

WHEN TEARS SING

The Art of Lament in Christian Community

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Introduction

God's Peculiar Wealth

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy!

—PSALM 126:5

A Society of the Fragile and Resilient

Several years ago, the parish I served in Boston repointed the mortar between the stones of the church's tired facade. The chairperson of the building committee asked my spouse, Victoria, a graphic designer, to create a construction sign to announce the renovation. The parish's physical plant is on Newbury Street, the toniest street in town. Victoria created a sign that was more "boutique" than routine, something to catch the eye of the thousands of people who walked by the property each day. Her sign centered on words by Tennessee Williams, which he chose for his gravestone: *The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks.*¹

The quotation became something of a mantra for the parish and a gift to those who passed by, an arresting gift for a few. One passerby, a friend from the neighborhood who remained on the fringes of the parish out of distaste for religion, sent this note about the sign:

¹ Tennessee Williams, *Camino Real* (New York: New Directions Books, 1953).

Last summer, I saw for the first time the quote on the church lawn. At first my mind was confused by the words and I didn't consciously understand the sentence. And, then, seconds later, I was overcome by such intense sadness at the realization of what the words meant—almost incomprehensible to my conscious mind, yet at a cellular level my being understood—and my tears fell uncontrollably. I began to play a game with myself of reading the words over and over to see when I would finally be able to read them without crying—it never happened. To me the words meant that this delicate, innocent beauty—the violets—were such pure goodness, that even though they were fragile, tiny, almost meaningless to some, these beautiful, innocent little violets kept growing and multiplying and their light and beauty broke open the hard, cold, impenetrable darkness of the rock. The realization that light, goodness, beauty, is so powerful that it is capable of breaking the hard, cold darkness is overwhelmingly emotionally jarring. Bill, is this something akin to God?²

Yes. And God declares, with open arms, our citizenship in the society of fragile and resilient people. We may not think we are eligible to vote. Yet God knows the troubles we've seen, and the troubles we cannot or will not let ourselves see—"That very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26). God also knows the enduring and resolute strength we discover when we bring our vulnerability into relation.

In the society of fragile and resilient people, shared sorrow, suffering, and trauma are transposed into ironic, immeasurable joy. Ironic because we do not readily imagine joy to emerge from

² William Blaine-Wallace, "A Pastoral Psychology of Lament: Pastoral Method, Priestly Act, Prophetic Witness" (PhD diss., Catholic University of Brabant [Tilburg, the Netherlands], 2009), 12–13.

shared pain. Immeasurable because the depths of joy cannot be plumbed. Joy, in the language of T. S. Eliot, is “a hint half guessed.”³

Tears express this community's ecclesiology. Tears are the heart of its civility. A chorus of tears expresses church at its finest. Tears are the church's surest balm and verve in what novelist Walker Percy, almost five decades ago, in the first sentence of his unnervingly prophetic novel *Love in the Ruins*,⁴ called “these dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A., in the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western World.” *When Tears Sing* is a commentary on and explication of the music of shared sorrow, suffering, and trauma.

The Strong Tug of Sufficiency

Though we belong to the society of the fragile and resilient, we are often slow to embrace God's invitation for us to bring the more broken dimensions of ourselves into relation. It's as if we are asked to accept an invitation to abandon ourselves, to take leave of the inordinate amount of compensatory activity invested in sustaining a thin wherewithal—the polished veneer of an intact self. We have received the grace of collective vulnerability. We know sufficiency's short half-life—the attainment of an adequate life can be fleeting and is an ever-moving target. Still, the content and pace of our lives presume a greater trust in buffers and borders that secure our material and relational property. In America, the Benedictine balance of work and prayer as the heart of community is privatized. While hard to confess, the *labora* of my daily life reflects a popular mid-nineteenth-century *ora*: “Lord bless Me. My wife. Our son

³ T. S. Eliot, “Four Quartets: The Dry Salvages,” in *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980), 136.

⁴ Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 3.

John. His wife. Us Four, no more. Amen.”⁵ We are cultivated to attain, hold onto, and take back sufficiency when it abandons us.

We strive to have and to hold onto enough to sustain an adequate level of existence. Why not? The issue is what we determine to be adequate. What constitutes adequacy is often determined by the tribe to which we belong. The couple who lives “off the grid” just over the hill from our farm in the western foothills of Maine has one idea of what constitutes enough. The family who jets to its summer home in Bar Harbor has another idea. We want to belong. Belonging demands attention to persona, how we seek to mirror what the tribe privileges.

During the late 1980s, I spent weekdays stewarding a hospice program at Grady Hospital in Atlanta. The King Center and Ebenezer Baptist Church were just around the corner. On the ninth floor a team of caregivers and volunteers oversaw the dying of mostly impoverished African Americans with end-stage cancer and younger white men with AIDS. The commonality of death sculpted two communities unfamiliar with each other into what was, for me, my closest experience of “the beloved community.”⁶ I spent my weeknights and weekends at home on what citizens of Atlanta proper call the Powdered Donut, the city’s outer circle of white enclaves. During the commute home, as I passed Stone Mountain, a sanctuary of the Ku Klux Klan, five miles from my subdivision, I put on the mask of the white middle class.

A Spirituality of Scarcity

We renounce our place in the commonwealth of the fragile and resilient in order to bank enough sufficiency to buffer ourselves from unanticipated factors and events that impinge upon us. The

⁵ “My Wife and My Wife’s Son,” *Harper’s Weekly*, February 8, 1868, 91.

⁶ Popularized by Martin Luther King Jr., the “beloved community” is the idea of a society based on justice, equality, and love of one’s neighbor.

problem, a spiritual one, is our belief that there is a fixed amount of resources to go around. Jesus reminds us, in the parable of the rich fool (Lk 12:13–21), that we fill our barns in the service of a holy scarcity. “And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years’” (v. 19a). Sacred regard for scarcity suggests that the cosmos is complete. Creation is a zero-sum game. Get what we can while we can.

A Spirituality of the Self

Our devotion to scarcity propels us to secure and protect a self-sufficient identity resonant with North America's escalating trust in rugged individualism and independence. Over the last fifty years many trees have been sacrificed for the production of self-help books. Huge amounts of time and money have been lost to the quest to find oneself. A great deal of therapy has been aimed at acquiring a more bounded, “individuated,” actualized self. And, as if that is not enough to wear us out, we try on different selves.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman writes about “momentary identities.” One's identity is “for today until-further-notice.”⁷ There are multitudes of promises, ideologies, products, regimens, allegiances, and spiritualities vying to suspend our search and claim our souls for a while. The quest to discover one's self and to try on different selves suggests that the self's primary relation is with itself, at the expense of relation with others.

This is not necessarily bad. Modernity's birth of the *subjective I* created the possibility of self-examination as the spring from which one may determine the shape of a faithful life. Medieval peasants were not that concerned with who they were, might be, or could become as a child of God. They mostly knew what they should do, where they could get help doing it, and who they could go

⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Morality, Immorality, and Other Life Strategies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 167.

to for forgiveness and penance when they did not do it. On the other hand, the early years of modernism offered Martin Luther more “space” for a fierce and prolonged existential wrestling with the nature of salvation, and with the question: What does it mean to be a child of God?

Modernity also offered greater possibilities for examining what it means to be a self-in-relation.⁸ Luther’s laborious engagement with what constitutes being a child of God led him to give almost sacramental status to the grace that is “the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren.”⁹ My good friend echoes Luther: “Whether to take the plunge into relation with another person doesn’t turn on any reasoned process at all, but on the self we’ve somehow become. That’s why some of us run into burning buildings and others run from sick friends.”

A Morality of the Other

Bauman offered more than a diagnosis of the postmodern self; he proposed a view of the self that is expressive of those who run into burning buildings. Bauman situates this self in the moral philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, the self is “I being *for* the Other, I bearing *responsibility* for the Other.”¹⁰ This is more ontological, who we are, than teleological, what we are supposed to do. Relation to the Other is what it means to be human, and the self remains human by living for others.¹¹ Levinas, over the years, has figured large in my own contemplations on the self-in-relation. I further develop Levinas’s moral philosophy later in the book.

⁸ Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 14.

⁹ Paul Timothy McCain, ed., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 2007), 319.

¹⁰ Bauman, *Morality, Immorality, and Other Life Strategies*, 42.

¹¹ Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 15.

The society of fragile and resilient people is composed of selves, who try and favor living for one another. A foundational premise of this book is that “I being *for* the other, I bearing *responsibility* for the other” is the more moral path. The path is countercultural, an alternative and prophetic position. We need one another to help us stay on the path.

Moreover, I find that life offered for the Other is not a martyred life. When I prayerfully behold the tear-gassed child screaming at our nation’s southwest border, I bestow upon her the authority to reorder my priorities. I am released from obligation and freed for engagement. The moral is transposed to the mystic.

The Dread of Impermanence

Praying the relational self strengthens our trust in the beauty of what is constant.¹² James Baldwin writes that the constants of life are relational: “birth, struggle, death, and so is love, though we may not always think so.”¹³ The quest to find and trust the beauty of these relational constants requires time and daily reorientation to patience and attention. The parable of the rich barn builder (Lk 12:13–21) is a timeless story of the human compulsion to outrun death and, in so doing, to disregard what matters. Daily prayer keeps before us a struggle original to each of us and our relations—the tendency to take for granted, leave behind, triage, and hand off to professional caregivers the dynamics of birth, struggle, death, and love. Baldwin continues:

Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples,

¹² James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International, 1993; original, New York: The Dial Press, 1963), 91.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 92.

mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death—ought to decide, indeed, to *earn* one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life.¹⁴

A Domesticated *Koinonia*

Our desire for citizenship in the society of the fragile and resilient ones, once it has passed through the sieve of sufficiency, often comes out as something like leftover grits. We tend to settle for and expect little more than lukewarm offerings to give or receive from neighbors. Our obeisance before the national idol of sufficiency dulls our desire for *koinonia*.

But here and there our desire for participation in the society of the fragile and resilient ones is quickened. Life-the-way-it-really-is¹⁵ blemishes or topples the idol of sufficiency. We long for hearty community. But soon enough, life-the-way-it-might-be, what John Douglas Hall names as North America's "officially optimistic society,"¹⁶ stimulates us to re-enthroned the idol of sufficiency.

This back-and-forth dynamic between the desire for sufficiency and the longing for *koinonia* is exhausting. Weary, we defer to self-sufficiency at the expense of community. We shelve the interdependent commerce of God that quiets the autonomy-laden priorities, claims, and goals we set for ourselves, desire for our loved ones, and expect from elected leaders. The more evidence we have to trust

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 91–92.

¹⁵ "Life-the-way-it-really-is" is a phrase I first heard in the "basic training" course of The Ecumenical Institute, an autonomous division of the Church Federation of Greater Chicago, which, in 1964, was incorporated as a nonprofit organization in the State of Illinois.

¹⁶ John Douglas Hall, "How My Mind Has Changed," *The Christian Century* 127, no. 8 (September 7, 2010): 35.

the web of life usually does not move us to significantly reorder our priorities. No wonder, then, that Jesus's persistent appeal for his disciples to lose their lives was received more as a threat than a possibility. It is hard to hear Jesus's offer for us to lose our lives as a gift rather than as a demand.

Furthermore, our consumer society works to keep sufficiency just beyond our grasp so that we will keep grabbing for it. I am continuously urged to replace my latest and no longer greatest cell phone or coffee maker, both of which became obsolete soon after they were removed from the box. We are trained like the greyhounds at the track to chase the forever-out-of-reach, mechanically propelled rabbit. No wonder that it takes loss and tragedy to wake us up, if only for a while.

James Baldwin's piercing indictment of white dominance in a radio dialogue with Reinhold Niebuhr in the aftermath of the September 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, which made martyrs of four little girls, remains far too relevant more than a half century later:

The nature of life forces you in, in any extremity, any extreme, to discover what you really live by, whereas most Americans have been for so long, so safe and sleepy, that they don't any longer have any real sense of what they live by. I think they really think it may be Coca-Cola.¹⁷

A Lukewarm Church

The North American church honors the idol of sufficiency. Church trusts sufficiency more than vulnerability, and it does so for reasons that make sense. We want to survive. Of late, our trust has been

¹⁷ "The Protestant Hour" (Atlanta: The Protestant Radio and Television Center, Inc., 1963), quoted in James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 54.

rattled by the erosion of our relatively sufficient existence as post-Christian North America places us more at the margins of daily life. The first-world church is losing body mass. We experience the deterioration of attendance, membership, property, seminaries, power, and influence. We seek to turn around our losses. We want our lives back.

I believe that the church will not be restored to what it once was. I cannot imagine effective therapies, new “clinical trials” returning us to the more substantial days that were the last half of the twentieth century. My doubts are not fresh news. For a generation, emerging and progressive church movements have broken new ground for a renewed, or what we might call an ancient, pre-Constantine orthodoxy. There is a budding movement toward a more relation-based body of Christ.

A Spirituality of Tears

A spirituality of tears advances the church's renewal. A spirituality of tears privileges vulnerability over sufficiency, relation over autonomy. A vulnerable and relational body of Christ exposes an emaciated assertion about existence: life is good until bad things happen. The duality of good and bad leaves gnawing questions about the nature of God. Is God too small or am I too bad? Moreover, the dichotomy of good and evil propagates ineffective responses to a world in crisis—“my truth is better than your truth” begets the “axis of evil,” which begets “might is right.” As perverse as this may seem, our tax monies fund it, and, in the end, little noise is made about it.

The relational heart of a spirituality of tears expresses an existence that transcends good, bad, and in between. Recently I was called to the home of a ninety-five-year-old woman who was actively dying. The house was full of family sitting vigil with their

beloved matriarch. A young woman, the great-granddaughter, held her four-day-old baby boy. She walked to the side of the bed and placed the child on the chest of his great-great-grandmother. They seemed to be of one breath. Here was an icon of several generations of family relation. An accounting of family life would include many manifestations and variations of good, bad, and in between, with plenty of commentary on who has been good, bad, and in between. But at this moment, the ledger dissolved into a prayerful "Amen."

A spirituality of tears applies a holy "this-ness" to existence. Hurt, disillusionment, melancholia, loss, anguish, inadequacy, and trauma are not extraneous or peripheral visitations. They are integral parts of daily life. Moreover, the legions of sisters and brothers who have suffered trauma bear a disruption of personhood, an indelible spiritual crisis. Trauma is not an event that takes place at a particular time. Trauma "is an event that continues, that persists in the present. Trauma is what does not go away. It persists in symptoms that live on in the body and in the intrusive fragments of memories that return."¹⁸ Deacon Julius Lee, staring at the foundation of what was his home before Hurricane Katrina, says, "The storm is gone, but the 'after the storm' is always here."¹⁹

When the life-giving and life-taking dimensions of lived experience are of a whole, not segregated like sheep and goats, we are less likely to see daily life as a riddle for God to explain or fix. We are apt to pray more simple and relational intentions that are answered through community. Relation is a prayer for forbearance answered.²⁰ Forbearance borne of relation is more and different than merely holding on and getting through. It arouses a more quietly offered and deeply experienced "Alleluia!"

¹⁸ Shelly Rambo, *Trauma and Recovery: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 2.

¹⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 1.

²⁰ I am grateful to my priest colleague and friend Sara Gavit for her insights regarding godly forbearance.

A spirituality of tears reorients and enriches what we mean by grief. Grief is more than what we experience and survive in times of bigger loss—death, broken relation, transition, loss of health, loss of work. Grief is a more reflective measuring of our lives both during and between times of bigger loss. Grief is prayerful attention, an awareness, acknowledgment, and embrace of life—the-way-it-really-is. Grief also pays attention to the many ways we avoid, deflect, and defend against life—the-way-it-really-is.

A turn toward a spirituality of tears is less about repentance, a turn from wrong to right, than a conversion begun and sustained by slowing down enough to see how our devotion to sufficiency distances us from God and neighbor. Close attention to one another amid life—the-way-it-really-is bridges the distance between self, God, and neighbor. Consolation and solidarity rise from and reside in the space between self, God, and neighbor. God rises among us. Resurrection is not a release from existence, not “an ecclesiastical projection of the ideology of success that drives the American dream.”²¹ Resurrection is near to and of existence, a chapter in the theology of the cross,²² an emerging, convivial joy that begins in, transpires among, and vivifies the community of the bent and broken.

Barbara Holmes makes art of joy:

Joy Unspeakable
is not silent,
it moans, hums, and bends
to the rhythm of a dancing universe.
It is a fractal of transcendent hope,
a hologram of God's heart,
a black hole of unknowing.
.....

²¹ Hall, *How My Mind Has Changed*, 35.

²² *Ibid.*, 37.

For Africans in bondage
in the Americas
joy unspeakable is that moment of
mystical encounter
when God tiptoes into the hush arbor,
testifies about Divine suffering,
and whispers in our ears,
“Don’t forget,
I taught you how to fly
on a wing and a prayer,
when you’re ready
let’s go!”²³

Lament and Relation

The organizing focus of a spirituality of tears is *lament*, a word that has biblical, theological, and pastoral meaning and significance. I construct lament as fundamentally relational. Lament is deep relation among the broken and bent. Lament is the art of life-in-relation amid both the blatant and subtle clutches of life-the-way-it-really-is. Attention to lament, then, is less about pastoral care, less about care for struggling members of the flock. Lament is more about how the flock, embedded in life-the-way-it-really-is, gathers for one another, and how such a convivial spirit blesses the world. Pastoral care attends to those who mourn. Lament is the passion that emerges between the mournful. Lament is born in the space between.

Lament is more and different from the solitary wailing walls to which we bring our sorrow, suffering, and trauma. By wailing wall I mean my early morning walks around the pond down the street

²³ Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), xvii.

several years ago. There, my less-constrained howls helped me better accompany Victoria through cancer. By lament, I mean Victoria and me talking together after my walks. In this conversational space our anxiety was eased enough to bring our fears into conversation. Such conversation was our way to go on together.²⁴ Lament's parish home might be an ordinary Wednesday morning bible study or the lingering of two choir members in the parking lot after choir practice Wednesday night.

Lament as Inquiry: Yes and No Days

When I was multifaith chaplain of a small liberal arts college, Victoria and I hosted dinners in our home for students, faculty, and staff. Folks from various religious orientations and no religious affiliation came for supper, twenty to forty at a time. We'd begin by holding hands in silence around the dinner table. People were invited to break the silence with one of two words, either *yes* or *no*, or with a combination of *yes* and *no*, with brief commentary on their choice. *Yes* meant a great day; *no* meant a bad day. *Yes-no* meant a more-good-than-bad-day; *no-yes* meant a more-bad-than-good day.

There were few clear *yes* or *no* days. Mostly combos. *No-yes*: "My grandfather's got to have yet another surgery. I called my mom to find out more. We are both really scared." *Yes-no*: "I called my dad

²⁴ "Go on together" and "going on together" are phrases used in postmodern psychology and psychotherapy to represent Ludwig Wittgenstein's understanding of words as the apparatus of relation. Words are the way we go on together. Postmodern theorists Tom Andersen and Harlene Anderson place words in the broader context of embodied *utterances* for the purpose of relational collaboration—words being one of the many ways, and not necessarily the dominant way, we go on together. For example, sometimes I catch myself leaning into a conversation partner's emerging expression. I discover that I am on the edge of my chair. Likewise, tears are an utterance.

to tell him that one semester of premed is enough for me. He didn't have a heart attack!" During the meal smaller groups formed where offerings around the table were expanded and nuanced in what my colleague and I called grace notes.

A No-Yes Afternoon

As I write just now, it is late Saturday afternoon. It's a *no-yes* day. A mild melancholia creates greater desire to gather for Eucharist tomorrow morning. I imagine the *yes* and *no* experiences parishioners will bring silently to worship and offer at the altar. I would love it if the *no-yes* folks could somehow find one another after worship. What stories might we tell, and what might emerge in the sharing of them?

A Yes-No Community

I live in one of the poorer counties of Maine. Local churches offer a lot of people power to help sustain those who are at or over the edge. One parish offers a warming center during the cold months. Between fifty and one hundred people show up for lunch and bags of food. Over time, more sufficient people from the community come out of a hunger for community. The distinction between server and served dissolves.

Four or five people from the parish prepare and serve the meal. They've shared kitchen duty for several years. Within the group, *life-the-way-it-really-is* manifests as cancer, divorce, incarceration, domestic violence, addiction, dementia, infidelity, child sexual abuse, homelessness, and more. They lightly hold one another's brokenness. Sorrow, suffering, and trauma are shared through the utterances of conversation, laughter, tears, cooking, serving, and cleaning up. Time at the warming center, both in the kitchen and around the tables, slows down for relation.

Lament and the Self

Relation with self, too, is lamentational. Our internal dialogue is polyphonic. Sometimes our inner voices are in rhythm and on pitch. Sometimes they compete for attention. Voices internalized from earlier trauma and suffering, often manifested as shame, guilt, righteousness, belittlement, or inadequacy, drown out gentler and kinder voices. Voices from our culture, which makes sacrosanct the sufficient self, seep into and muddle the voices of connection. At times, experience collars us, reveals sufficiency's hold on us, and slows us down to tune our inner voices in the service of a more relational symphony of the self.

Back in the day, I served as chaplain in an inpatient hospice facility in the Boston area. Ben was a patient with whom I was particularly close. He was a lively one, from my region of the South, who spent many of his early years as a hobo, and liked to remind me that his theme song was "My Way." Ben died while I was visiting other patients down the hall. I did not get word of his death. I walked into Ben's room expecting to pick up where we left off.

The stillness of death.²⁵ No need to write down the time the visit started and ended. No need to deliver a presence that lightened his load. No need to chart the encounter in a way that ensured reimbursement. No need to be a sufficient chaplain by means of an efficient stewarding of the visit and the day. For a long moment I stood there not just as a chaplain but as his friend. I saw Ben,

²⁵ I have seen many dead bodies. Yet Ben's body, that morning, was uniquely unnerving. As I reflect now on the experience, the painting of *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* by Hans Holbein the Younger, painted between 1520 and 1522, comes to mind. I find that the painting penetrates the filters we use to absorb death, and I find that my contemplation of the painting exposes the impermanence of life in a way that loosens and dissolves, for a while, our priorities that are in the service of sufficiency.

the quilt on his bed, the photographs on the bedside table, and his toothbrush in the bathroom, all with an attention I hadn't had before. How much do I miss by crossing the thresholds of the dying as one with a role to fill and a good to deliver? What do I not see with the prescription lens of professional chaplain? Where might a curiosity borne in the territory of the moment, glasses off, move our conversations?

Teachers of Lament

Most of our teachers for the formation of a more lamentational Christian community, whom we will meet in the pages ahead, are further away from the sufficiency most of us depend on. Those whose lives are barely sustainable without intense and ongoing interdependent relation have a lot to teach us about the power of lament. Two communities stand out. One I witnessed as a child and studied and taught as an adult: the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The other I served among for several years: the patients, families, and caretakers of the first wave of the AIDS pandemic, often referenced as the Missing Generation.

SNCC was organized after the student lunch counter protests in the early 1960s of the civil rights movement in the southern United States. It was a community of mostly younger black men and women from the South along with mostly white, college-aged students from other parts of the country. They joined together to take up the very dangerous work of voter registration in the rural Deep South.

The sustenance for their daily expense of selves was early morning coffee on the porches of the sharecroppers they sought to empower and late nights of animated conversation among themselves. Imagine a rising senior at Syracuse University and Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael before he changed his name) debating the

violence or nonviolence of SNCC's strategies. United States Representative John Lewis, one-time chairperson of SNCC, remembers the rousing and absorbing conversations with fellow "Snickers" (a nickname given to members of SNCC) as the enactment of SNCC's "business plan."²⁶

The business plan required and depended on intense relation. White students were trained for the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer at what was then Western College in Oxford, Ohio. The night before they were bused to Mississippi, they received news, at the closing assembly, that three civil rights worker—Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney—had gone missing after being stopped for a "traffic violation" after leaving a meeting with black church members whose building had been burned to the ground. Three days later their burned-out car was found. Two months later their bodies were discovered buried under an earthen dam, each having been shot in the head at point-blank range. Deep and ongoing lamentational relation helped to ease deep fears, strengthened fierce resolve, and stoked the passion of SNCC volunteers.

The Missing Generation is the 235,000 people in the United States who died of AIDS between 1982 and 1993, before AIDS became a more chronic illness. I served among the Missing Generation between 1985 and 1993. Among its members I witnessed an illogical power issuing from weakness shared, a restorative force that burrowed up and through what was a seemingly impenetrable granite of horrific death and a nation that mostly abandoned and judged them. Their tears-in-relation hydrated an arid landscape of death, bigotry, and neglect. Their shared sorrow created and sustained hope.

²⁶ The Rev. John Lewis used the phrase "business plan" in his keynote address to the SNCC fiftieth anniversary conference at Shaw University, Raleigh, North Carolina, April 15–18, 2010.

Linda, who made her way from the streets to our parish, slowly garnered the courage to take Eucharist and from Eucharist to engage in parish life. And the survivors of the 1994 Rwandan genocide make us more aware of the power of rituals of lament when hope seems impossible. They reveal the almost unimaginable possibility of forgiveness through processes of lament. Present-day social movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo herald a new awakening of the power of communal lament after several quieter decades.

A Skin in the Game

My passion for ministry among sorrowful, suffering, and traumatized persons and communities stems from my early years in Albany, Georgia. I was raised in a violent home, where my mother and siblings suffered many manifestations of abuse. The trauma of our home remains a disruptive, embodied, relational, and lasting spiritual crisis that requires regular prayerful attention and lamentational conversation. I also witnessed public violence on the sidewalk in front of my father's clothing store on Broad Avenue in downtown Albany. Broad Avenue was the major scene of the Albany movement, which lasted from October 1961 to August 1962. It is considered one of the most vicious chapters of the civil rights movement, and is recognized as the movement's first big failure in terms of progress made toward desegregation. Lessons learned from the Albany movement contributed to the success of the Birmingham campaign, which followed shortly thereafter.

I was ten at the time of the Albany Movement. I was exposed to large protests met with police on foot and on horseback, with shields and helmets, attack dogs, and fire hoses. Protesters—children included—were thrown into paddy wagons. Until we moved from Albany in 1965, I witnessed the unhinged bigotry of adults close

to me, who otherwise offered spaces safer than my home in which to learn and relate. I was disturbed and confused by the contradiction. For example, I remember the vitriol of a seventh-grade teacher, who often fumed about Dr. King and rambled on about membership in the KKK. And I remember my dad's best friend, who came into my dad's store when the assassination of President Kennedy was announced on the radio. He shouted, "They finally got that nigger lover."

The domestic and public terror of Albany arouses and sustains my vocation-long desire and commitment to build bridges between the pastor's study and the public square. This book is one such bridge.

The construction of lament, which unfolds in the following chapters, bears an asterisk. My voice is conditioned by my positionality. I write as a straight, white, middle-class, educated man and Episcopal priest who, through such privilege, composes at a great distance from those whom I write about—the sorrowful, suffering, and traumatized. At times, I will not see as clearly as those who are closer to the "open wound of life in this world."²⁷ I pray that, in the balance, my writing expresses more respectful curiosity than asserted knowledge.

My Hope for Readers

First, I hope to inspire us to review our own lives, parishes, and communities to determine if there are active lamentational relations and conversations going on. If not, how might we create them? If so, how are we stewarding them? How might we fashion new ones?

We cannot fathom what pain parishioners bring into Sunday worship, what's inside the prayerful reflections of many who kneel after communion, what's behind the smiles at the sharing of the

²⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 49.

peace. We can, however, imagine and offer safer spaces for them to converse with one another about what is going on and what matters.

Over time, here and there, as we imagine and implement these safer spaces for lamentational relations and conversation, the veneer of sufficiency that we wear to church peels away and the hardwood of the body of Christ is more fully experienced. Flannery O'Connor, in the short story "Revelation," writes:

A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their whole lives, and hordes of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet you could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.²⁸

Second, I hope readers discover that making and populating safer spaces for lamentational conversation in the parish setting is a contemplative act. By *contemplation*, I do not mean another way to pray, or the next new way to get to God. Conversation slows us down and brings into clearer focus what is going on in the circle

²⁸ Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation," in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1946), 508.

of relation *now*, the eternal moment where God waits for us. By *moment*, I mean a curious, kindly, respectful examination of what is presently happening with us and our relations with respect to what is required of us, what we desire, value, and prefer for our lives-in-relation. Contemplation, I find, is the full-bodied, open-hearted attention to the moment. How we get to the moment is the contemplative act. Yesterday afternoon my Anglican prayer beads took me to the moment; this morning Bach Cantata 180, *Adorn Yourself, Dear Soul*. Later in the book we will learn about less “sufficient” contemplative practice, what Barbara Holmes names crisis contemplation.

Prayerful attention to the forever available *now* brings into greater focus the wounded self, neighbor, and world. It helps expose our hurried, anxious, often unwitting, automatic clamoring for sufficiency, a clamoring that leads us to shelter ourselves from, anesthetize, and throw our pain at others. We learn that our histories with hurt and trauma are not anachronistic, “back there.” Rather, they are embodied and yearn for engagement and healing.²⁹ Prayerful attention to the moment, personal and corporate, is “divine therapy, the perennial clearinghouse of the soul, a deliberate detachment from the tyranny of emotions, the addiction to self-image, and the false promises of the world.”³⁰

Moreover, the eternally present moment breaks the tyranny of the past and future, which overdetermines persons and communities for sufficiency’s sake. We are released, for a time, from what might

²⁹ Recent research elucidates how trauma from the past is embodied in the present. Trauma “re-wires” our brain and manifests in ways that negatively affect our daily lives and relations. See Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).

³⁰ Citation from the Center for Action and Contemplation newsletter, *The Mendicant* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 1.

have been and what could be. As Paul Tillich reminds us, the past and future are ours to place in God.³¹ With our burden lightened, we may rest in love. At rest, our lives-the-way-they-really-are are more vulnerable to and open for God. From rest, we depart in greater solidarity with God, hungrier for company with one another and our desperately hurting world.

Third, and most important for me, I hope readers refresh and embrace their citizenship in the society of the fragile and resilient. An enlivened civility exposes a patch of the church's underbelly, our noblesse oblige inclination "to help those in need."

Prayerful questions arise. How do we serve without succumbing to the disposition of sufficient ones sacrificing for the less sufficient others? How do we stand down sanctification's relentless attempt to bend our desire to care into a duty to serve? Some of the words of James Baldwin, thoughts about the plight of his people, come to mind:

This past, the Negro's past . . . this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity . . . contains for all its horror, something very beautiful. I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering . . . but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are.³²

Civility in the society of the fragile and resilient ones is inquiry about, engagement with, and risky embodiment of what we confess and trust to be human, and a call to discover greater dimensions of our humanity.

³¹ Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), chap. 11.

³² Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 98.

What's Ahead

The book is divided into two parts. In Part I, “Coming Together,” I elucidate the relational heart of lament, touching on lament’s biblical, theological, psychological, and social dimensions. Part II, “Going on Together,” focuses on the application of the art of lament in the contexts of parishes and the broader Christian community.