

# The Power of Lament to Create a Village of Care

## Workshop Handout

***The first step toward overcoming suffering, is, then, to find a language that leads out of the uncomprehended suffering that makes one mute, a language of lament, of crying or pain, a language that at least says what the situation is.*** Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, p. 70

### A. Introduction – The Common Use of Lament throughout History

Laments have been used in many places, cultures and times to enable people to cry out to the power(s) that exist, as they understand them, to express their pain, or rage, or grief, or regret against the forces that are causing them anguish or suffering.

Examples of laments can be found in ancient Greek epic poems, in Old English heroic epic poems, in the Hindu Vedas, and in ancient Near Eastern religious texts. The Hebrew and Christian scriptures contain many laments, with one book even entitled Lamentations. Individual or corporate laments far outnumber any other kind of songs in the Psalter.

Further expressions of lament can be found in art works, songs and other musical compositions.

### B. The Power of Lament to Create a Village of Care – One person’s story concerning job loss

“By giving voice to lament one can intercept and work on his [or her] suffering within the framework of communication... That sort of thing is conceivable only in the context of a group of people who share their life – including their suffering – with one another.” Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, p. 74

**A Ritual of Lament** (adapted from Bernhard Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, p.76-77)

1. **Addresses to God** (in whatever ways we name God, call out in our prayer to God)
2. **Complaints**
  - name whatever we feel unsettled or upset about
  - express the wide range of our feelings and complaints to God
3. In spite of our complaints, we **Confess a Trust In God**
  - list all the ways that there is still trust in God in spite of what we feel and the situation that we need to complain about
4. **Petition or Appeal** – What do we want?
  - list our prayer needs in the light of the trust we have
5. **Words of Assurance or Expressions of Certainty** – that what we ask for will be heard
6. **Praise** – assuring God of our Love.  
The final expression is one of affirmation and praise.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Give an example from your experience when you wanted to cry out with a lament?
2. Describe any “village of care” that surrounded you at that time?  
If there was no “village of care” for you, would you have liked one and what would you have wanted from that “village”?

### C. Creating a Village of Care for People with Dementia and Their Family, Friends, and Caregivers

Grief and loss are profoundly important issues for those who suffer from dementia, as well as for their families and friends. Sometimes called the ‘long goodbye’, due to Alzheimer’s years long duration, coming to terms with one’s situation requires much understanding of the healing potential of lament, and the essential nature of support from one’s community of care that respects the crucial healing potential of lament.

Dementia is a disease of separation. Many with early dementia symptoms lament their inability to work anymore at the high degree of performance that they were accustomed to at their life’s work and/or hobbies, which support their self worth. Many are without or are losing past family support, in part because many family members do not know how to ‘be with’ or what to say, or not say, to their loved one in their world of cognitive deterioration, where intellectual precision has been a given in the past. **Lament expressed in community can provide a place for deep feelings to be named and validated, and known beyond the individual suffering the loss.**

In the early stages of dementia, many can anticipate losses to come and need someone to empathize and listen. Some in special care homes need to lament the loss of home and the ability to function as before in society. For example, driving is a huge loss for men and women since it means a loss of independence. With whom can they express such pain? Who has the patience to listen to repetitive statements of sadness and anger at their losses?

One of the suggested ways of offering lament and hope is through a community-based ritual when the loved one enters a care home (which will be shared today). As a caregiver, one needs to learn some of the ways to communicate with those with dementia in an upside-down world that has become very insecure and unpredictable to the sufferer, both in location and time, as they lament their losses. How can one use ritual or other artistic pursuits (music, fine art, collecting their words as poetic expression) or other ways, when lament needs to be expressed?

#### Discussion Questions:

3. Who do you know who is living with dementia?
4. How have you experienced and heard the lament of this person or others with dementia?
5. In what ways do you find yourself lamenting this experience?
6. Describe any “village of care” with whom you can lament any issue that has arisen for you.
7. Describe any ritual, symbols or other creative methods you have used to express your lament.

#### **D. Expressing Our Lament**

Daniel Goleman, in his book *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*, contends that “art...[is] the medium of the unconscious.” He asserts that “the emotional brain is highly attuned to symbolic meanings” and that the way to reach it is through “the messages of metaphor, story, myth and the arts.” Times when people need to cry out in expressions of lament are times that are extremely emotionally charged for them. What better way to express them than in the arts?

Laments can be, and have been, expressed in many creative ways – drama, art, sculpture, music, song, dance, creative movement, poetry, story, prayer, symbol, liturgy and ritual, etc. They can be produced for and shared by a mass audience, can be designed for or generated by small groups or can be created by individuals to express their own lament spontaneously and to fit their unique experiences.

#### Activity:

Reflect on a situation in which you would like to express some form of lament.

What symbols or expressions come to mind as ways that you might express this lament?

Create (or imagine creating) your own lament in whatever way fits for you and the situation.

#### **E. Closing and Ritual of Lament**

In the godforsaken, obscene quicksand of life,  
there is a deafening alleluia  
rising from the souls  
of those who weep,  
and of those who weep with those who weep.  
If you watch, you will see  
the hand of God  
putting the stars back in their skies  
one by one.                      Ann Weems, *Psalms of Lament*, p. xvii

#### **Resources for use with individuals and groups in the process of lamenting**

Carmody, John. *Psalms for times of Trouble*. Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995.

Hutchison, Joyce and Joyce Rupp. *May I Walk You Home? Courage and Comfort for Care-givers of the Very Ill*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1999.

Killick, John. *You Are Words: Dementia Poems*. London, England: Hawker Publications, 1997.

Killick, John, and Carl Cordonnier. *Openings: Dementia Poems and Photography*. London, England: Hawker Publications, 2000.

Miller, James. *Welcoming Change: Discovering Hope in Life's Transitions*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1997.

Weems, Ann. *Psalms of Lament*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995.

#### **A Resource for use with children**

Schwartz, Noa. *Old timers: the one that got away!* Downsview, Ont.: Tumbleweed Press, 1998.

#### **For a discussion of the meaning of psalms of lament for pastoral counseling, see**

Capps, Donald. *Biblical Approaches to Pastoral Counseling*. Louisville: Westminster Press, 1981. Ch. 2.

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