair in front of you. As we grieve together and alone, in God’s presence, we open ourselves to the miracle of healing and the new life which is promised in our baptism.

Meditation modified from
Weller, Francis. *The Wild Edge of Sorrow* (p.156). North Atlantic Books. Kindle Edition. Note:
Another resource I have found very helpful is *The Inner Work of Racial Justice* by Rhonda V. Magee.

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