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Religious Education Association Annual Meeting 2014

## **“Mourn First:” Interrupting and Unlearning Violence Through Community Practices of Lament**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the theological and pedagogical significance of communal practices of lament that emerge from communities wounded by ongoing violence. Utilizing as a case study the Good Friday Neighborhood Way of the Cross at St. Mary of the Angels Parish in Roxbury, MA, I propose the dynamics of a “practice of lament” and examine the ways in which such practices educate for nonviolence, as persons and communities on the margins become agents in mourning, naming, and ultimately transforming violent realities.

### **I. Introduction**

On a chilly April morning, a crowd sets out from St. Mary of the Angels Catholic Parish in the urban Boston neighborhood of Roxbury. They are Hispanic, African-American, Caribbean, white; first-generation immigrant and fourth-generation Bostonian. Some push strollers and bicycles; one walks a dog. Cars reluctantly come to halt after fruitless attempts to circumvent the crowd spilling unapologetically into both lanes of Homestead Street. The mournful notes of a traditional Spanish-language hymn of lament fill the streets. Leading the procession is a middle-aged Puerto Rican man, silently carrying a large cross on his shoulder.

It is Good Friday, and the community of St. Mary’s is walking the *Via Crucis* – the Way of the Cross.<sup>1</sup> In this procession, there are no “passion play” costumes, only a cross. The fourteen stations are not pictures or statues but places: street-corners, storefronts, and sidewalks throughout the community where, during the year prior, life, death, and resurrection have

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<sup>1</sup> The ritual is a contextualized version of the Stations of the Cross, the traditional Roman Catholic Lenten devotion in which a series of fourteen stations mark successive points along Jesus’ journey to his death on the cross in the Gospels. In their earliest form, the Stations originated as a medieval Franciscan devotional for Christian on pilgrimage to Jerusalem – a way of remembering Jesus’ passion and death by ritually retracing his steps. The division and codification of fourteen “official” stations developed during eighteenth century. The walls of most Roman Catholic churches bear some depiction of the fourteen stations, typically in the form of artist renderings or small sculptures. Sometimes, the stations are translated into performance in the form of so-called “passion plays,” in which groups of faithful, often children, dramatically reenact the final hours of Jesus’ life, culminating with his death on the cross.

contended and comingled. The ritual was begun around three decades ago by members of area parishes during a period of intense gang violence and has continued annually ever since. Beginning and ending at St. Mary's and taking a different route every year, the procession moves throughout the streets, stopping for prayer at sites of the neighborhood's own passion: the site of a massive fire in a low-income housing complex; the intersection where gang violence cut short another young life; the parking lot the local YMCA where mentors have, in concrete ways, become instruments of resurrection in the community. The ritual has served in ways both symbolic and practical to interrupt cycles of violence in the Egleston Square community.

In this paper, I examine the theological and pedagogical significance of practices of lament that emerge from communities wounded by ongoing violence. In such situations, violent acts are often reacted to (through, for example, incarceration, retaliation, police brutality, white flight, neighborhood divestment, etc.) but less often reflected upon. Even more rarely do members of affected communities become agents in processes of naming, mourning, and ultimately transforming situations and systems of injustice. I suggest that practices of lament play a critical pedagogical role in communities where violence is prevalent, and that such practices, when they are public and emerge from lived experience, function as interruptive in such contexts. I identify three dimensions of such practices: naming pain and protesting injustice, envisioning hope, and engaging in transformative praxis. To ground and illustrate this dynamic, I turn attention to the Good Friday Neighborhood Way of the Cross at St. Mary of the Angels.

## II. Lamentations: From Text to Practice

In contemporary Western societies, where pain is treated as an individual, private experience, we must be reminded that pain is also a fundamentally social phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> If pain is not fundamentally social, then lament – the expression of grief over pain or loss – does not need to be “practiced,” at least not communally or collectively. If pain is social, however, the loss of lament in public life, as Walter Brueggemann argues, is indeed a costly one and recovery is in order.<sup>3</sup>

Harvey Cox argues invites us to turn attention to the book of Lamentations, a “shockingly current text”<sup>4</sup> about how a community deals with the memory of individual and collective trauma.<sup>5</sup> Its attention to the shared, communal dimensions of grief, trauma, and healing suggests a foundation for the elaboration of the dynamics of shared practices of lament. The meaning of this evocative text, Cox argues, is not uncovered through the objective, emotionally detached process of historical-critical investigation. Rather, the text “speaks” when readers/hearers enter

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, too, that this privatization and “sanitization” of pain is especially characteristic of white, middle class experience in the United States. Through the dominant lens, vocalized emotion and “messy” grief is suspect, especially when it comes from women and persons of color.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 3 (1986), 64.

<sup>4</sup> Harvey Cox, in Cox and Stephanie Paulsell, *Lamentations and the Song of Songs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 4. In this text, Cox and Paulsell engage in theological reflection in conversation with these works, not in biblical exegesis.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6

into and participate in the drama of the lament – when, in conversation with the text, one listens, feels, remembers, cries.<sup>6</sup> Lament, in other words, should be practiced.

In her study in aesthetics and ethics focusing on the Mural Arts Project in Philadelphia, Maureen O’Connell advances a conceptual bridge between lament as encountered scripturally and historically, as in the book of Lamentations and the Psalms, to lament as publically and communally performed in ways that include and surpass the linguistic. O’Connell defines lament as an act of truth-telling that evokes social consciousness and moral responsibility and opens a public space for transformative compassion. Lament conveys “the *groaning and suffering* of a people, ‘sometimes too deep for words’ (Rom 8:23 and 26).”<sup>7</sup> O’Connell, like Cox, emphasizes the necessarily shared, public dimension of lament. Thus, laments are communal, spiritual practices that express simultaneous separation from and desire for reunion with God. They express “an acute sense that it need not be, and... public demands that their circumstances be changed.”<sup>8</sup> Because lament is public, it possesses a prophetic and interruptive character. The act of naming, mourning, and ultimately transforming unjust realities becomes a critical source of moral agency and subjecthood, particularly for those dehumanized by injustice.<sup>9</sup> As public testimony, lament also represents an important redistribution of power not only between petitioner (whose claim is legitimized) and God (who risks a response) but also between parties within a society. Brueggemann argues that when cries of pain and demands for justice are erased from the public’s senses, such pleas lose their claim on public consciousness and such questions no longer implicate civic and religious authorities.<sup>10</sup> For persons and societies, there is something deeply at stake in the practice of lament.

### III. Dimensions of Lament

Bringing insights that emerge from examining the role of lament in Christian tradition into conversation with practices of mourning that arise from the lived experience of individuals and communities victimized by systems of injustice in today’s world, three dimensions of such practices emerge: communities publically name past and present injustices and speak/perform words of truth against such injustices,<sup>11</sup> envision hope at the site of this naming, and engage in transformative moral action in service of a humanizing vision of life together.

#### a. *Dimension One: Naming Pain and Protesting Injustice*

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 19

<sup>7</sup> Maureen H. O’Connell, *If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 188.

<sup>8</sup> O’Connell, 189

<sup>9</sup> O’Connell, 189

<sup>10</sup> Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” 64

<sup>11</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (New York: Continuum, 2000), 87.

Lament necessarily begins with the naming of pain by victims and those close to them. Will Morales, former high-profile member of a powerful Egleston gang,<sup>12</sup> recalled the way in which Fr. Jack Roussin, then pastor of St. Mary's, encouraged him to practice lament:

When the guys were thinking about retaliating [against a gang-related killing], and just going all out, and figuring, hey, my boy gave his life for us, we should give our life up for him and make a sacrifice, it was Fr. Jack who... was able to convince them to mourn first. He was just saying that you're skipping the mourning process. 'Cuz he knew that if they mourned, and they experienced loss, then something might inhibit that thought process about what their next steps are gonna be. So he was trying to get them to start thinking about mourning first. It's a practice that I tend to use nowadays [with young men at the YMCA], because it's what I remember.<sup>13</sup>

For Morales, the act of mourning functioned as interruptive to the cycle of violence and retaliation. To name pain is to dwell, momentarily, in the reality of loss. As Cox notes, "people cannot jump immediately to the task of rebuilding their lives or their cities after a disaster without a period in which they acknowledge the full scale and import of what they have lost."<sup>14</sup> When mourning is the result of injustice, to name loss is also to expose and decry oppressive social structures, especially those of racism and poverty, which operate insidiously to normalize and concretize such cycles of loss in communities like Egleston Square. Thus, the expression of mourning must always also be a protest against structures of sin that are its root cause.

### **b. *Dimension Two: Envisioning Hope***

Mourning occasions sustained presence to that which should not be. Because the act of naming is an act of recognition, it is also an act of hope, a beginning to imagine what should be. The radical "no" to present evil invites and implies a hopeful "yes" to a humanizing vision wherein this present evil is subverted. One of the distinguishing features of the Psalms of lament is the movement from expressing pain to envisioning hope.<sup>15</sup> These Psalms are filled with examples of this at-first-inexplicable jump from visceral cries of anguish to praise of God. Psalm 22 serves as a clear example:

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?...*

*Yet you are holy,  
enthroned on the praises of Israel.  
In you our ancestors trusted;*

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<sup>12</sup> After serving seven years in prison on drug trafficking charges and turning his life around, Morales currently works as the Executive Director of the Egleston Square YMCA. Now a public figure in the community, Morales is comfortable with the use of his name in this paper.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with William Morales

<sup>14</sup> Cox, 133

<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," 57

*they trusted, and you delivered them.* (NRSV 22:1, 3-4)<sup>16</sup>

Neither the cries of anguish nor the concluding praise can be understood apart from one another. The lament, which bespeaks both remembrance and expectation of God's salvific intervention, gives cause and context to the words of praise.<sup>17</sup> And yet the God portrayed in Lamentations – Cox puts it bluntly – is “not the smiling superhelper who will lift us from our worries.”<sup>18</sup> God is praised as the one in whom, despite apparent silence in the face of continued human suffering, God's chosen ones choose to hope. In this way, praise is as much about memory as it is about expectation: *it was you who took me from the womb; it was you who delivered our ancestors; it is you who heard my cries.*

Popular images of social action often conceptualize it as the natural overflow of indignation: “We're mad as hell and we're not going to take it anymore!” But lament invites us to pause between mourning and action in a middle space: the space of hope, perhaps even praise. It is here that a community is re-membered to itself. Hope expressed in and awakened by praise entails self-definition, self-articulation, a definitive reclamation of the community's belovedness by God. Thus, “[laments] are often not couched in logic or even in the language of the dominant culture in order to protect the depth or loss they convey from easy explanation or from being too quickly vanquished from the public consciousness.”<sup>19</sup> The embodied, constructive work of praise, self-remembrance, and the naming of reasons for hope must precede action, or else such action emerges from a community still defined by, if against, the words and categories of what Brueggemann calls the royal or dominant consciousness.<sup>20</sup> As Will Morales so clearly perceived, there is an intimate relationship between the way we mourn loss and the way we ultimately respond to it. We cannot move directly from “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?” to action, or else the acts that flow from mourning will be acts of desperation and revenge. If action is to transform cycles of violence rather than perpetuate them, then envisioning and sharing past and present hopes is critical as lament is practiced.

### ***c. Dimension Three: Engaging in Transformative Praxis***

At the end of his analysis, Cox wonders: “After reading Lamentations, one cannot help wondering: What happened next? How did this wounded city pull itself together?” “Perhaps in the end,” he conjectures, “Lamentations set the stage for what is to follow—the insistence by the prophets Amos and Jeremiah on equity and justice, the vision of a beloved community spelled out by the Sermon on the Mount and by the New Jerusalem envisioned in the book of Revelation.”<sup>21</sup> It is here that we are moved to what Fr. Bryan Massingale calls “risky speech and increasingly bold actions that seek to redress the evils that so shock and offend me.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Readers of this paper are encouraged to read Psalm 22 in its entirety.

<sup>17</sup> Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” 58

<sup>18</sup> Cox, 5

<sup>19</sup> O'Connell, 190

<sup>20</sup> In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire makes a similar point by distinguishing between subjects, “those who know and act,” from objects, “which are known and acted upon.” See translator's note, Introduction to 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, 36.

<sup>21</sup> Cox, 141

<sup>22</sup> Massingale, cited in O'Connell, 190

Transformative action is the natural overflow of initial processes of naming and unmasking unjust realities and envisioning more hopeful and humanizing ones.<sup>23</sup>

#### IV. Walking the Neighborhood Way of the Cross: The Streets of Egleston Square

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Egleston Square neighborhood became virtually synonymous with gang violence in Boston. The gangs emerged out an urban environment defined by poverty, unemployment, and poor education.<sup>24</sup> It was within this milieu of gun violence, gang territorialism, and cheap crack cocaine that Fr. Jack Roussin ministered.<sup>25</sup> Fr. Jack believed in what one parishioner called “shoe leather ministry.”<sup>26</sup> He cultivated deep and unconventional relationships with the gang members who would deal drugs in Egleston Square. “He was always reaching out to us not by inviting us to the church but by really bringing the church to the corner,” Morales recalled. “He developed a deep relationship with some of the most hardcore guys in this block. And they all had his respect. They’re like, ‘If he says something, we respect it.’”<sup>27</sup>

It was during those years that the Good Friday ritual came into the form it continues to take. By tracing the intertwined histories of the neighborhood and the Neighborhood Way of the Cross, it is clear that the ritual evolved as practice of lament in Roxbury. All three dimensions are illustrated in the practice:

***Naming Pain, Protesting Injustice.*** In the walking, stopping, and praying of the Way of the Cross, the violence that characterizes the present is publically named, mourned, and protested – not only the more obvious scourges of gang violence and drug trafficking, but also the more frequently ignored violences which insidiously function to concretize the urban status quo: racism, municipal neglect, incarceration, poor education, domestic violence, gentrification, poor health care access, and more. In the words of Bradford Hinze, laments “bring public expression to those very fears and terrors that have been denied so long and surpassed so deeply that we do not know they are there.”<sup>28</sup> Exposing such systems and cycles by bringing the cross to sites where they have manifested themselves as acts of violence and desperation, the ritual becomes a powerful act of truth-telling, opening up a space for the hope-filled envisioning of “what should be” in the context of the community.

***Envisioning Hope.*** During the Way of the Cross, the streets of Egleston Square become a shared vernacular in which the history of the parish and neighborhood as well as the Christian

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<sup>23</sup> We can recall here Paulo Freire’s understanding of praxis as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.”

<sup>24</sup> According to 1990 Census data, in the Greater Egleston Square community, 32% of youth in the largely African American and Hispanic area lived in poverty. At 9.2%, the unemployment rate in Egleston was considerably higher than the state average, and nearly half of the adults living in Egleston (47%) did not hold a high school diploma. 1990 also marked the apex of Boston’s gang epidemic: 73 young people were murdered in the city that year, a staggering 230 percent increase over a three-year period (Lanfer, 90).

<sup>25</sup> Roussin was Parish Administrator and later Pastor of St. Mary of the Angels from 1976 to 1992.

<sup>26</sup> Interview 14

<sup>27</sup> Interview with William Morales

<sup>28</sup> Bradford Hinze, cited in O’Connell, 192

passion narrative are both translated, remembered, and shared. The abundant living text of the ritual is composed in a dual vernacular – that of the Gospel, and that of the streets themselves – disclosing a surplus of interpretations that cannot be contained or comprehensively articulated.<sup>29</sup> Footsteps ritually reclaim and transfigure streets marred by violence, mapping them into the contours of a sacred topography beyond which lies the uncharted but promised hope of resurrection. The ritual provides a space for the ongoing, public construction and reconstruction of a communal narrative – or counter-narrative – in which private experiences of suffering and hope are folded into and juxtaposed against the paradigmatic sacred story of the Christian faith community. Recalling the words of Brueggemann, the ritual represents a temporary but important subversion and redistribution of typical power relations: streets marked by gang- and drug-related violence and patrolled unceasingly by police cars are reclaimed, subverting what Karen Mary Davalos calls the “architecture of domination,”<sup>30</sup> thus becoming a source of shared identity and revealing Egleston Square as a privileged *locus theologicus* for a community on the social and ecclesial margins of Boston. This hope is illustrated in the inclusion within the Stations of the ritual spaces not only of crucifixion but also of resurrection: the community development coalition, the healthcare agency for the homeless, the neighborhood bilingual school which not only educated several generations of Roxbury children but also represented one of few safe spaces during the violence of the 1980s and 90s.

***Engaging in Transformative Praxis.*** The Neighborhood Way of the Cross ritual has served in ways both symbolic and concrete to interrupt cycles of violence in the Egleston Square community and has long worked in tandem with efforts by other local churches as well as public officials and civic organizations towards transforming cycles of violence. Interviews reveal the conviction on the part of many in and around the community that the annual practice is among the neighborhood’s most powerful teaching tools in the ongoing struggle to educate for peace and nonviolence in Egleston Square. Gerd Baumann highlights the capacity of ritual not only to reflect or reinforce existing social structures, as many ritual theorists have contended, but also to tend toward cultural and social change.<sup>31</sup> The Way of the Cross, as a ritual of transformation, functions in a way that implicates both community “insiders” (parishioners, neighborhood residents, local police) and “outsiders” (members of the broader Boston community, elected state and local government officials) in the work of constructing a more just and hope-filled future for Egleston Square.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1981).

<sup>30</sup> Karen Mary Davalos, “‘The Real Way of Praying:’ The Via Crucis, *Mexicano* Sacred Space, and the Architecture of Domination,” in *Horizons of the Sacred: Mexican Traditions in U.S. Catholicism*. Edited by Timothy Matovina and Gary Riebe-Estrella (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> Gerd Baumann, “Ritual Implicates ‘Others:’ Rereading Durkheim in a Plural Society,” in *Understanding Ritual*, edited by Daniel De Coppet (London: Routledge, 1992), 97-116.

<sup>32</sup> Throughout its history, the ritual’s public character has served to highlight places in the community in need of prayer and action: the Egleston branch of the Boston Library slated for closure, the local YMCA targeted for relocation, even the parish itself, which was identified for closure during a wave of Boston parish shutterings in 2004. (All three remained open, some would say miraculously). The ritual can also be viewed as affecting transformation *within* the parish community. St. Mary of the Angels is a parish wherein distinct English-speaking and

O’Connell notes, “Laments heal precisely because they leave some wounds open so that their pain might prick the public consciousness and stir people to action.”<sup>33</sup> It is these open wounds that, in each of our communities, continue to invite and demand a response. May we recognize that the call to action that these wounds awakens in us is, first and foremost, a call to mourn – to publically, communally, and boldly practice lament.

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Spanish-speaking communities coexist. While St. Mary’s undoubtedly falls on the more integrationist end of the spectrum – most committees include representatives from both linguistic communities, and most nonliturgical events at the parish are bilingual – the ritual also functions in a smaller but no less important way as an instrument of peacebuilding between distinct cultural and linguistic communities within the parish. While a thorough examination of the intra-parochial significance of the ritual lies beyond the scope of the present paper, many parishioners interviewed noted that the Way of the Cross served as an important site of crossing cultural, linguistic, and class borders that exist within the parish community.

<sup>33</sup> O’Connell, 193



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