

SBL Annual Meeting Papers, November 2011

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Jay Harold Ellens
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor

Lament: Psalms, Sorrow, Self, and Society in Post-Traumatic Cultures: Peter Homans' *Ability to Mourn*

Human history is marked by frequent crises that created traumatic disjunction in the flow of social culture. Such disruptions always result in significant periods of post-traumatic stress for individuals and communities. The long story of communal anguish is typified by incidents not far from current memory. 1) The aftermath of the French Revolution; 2) Germany after WWII; 3) The USA after the destructive 1960s and 1970s revolution; 4) The months following the assassination of JFK; 5) The PTSD of both the North and the South following the Civil War. The grief-loss in each case forms the communal fabric of suffering that then becomes the matrix within which and by which individual tragedy and grief-loss is enlarged and lived out. It has ever been so for humankind.

It is not surprising, then, that nearly half of the biblical psalms are personal and national laments. Psalm 22, is such a psalm in five sections that reflect David's post-traumatic stress expressed in a grief process that looks very much like a modified Kubler-Ross model. Psalm 22 is made notable by the fact that Jesus' last desperate words were a quotation from verse one. "*E'loi, E'loi, la'ma sabach-tha'ni*" (Mark 15:34), not in Hebrew or LXX Greek, but in Jesus' mother tongue, Aramaic. He had been driven inward to his core, as is common for persons in extremity. Like Jesus in his dereliction, it is difficult in the end to discern whether David completes his lament, in Psalm 22, ending in the reality and integration phase or in delusion. Is it faith or fantasy. Those of us who treat PTSD clinically recognize that such a confused outcome is quite common.

It always worries the concerned therapist whether the patient is developing a solid ground of accommodation and integration of the trauma; or an alternate form of imagined reality; essentially a reversion to a new type of the denial phase. This is a special danger with patients, who like David, wrestle with PTSD in a religious matrix. Peter Homans says that out of the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century arose an entirely new kind of quest for the meaning of life in the world caught in that post-traumatic stress disorder. It was this syndrome, Homans claims, that produced the Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytic movement with its flood of new insights and speculations about what makes humans tick. It was also this trauma that produced the religious phenomenon of the Great Awakening and the rationalistic constructs of that heresy known today as American Fundamentalism.

Homans is sure that it is the ability of a society constructively to mourn, communally and individually, that empowers its creative survival and restoration of function, after such trauma. What does that mean for our moment in time and for understanding of Psalm 22 and Jesus'

final helpless gasp of dereliction? Are we stuck with the rather mechanical Kubler-Ross grief process model or is there another option? What is going on in Psalm 22 that might illumine us? Is there something from our present day trauma that we can bring to Psalm 22 to read it more accurately and empathically? Not all of these vital questions can be answered in 20 minutes. How can Homans' model help us with all of this in the twenty-first century? This paper attempts to address that question, focusing Homans' psychological lens on the moments of profound individual and community grief-loss.

Lament Psalms and Sorrow

Two weeks after 9/11 my young brother, aged 53, developed an abscessed tooth and was sent by his dentist to an oral surgeon on a Thursday evening. He could not get an appointment until the following Wednesday, but the surgeon obliged him with a prescription of Clendamyacin to tide him over. Gordon went hunting Friday in a distant forest. By Saturday morning he was bleeding from every orifice and his son drove him home, arriving in the evening with Gordon lapsing into a coma.

After intense medical treatment, the excision of his colon, and other extreme interventions, he was sustained only by life supports when the family gathered on Monday afternoon to decide on his fate. As we ruminated, and prayed for the light, my brother in law, Orville, indicated at 3:00 PM that he had to go to do a favor for a friend and would be back at 6:00 PM. He was back at the appointed time, on a stretcher, and dead of a broken neck. He had fallen from a roof. On Tuesday, at 8:00 AM we pulled the plug on both of them. Ten days later my youngest daughter at age 36 fell, unaccountably, and was subsequently hospitalized with a relatively fast moving form of Multiple Sclerosis that now confines her to a wheelchair.

You will have no difficulty in comprehending that for the last decade we have been a family in post-traumatic stress. It is quite surprising what that does to a family and all of its individual members. Sorrow, self, and the family circle all take on such new meanings as to change every facet of everything. Kubler-Ross' grief model is the reigning reality of our family process. The trauma has loosened our grip on life so that nothing is as important any more as everything was before the triple hammering of the Muslim attack on our country, the untimely losses of two brothers, and the invaliding and impending death of our dear doctor daughter.

Homans argues that a profound quest for new meaning was initiated by the cultural and society trauma of the Industrial Revolution. It may be observed that similarly a profound quest for new meanings was provoked by the socio-cultural revolution of the 1960s and 70s in the USA. Moreover, that had hardly been integrated into a new cultural equation when a revolutionary new trauma beset us, namely the violent surfacing of the Muslim siege of the Western World by the attack on the WTC on September 11, 2001. As a culture and society, America has not begun to pick up the tattered threads of the destructive 1960s as we stagger around dazed by the unbelievable new insult of our world at war.

Well, the Kubler-Ross grief process model has illumined the reordering of our world over time, but it has significant limitations. It is mechanistic and superficial. Is there another option? What is going on in the trauma reflected in Psalm 22? Or is there something from our trauma we can bring to Psalm 22 and other times of anguish to illumine them more empathically? How can Homans' model help us in such inevitable times of trauma in life?

I remember distinctly exactly where I was standing when I heard the news of the assassination of President Kennedy. I also remember the mind numbing and depression of the national psyche that prevailed palpably for the rest of that year. As a whole people we were just unable to lift ourselves up out of the post-traumatic stress. Normal psychic life almost stalled out for the entire world of Americans. We were stunned into deep reflective fear, shame, and inexpressible rage. What is it that happens to a culture when it is massively broadsided by unexpected trauma? Is it similar to what it is like for an individual to be laid low with suffering?

Jesus' last helpless gasp indicates that the lament psalms had become second nature for him. He had made Psalm 22 his own sentiment. That psalm epitomizes post-traumatic expression. This Psalm of David, has five sections that reflect to some degree the Kubler-Ross process. Verses 1-2 are denial of reality. They interpret the pain and perplexity of daily life as divine abandonment, implying a narcissistic expectation that God should be paying special attention to David. "Why have you forsaken me, God, despite my calling for you day and night?" The second section, 3-8 is bargaining in which David tells God how wonderful he thinks God really is, so let him please act favorably to this fauning admirer? Verses 9-11 express some degree of the reality phase. "You gave me life, sustained my life from birth on, so keep it up, God." This is followed by 12-18, a complaint that clearly expresses the rage phase. "I am beset by enemies and illness and you are doing nothing about it, God. What is wrong with you, God." Then comes 19-24, a regression into bargaining and denial. "Deliver me, God, and then I will do world-changing things for you. The psalm then seems to conclude with a long leap into reality or apocalyptic wish fulfillment. "You fill me with praise, God, and if you keep up your provident care, all the world will be filled with praise of you."

It is difficult to discern whether to call this outcome faith or fantasy. David ends in a state that mystifies us as to whether it is vision or delusion. "All the bad guys are going to bow to God and all the good guys are going to tell to their progeny the story of their deliverance." Reality or pathology? Which ever is the case with David, it is clear that one cannot read Psalm 22 articulately, or hear Jesus' deluded apocalyptic cry of dereliction, without seeing it as an ultimate kind of grief. Even then, one is left with mystification rather than meaning, in the end.

In *The Ability to Mourn, Disillusionment and the Social Origins of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989) Peter Homans sets forth a startling new and radically innovative model of how persons, societies, and cultures, move from tragic events in history to healing and re-stabilization. He notes at the outset that psychoanalysis developed as a creative response to the grief-loss resulting from society's shift away from meaningful Western cultural and religious values and symbols. This process had roots deep in history arising from the Renaissance triumph over 14th century theology, from the Reformation's rational foundation for science and a tractable universe, and from the secularization arising with the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. Homans sees this specific historic trauma as typifying the kinds of grief process that regularly marks human history in its repeated tragic adventure.

Homans wants to ask and answer the question as to what happens in such processes and what works to return some degree of creative stability to a society or to an individual in devastating trauma. He thinks the answer is discerned in the way trauma affects the "ego's relationship to the symbols of traditional culture" and personal values. He believes it has specifically to do with the way humans in that cultural ego-process create meaning. His model

is rather profound and illuminating, cutting deeper into our psycho-social dynamics than the more superficial and mechanical Kubler-Ross taxonomy. The key is deep cultural, social, and personal mourning for the trauma of value-change and value-loss.

Freud declared that, “mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal and so on” (1917, 243). This issue of love-object-loss is the central theme of the Western psychological quest since Freud; and its roots in the Renaissance include such recent specific events of cultural loss as the structural destruction of Continental Europe by the French Revolution, the physical/cultural destruction of Germany by WW II, and the assault on the USA in the destruction of the WTC towers. Homans notes that Kohut addressed the effect of such personal or societal trauma in terms the de-idealization it causes, Winnicott uses the notion of disillusionment, Klein says it produces pining, while Max Weber developed a theory of disenchantment; and Durkheim saw it as the anomie deriving from the breakdown of social solidarity.

Homans perceives that the trauma for the individual and the society experienced in these moments of massive loss of loved ones or cherished values, and the grief over the accompanying psycho-social change, lies in the sense produced by this that the personal and/or cultural values of one’s world are now of the past and have been lost. Freud’s genius was to produce the psychoanalytic system for handling a total break from the past and thus reorganizing a foundation for integrating the trauma of that loss in a radically new way. Freud gave us a new mechanism for both personal and social mourning, namely, acknowledging that the trauma has both an outer operation (social) and an inner operation (psychological).

In exploring the inner operation, Freud helped us discern intentionally and consciously how we can understand the reality of the pain and loss, producing personal and cultural mourning. When in that mourning we can discern what the losses are really doing to us, both internally and externally, that mobilizes what Homans calls the process of individuation. I prefer to use simpler and more explicit terms. Such mourning can empower us to desire to become again who we really are at the core. This is a motivation for the self to develop a more independent individuality, not defined by the loss but by what one is able to do with the loss; how one can use it for a new orientation to reality that makes it possible to go on constructively.

Homans argues that it is precisely this latter process that leads healthy individuals and traumatized societies to move on to the third stage of recovery, namely, the employment of the trauma and individuation to lead us to create meaning out of the loss and change created by the trauma. “This action is at once a work of personal growth and a work of culture. In it the self both appropriates from the past what has been lost, and at the same time, actually creates for itself in a fresh way these meanings” (9). Homans goes on to critique three contradictions in Freud’s work: his separation of primitive from civilized, his separation of ego from its cultural context, and his dissociation of religion from science. Nonetheless, Homans affirms with much appreciation the dynamics of Freudian psychoanalysis as the seed bed for his triad of mourning, individuation, and creation of meaning as the healing way to understand and process profound suffering.

I was socialized in the Great Depression and WW II. I was an enlisted soldier in the Korean War in which I was wounded in action, and I served after college and seminary as an army chaplain during seven wars, participating in three of them, and being wounded again in Beirut.

When the narcissistic social revolution of the 1960s and 1970s broke out, accompanied by the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King I felt profoundly betrayed. Everything I had lived and given my life for seemed to have been lost. The primary values in terms of which my life and person had been constructed, were trivialized and eroded. I told my wife in 1967 that when the narcissistic and fascistic flower children of that social revolution became the first and second line managers of our society they would fail to attend to detail, they would steal the largesse of our country, they would erode the values of our democracy, and they would pull the plug on us when we got old.

Quite aside from the accuracy of my prophecy and the fact that it has fully come true, I began to realize while reading Homans that the last half century has been an intense grieving process for me, probably stuck in the rage phase. Pile on top of that the personal trauma in my family, and we have a formula for Homans mourning phase. Upon reflection I now also notice that I have been driven along the road of individuation by an effort to make meaning out of all these losses. My theology, vocation, sense of self, relationship to the established church as an ordained clergyman, and even my relationship toward my family has radically changed in the direction of Homans' prescribed individuation process of "becoming all I can be," in spite of the trauma.

I suppose, of course, that Piaget and Erikson would claim I have just been universalizing, but Homans' model seems to interpret me more authentically to myself. I have, in the process, come to the creation of a great deal more secure and solid sense of meaning and find myself now quite unconventional in all my perceptions. I am, quite obviously, experiencing Homans' third phase. In consequence I turn back to Psalm 22 and all of the Lament Psalms, as well as to Jesus' cry of dereliction, and read a brand new set of meanings. Homans provides a psychological lens that is, I think, a crucial new tool for understanding the biblical texts about human suffering. David's lament does not quite fit the Kubler-Ross model but may be wholly comprehensible through Homans' revealing lens. As a consequence I have researched in depth and developed a paper on "How Notable Men and Women have Managed Suffering Throughout History", from David to Job, to Boethius, Dante, Gower, and more recent figures, including an ironic pot shot at Fox News' counterproductive proposal for how we should handle it. However, that is a matter for another time and place.