

Silent reflection

This is a poem by Aeschylus, that presidential candidate Robert Kennedy delivered to small crowd in a poor neighborhood of Indianapolis on the night that MLK, Jr was assassinated. Those assembled did not know that MLK was dead.

Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget  
falls drop by drop upon the heart,  
until, in our own despair,  
against our will,  
comes wisdom  
through the awful grace of God.

We will take a few moments now for reflection. I ask you to bring back to your consciousness a dramatic loss in your life and your inner struggles with that loss.

### **Lament**

I must begin by telling you that it is my honor to be able to share reflections with you. I value this pre-sermon time of soul searching, research, and contemplation. It is truly a gift for me. Thank you!

My recent talks have all centered on my coming to grips with my pain for our mistreatment of earth. Global warming and extreme climate is the biggest problem civilizations have ever faced. Marine biologists across the Pacific are weeping in their scuba masks as they dive on reefs bleached of life in a matter of days. The drought in India is deep enough that there are armed guards on dams to prevent the theft of water. Each of the past 14 months, we recorded the hottest month ever measured on the planet, and then smash that record the next month. Scientists are reassessing the stability of the Antarctic ice sheet. They have started to talk about massive sea level rise in the next 30 years. A few months ago, 135 children drowned in Thailand trying to cool off from the worst heatwave on record there. This past year we've recorded the highest wind speeds ever measured in both the

northern and southern hemispheres. Scientist recently created the conditions for a new category 6 hurricane. The world met in Paris last December and announced it would like to hold temperature increases to 1.5C or less. Celebration ensued. But what also ensued was February, when the planet's temperature first broke through that 1.5C barrier. The promises made in Paris will add up to a world 3.5C warmer—an impossible world. This is the world that is taking shape around us; a world that is no longer a safe operating space for humans. How are we preparing ourselves?

One of my recent sermons I spoke that the response to a new earth was beyond our individual action to stop putting C in the atmosphere and planting trees and plants everywhere to sequester C, although those actions are critical. The response I mentioned was “hospice” where we not only tend to mother earth but we also prepare each other for this change and help each other with their lament. I'm here today to continue my hospice work by sharing my contemplations on the process of lament.

As fate would have it, my daughter invited me to a conference this Spring at Harvard Divinity School about the Spirituality of Farming. At this conference I found a couple hundred farmers and scholars, kindred spirits, who recognized that there is more to an agrarian life style than growing food. There is a socio-economic independence from capitalism and a dependence on each other and our environment. What may seem like long days of hard work to some, for the spiritually engaged farmer, the daily chores and seasonal tasks define who they are. Farming is religious action of compassion and love. I attended one session where the presenter mentioned the process of lamenting as a companion process to caring. Lamenting is an expression of great sorrow or deep sadness.

I began to think, during this talk, that rather than celebrating farming, I was at this conference to learn more about the religious and deeply personal process of lamenting. So, when Rick Hendricks asked if I would consider speaking this summer I jumped at the chance to work on lament.

All of us have had experiences with grieving; probably the loss of family member, pet, parent, friend, and even a child, or loss of job, separation and divorce, and physically separating from place and friends. Some losses are more painful and debilitating than others. With each experience we have the opportunity to practice lament. Lamenting each loss is most likely a different experience as we grow from past losses or have significantly different circumstances. For me, and I suspect for you, the process of lament does not have a conclusion. It starts out with very intense pain, debilitating pain. Reflecting on the words of Greek philosopher — Aeschylus at the top of the order of service “There is no pain so great as the memory of joy in present grief.” The memory of joy is so vivid at that initial moment. We are so aware that the joy will now only exist as a memory, will not grow or develop, will not return, and that it hurts. Which is often called a broken heart.

*(Ecclesiastes 7:2 “It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart”).*

This Bible author recognized that understanding and living with grief was an important human endeavor in preparation for one’s own death. They suggest that God honors those of sad and broken hearts. When I reflect on biblical stories I find this a common theme where often the prophet would go away from society and grieve. Prophets, such as Moses, David, Solomon, Zachariah, John the Baptist, and

Jesus experienced life as a series or assemblage of sorrows, and lived enveloped with sorrow. It seems to me that all great religions honor the grieving process. The time spent to lament is that opportunity for finding your internal path to wisdom and virtue.

When going through sorrowful times, we are reminded of the brevity of life and, remarkably, the promise of hope. These moments help us realign our lives as we weave the tissue of life with the “threads” of sadness on the “loom” of time.

Deeply reflective lament can re-focus us to wasting less time on the fruitless self-centered pursuits of worldliness and spending more time and energy in the pursuit of holiness and righteousness by coming into the care of and the care for fellow beings.

Joanna Macy describes lament this way: “The sorrow, grief, and rage you feel is a measure of your humanity and your evolutionary maturity. As your heart breaks open there will be room for the world to heal.”

Sadness and process of lament protects a believer’s heart and feelings from rust and decay, and compels him or her to concentrate on their inner world.

Grief takes us below the surface of our ordinary lives... We withdraw and go inward. I have experienced sorrow so deep that I lost track of light, sound, and communication with my environs. Some behavior scientists call this a “night world”. I was surrounded in darkness and mystery; feeling lost. I once expressed to another the feeling of my feet being planted firmly in mid-air. Although I wanted to be held and comforted at this time, I didn’t have the strength to

reciprocate. I felt detached. I was mostly centered in my inner world, because the comfort I sought could only come from within.

In his book “The Wild Edge of Sorrow”, Francis Weller states “In the night world, we are invited into a conversation with death in which we are asked to look directly at the ways we are living. Are we fostering vitality, participation, and intimacy - those qualities that matter to the soul – or are we turning away? By letting an old pattern die, we enter into a larger encounter with being alive. This ritual of shedding our outworn skin, of being remade, is an ancient understanding most notably witnessed in the work of initiation. Every initiation brings one to the precipice of death. In fact there is no genuine experience of initiation without an encounter with death. We are required to die to the old image of who we thought we were and step across the threshold into a radically altered self. Loss and grief are an initiation into a changed landscape, reminding us that everything is passing.” This passage really resonated with me because this is my understanding of the role of hospice, for those staying on, to recognize that loss and grief are passing and if one does not suppress lament then one becomes more vital, loving, joyful, and wise.

In today’s political circus called presidential election, I feel that both major party candidates can’t envision another socio-economic system than the continued assault on our planet and hoarding of wealth and power by a few. I am feeling deeply depressed with the continuation of those failed policies. Being close to the land, I experience the pain of the flora and fauna in our area. First their pain from a warm March followed by a frigid April 4<sup>th</sup> that froze the newly surging life in plants buds, to now, the extreme drought. I can hear my plants crying for water every day. I am pulled to draw water from my well of unknown quantity to share

with them. And I watch those plants that I cannot water become brown, no longer participating in photosynthesis, their source of energy, and no longer sequestering of C from the atmosphere. I see a loss of wild life as they move to new water sources or die because they cannot move far enough. My wife noticed that even mosquitos are gone as they have also lost habitat. Since I daily water my garden, I have had to turn it into Fort Knox as every animal seems to be trying to get to these lush growing plants. I watch my bramble berries, normal abundant, produce no fruit and little new growth which would be the source of next year's fruit. I could never have guessed that our Finger Lakes ecosystem, with abundance like the Garden of Eden, could break apart so quickly as I helplessly watch. This is my lament. And I am not alone, as drought is a common topic with my neighbors, they are continually focused on the sky and/or weather channel searching for some hope of rain.

And I think of the ominous words of Bill McKibbin: "The only Earth we have ever known no longer exists."

I lament the loss of the joy I have known of an interconnected ecosystem with fairly predictable climate. I lament its departure; that it no longer exists. I am angry. I am sad. I feel helpless. But most of all, I feel remorse for my children who knew what was and its joy but will live much longer than I with extreme climate. And that their children, my grandchildren, will live in a challenging and unsafe operating space for humans. These grandchildren are young enough they won't know the reason for my lament, but they will experience pain and suffering from the effects of extreme weather.

This is a different grief than any other that I have experienced. This grief is for damage that I was complicit in creating. This grief is for a change that is occurring, will continue to occur, and will become more profound with each passing year.

What I learn from the sages is that this lament be a place of growth. There is a profound connection between the expression of grief and finding a genuine experience of belonging. I can become more intimate with my surroundings and lean into those I love. These relationships would become deeper and more sincere. My lament will hopefully help me come to terms with the path the earth is on. After all it is all about physics and laws of nature. Things that don't change. There is no turning back. We have altered the earth's surface and atmosphere beyond repair for millennia if ever. This lament is about being fully engaged in being human. I can use this grief to affirm the bonds of affection, of affinity, and love.

Lastly, this sermon is a prayer, a plea on behalf of our beloved earth; a plea on behalf of our fellow earth travelers (plants and animals); a plea for you and this community, and a plea for the wisdom and action as individuals and a community to recognize what we have done and through our deeds and words bend the arch of history to husbandry, justice, affection, and love.

Closing words: **Joanna Macy**

We are capable of suffering with our world, and that is the true meaning of compassion. It enables us to recognize our profound interconnectedness with all beings. Don't ever apologize for crying for the trees burning in the Amazon or over the waters polluted from mines in the Rockies. Don't apologize for the sorrow, grief, and rage you feel. It is a measure of your humanity and your maturity. It is a measure of your open heart, and as your heart breaks open there will be room for the world to heal. That is what is happening as we see people honestly confronting the sorrows of our time.