

# Bearing the Unbearable

*Trauma, Gospel, and Pastoral Care*

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## Keeping an Open Heart in Troubled Times

### *Self-Empathy as a Christian Spiritual Practice*

How do you keep your heart open when you see person after person afflicted with trauma? I used to think that 95 percent of the female population in this country had been sexually abused as children.<sup>1</sup> Were the statistics of sexual abuse vastly underreported, I wondered, or was my perception skewed because of my work as a pastoral counselor? When you listen to stories of pain day after day, how do you keep your own spirit alive? The root meaning of the word “compassion” is “to suffer with.” What do you do when you reach the limit of your capacity for compassion?

We are contextual beings whose many contexts exist not simply outside us but also within us. As one member of a particular family, we internalize every member in it, along with the family culture as a whole with its unique dynamics, both for good and for ill. Similarly, as cultural beings, we dwell within a particular culture, but that culture also dwells in us.<sup>2</sup> We internalize the context in which we live, a context so complex that it would take hours adequately to describe it.<sup>3</sup>

1. See Pamela Cooper-White's chapter “The Sexual Abuse of Children,” in *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 168-92. See also Nancy J. Ramsay, “Sexual Abuse and Shame: The Travail of Recovery,” in *Women in Travail and Transition: A New Pastoral Care*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner and Maxine Glaz (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 109-25.

2. A. J. van den Blink, “Empathy amid Diversity: Problems and Possibilities,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* (Summer 1993): 8.

3. For a fascinating firsthand account of some of the cultural, socioeconomic, and theological factors that influenced her own beliefs about self-care, see Teresa E. Snorton, “Self-Care for the African American Woman,” in *In Her Own Time: Women and Developmental Issues in Pastoral Care*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 285-94.

The overarching context that each of us has internalized — that affects us daily, body and soul — includes the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the daily terror and anguish of those in the Middle East. Depending on which issues live in our hearts, we may also bear the pain of those who suffer from HIV-AIDS, political oppression, torture, or any number of tragic features of today's world. As members of a common humanity, each of us participates in the world's distress. Those of us in ministry internalize certain levels of pain by our commitment to be fully present with the handful of persons we serve on a daily basis. The cumulative effect of being in the presence of so much pain puts us in danger of compassion fatigue, in which we simply reach our limits.<sup>4</sup> We stop caring, not because we want to, but because we no longer have the capacity to take in anything more.

Philip Hallie, author of *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, describes the danger of having a vocation that continually confronts one with suffering and evil. He writes of researching the Nazi era:

For years, I had been studying the slow crushing and grinding of a human being by other human beings. . . . Across all these studies, the pattern of the strong crushing the weak kept repeating itself and repeating itself, so that when I was not bitterly angry, I was bored at the repetition of the patterns of persecution. When I was not desiring to be cruel with the cruel, I was a monster — like, perhaps, many others around me — who could look upon torture and death without a shudder.<sup>5</sup>

Being exposed to evil in this secondhand way had taken a heavy toll on Hallie's spirit, even without his knowing it. Harry Wilmer, a Jungian analyst who studied the repetitive nightmares of Vietnam veterans ten years after the war had ended, acknowledges something of the personal cost. “It goes almost without saying that my work with these men was often painful to me. Many times I asked myself why I had taken it on, or more correctly, why it had taken me on. At times I experienced war nightmares and dreams of combat. Then I knew that the suffering of the men was getting to me.”<sup>6</sup> While Hallie apparently defended against the pain for a while, he came to see that he had

4. See B. Hudnall Stamm, *Professional Quality of Life: Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue Subscales, R-IV (ProQOL)*. [www.proqol.org/ProQol\\_Test.html](http://www.proqol.org/ProQol_Test.html).

5. Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 2.

6. Harry A. Wilmer, “The Healing Nightmare: A Study of the War Dreams of Vietnam Combat Veterans,” *Quadrant* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 57.

done so at the cost of his own humanity. Wilmer, by contrast, allowed the veterans' suffering to affect him intimately. Years after the war had ended, he himself awoke at night in a sweat of terror. The war lived on, as he says, "in the nightmares of combat veterans and in the collective unconscious of us all."<sup>7</sup>

In January 2006 my husband, George Hunsinger, organized a national conference for religious and military leaders, human rights activists, and lawyers to launch the National Religious Campaign against Torture, a group of "national, regional, and local religious and secular organizations committed to ensuring that the United States does not engage in torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of anyone, without exceptions."<sup>8</sup> My husband spends hours each day reading volumes of material on the Internet about our current world crisis. Books on torture are piled on the breakfast table, in the living room, and on the floor beside the bed. Stories of torture fill his heart, fueling his commitment to do what he can to bring these horrifying practices to an end.

One evening some time ago, as I went to him to say goodnight, he began to tell me about what he was reading. Worried about the next day's responsibilities, I interrupted him, stating emphatically that I couldn't bear to hear stories about torture right before going to bed. I was anxious about lying awake for hours seeing these images over and over in my mind's eye. No longer able to keep my heart open, I told my husband with considerable energy that *I just could not bear* to hear one more story of trauma.

As I have reflected on that moment, I have come to see something of the cost of telling myself that "I cannot bear it." First, I cut myself off from the solace of shared suffering, in this case my husband's and my own. In subsequent weeks, my husband acknowledged that he was now consciously keeping such stories from me. Second, I found that I was shielding myself from any news that might upset my peace of mind or interfere with my ability to concentrate. Third, I felt regret over constricting my awareness in this way, limiting my freedom to learn and to act. The victims of torture were actually suffering torture while I could not even bear to hear about it. Wanting to *expand* my capacities for compassion rather than shrink away from such stories in self-protection, I found myself at odds with my core values.

This, then, is the dilemma: How do I keep an open heart toward those who need my compassion, whether it is my husband with whom I share my life, myself, as I face my very real limits, or the victims of torture living

7. Wilmer, "The Healing Nightmare," 47.

8. <http://www.nrcat.org/>, accessed August 26, 2009.

in prisons or dungeons whose very lives may depend upon the willingness of others to feel their plight and act on their behalf?

### Nonviolent Communication: Self-Empathy

In his book *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, Marshall Rosenberg teaches a mode of consciousness and a set of skills that enable us not only to practice empathic reception of others, but also to learn how to respond empathically to ourselves.<sup>9</sup> While empathy is considered an essential skill for pastoral care, I do not believe that it can flourish apart from self-empathy. To hear another with compassion, we need first to hear ourselves with compassion. If our anxiety is triggered (as mine was when my husband wished to share a story of torture), we are unable to hear little beyond our own internal static. As I have written elsewhere, "Much of the self-discipline required in listening to others without interjecting one's own reactions develops as one learns to pay attention to one's anxiety. In order to focus on another, one must know, paradoxically, how to pay attention to oneself."<sup>10</sup>

In nonviolent communication, Rosenberg teaches us how to pay attention not only to our feelings but also to the underlying needs or values that are causing the feelings. Needs are understood to be universal qualities that enhance life. They are life-giving, by definition. Thus, all human beings have physical needs, such as food, rest, water, warmth, and shelter. But just as essential to human thriving are our interpersonal needs for love, acceptance, understanding, community, and mutuality, among others. In addition, we might identify spiritual needs for forgiveness, hope, courage, trust, faith, integrity. These brief lists are meant to be suggestive, not definitive. What is pertinent here is that needs are evidence of our basic humanity. Though they transcend culture, each culture has its own particular way of understanding and expressing them. For Rosenberg, human needs are the underlying motivation for all our choices, whether we are conscious of them or not.<sup>11</sup> When our needs are met, we typically feel satisfied, delighted, or joyful. When our needs are unmet, we might feel frustrated, angry, sorrowful, or perplexed.

9. Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Encinitas, Calif.: PuddleDancer Press, 2003), chap. 9.

10. Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray without Ceasing: Revitalizing Pastoral Care* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 85.

11. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication*, chap. 5.



When we have chronically unmet needs, we experience emotional pain and need healing. When we attune ourselves inwardly with an attitude of caring attentiveness toward ourselves, seeking to understand our own feelings and needs, we are practicing self-empathy. I believe that we cannot remain openhearted toward others unless we know how to metabolize our own pain. In the example above, I was unable to connect with my husband's pain because I was not fully present to my own. I needed more understanding of my reaction to his request to share what he was reading. Why, I wondered, did I interrupt him with such intensity?

I have come to regard moments like these, when I am "triggered" into uncharacteristic reactivity, as significant nodal points of potential healing and growth. I believe that any time I react rather than respond, it is because forces outside my awareness are at work. This is the "psychopathology of everyday life" that Freud describes so lucidly. Slips of the tongue, moments of lightning rage, and irritability over which I have no apparent control are opportunities to become aware of unknown forces at work within me. In nonviolent communication (NVC) terms, they are opportunities to practice self-empathy in order to connect with unmet needs.

The life-giving human needs at work in me were as yet impossible for me to grasp. On the surface, my need for rest seemed paramount. Yet the intensity of my reaction signaled that something deeper was possibly at stake. In the days and weeks that followed, I found myself repeating the words "I cannot bear it." I would say to myself, "I cannot bear to hear the stories of abused and tortured human beings; I simply cannot bear it." Though I understood this kind of self-talk to be life-alienating, something that disconnected me from myself and others, I did not know how to change it.

### Practicing Self-Empathy

Self-empathy gives us the opportunity to listen to our own hearts with the same quality of compassionate attention that we would offer another in our best moments. However, simply *finding words* that accurately describe our feelings and needs is not the same as actually *connecting with them*. The process of connecting with an activated need in any particular situation requires us first to notice what is happening in the body. We ask ourselves gently what it is that we are seeking: "What is the longing of our heart?" As we listen for the answer, we focus on what goes on in our body, not on words in our mind.

As we attend to the body, we are seeking to name the unmet need that activated the feeling of frustration or pain. NVC teaches a kind of exquisite awareness of the range and variety of human needs. When several needs are tied up together in a gnarled ball, it takes time, care, and patience to identify each one. When we discover and accurately connect with the activated need(s), we experience an internal shift in the body. By internal shift, I mean something similar to what we experience when we finally remember a person's name that has been on "the tip of our tongue." When we discover the name, our body relaxes; we might give a deep sigh and say, "Ahh, I am so *relieved* to have remembered her name." In NVC, a similar feeling of shift and relaxation comes when we find the need that matches our feeling.<sup>12</sup>

So, for example, when I am upset by the kitchen piled high with dirty dishes, I want to identify my underlying need. Is it, I wonder, a need for order? Am I upset because I value a sense of order and beauty in my surroundings? Or is my underlying need one for trust and reliability? Perhaps I had a conversation with a family member who promised to clean the kitchen before going off with friends but did not follow through on that promise. Or is it really support that I need most of all? Are guests coming in thirty minutes and I am desperately needing support to make everything ready? The need, in other words, is always nested in a set of particular circumstances. I alone can identify my true need by attuning myself to how my body responds. What need, if met, would bring about palpable relaxation in my body?

The feelings I identify then become the thread that takes me deeper into my underlying longings. The feelings are usually more on the surface, whereas the needs are the buried treasure. We can feel the same feelings for weeks, months, even decades; they remain inert, a simple story that we tell again and again unless we connect with the unfulfilled desires that are causing the feelings. In NVC it is not necessary to understand the problem intellectually to bring about clarity or release. In fact, intellectual understanding can actually delay or block the desired liberating shift.

In order fully to connect with my need (rather than merely identifying *the word*), I might imagine a situation where that need is fully met. For example, I *connect emotionally* with the joy I feel whenever I see this quality in myself or anyone else (e.g., order, trust, reliability, or support, to take the example

12. Readers familiar with Eugene Gendlin's *focusing* will see close parallels with the practices he teaches. Both Rosenberg and Gendlin were students of Carl Rogers. See Eugene Gendlin, *Focusing* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982).

above). In other words, truly to connect with the need means that I imagine it as something fulfilled and present rather than as something lacking.

Truly to connect with the need is to experience its life-giving power. When I check how it feels in my body not to have the need met, I notice a heavy, tight, or constricted feeling. To connect with its *life-giving value*, by contrast, I shift to imagine the need being fully met. How do I actually feel *in my body* when I have order and beauty surrounding me, for example, or when I trust that those I live with will follow through on their promises? When I identify the actual need at work in the specific circumstances, I will experience a shift *in my body* when I ask myself this question. As I look inwardly with self-empathy, I am looking for an inner sense of release or relaxation, an “*aha*” feeling: *this* is the quality of being that I want in my life. “I want my surroundings to be orderly and beautiful because that gives me peace and joy.” I don’t focus, in other words, on the dirty dishes or the messy kitchen, but rather on the feeling in my body when the need is met.

Connecting with the need means to connect with its beauty, as one NVC trainer has put it.<sup>13</sup> It means that we live in a consciousness of this need or quality as an enduring value in our life. When we dwell in the need, we celebrate its presence and mourn its absence. When we feel the pain associated with its absence, we shift our attention to the joy of its intrinsic beauty or preciousness. Connected inwardly to its life-giving goodness, we may consent to living vulnerably with our unfulfilled longings.

### Self-Empathy as Opening the Heart

In an NVC workshop on self-empathy, NVC trainer Robert Gonzales asked us to identify a sentence in our minds that seemed to disconnect us from ourselves or others. I knew that the sentence “I cannot bear it” truly disconnected me from others because I had seen how it had disconnected me from my husband. I was also aware that it alienated me from myself.

I began, with Robert’s guidance, to repeat the phrase “I cannot bear it.” Because we were working on “old” material (as opposed to a current trigger), Robert encouraged me to repeat the phrase several times until I could become fully connected to the emotions associated with it. After several repetitions, the underlying pain searing my soul emerged. What

13. I first learned of the “beauty of human needs” from Robert Gonzales, Ph.D., at an NVC International Intensive Training session in Rochester, N.Y., in July 2004.

was it *in particular* that I was telling myself I could not bear? What was the *specific observation* that I was reacting to?<sup>14</sup> In this case, the observation was not something my husband had actually said, but something I had remembered from an earlier conversation. What in particular I could not bear was the torture technique of waterboarding, in which human beings were brought to the very brink of drowning, and the hypothermia techniques that put naked prisoners into cold prison cells. Shivering and miserable, they were denied the most basic human need for warmth. As I lay snug in my bed at night with my down comforter wrapped around me, I would meditate on their plight until I thought I would go mad with the terror, the rage, and the sorrow of it.

As I began to tell Robert the specific images that haunted my imagination, my tears began to flow, to the point that my words were swallowed up by sobs. Robert did not simply hear my agony; he listened *for my needs*. He heard and reflected back each need with care. “You long for compassion for these prisoners. You want respect *for all people*, no matter what their sins or crimes. You want the truth to be spoken. You want it known what our country is doing to human beings in our name.”

It required intense concentration as I struggled to give words to every facet of the pain. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, *when every need had been fully heard and named*, I became calm. I said matter-of-factly: “I can bear it because I just did. I can bear it because you were willing to hear it.”<sup>15</sup>

### Further Reflections

As I processed what had just occurred, I was astonished to realize that in shielding myself from the pain I felt, I had been perpetuating the very

14. In nonviolent communication, it is necessary to specify the exact thing one is reacting to so that there is clarity about the triggering issue. One aims to describe the specific observation (the precise words or events that were seen, heard, or remembered) in any communication with oneself or others. The NVC “template” for complete communication is OFNR: observation, feeling, need, request. See <http://www.cnvc.org/en/online-learning/nvc-concepts/nonviolent-communication>, accessed August 26, 2009.

15. One of the reasons I felt so fully heard and received was the expression of anguish on Robert’s face as he listened. I was moved by his willingness to enter into my suffering with such compassion. The example also shows the interconnection between empathy and self-empathy. I was unable to have empathy for myself until I had received empathy from another.

thing I abhorred. In a strange way, I was unwilling to acknowledge what we were doing to other human beings because I continually told myself that I could not bear to do so. I was unwilling to speak the truth as I understood it because I feared plunging others into the same nightmare of raw pain, fear, and grief that I was avoiding in myself. I, myself, thus kept the very complicity of silence that would enable these practices to continue. Were there others, I wondered, who also told themselves that they could not bear to acknowledge the truth? Did I now understand something of the horror and shame, I wondered, the sickening feeling, that might have swept the hearts of our German brothers and sisters during the Nazi era when they heard whispers of what was being done in their name?

### Self-Empathy as a Christian Spiritual Practice

NVC is a form of consciousness and a set of skills that have an implicit spirituality all their own.<sup>16</sup> Depending on the theological assumptions of any particular teacher, different aspects will be emphasized. I have been instructed and edified over the years, as I have learned from serious practitioners of other religious paths how NVC has contributed to their ability to live out their deepest convictions. This ongoing interreligious dialogue is a fascinating subject that unfortunately lies outside the scope of this book. From the beginning of my own study of NVC, however, my interest has been in how it can be used practically in living out the gospel. My specific focus here is how I understand self-empathy as a Christian spiritual practice.

As a Christian, I am aware that my needs and core values are deeply shaped by the gospel. Whenever I seek to respond empathically to others, I am assuming that they, like all human beings, have, in the words of John Webster, "a given teleology. . . . They are not simply discrete units of personal need, but are what they are as they belong to an order of reality with certain ends."<sup>17</sup> I understand the order of reality to which they belong as the kingdom of God. In other words, I understand all human need in the

16. See, for example, <http://www.cnvc.org/en/learn-online/spiritual-basis/spiritual-basis-nonviolent-communication>, accessed August 26, 2009.

17. "Response" [to Caroline Simon] by John Webster, *For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 163.

light of the prayer that Jesus taught, that God's kingdom should come, on earth as it is in heaven.

In my personal anguish over the plight of the tortured, I recognized my own most urgent need for the balm of human compassion. What I could not bear to imagine was the apparent lack of compassion for the suffering of human beings who were denied access to the most fundamental human need for breath and warmth. How could human beings so harden their hearts toward other human beings who, like them, were made in the image of God?

It is a curious fact that in the New Testament the verb for our word "compassion" is used only of Jesus or of the God figure in Jesus' parables.<sup>18</sup> I have come to see that my understanding of compassion has an inevitable christological shape. My faith has been decisively shaped by the stories of Jesus' compassion for the blind, the deaf, and the lame, for the ill and the grief-stricken. I am moved by the stories in which he has compassion on the crowds, in which he feeds the thousands who hunger for bread and for the smallest morsel of hope. I am astounded by his words of compassion toward those who brought about his death. In all these ways and more, I understand Jesus' compassion to be "a window of access into the nature of . . . God's vulnerability and willingness to suffer with us."<sup>19</sup> I believe that Robert's willingness to open his heart with compassion toward me had its source in God's grace, enabling him to "participate in God's compassion for the world."<sup>20</sup> Compassion, in my understanding, does not arise out of our own finally limited human capacities, but is grounded instead in *God's* love for the world.

Whenever I practice self-empathy, I am in search of what I most deeply need in any given situation. Though I can sometimes be badly mistaken in assessing my true need, in Christian worship, song, and prayer I confess my need of God and of God's grace in its rich multiplicity of forms. When discouraged, I need patience or courage. If I am disappointed in myself, I may identify my need as a sturdy sense of integrity or a more complete honesty. When afraid, I may recognize that I am lacking trust. If I only had more faith, I could act with more freedom. If I am in despair, I recognize my need for hope. Our human needs, in other words, are all ultimately

18. Andrew Purves, *The Search for Compassion: Spirituality and Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 16.

19. Purves, *The Search for Compassion*, 16.

20. Purves, *The Search for Compassion*, 12.



rooted and grounded in God. They are not finally qualities that we can develop on our own but are rather gifts that come from above.

It follows, therefore, that self-empathy as a Christian spiritual practice leads directly to prayer: to asking God for what I need. When I turn to God in prayer, I don't simply rattle off requests as if I were reading a grocery list. Instead, I meditate on the true nature of my need, and offer it up to God, trusting him as the author of every good and perfect gift. I cling to the promise that God will hear my requests and meet my needs (or else give me the strength to live in the midst of unmet need): "Rejoice in the Lord always. . . . The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:4-6). "And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19).

Prayer connects us to God and to all the needs that are fulfilled in him.<sup>21</sup> Through its stories and images of our core human needs fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, the gospel actually shapes the awareness of our needs. Jesus Christ is presented as the light of the world, fulfilling our human longings for illumination, for wisdom, for understanding; as the bread of life, fulfilling our daily need for basic sustenance, both body and soul; as the water of life, assuaging the thirst of every soul that aches for justice and peace. There is no longer any separation between *your* need and *my* need; there is simply *human* need that God alone can fulfill. Praying fervently about our needs deepens our sense of longing for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. Indeed, it magnifies our longing until we join the groaning of creation for the new world to come (Rom. 8:22-23).

The gospel also underscores our fundamental need of one another. In the body of Christ, the church, we recognize our profound need for community, for mutual care, forgiveness, and love. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'" (1 Cor. 12:21). Our attempts to be self-sufficient are revealed as signs of our fallenness and sin. We need one another as fundamentally as a "fish needs water." Karl Barth comments: "My humanity depends upon the fact that I am always aware, and my action is determined by the awareness, that I need the assistance of others as a fish needs water."<sup>22</sup> Barth goes on to say that my humanity *also* depends upon the fact "that I need to give

21. See also chap. 6 of this volume.

22. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 263.

*my assistance* to others as a fish needs water."<sup>23</sup> Thus Barth underscores Rosenberg's basic conviction that mutual and reciprocal care lies at the very heart of what it means to be human.

I believe that God's love is the wellspring from which we draw when we need compassion for ourselves or others. Not only Robert's caring presence toward me, but also my own ability to accept my human limitations, was finally sustained by a transcendent source of caring, the unfathomable abyss of God's love. Though my meditation began in deep grief, it led through the anguish for the tortured to compassion for myself and every human being who consents to bear a portion of the world's suffering. I was filled with gratitude for Robert and for all those willing to keep their hearts open in longing and vulnerability, to share in the suffering of our frail and fallen humanity.<sup>24</sup>

I believe that it is finally our connection to this transcendent source of compassion that enables us keep our hearts open in troubled times. When I am exhausted or confused or lost in a wilderness of sorrow, worry, or despair, I believe that there is One to whom I can turn for strength. In worship, in the great hymns and creeds of the church, in the comfort that comes from the simple compassion of another human being — in all these ways — I am comforted by the comfort of the gospel. For the New Testament presents Jesus Christ as One who has taken the suffering of the entire world into his own heart. He does not leave us to suffer the anguish of our mortal condition, nor the consequences of our sin, alone, but actively intercedes for us. Though I cannot fathom the depth of such a love, nor comprehend the mystery of his atoning sacrifice, nevertheless I am able to anchor myself in a transcendent ground for hope, a vision of the redemption of the entire world. Like the saints who have gone before us, I, too, long for the kingdom of God to come on earth as it is in heaven, where all human needs matter and every human need is fulfilled: a great banquet where the human family feasts in mutual joy.

23. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 264.

24. While empathy and self-empathy are interlocking technical skills, compassion, in terms of one's willingness to suffer with others, "is only possible for us in and through our relationship with God." Purves, *The Search for Compassion*, 12.

### Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have sought to introduce a spiritual practice that has given me hope in a time when I desperately needed to be anchored in hope. The events following 9/11 have compelled me to dig more deeply in an attempt to be equal to the times. How do we keep our own spirits alive and not plunge into a sea of despair? My ability to speak out followed my willingness to enter a cauldron of grief and rage. Until I was able to have compassion for my own suffering, I was paralyzed by the frozen grief in my soul.

The prophetic witness and action to which we are called as Christians cannot endure without a willingness to suffer with those who suffer. Yet we cannot do this work with a glad heart unless we know how to drink regularly from the wellspring of God's compassion for all people. Those of us who work as pastors, counselors, or human helpers know that mourning is itself the work of healing. Active, fully engaged mourning, crying out in lament to God, is precisely what enables us to keep our hearts open in troubled times because we thereby open ourselves to the immeasurable compassion of God for each vulnerable human heart.

## Prayers of Lament

### *"How Long, O Lord?"*

Prayers of lament arise *in extremis*. When the people of God undergo trial and cry out for deliverance, lament is faith's alternative to despair. It is a peculiar form of petitionary prayer, one that springs from unrelieved suffering. When healing fails, lament is the hopelessness that refuses to give up hope. When injustice prevails, lament is the protest that digs in for the long haul. When humiliation abounds, lament is the self-respect that cries out to a hidden God, "How long, O Lord?" Lament bends anguish and anger into ardent supplication. Sometimes it is no more than an inarticulate cry.

Lament is fueled by human longings, whatever they may be. Why does one woman lament over her inability to conceive a child while another can accept that a child is not given? Why does one member of a family still grieve for a beloved but lost brother, refusing to be consoled? Why does a man of faith persist year after year with the same plea to God, refusing to let go of a dream that seems within reach but is nevertheless withheld? Those who cry out to God in lament refuse to quench their desire. They are like the nuisance in Jesus' parable, who wrenches his neighbor from a warm bed in the dead of night to filch three loaves of bread for his visitors. They are like the importunate woman who so wears down the judge that he gives in just to be rid of her. Jesus admonishes his disciples never to give up hope but to persist in their entreaty to God, that their petitions may be heard. For if even an unjust human judge gives in to such importunity, how much more will the righteous Judge of the universe listen to their cries?

Yet, how long can lament persist? Over time, hope and despair seem to hang in the balance. The more fervent the hope, the more insistent the whisper of despair. Lament risks everything on God. It refuses the shell of cynicism that would protect its vulnerable heart. Instead, it remains open,