

HOPEFUL LAMENT: TENDING OUR GRIEF THROUGH SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Lament tells the truth about what it. It refuses to ignore pain and injustice, and it is an expression of love. You and those you love have lived through losses, both large and small, and some of those must be healed over time. Some have experienced the death of a loved one and are learning to survive with the ache of their absence. Some are living on the other side of a heartbreaking divorce. Some are enduring the more hidden grief of infertility or miscarriage, or a painful season of parenting when the energy and means to love your child well has been hard to find. Whatever it is, if we refuse to lament, we will not be able to move on without carrying brokenness or trauma that will replay unprocessed pain in and around us.

Lament is about giving grief—and the love hidden within it—a way to be expressed so it doesn't end up doing violence to us or those around us. In that way, lament is a life-affirming gift! What follows are practices for you to try. Our hope is that you will add your own wisdom and creativity to practicing as you go. We encourage you to experiment, coming up with ways that work for you, as well as to invite trusted friends into it. There's power and healing in sharing our pain with others and the Spirit! *Many of these practices are also appropriate for those dealing with things like anxiety and depression.*

BREATH PRAYER

Breath prayer is a wonderful way to “pray without ceasing” in practice (1 Thessalonians 5:17), and is a way to calm and ground the body. Breath prayers add a simple yet powerful layer of articulating a prayer, bringing intentionality to the natural breath with all its centrality to life. To practice breath prayer, choose a word or phrase that expresses what you need or what you know. It could be a verse (breathe in “Be still”—breathe out “and know that I am God”); inspired by a line of a poem (breathe in “awakening to kindness”—breathe out “speaking to sorrow”); a name of God (breathe in “yah”—breathe out “weh”); and so forth. Try the following breath prayer now:

BREATHE IN: *Here I am.*

BREATHE OUT: *Healer, meet me here.*

When you are in moments of grief or pain, you might try letting your exhale be a little longer than your inhale. If you are feeling anxiety, you might allow your inhale to be a little longer. Whatever the rhythm of breathing, invite the Spirit into that place with you and notice what, if anything, shifts. You can also experiment with using breath prayers in different places and postures with or without movement. You can read more about this here → terramcdaniel.com/breathwork

TEARING

In the pages of Scripture, you will find several people that tore clothing, let themselves cry, fasted from meals, and wore ashes. For this practice, gather paper or cloth for tearing (i.e. junk mail, magazines, old t-shirts, and rags work well). Natural fibers are usually easiest to tear. If the cloth has a hem, trim it off and cut notches to get your tearing started. Consider what you want to practice lamenting today.

What happened? Who was involved? What did you hear, feel, or see? Focus on your emotions as you hold the paper or cloth in open palms. When you are ready to express your sadness, begin tearing. Listen to the sounds. Touch the frayed edges. Tear as many or as few strips as you like. Hold the torn pieces in your hands, noticing how they reflect the brokenness you're lamenting. Allow this to be prayer. If at any point you feel overwhelmed, stop and take slow, deep breaths.

Then imagine releasing any pain or disappointment and receiving comfort and healing. What was it like to tear the paper or cloth? You might have experienced sadness, anxiety, or anger. You might have noticed memories of other losses emerging alongside the one you initially focused on. All of this is welcome. It might be helpful to journal about your experience or share it with a trusted friend or two. Here are a few additional ways to end your time: throw the strips in the trash to release them; continue processing what you're letting go or carrying forward by braiding the strips together and tying them on your wrist or putting in your pocket until you're ready to let them go; bury the strips to signify a hope for renewal, adding some flower seeds if you choose.

PSALM-WRITING

To write your own song or poem of lament, start with bringing to mind what you need to lament today. It can be something systemic, small but significant, or a loss or sorrow from the past or right now. Take a moment to decide what you want to focus on, noticing what happened. Who was involved? What did you hear, feel, or see? Hold this memory in your mind. Take a few minutes to journal a little about what you want to grieve. As much as you're able, try not to censor your thoughts.

To create your own psalm, use your journaling as a basis for writing your own song of mourning and release. You might begin with calling out to the Helper. You could use a favorite name for God or a description like shepherd, healer, or loving parent. Next, try briefly naming the help you need. Then, put language around what you're grieving. Be as specific as you can. You could use questioning words as the psalmists often do, like why, how long, and when (see Psalm 13:1, 44:24, and 119:82).

You could include your belief in God's coming deliverance or remember times of past goodness at this point in your psalm if you'd like. Then, describe what help you're asking for in more detail. Consider closing your psalm with your hope of being able to thank God for relief and renewal in the future. You can try reading your psalm aloud or sing it to the tune of your favorite song.

TEAR JAR

God considers your tears precious. Whether you cry often or your tears tend to remain unshed, your grief matters to the Spirit. The Holy One knows every sleepless hour and preserves your tears like treasures. When you have something complex to grieve, try creating a tear jar. Keep a jar of water and a saltshaker somewhere accessible. When grief, anxiety, or other painful emotions come, release them as though through tears by shaking a few grains of salt into the water. Continue this practice for 3 days. At the end of the third day, spend a few minutes noticing what it was like to release your grief this way.

You can pour the water out into the sink to represent entrusting your sorrow to the safekeeping of the Divine. If you live near a body of water, you might consider releasing the record of your tears into the flow of the river, lake, or ocean.

TERRA DIVINA

This Japanese practice of forest bathing is more than a walk, it's a way of paying attention to senses and surroundings. Terra divina uses the four movements of lectio divina (reading, reflecting, responding, and resting in a Scripture passage) to engage nature. Terra means "earth" in Latin and can refer to dirt, clay, or the planet as a whole. Find a time when you have at least 15 minutes available. You don't need any special supplies, but you may want a journal, writing utensils, or markers. Begin with a leisurely walk, putting away your devices and headphones for now. Enjoy the landscape and let your senses be engaged. When you feel ready, let your eye be drawn to something (that won't hop or fly away). Find a place to settle comfortable to contemplate the object.

First, notice its texture, colors, size, and so on. Take several moments to reflect. What do you notice? Next, consider what God wants to say through this object for your life today. Let your gaze be drawn to its various details, allowing yourself to be curious and to wonder. Don't be in a hurry! Now reflect on how you want to respond to what you've sensed from the Spirit. What do you want to tell God? How do you want to be changed or carry this moment with you? Finally, allow your gaze to take in the object for a few final breaths, simply resting in its beauty and God's presence with you. You might journal what you've noticed. You could also draw a sketch of your object to take with you. If you can't get outside, you can engage terra divina inside with a plant, a piece of fruit, or even a beloved pet.

GROUNDING

When you are feeling stressed or anxious about life, what is happening in the world, or a complicated part of your history that has resurfaced, grounding in your body and your physical surroundings can be helpful. This practice has three movements and takes around 10 minutes to engage all three. If you're short on time, you can simply choose one or two. If you begin to feel anxious or respond in a negative way to this exercise, simply stop and focus on your breath.

Start by looking around you, including above and behind you. As you look, pay attention to your surroundings. Then begin scanning your body starting at the top of your head. Move slowly down your head, neck, and shoulders, noticing sensations. Continue to your back and belly, your hips and thighs, your calves and so on, all the way to your toes. Are there places in your body that feel light, free, and energized? Are there other places where you feel tension or pain? Are there parts of your body that feel numb or vacant? If there is a particular sensation, you could try placing a hand on that part of your body. You could even experiment with speaking kindly to your body (something like "thank you for telling me this"). It might feel a little silly at first, but try it anyway and see what happens. Next, let your senses connect with your physical space. Do this by noticing:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch and touch them
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell ... feel free to move around the room.
- 1 thing you can taste ... it might be a lingering flavor from your coffee, lunch, or something else.

Last, scan your body again. Start at the top of your head and make your way down your toes. Notice your posture, breathing, and clothing against your skin. Pay attention to "warmth, coolness, energy, relaxation, tightness, softness, pressure, numbness." Has anything shifted since your first body scan?

WORRY TREE (great for kids)

For children who are grieving, the loss may surface worries that other things will go wrong. Invite a child to draw a tree on paper and write various worries as the leaves. If the loss is more significant and invites more reflection over time, create a tree trunk and limbs together out of butcher or wrapping paper. You can cut leaves or use Post-it notes to serve as your tree's leaves. As often as is helpful, invite the child to write down a worry and place it on the tree for safekeeping. Their worries might include things like: Will someone else get sick or hurt? I am afraid I will forget the person we lost. I worry I will always feel this sad. Assure them that all worries are welcome and that nothing is off limits. Keep the tree available to add more leaves as long as helpful. Invite them to let their worries become prayers. You could read the following together: "O Most High, when I am afraid, I put my trust in you." (Psalm 56:2-3). You could also read Psalm 23 or pray together after recording fears and anxieties.

(Adapted from "Hopeful Lament", by Terra McDaniel)