

Yelling at God about poverty

An introductory exploration of the possible contribution of lament to community development

Assignment details

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Course: MAVP

Unit: MN555-512

Assignment no.: 4

Assignment title: Major Essay

Required word count: 6000

Actual word count: 5981

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Introduction

Lament as a spiritually-formative practice has largely been overlooked in modern times. When it has been championed, its flag has almost exclusively been flown in the area of Christian worship. While there is increasing interest among Christian psychologists and theologians in the use of lament as a process of dealing with grief and trauma, as yet there appears to have been little exploration of lament's potential contribution to issues of poverty. Drawing from Biblical scholarship, theology, psychology and community development commentators, I hope to make a firm case for the unique contribution of lament to the task of poverty alleviation. Almost the entire global south sees the spiritual as integral to life; and so poverty, with the trauma and distress it brings, by necessity invokes questions of theodicy. My argument will be that lament addresses these questions while simultaneously being a process for dealing with grief and loss; and as such is a powerful and appropriate tool of healing and restoration for situations of poverty.

Lament and the historical people of God

Lament in the biblical narrative

Although largely neglected by the modern Christian community, the practice of lament in the biblical narrative is integral to the experience of the people of God (Westermann 1981:263). So many biblical heroes added their voice to those that cried out in frustration and despair to a God who seems to have removed himself from the crisis at hand: Moses, David, Hezekiah, Jeremiah, Job, Elijah, Jesus – even Jesus. The biblical narrative never attempts to hide the awkward things that suffering and confused people said about God to God (Broyles 2008:395). A brutal honesty is permitted and remains uncensored from first page to last (Westermann 1981:264); one in every three songs in the worship music of the people of God - the Psalms – is a song of lament (Broyles 2008:387). The Exodus event, so prominent in

the Hebrew mind, began with a cry of lament (Brueggemann 1995:106), and the crucifixion, *the* biblical event, hears no less than Jesus, *Emmanuel*, cry out with a loud, confused and pained voice: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Somehow the repeated cries of the tormented people of God, engraved forever in the biblical narrative, remain largely unheard and unjoined by twenty-first century Christians (Westermann 1981:264f). Yet if lament is prevalent throughout the biblical narrative, and immediately preceded Jesus’ death and resurrection - God’s climactic intervention into the broken human condition - surely it has something to teach us about who God is, how the divine-human relationship is to be worked out and how humanity can be healed. Lament is not a footnote in the narrative of God’s restorative work; it is an indispensable thread woven throughout the story.

Yahweh and lament

Against God to God

Perhaps one of the most striking features of lament is that it is a complaint to Yahweh about Yahweh; it paradoxically ‘clings to God against God’ (Westermann 1981:273). Lament believes that God has not acted as he should have, but it cannot see any other place to bring that complaint than the presence of Yahweh himself, and as such is a movement *towards* God (Westermann 1981:273). In the words of David Cohen: “The invocation *acknowledges*, but also *questions* the divine-human relationship at the same time” (Cohen 2013:52, emphasis mine). Lament looks at what is happening in light of the promises and abilities of God, and declares with brutal honesty that things are not as they should be, and that frankly, Yahweh cannot wash his hands of the matter (Broyles 2008:395). In the context of the divine-human relationship, lament calls God lover (at times tenuously) while also bringing into question whether this is how lovers truly act (Cohen 2013:52). Prayers of invocation then, assume that God is involved and interested in the unfolding drama; they recognise that the world isn’t

right – that injustice and oppression are rife; that these sorrows, confusions, this anger and despair must be voiced (Cohen 2013:67), and that Yahweh must listen to these complaints. Lament cannot be an appendix to life in relationship with God; rather it is an inevitable outcome that ebbs and flows as people experience a broken life in the company of a Friend and Father who is able to intervene and has promised to restore all things. To not lament then, is to live in either denial of the injustice that surrounds or to attempt some illusion of relationship with God; and like most illusions, it will be shown for what it is when a mishap in the glossy routine occurs.

A God who is willing to listen

What is beautiful then, is the imminence of this transcendent God who is the only one big enough to fix our complaint, and is also willing to hear it (DeGroat 2009:188). “There is no god like Yahweh” was the catch cry of Ancient Israel, but there is also no-one who listens like Yahweh. When we lament, ‘we seek an audience with the most-high God’, and he willingly condescends - even if our complaint is irrational, unjust, tainted with self-righteous anger or tinged with hypocrisy (Broyles 2008:394). Yahweh is not only big enough to restore all things, he is big enough to *hear* all things. It is poignant that the editors of the Psalter never sought to sanitise or censor the material of the complaints. Rather the inclusion of lament throughout the biblical canon describes a God who hears his people hope that ‘the infants of my enemies would be smashed upon the rocks’ (Ps. 139), and *permits* rather than discourages such language (Cohen 2013:79) even though his desire is that they love, and love enemies (Mt. 5:43-48).¹ Yahweh listens to the complaints of his bride and gives her room to scream her unfair tirades at him, for he is not indifferent to her suffering; Yahweh has had his share of grief.

¹ David Cohen goes further, and suggests that the inclusion of lament in the canon is not only indicative of God’s permitting lament, but indicates that lament is ‘perhaps a divinely sanctioned process’ (Cohen 2013:71).

A God acquainted with sorrow

It's worth noting here that Yahweh is 'a God acquainted with grief and sorrow' (Brueggemann 1984:52). He has not stood immune to the suffering of his beloved creation. The fall didn't only impact the created order; God himself was touched. Perhaps for the first time in all eternity, the heart of God was pierced with pain and regret (Gen. 6:6), and it continued outside the beautiful confines of the Garden of Eden. The pursuit of his beloved into a world of darkness was often done with pleading lament - Yahweh imploring his people time and time again through the prophets to return to his loving embrace (e.g. Hos. 2). While the Psalms describe humanity's cries to a patient, listening God, the prophets detail Yahweh's pleas with an impassionate, disinterested and fickle humanity. Later in the narrative it was no longer just his heart that was pierced, but his hands and feet, suffering excruciating pain, humiliated and abandoned by Father and friends – is it fitting that Jesus cried out, with so many who have lamented, those heart-wrenching words of Psalm 22: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” God himself felt the full extent of the broken human experience. It's no wonder then, that lament ultimately draws us closer to Yahweh. This is important; Yahweh not only permits and listens to our complaints, and is able to act on them, but he understands and identifies with the very grieving of our hearts; and it's this symphony that allows lament to be such a powerful healing process.

A time to lament

While some scholars have attempted to place the individual psalms of lament in their correct historical context, the task has proved elusive and tenuous (Lasor, Hubbard and Bush 1996:431f). While exegetically this may be problematic for some, a unique benefit is that the psalms, both worship and lament, take on a abiding quality; their expressions of the ups and downs of the divine-human relationship aren't tied to any one place and situation (Cohen

2013:11). While there is a particular linguistic and cultural flavour to them - which importantly grounds them in the history of humanity and prevents them from becoming abstract ideology - the questions and sentiments they posit are timeless (Hankle 2010:276). The songs of distress provide words for those whose hearts have been too numbed by pain to speak; their voices hoarse from crying; their thoughts too confused to express the internal chaos.

Not only do the biblical laments have a timeless quality to them, they also express a wide range of sentiments and situations in the divine-human relationship: anger, despair, questioning, confusion; some individual, some corporate (Broyles 2008:385); some in the context of worship, others in the context of daily life and natural disasters (Brueggemann 1995:76). When all the biblical laments are placed together, the impression is that there are no issues or situations outside the boundaries of lament (Brueggemann 1984:52; Cohen 2013:6). When God's promises appear impotent in light of the world we live in - whatever context that may be - lament is an appropriate process of addressing the quandary.

The enabling gift of lament

Healing through screaming

Lament's first enabling gift is the granting of a necessary permission, as Hicks describes it, to scream; for "it is human to scream at dead and mutilated bodies" (Hicks 1993:134). It is well-accepted by psychological experts that disclosing emotional trauma directly improves mental and physical health (Pennebaker and Beall 1986:274; Westen et al. 2006:398, 588; Lepore et al. 2004:341). Contrastingly, suppressing the emotional offspring of our distress has a negative impact on mental and physical health while also stopping us from moving forward and making meaning of what occurred (Hicks 1993:34f; Snow et al. 2011:131;

Benner 1990:68; Ringma 2000:104). As one PTSD sufferer who served as a soldier in East Timor and witnessed a gang-rape among other horrors said, "...you're paying for it [emotionally] at the time; it's just on credit. Once you're out of the situation, and you let the façade down, it's payday" (Summerton and Wishart 2004; Hicks 1993:8). Further, a recent study has suggested that the health benefits of emotional disclosure can be enhanced when people are provided 'response training' (Konig et al. 2014); that emotional disclosure is important to mental and physical healing, but that having a structured process to the release further leverages its benefits.

Lament permits the initial and at times repeated 'scream' that is fundamental to healing from situations of distress, while also providing a framework and a process through which the healing can occur. It is significant that the social sciences are uncovering truths about healing that have long been present in the practice of lament.

As a movement

While despair, trauma, suffering and theological conundrums often cause us to freeze, circle or wander aimlessly, lament is a process that allows us to move forward without abandoning those feelings or the chaos that ensues (Brueggemann 1984:54). There is a wonderful paradox here, as David Cohen so aptly describes:

The shape, or structure, of psalms of distress can be viewed as juxtaposed to the lack of structure, or containment, often resulting from personal distress. In this way these psalms offer an engagement which paradoxically invites the distressed person to embrace the chaos caused by distress *through* a structure (Cohen 2013:35).

Grieving is never a straight-forward process (Benner 1990:72), and while there are loosely recognised 'stages' of grief, most people do not move through them in a sequential, orderly fashion (Worden 2001:25). Resolution is not always a straightforward phenomenon: while

there is a “...sense that mourning can be finished... there is also a sense in which mourning is never finished” (Worden 2001:47). Lament provides a framework through which emotional trauma can be expressed, while also moving the participant, even with tidal emotions, towards a place of resolution (Hankle 2010:276). The Psalms of lament typically follow a pattern of 1) *expressing* the complaint 2) *asserting* a plea or a confession, 3) *investing* confidence in the divine and 4) *imagining* the way forward (Cohen 2013:34); a very similar movement to the ‘tasks of mourning’ that Worden proposes: 1) *accepting* the loss, 2) *working through* the pain by expressing it, 3) *readjusting* to the situation at hand and 4) *moving on*, placing the distressful situation in the adjusted reality (Worden 2001:27ff).²

Thus lament allows the necessary emotional disclosure, while providing a process through which healing can take; for to stagnate at the scream is harmful, and not just for the larynx. There must be movement (even if it is tidal at times) towards healing – but without rushing the healing process (Benner 1990:73). Lament, and particularly the regular use of lament, provides the carefully balanced, carefully nuanced framework that healing from distressful situations requires.

Holding truths in tension

It must be pointed out that lament doesn’t always result in resolution; at times the resolution is partial. But what lament does is enable the distressed person to ‘hold’ the suffering. Cohen undertook a small study using lament as the process through which unresolved grief was expressed. While none of the twelve participants felt that their particular situation had been resolved, they all experienced a decrease in distress, leading Cohen to suggest that, “This... underlines the significance of lament as a process for *holding* distress rather than, necessarily, *resolving* it” (Cohen 2013:145, 80).

² I have not necessarily used Worden’s headings directly, but the words I have used are consistent with his descriptions of the various stages. I have done this for clarity and brevity.

The holding of distress rather than removal is a consistent conclusion to the laments in the biblical account (e.g. Ps. 10, 22, 55); there is a shift in the lamenter's perspective even though there is no indication that circumstances had improved. Job never received answers to his questions, and no doubt the memories of his dead children and that fateful day remained long after the conclusion of the narrative; yet chapter 42:3 finds Job describing a peace and a deeper understanding of God and his own self. This is prior to the positive concluding section where Job receives riches and children again (42:10f). His words aren't fatalistic as much as a strangely joyful acceptance that there was something 'too wonderful for me' going on (Job 42:3).

Some may argue this is a type of 'meaning making' or 'suspended growth' (Bowlby in Worden 2001:35); yet I would suggest that there is a delicate difference. Meaning has not been made: "I still don't understand why God let this happen," yet growth has somehow continued: "I feel less distress." The difference is subtle, yet important. 'Holding distress' allows the lamenter to preserve a number of truths in tension, including the truth that "I don't understand how these truths fit together," while also assisting the imprecator to have hope and move forward in life. This is a subtle yet significant contribution of lament to situations of distress.

Working definition of lament

Lament then, is a dynamic, yet structured spiritual process of dealing with loss that enables the distressed person to express the full gamut of chaotic emotions that trauma causes while moving the lamenter towards a resolution. While lament doesn't always resolve the issue at hand, it enables the concerned person to 'hold' their distress. Lament's close parallels with secular approaches to trauma recovery suggest that expected outcomes can include mental and physical health improvement, coupled with a more intimate relationship with the divine.

We will now begin to explore the potential contribution of the process of lament to the community development sector. We will focus on three important people groups involved in the issue of poverty; the global south, the global north, and the community development practitioner.³

Lament and the global south

The broader impacts of poverty

It is a universally accepted fact that poverty has an adverse effect on human flourishing. In tackling this issue, western aid and development organisations typically separate the physical and spiritual realms and implement interventions that focus entirely on physical deficiencies; programs such as access to water, education, healthcare (Myers 1999:4f).⁴ However, almost all indigenous cultures and peoples of the global south see no such divide between the spiritual and physical; life is completely interconnected (Ife 2013:97f). When disaster strikes or generation after generation experiences poverty in this setting, there are necessarily deep spiritual questions that arise (Myers 1999:87; Aten 2012:132f; Ife and Tesoriero 2006:237).

Further, the impact of poverty extends beyond the tangible needs of the poor and affects mental health (Funk et. al 2010:28ff). I have met people in rural Indonesia who have buried two, sometimes three children from preventable diseases; one cannot remain unaffected in these types of repeated trauma. The impact of poverty on mental health often expresses itself through coping behaviours such as addiction, violence, and crime (Murali and Oyeboode 2004:216f; Trudgen 2000:59, 172f). However, there are few development organisations that

³ It may have been helpful to dedicate space to the potential contribution of lament to Christian NGOs in terms of organisational structure (e.g. caring for staff), marketing material (almost perpetually upbeat), and engagement with the global Christian north (e.g. 'please pray for Nepal that the resources will get there quickly'). My hope is that some of the material from each of the areas I've focussed on (global south, global north and practitioners) will be readily transferrable to the areas of Christian NGOs suggested; there is simply not enough room to explore the contribution of lament to all aspects of community development.

⁴ It is worth noting that Christian development organisations are not immune from the creation of a spiritual-physical divide; they just typically express it in different ways to their secular counterparts (Myers 1999:7).

include mapping mental health as a part of needs assessment. Indeed, the impact of poverty on mental health is a relatively new field of inquiry for aid and development organisations (Funk et. al 2010:24; Murali and Oyeboode 2004:217).

If poverty causes issues of spirituality and the trauma it creates leads to mental health issues, then failing to acknowledge and address these foundational poverty outcomes will have unintended consequences for the community development program and, most importantly, the very people these programs aim to assist.

Failure to lament

Failing to adjust our approach to including the spiritual, trauma and mental health dimensions of poverty can have a significant and negative impact on the very people we are seeking to help. Richard Trudgen relays a tragic story of Aboriginal spirituality being ignored that resulted in an indigenous community expecting and experiencing a death for every bore that was drilled on sacred land by well-intentioned community development practitioners (Trudgen 2000:190f).⁵ Not only is implementing programs that ignore local spirituality potentially harmful, passing over the spiritual *questions* of communities can be counterproductive - particularly for communities where “...life outside of the spiritual context is meaningless and pointless” (Ife and Tesoriero 2006:247). In these situations, ignoring the spiritual questions raised by poverty or disaster amounts to not just missing part of the story, but at times the *whole* story (Aten 2012:132). Programs built on such a foundation will be woefully inadequate, and the ideals of local participation and ownership, so crucial to sustainable development (Chambers 1983:168ff; Ife 2013:173), will likely be

⁵ Interestingly, the community development practitioner had requested and received permission from the indigenous people; however the reason why permission was given was because the indigenous people had realised that the practitioner believed their spirituality to be primitive ‘pagan rubbish’ and that the practitioner wouldn’t negotiate even if they protested (Trudgen 2000:190f).

missed or reduced. Space must be created for the spiritual and its theodicean questions when engaging communities that acknowledge spirituality.

In a similar fashion to the issue of bypassing the importance of spirituality, a recent World Health Organisation study found that mental health has largely been overlooked in the community development sector, even though 80% of the mental health burden is found in low and middle-income countries (Funk et. al 2010:24).⁶ Although incidents of depression (3.2%) among the poor are only slightly lower than cases of malaria (4%), malaria receives significantly more attention and resources (Funk et. al 2010:2). Failing to address the mental health burden of poverty runs the risk of the mentally ill remaining in their perilous state, sinking further into greater vulnerability, and dying prematurely (Funk et. al 2010:24).

If the trauma of experiencing disaster and poverty has a strong correlation to issues of theodicy and failing to disclose that emotional trauma causes high rates of mental health issues among global south communities, then lament is well placed to assist in holistic development practice.

The potential contribution of lament

Spiritual and emotional care in development and disaster relief must be suitable to the particular spiritual worldview of the community being engaged, and must not be ‘parachuted in’ from the global north context (Aten 2012:132f). However, this does not imply that principles cannot be taken from a process such as lament and appropriately contextualised; the successful use of lament in the global north demonstrates its adaptability, for it is a middle-eastern practice. Lament is unique in that it is a process that has distinct parallels with modern approaches to grief and trauma counselling, yet uses this process to heal and

⁶ Interestingly, the paper didn’t appear to explore the foundational causes of mental health among the poor, which I would expect would include a large percentage of situations of unaddressed trauma.

empower in the context of theological relationship (Cohen 2013:65, see also Snow et al. 2011:133) so important to the majority of global south communities.⁷

Another potential area of contribution to community development in the global south is the ability for lament to enable the imprecator to move to a place of peace even when the situation at hand has not yet resolved. While a development agency may improve a particular community's access to water, for example, issues such as education, health and local economy may remain relatively unaltered. Life has improved, but it is still incredibly difficult; everything desired has not yet been received, and so an element of distress continues. However, lament has the potential, when used regularly by the global south, to enable them to hold that continuing distress in tension without their worldview or spirituality crumbling. This is crucial for communities of faith, without which hope may be lost and coping behaviours of addiction, violence and crime return.

The evidence of lament working in this way is perhaps most clearly seen by the African-American slaves, who used lament effectively in the face of continuing hardship and oppression:

I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow
I'm tossed in this wide world alone
No hope I have for tomorrow;
I've started to make heaven my home.

Sometimes I am tossed and driven, Lord,
Sometimes I don't know where to roam.
I've heard of a city called heaven,
I've started to make it my home.

Lament, if not already used by suffering communities of faith, has the potential to contribute significantly to their empowerment, healing and holding of distress. As yet it appears to be

⁷ A number of authors interestingly noted the prevalence of the question of theodicy among agnostics, suggesting that lament may be a useful tool at times among communities that don't express a particular faith perspective (Hicks 1993:106; Snow et al. 2011:131; Exline and Grubbs 2011:306).

underutilised, but perhaps with the rising recognition of the importance of spirituality and mental health issues in situations of poverty, the social sciences and community development theorists may uncover the process of lament as an important and appropriate community engagement tool.

Lament and the Christian global north

The disconnect

While the inclusion of a section exploring lament and the Christian global north in the context of community development may appear out of place, it is this very assumption that requires addressing – and an issue that perhaps lament could contribute towards positively. The underlying assumption is that the Christian global north can be separated from their southern family which stands in stark contrast to the repeated and consistent biblical mandate to care for the poor and vulnerable. While most Christians make the odd donation to their favourite aid organisation, there is little difference in overall posture towards the poor between those who describe themselves as ‘deeply religious’ and those who would call themselves ‘non-religious’ (Sider 1997:40). Issues of social justice are not at the forefront of many Christian communities; we’ve somehow managed to have a ‘pious spirit’ while ignoring the ‘real world’ (Stassen and Gushee 2003:449). As Brueggemann succinctly puts it:

It is a curious fact that the church has, by and large, continued to sing songs of orientation in a world increasingly experiences as disoriented. That may be laudatory. It could be that such relentlessness is an act of bold defiance... a great evangelical “nevertheless”... but... it is my judgement that this action of the church is less an evangelical defiance guided by faith, and much more a frightened, numb denial and deception that does not want to acknowledge or experience the disorientation of life. The reason for such relentless affirmation of orientation seems to come, not from faith, but from the wishful optimism of our culture (1984:51).

Though Brueggemann is exploring the reasons for the avoidance of lament in the liturgy of the modern Church, it is striking how complimentary his thoughts are to those of Sider, Stassen and Gushee. For the vast majority of humanity, the world is a ‘frightening and disorienting’ place; particularly for the poor and vulnerable. But the modern Christian is permitted to dance to only one band – Enlightenment optimism and its harmonising vocalist, the marketing jingle. We must be perpetually positive and upbeat. There is no room for lament or doubt because it may be indicative of an impermissible crack in the amour of God (Brueggemann 1984:52). In a recent American study by Exline and Grubb, 52% of people who disclosed their anger towards God with a friend said the response they received was that “...it is wrong to have negative feelings towards God” (2011:310). There is little room in the Western Christian mind for confusion, doubt, or anger towards God; in an ugly echo of the corporate world, expressing these feelings may be detrimental to your perception and promotion by others.

Failure to lament

This failure to lament has a direct impact on our posture towards the poor; they are a physical theodicy that is best left out of sight in darkened alleyways and overseas slums.⁸ Sider seems to suggest that the failure of the Christian global north to be deeply troubled by social justice is an issue of biblical education:

Most wealthy Christians have failed to seek God’s perspective on the plight of our billion hungry neighbours... There are millions of Christians who will take any risk, make any sacrifice, forsake any treasure, if they clearly see that God’s word demands it (Sider 1997:40).

⁸ Failing to lament also has significant ramifications for the suffering global north; this has been the almost exclusive focus of commentary on the role of lament in the Christian community. The contribution of lament to the suffering global north will not be explored in this paper.

I would argue it runs deeper than that; the global north doesn't need another Bible study as much as a lesson in how to shed an honest tear. Again, Brueggemann:

A community of faith that negates laments soon concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne, because the throne seems to be only a place of praise. I believe it thus follows that if justice questions are improper questions at the throne... they soon appear to be improper questions in public places, in schools, in hospitals, with the government, and eventually even in the courts... we are left with only grim obedience and eventually despair. *The point of access for serious change has been forfeited when the propriety of this speech form is denied* (Brueggemann 1995:107 emphasis mine).

Permitting only positive words in the context of relationship with Yahweh results in an illusion that there is no injustice, that there is no poverty, there is no suffering. In this setting, one must not just ignore the injustice, but the one who is enduring the injustice. It doesn't just forget the malnourished and swollen bellies of children, it overlooks the urgency that *they are children* and that there is something terribly wrong and unjust about malnourished children. It allows us to hear of terrible disasters and suffering without shedding a tear, and pray for those suffering without any stirring or solidarity in our heart:

"God, please help the people in Nepal. Amen."

"Next prayer point?"

I clearly remember a time when I believed that the poor somehow didn't feel the pain of suffering as deeply as I did; until I began meeting people like the village leader in rural Sumba who had lost his wife and three children to cholera; until I attempted to treat the gangrenous legs of 5-year-old Dexy and felt something of his mother's despair and helplessness; until I sat with a leper colony in Sabu and heard them express a quiet but deep pain at being ignored by their community, left to rot on their own hidden from sight.

Failing to lament fosters a terrible, terrible disconnect between the Christian global north and our suffering family in the south. I am hopeful however, that this can be readily undone if we take up this ancient tradition of our faith once again, making it a regular part of our life and worship.

Reconnecting through lament

Learning to lament, and using lament as a regular, spiritually formative practice will help integrate issues of social justice, both local and international, into the global north agenda (Brueggemann 1995:106).⁹ Songs of lament strip away the false filters we build for ourselves, and ‘dangerously’ help us to see the world as it really is (Brueggemann 1984:53). As we open ourselves up entirely before God, warts and all, rational thoughts and irrational thoughts, with words of praise and lament, we become ‘liberated’ towards both God and our neighbour (Gill 1989:119); lament allows us, even forces us to measure up our story against others, opening our eyes to our shared humanity (Broyles 2008:386). It enables us to advocate for those who are suffering to the One who promised would remove all suffering (Westermann 1981:276), while also forcing us to answer the same questions of ourselves: how have I contributed to the suffering? Why do I ‘stand far off’?

Lament builds solidarity between the global north and our suffering family in the south – but it also builds solidarity with Yahweh in declaring that the world is not as it should be; it causes us to be imminent and understanding of suffering as Yahweh is (Hicks 1993:170). The regular use of lament can prepare the global north for times of disaster and news of disaster, as the process becomes embedded in our way of engaging with a broken and suffering world (Brueggemann 1984:67; Cohen 2013:75), while breaking down the false assumption that we know what God is doing in the world, forcibly reshaping our response to

⁹ Again, I believe the benefits would be broader than what I articulate here, but the intent of this paper is to explore the implications of lament as a poverty-reduction tool.

questions of theodicy. Perhaps one day a posture of embrace with silent tears of solidarity will replace the theologically correct propositional statements and calls to repentance that Christians have been known to trot out in times of suffering.

Lament and the practitioner

The impact of working with the poor

We turn now to consider the potential contribution of lament to the community development practitioner; for to be at the coal face of poverty alleviation brings questions of theodicy and issues of mental health. The very nature of development work is emotionally taxing, and many feel isolated and relatively unsupported; it is a common sentiment among community development practitioners that “there is nowhere to take the shit, but home” (Hoggett et al. 2009:60). It is a complex task involving the balancing of the many varied views of stakeholders, regular impossible questions like, ‘do we help 500 people marginally, or 50 significantly?’ There is a constant dilemma of one’s own wages and expenses coming out of project budgets assisting people in (for example) accessing water; If I eat, they drink less; If sleep comfortable, they will walk further to get their drinking water. It is no wonder that there are high rates of staff turnover in this sector; the mental burden can be significant (Hoggett et al. 2009:62).

Failure to lament

Failing to deal with the distress and theological dilemmas associated with engaging poverty first-hand are the same for ignoring anguish and theodicy elsewhere: “...easily blindsided in particular situations and... involved in strange compensatory behaviours” (Ringma 2000:104). This can only have a negative impact on the very situation we’re seeking to address. Practitioners can become outcome-oriented and rush or impose projects in hopes of

belaying our fear of ‘not making a difference’ when the practitioner – to really make a difference – must in the first place have a posture of learning and be people oriented (Myers 1999:157; Chambers 1983:201).

This dilemma is particularly sharp for Christian practitioners raised in the environment of the Christian global north outlined above; practitioners who have had it drummed into them that Christ has triumphed over sin and that ‘there really are no other crises to be had’ (Ringma 2000:108); we typically don’t have a ‘theology of disasters’ (Aten 2012:134). It is understandable then, as Melba Maggay posits:

There is something about the daily exposure to poverty and other ills of society which tends to tear away faith and make agents of change some of the most cynical people around (in Myers 1999:163).

This runs the risk of ‘agents of transformation’ ironically turning themselves into ‘agents of destruction,’ where coping mechanisms such as violence, control, addiction and emotional withdrawal beginning to take over as the formative characteristics of the practitioner. Being indefinitely angry at God has been demonstrated to result in mental and physical health deterioration (Snow et al. 2011:130), which is unacceptable for people who are in an almost constant theodicean state.

The potential contribution of lament

In dealing with the difficult task practitioners face, Chambers recommends taking time to reflect on others who have done great things (1983:216), Ife proposes reflective journaling (2013:305), and Myers suggests a mix of theological reflection, moderated expectation, and detachment among other things (Myers 1999:162f). His proposal that comes closest to the process of lament – counselling and psychological help - is a final option reserved for ‘critical incidents’ (1999:166). While I greatly respect these authors, and appreciate that

Myers has even suggested spirituality as important to the practitioner, I believe their suggestions fall short of practitioner needs.

My proposal is that lament offers Christian practitioners a way to be truly incarnational in approach while holding the distress and “bringing the shit” to the one who sees the things they see and travels with them on the road; who will hear their hardest criticisms, weep with them, think no less of them for their despair, and gently remind them – when they’re ready – that they’re right; it is his problem to sort this mess out. Then, and only *then*, am I ready to hear an inspirational story, recite a popular fatalistic poem (“Lord, grant me the serenity...”) and head back into the fray with a reckless and abandoned love. It’s shaking my fists at a loving Yahweh that allows me to slowly open my hands to embrace the disfigured and down-trodden. It’s his listening to my despair that enables me to sit with the despairing. It’s reflecting on his promises and character that reshapes *my* character and deepens my resolve and commitment to the participating in the restoration of all things in spite of the overwhelming task at hand. I identify more with Nouwen’s *Wounded Healer* than Osteen’s *I can, I will*. I “...must bind my own wounds carefully, in anticipation of the moment when I will be needed... so that my wounds might be a major source of healing power” (Nouwen 2010:88f).

Perhaps that’s too self-reflective. Too much ‘I’. But in the absence of research and qualitative studies in the area of lament for community development, I put myself forward as an example of a practitioner who has found and is finding lament to be a most helpful tool. While researching this essay, I penned a quick lament, to which the overwhelming response from family was distress at my distress, while for me the process was thoroughly cathartic:

As I attempt a cheap plastic plaster
On the mountainous boil of the poor,
I cry: “How long O my God,
Will you lay there, asleep, silent, snore?”

Then I remember the ways
You've acted times past,
And I glance again in their eyes.
Seeing you, silently pleading with me,
My question's U-turn realise.

Your arms still embracing,
Your hand on my shoulder,
We start on the boil once more.
I don't know how we'll do it,
Or how, when it'll end,
But it's a plaster I hear you ask for.

Conclusion

Lament has somehow been, for the most part, a tool left on the shelf of Christian antiquity - to be admired from a distance while it gathers dust. My suggestion is that it requires taking down and dusting off, for it is a breathing apparatus without which we will be barely alive in the current climate. We need this important spiritually forming tool, and not just on the brightly-lit, well-choreographed stages of Christian worship - although some chaos and despair would be helpful in those realms. Lament has the ability to strip away the rosy glasses of the north, allowing us to serve and see the world as it really is. It can be a place of refuge and restoration for those working in distressing situations - the community development practitioner - while also providing a healing framework for indigenous communities who suffer the theodicy of poverty in their very minds and bodies.

There is an obsolescent nature to lament as it drives us closer to the day when "crying will be [needed] no more." And I long for the day when lament will rightfully be a dust-gathering relic. Til then, however, I will continue to cry out to Yahweh, with the poor, and I hope increasingly the global north:

"How long, O Lord?"

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