

# Reclaiming Lament



A Model for Engaging the Human Spirit in Journeying  
toward Transformation, Healing and Justice-Making

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**RECLAIMING LAMENT:**

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**A THESIS**

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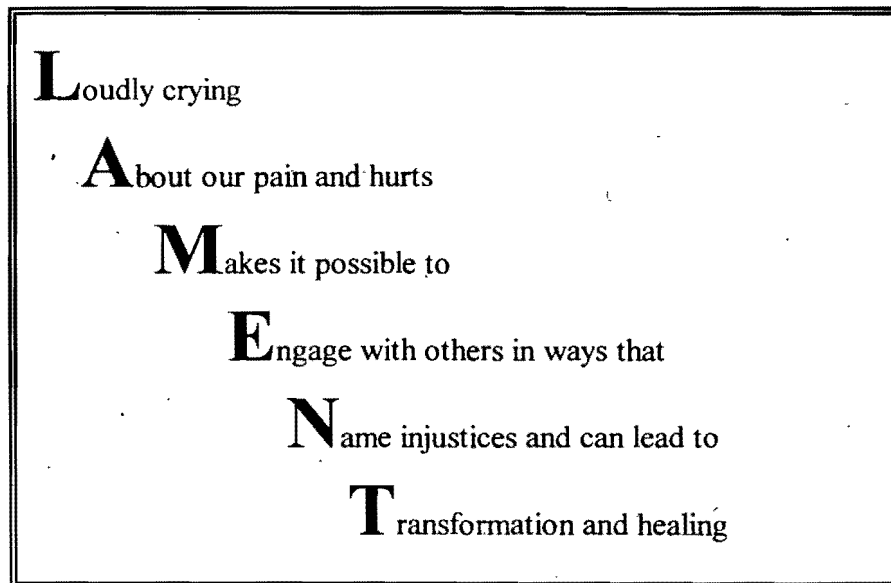
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*Dedicated to all those wise companions  
whose presence supports and sustains us on the awesome journey toward  
transformation, healing and justice-making.*

## ABSTRACT

Lament is an ancient literary form through which our Hebrew ancestors expressed to God their distress about injustice and suffering. The work of some contemporary scholars, however, indicates that lament has not been valued by the Christian church or Western culture. This research project, which centred around interviews with 12 people, demonstrates that lament is integral to healing and transformation as it engages the human spirit in an interactive, communal process through the following elements:



In this study, we discovered that lament itself is not enough and that four factors must accompany it if healing is to be realized. These factors include: **acceptance; analysis and critique; power and authority that affirms change in the direction of justice and healing; and actions that can be risked.** The model which emerges forms the basis for a theology and ministry of transformation and justice-making, as well as a compelling argument for **RECLAIMING LAMENT.**

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CHAPTER I  
THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Loudly crying

About our pain and hurts

Makes it possible to

Engage with others in ways that

Name injustices and can lead to

Transformation and healing

Lament is a word and a process which is not readily understood in our society. It is an ancient literary form through which our Hebrew ancestors, along with many of the other peoples of the Ancient Near East, expressed distress to God. The Hebrew scriptures contain many psalms and prayers of lament.<sup>1</sup> These were the response of our ancestors in faith to their experiences of injustice and suffering. They provided a form and vehicle for naming, sharing and protesting the pains of life and the suffering which resulted from oppression and injustice.

The work of some contemporary scholars, however, would indicate that lament has not been valued by the Christian church or Western culture. Claus Westermann articulates this position strongly when he claims that "in Western Christendom the lament has been totally excluded from human relationship with God, with the result that it has completely disappeared above all from prayer and worship" (Praise 265). Walter Brueggemann echos this sentiment when he points out that "the 'lament psalms' have nearly dropped out of usage" (Message 23). When we encountered the arguments of these scholars, we recognized, as researchers, that these observations resonated with our experience as members and leaders in the church. Only occasionally have we found any of the lament psalms included in the lectionary and very rarely have we heard them used as the focus of a sermon.

Why, then, would we chose to research and write a thesis on such an ancient, nebulous and obscure concept? As we will explore more fully in later chapters, we believe that the church is called to walk with people through times of suffering and struggle, offering support, challenging injustice and witnessing to God's compassionate presence, sharing our joy and our pain. In order to be effective in this role we believe we need to offer words and images, prayers and practices that model and communicate this pastoral and theological



approach and the promise that it encompasses. In addition, one of the most pertinent reasons for undertaking this project is the hope that we believe is integral to the process of lament: hope for healing from life's hurts and disappointments; hope for change in systems of injustice and oppression; hope for movement toward wholeness both individually and corporately. One of the powerful and recurring themes in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures is expressed through the words of Isaiah: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined" (The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Isaiah 9:2). In their ongoing struggles with suffering and oppression, our biblical ancestors cried out again and again to God, protesting their pain, condemning their enemies, seeking salvation. Through their crying, they acknowledged God's presence, knew God's promise, experienced God's love and found hope in the vision of a new reality of wholeness and abundant life for all. In undertaking this research, we endeavour to make transparent to the church the ongoing importance of proclaiming this vision and supporting the people to journey through the darkness.

We understand lament to be a public<sup>2</sup> acknowledgement, protest, complaint, crying out against the pain of grief, loss, misery and/or injustice. It is an active, ongoing process for overcoming denial, one which requires a sharing and naming of being in the depths. It can be an expression of anger, a release of energy, which involves the identification, naming and blaming of the enemy. It accepts the intricacies and identifies the complexity and interconnection of many different forms of pain and injustice.

Our interest in exploring the concept of lament grew out of our intrigue with Brueggemann's analysis of the role that lament plays in the process of transformation as he describes it in the faith development of the people of Israel (Hope Within History 10-26). This process, he says, has three elements: the critique of ideology; the public processing of pain; and the release of new social imagination. It was the second of these three elements which first hooked our own imaginations. The public processing of pain, Brueggemann suggests, is "an intentional and communal act of expressing grievance." As long as people "experience their pain privately . . . no social power is generated" (Hope Within History 16).

Introduction to this concept of the public cry/processing of pain led us to reflect on our own experience. These reflections helped us to identify a significant process: when we had been able to share our pain and when it had been heard and accepted by others, we had experienced healing and movement to new places in our own lives. So too, we were able to recognize that we had witnessed the transformative power of healing in others when they had been able to express their pain in some public way, have it acknowledged and accepted. The range of situations in which we had seen this happening included experiences in social ministry and pastoral care as we had journeyed with folks struggling with issues of grief, abuse and oppression, illness and death, congregational conflict and change, family violence and childhood sexual abuse, poverty and racism.

We also recognized that there seemed to be many connections between the prayer form of lament and other forms of social protest. Such social protest ranged in format from

large demonstrations to the interpersonal sharing of pain. Canada's social legislation and programming was directly influenced by the protest resulting from the widespread suffering during the severe depression in the 1930s. This concrete response, a public affirmation of the pain and suffering of the protestors, promoted the social change which continued through the 1960s and 70s with the implementation of programs such as Medicare, the Canada Assistance Plan and Unemployment Insurance (Armitage 270-81).

During the 1970s and early 1980s, we personally participated in a number of social justice movements such as the feminist movement, the peace movement and the environmental movement. In these movements, protest was an important component of the work for increased human rights, nuclear disarmament and a more equitable sharing of economic resources. As we heard the pain of others we made connections with the pain and oppression in our own lives. We identified that as we gathered together, named our fears and shared our anger, our perceptions of injustice were validated. As a result, we gained hope and were energized to work for change.

Now, however, the situation has changed. The social safety net is being dismantled and we have entered a period of backlash. Poverty, social alienation and social disintegration are increasing. Abuse and violence, rooted in classism, sexism, racism and heterosexism, are alive and well.<sup>3</sup> It is our assessment that there is much need of change in our current reality.

We live in a grief- and death-denying culture which discourages the sharing of suffering and the protesting of injustice.<sup>4</sup> In our ministries and in our personal relationships, we have recognized that a great majority of people feel trapped by a broadly accepted assumption that once the funeral is past, it's time to get over their grief and get on with life. Popular sayings like "keep a stiff upper lip," "laugh in the face adversity," "smile and the world smiles with you, cry and you cry alone" feed this social convention, suppressing tears and silencing cries of protest and pain. In our experiences in congregational and outreach ministry, we have observed that, as a culture, we frequently blame people for their own suffering. The poor and the wealthy alike are assumed to have chosen and earned their place in the social order. Victims of abuse and violence are encouraged to believe that they must have done something to invite the assault. In addition, our modern media exposes us daily to our global reality and the struggles of people all over the world as they wrestle with their diverse yet similar experiences of oppression, violence and starvation. In the face of all this suffering, we feel small and powerless. To share the pain is to risk despair. It is easier and safer to feel numb, to affirm the status quo, to accept the cultural messages which claim that competition is good, that conflict over scarce resources is inevitable, that killing our enemies is appropriate and just.

This contemporary reality is supported and maintained by a belief system proclaimed in many of our Christian churches, in which pain is considered to be an individual issue, the result of private sin, something to deny, to feel guilty about, to blame ourselves for, something which we need to "get over." However, many liberal, liberationist and feminist theologians, therapists and pastoral ministers are now challenging that understanding and

encouraging us to recognize the injustice inherent in an approach which denies grief or blames victims for the pain which they are experiencing.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is one such person who has challenged our assumptions that feelings associated with pain, death and dying should be ignored, avoided and/or denied. Her stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance—have developed out of the stories of the folk with whom she travelled during their final period of life. Kübler-Ross suggests that movement through these stages, for both the person who is dying and for their friends and family, requires opportunities to voice feelings of pain, anger and fear which are normal responses in the process of dying. She encourages us to get closer to the terminally ill and promises that, if we can, we will emerge from the experience enriched (xi). Similarly, Dorothee Soelle suggests that the first step towards overcoming suffering is finding a language that names it and makes it visible so that it can be shared and addressed (Suffering 70). Ironically and paradoxically, she observes that we "have no language or gestures with which to battle suffering" (37).

Lament, we would suggest, offers such a language, as well as a process, to reveal the connections between our individual sufferings and the injustice inherent in our systems. It promotes closeness with others which can enable life-giving energy. In other words, lament "leads to the release of new *social imagination*" (Hope Within History 20), the third element of Brueggemann's process of transformation.

This process is also related integrally to Diaconal Ministry within The United Church of Canada and its call to be enablers of creative transformation. Diaconal ministry is the ministry of the whole people of God, a collective undertaking of engaging in service (diakonia) to one another and the world. It

- ▶ recognizes that we all share the responsibility for working to create the shalom community;
- ▶ encourages and enables people to be all that they can be;
- ▶ emphasizes the wholistic nature of ministry by integrating the components of education, service and pastoral care.<sup>5</sup>

We believe lament plays an important role in all aspects of diaconal ministry. Utilizing lament in pastoral care contributes to transformation and healing as folks are supported to deal with the wide range of life's crises, from birth to death. In the struggle for social justice and the establishment of right relationships, lament significantly empowers people to let go of the abuse they experience as victim and/or to let go of their capacity to inflict abuse as oppressor. In the educational process, lament enables people to move toward a healthy analysis of their beliefs and circumstances and the transformative potential inherent in existing realities. We have witnessed that as people share fears and sorrows, pain and anger, shame and guilt, there is movement toward mutuality, healing and wholeness.

At the same time, we recognized that we had observed situations where individuals and groups were unable to move beyond the lamenting into a new reality. Upon hearing about our topic, Karen Tjaden, a Winnipeg inner city minister, wondered if those caught in the depths of poverty could ever lament enough to reach a place of healing and transformation. At that time, Tjaden was completing her eighth year of ministry working with those in conditions of chronic poverty where there were many examples of folks who, throughout those years, continuously complained and protested about their situations, yet nothing changed. Transformation remained elusive regardless of the presence of lament. In spite of the reservations generated by observations like Tjaden's, our own pastoral experiences with folks healing from a range of traumas, as well as conversations with a variety of colleagues and friends, advisors and mentors continued to affirm our belief that lamenting, or naming and protesting, those things which hurt us is a necessary step in the journey toward transformation. Recognizing the possibility of differing outcomes in situations that included a process of lament led to a desire to discover what enables healing in some cases and not in others. This resulted in the articulation of our thesis question:

**How is lament a catalyst which enables the transition from situations of pain and injustice to healing and right relationships?**

The process of researching and writing this thesis has been a time of deep reflection and new insights. Perhaps it is the topic and its relevance in our lives and our work that has kept us interested and engaged. An extended time line also had its advantages. During the gestation period (five plus years) both of our lives have been changed through marriages, deaths, births, job changes, retirements, not to mention the effects of September 11, 2001—the day our North American understanding of vulnerability soared to a new level; the day we witnessed, again and again through the media, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. Through all these experiences, along with the stories we heard in conducting this research project, our understanding of the place of lament in the process of healing and transformation has been refined and revised. Our research has confirmed for us the importance of lament as a crucial piece of this interactive process. It has also revealed other components that must accompany lament, if healing and transformation are to be realized.

## CHAPTER II

### CONNECTING WITH THOSE WHO HAVE JOURNEYED BEFORE

#### Relating to the Subject

Although “lament” is a word which is not commonly used and readily understood today, there is much written which could be described as lament and/or which describes a process of lament. For the purpose of our research, we began by reviewing literature in the following categories: theology, spirituality, biblical studies, social sciences and expressions of lament resources in the forms of poetry, prose and worship.

We found, however, that the lines between the categories of theology, spirituality, biblical studies and the social sciences were very blurred. On the one hand, Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann suggests that theology, psychology and sociology are all elements of the lament process in the Old Testament. He uses suffering in the Book of Job as an example, describing it as a drama which is played out between God, Job and Job’s friends (Structure 268). On the other hand, many writings in the social science field echo the theme of hope which is usually found in theology and spirituality. Because of this blurring it seemed futile to continue with the categorization. The following review includes the work of theorists from many different disciplines and demonstrates the inter-relationships among elements and approaches within the lament process. We also found that there is much more being written from personal and practice of ministry perspectives than we first thought. Even in this death-denying culture of ours, we encountered many expressions of lament, as well as an increasing number of resources, which served to affirm our belief in its importance.

The genesis of this thesis began with the writings of Brueggemann and quickly led to the work of Westermann. Their writings name a tension between the practice of ancient Israel and our present day Christianity in the valuing and, therefore, the use of lament in ritual and worship (Brueggemann Message 23; Westermann Praise 265). These sentiments are echoed in the work of Soelle (Suffering 73). The loss of these rituals, according to Brueggemann, means that, unlike our Hebrew ancestors, Christians have no rituals or liturgies for acknowledging the pain of living, although such acknowledgment is necessary in the healing process. Instead, Christians are turning from the rituals in the church to other disciplines such as psychotherapy, (Brueggemann Psalms 68) because within the psychotherapeutic relationship there is permission to name the hurtful dimensions of existence in a way that does not minimize either the pain, or the person feeling it. The psychotherapeutic process may offer an opportunity to wonder about, and critique relationships with God, parents and other powers and authorities. It may also be supportive in the risking of new ways of being.

Brueggemann is adamant that the recovery of lament is imperative (Psalms 111). Profoundly at issue in our society, he says, is the evidence of hopelessness, because “[o]urs is a society in which hopelessness is prevalent and powerful” (Hope Within History 90). As a social force, hopelessness is extraordinary and can lead to a deeper despair. One of the evidences of such despair in our time, says Brueggemann, is “the action of *terrorists* which is a desperate, hopeless act of those without access or prospect of access to dignity or influence” (Hope Within History 90, 91). The events of September 11 serve to underscore his analysis. Hopelessness is enabled by those who keep silent, and who, in so doing, unwittingly endorse unjust systems and maintain the status quo. Hope, however, is evident when those who have grief and pain are able to process it (lament) in the community (Hope Within History 90) thereby revealing injustices.

Our world, Brueggemann says, is changing economically, politically and intellectually; it is dying because it has failed. In their times, Jesus and Jeremiah also saw that the world was dying. They both enabled cries of pain--Jesus through his teachings when he encouraged his disciples “to let the private anguish touch the public, cosmic reality” (Interpretation 314) and Jeremiah through poetry in which he invited the people to recognize how the world was coming apart. Brueggemann suggests that we need to be engaging “people in this cosmic hurt. . . [which] touches us so intimately. . . and we must weep;” (Interpretation 315) otherwise, “in our denial, we bomb and control and coerce in a wishful propping up of the failure, or we are numbed into resigned acceptance” (Interpretation 316). Brueggemann and Westermann offer strong argument for the return of lament to liturgy and ritual in the Christian community.

As the literature was reviewed, we identified components of lament which seem pertinent for the research we were undertaking. These include the understanding that lament is a process, that it connects us with one another and that it is an indication of hope.

The Book of Lamentations and the Book of Job are but two biblical examples of lament. The poems found in the Book of Lamentations, says Delbert Hillers, were written to serve in ritual and “are aimed at remembrance and repetition commensurate with the need not to forget and to live on.” He makes a strong case for the importance of lament in devastating and chaotic times because “[p]eople live on best after calamity, not by utterly repressing their grief and shock, but by facing it, and by measuring its dimensions” (4). Hillers suggests that lament is not something which is done once and for all, but that it is a process which is ongoing—a reminder of what has been.

Westermann claims that “lament is an existential process” (Structure 3). In the Book of Job, the existential question “[w]hy must I suffer?” (Structure 2) dominates the book. This question is the lament which arises out of, and in reaction to, Job’s suffering.

In his article “Lamentation and Euthanasia” in Humane Medicine, John F. Scott, describes this lament process from the perspective of the pastoral care person. He says

that even though suicide is rare among cancer patients, the lament of a dying person is often interpreted as a cry for death. However, when patients are given the freedom to cry out their lament without fear of it being misinterpreted as a cry for death, the cry may be reinterpreted as a cry for life. Such reinterpretation means that rather than crying out for death on the patient's behalf, the pastoral care person will be challenged to learn to listen and wait—providing pain relief and palliative care (116, 120).

As medical director of the Family Service and Mental Health Center of South Cook County, Illinois, Kübler-Ross has also been engaged in the challenge of listening and waiting while providing pain relief and palliative care. In On Death and Dying, she summarizes what was learned about coping mechanisms from listening to over two hundred dying patients at the time of terminal illness. She categorizes these coping strategies in five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (263, 264). Brueggemann states that although Israel and Kübler-Ross begin at very different places, there is evidence of striking similarities between them. Kübler-Ross's five stages "can be correlated with the movement in Israel's laments as discerned by Westermann" (Psalms 89): "Westermann . . . has shown that the central movement of the lament is a sharp, discontinuous step from plea to praise, from brokenness to wholeness." Through such a form "Israel was restored to full life and affirmative faith" (Psalms 85). Four of the stages as discerned by Kübler-Ross speak of *plea* (denial, anger, bargaining, depression) and one (acceptance) speaks of *affirmation*, with a radical turn taking place between depression and acceptance (Psalms 89).

Although not named as such, an example of the lament process is found in an article by James Poling, Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology at Colgate Rochester Divinity School. Poling is writing as a pastoral caregiver. He laments the middle-class bondage of our privileged social location in which there is constant pressure to maintain the established systems of power while ignoring the suffering that is endorsed and hidden within these systems. This lament leads him to the recognition that the "sufferings of women, of Blacks, of abused children, of the poor have been hidden for too long by both church and society." He suggests that the "ethical calling of the pastoral care movement is to attend to suffering as a critique of a social order that is unjust" (306). In this observation, Poling is also identifying the injustice of denial which, by its very nature, inhibits the crying out of those who are marginalized, as well as those who are dying.

Lament promotes closeness with others which can enable life-giving energy, according to Brueggemann (Hope Within History 20). Karen Labacqz describes this closeness as "bridging the gap" between ourselves and others in our world. Such a bridging, she says, is "rooted in the common human experience of suffering and pain," (92) and is enabled through the sharing of stories, or lament. By feeling our own suffering we are able to imagine the sufferings of others and to react with compassion. This, Labacqz suggests, is the first step toward rectification of injustice (90).

Labacqz makes the connection between the pain of the individual and the pain of the community which Brueggemann says is inherent where injustice is present (Hope Within History 17). Without the public processing of pain, Brueggemann says, no grief will be brought to voice, and *status quo*, hopelessness, invisibility and docility will result (Hope Within History 87). In "Moving the Congregation Beyond Grief," pastor David Henry suggests that this is certainly the case where congregations have been stunned by change. It is important that the congregations grieve for the past and then move beyond the grief to claiming a new identity. "Until parishioners can verbalize their anger, disappointment and frustration," Henry says, "the healing process cannot move forward" (13).

We found several examples in which those who had experienced pain were gathered together in order that they might name that pain and enable the healing process. "Grief in the Aboriginal Community," Vol. V of The Dancing Sun, edited by Joyce Carlson, describes a workshop held at the Francis Sandy Centre, a theological training centre for Aboriginal leaders in the United Church of Canada. The purpose of the workshop was to help participants "name" personal loss, understand natural patterns of grief, explore cultural loss and find healthy expression of grief either through recovery of traditions or visioning new ways of being community together (1).

In "The Risk of Hearing Death and Life in a Survivor's Story," assistant medical college professor and ordained minister Marlyne Cain, and Professor of Religion and ordained minister David Cain tell the story of sexual assault victim, Susan Brison. In so doing, they describe another example of the healing process enabled through working in community. Four years after a vicious assault, Brison says that her life has been changed by turning indignation into action (28). Through working with others on issues of violence against women, she has found a "larger self" which Sharon Welch, Professor of Religious Studies and Women's Studies, describes as possible when risking to work through such trauma (162). Susan now feels "both 'stronger' and 'more vulnerable'" because she has been "existentially sensitized to worldwide suffering" (Cain and Cain 29).

Central to Brison's ability to work through her trauma by joining with others to work on issues of violence against women, is the issue of control. Having experienced the loss of control in the vicious rape, she is wanting to define herself as more than victim, to claim some control again (28). Being with others who also experience that need to maintain some control, as well as with those who understand that need, is a major piece of her healing process. Control would also appear to be an issue in the research of psychologists Stephen C. Wright, Donald M. Taylor and Fathali M. Moghaddam. They found that when folk in a disadvantaged group perceived that entrance into the advantaged group was possible, they responded individually in ways designed to improve their personal positions. However, when the advantaged group was perceived as being closed to those in the disadvantaged group, those in the disadvantaged group were more likely to join a communal lament, or protest (1003). For both Brison and those in the disadvantaged group, the support of others who were in a similar position enabled them to



perceive their feelings of violation and/or exclusion as normal, to gain some sense that they had control of their own actions and therefore to risk acting in new ways.

From the findings of the Ackerman Institute's Depression in Context Project directed by social worker Peggy Papp, it appears that the response of others, and thereby, the sense of control in the person that is in pain, is important to the outcome of lament. For instance, the support of a marital partner can have enormous potential in the healing of depression (55).

Hospitality is an important component in the process of connecting with others, especially when that hospitality enables the sharing of pain of those who are excluded from the main stream of society. Through offering hospitality to the outsider, the stranger, the marginalized one, Brueggemann says, we begin a process which unsettles the status quo. This takes place as the outsider is able to bring hurt, hate and grief to public speech in the midst of community (Interpretation 296), to dream and hope a different hope than that of the status quo, to endorse a different ethic, pray a different prayer and permit and credit an abrasive prophetic voice of criticism and possibility (Interpretation 299-302).

Just as offering hospitality is a sign of hope to the one who is marginalized, so too Hillers, Professor of Semitic Languages, suggests that the lament rituals found in the Book of Lamentation are indicative of the presence of hope:

Central to the book, and to the intent of the ritual is the expression and strengthening of hope. It is the merit of Lamentations that it does not quickly or easily promise away the present agony. . . . Nor does it at any point forecast a speedy turn in . . . fortunes. . . . Instead the book offers . . . [an example of a process] from near despair . . . to confidence that God's mercy is not at an end. . . . this beginning of hope [leads to] waiting for God's mercy. (5-6)

In Brison's story we can identify hope through Brueggemann's definition. He says that those who hope are those who "enter their grief, suffering, and oppression, who bring it to speech, who publicly process it and move through it and beyond. They are the ones who are surprised to find, again and again, that hope and new social possibility come in the midst of such grief" (Hope Within History 86). In his work in palliative care, Scott advises that the new social possibility is evident when the pastoral care person can hear the lament of the dying person as a cry for life, and thereby become "a new source of hope and life for the one who suffers, both through . . . professional skill in comforting and in . . . personal commitment to share the lament" (120-21).

In the process of this literature review, we also discovered writings and processes which are not labelled as lament, but which we would consider lament. For example, sociology Professor and Certified Clinical Sociologist Sarah Brabant, does not use the word "lament" in her article, "Women and 'Inappropriate' Grief." However, as she advocates for the right of women to grieve the loss of a child through miscarriage or

abortion in a society which minimizes and denies such grief, she encourages the action of lament (43).

Evidence that the process of lamenting can make major changes in individuals both physiologically and socially, was found in the writings and research of Dr. Arthur Janov, Michael Yapko, the Archives of General Psychiatry edited by Dr. Harold A. Sackeim, the collaborative works of Roy Pierce and Phillip Converse, the studies by Byeong-Chul Park, Eric Hirsch, Sherry Cable, and David Wagner and Marcia B. Cohen. Tears, which we would suggest are integral to the cry of lament, have the power to transform physiology, change our personality and refire the evolutionary engine, according to psychologist, Dr. Arthur Janov in "The Role of Weeping in Psychotherapy" (321-24). The research of clinical psychologist and marriage and family therapist, Yapko, has revealed that psychotherapy, which we would also suggest is a form of lament, is as effective in the treatment of depression as are antidepressants (46). In the July 2001 issue of the Archives of General Psychiatry, editor Sackeim reports on two recent studies which indicate that the effect of psychotherapy and antidepressants on the brain are similar (631-48). In their study on the attitudinal origins of protest behaviour, Pierce, political scientist, and Converse, behavioural scientist, suggest that the process of lament can be formative. According to their research, attitudes of both protesters and bystanders may be transformed during mass protest (308-15).

The research of sociologist Byeong-Chul Park, which used data from 360 self-administered questionnaires conducted at three Korean universities, suggests that participation in student activist groups will influence political leanings and protest behaviour (171). This research is also indicative of the formative socializing power of groups, in general, and protest groups, in particular. Although the Korean students had been raised in a rigid, age-hierarchical culture in which children were required to show absolute obedience and unconditional reverence to aged parents (196), participation in student movements led to students arguing with either one or both parents on substantive political issues (188).

The questions of why one might get involved in a protest reveals a process in itself, according to the work of sociologists, Hirsch and Cable. Hirsch's work indicates that consciousness-raising, collective empowerment, polarization and group decision-making are all part of that process (244). Cable's research shows that participation in a social movement organization is an ongoing, dynamic process through which the activists themselves undergo "continual and gradual changes in their perception of grievances, of themselves, and of their roles" (37). Sociologists Wagner and Cohen's research illustrates the possibility of lament making visible the injustice endemic in social systems thereby leading to some change in those systems. It also highlights how such lament can enable strengths in social ties, group affiliation, and political mobilization (543-61).

As we began to research the expressions of lament, we quickly realized that our world is full of them. Such expressions include: the response of Anne Weems and

Nicholas Wolterstorff to the tragic deaths of their sons, as found in their writings Psalm of Lament and Lament for a Son, respectively; Janet Silman's documentation of the struggle of the women from the Tobique Reserve in New Brunswick to regain their full Indian status, rights and identities in Enough is Enough; Arthur Solomon's Songs for the People: Teachings on the Natural Way, in which, through poems and essays, he tells of his experience as an Aboriginal person in Canada; Louise Cummings' personal journey of recovering from childhood sexual abuse as described in Eyes Wide Open: Spiritual resources for healing from childhood sexual assault; Joyce Rupp's Your Sorrow is My Sorrow in which she relates the seven sorrows of Mary to the sufferings of others; and Elia Wise's For Children Who Were Broken . . . on the difficulty of living and relating for those who had experienced physical and sexual abuse as children; and dropped threads: What We Aren't Told which gives voice to the silences women keep, including Miriam Toews' analysis of her father's life, faith and suicide in "A Father's Faith," and Deborah Schnitzer's lament of the uncertainty and difficulty of living with one who has a long-term, chronic, terminal illness in "just a part."

As we look at our libraries, we realize that they contain countless other expressions of lament in the form of feminist writings. These writings are about life, both in and out of the church, and the way in which women have been abused, their experience minimized, and/or their stories forgotten. These include Carolyn Osiek's Beyond Anger: On Being a Feminist in the Church; Marilyn French's Beyond Power: On Women, Men, and Morals; and Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology by Chung Hyun Kyung.

When we first began this project, our intention was to develop resources for use in worship and rituals. However, the more we researched the more we were pleased to discover that many resources are already available. Some of the resources we found, which are explicitly about utilizing lament in worship and ritual, include: Frank Henderson's Liturgies of Lament; the section on lament in Keri Wehlander's Joy is our Banquet; and Jann Aldredge-Clanton's Praying with Christ-Sophia: Services for Healing and Renewal.

We were encouraged by the amount of literature which we found on the theme of lament. The evidence of it in many disciplines affirmed our belief in its importance. However, there was not a lot of clarity on how lament made a difference in the process of healing and change. We were therefore greatly encouraged to test out our research question.

### **Relating to Methodology**

We embarked on our research with the desire and concern to explore lament and its role in the healing/change process in a way that would respect and honour experiences of pain and suffering in a grief denying society. In order to discover what enables healing and change, we wanted to talk with people that we sensed had worked through

experiences of pain and struggle to learn from them. We also recognized that, as researchers, we would be filtering and interpreting what we heard in light of our own experiences of suffering, healing and change. Thus, we were concerned to find a method that would allow for the inclusion of these experiences in ways that did not bias our results inappropriately.

Such an approach was validated by Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna in Experience Research Social Change: Methods from the Margins. Kirby and McKenna argue that "research must begin to reflect the experience and concerns of people who have traditionally been marginalized by the research process and by what gets counted as knowledge" (22). They are "critical of mainstream research both because it is based on assumptions which often support and legitimate particular political and social interests, and also because it ignores many areas of experience" (21-22). They go on to say that "research from the margins is not research on people from the margins but research **by, for, and with them**" (28) and thus, "research activities should empower the people who are usually merely the objects of research" (41). This methodology incorporates a process by which the researcher becomes another subject in the research process. At the beginning and throughout the research project, researchers need to record their thoughts, ideas and personal assumptions about the topic and the process. This technique, which Kirby and McKenna call "conceptual baggage," adds another dimension to the data and makes visible material which is always present but not necessarily acknowledged. It also serves to change "the traditional power dynamics/hierarchy that has existed between researcher and those who are researched" (32). This appeared to us to be a promising approach because it encouraged levels of accountability and transparency that are themselves congruent with our understanding of the importance of openness and acceptance in the grieving process.

In deciding to explore lament by listening to voices from the margins, we recognized that we were also choosing to take a qualitative approach to gathering data about the healing/change process. Denise F. Polit and Bernadette P. Hungler describe qualitative research as emphasizing "the dynamic, holistic, and individual aspects of human experience and attempt[ing] to capture those aspects in their entirety within the context of those who are experiencing them" (16). According to many qualitative researchers, this approach to inquiry tends to emphasize inductive strategies of theory development. The results and findings on which the theory is based are "grounded" in the real world of human experience (Patton 66-67) and look for explanations of "social or cultural events based upon the perspectives and experiences of the people" (Isasi-Diaz 66). An increasing number of disciplines are beginning to consider the benefits to be achieved by engaging in research which facilitates the emergence of grounded theory through the various types of qualitative approaches. These qualitative perspectives are used for a range of purposes, from examining cultures or systems to understanding the development of symbols or meaning. The purpose of the inquiry determines the focus of the questions asked and the specific framework chosen for interpreting results. However, these approaches also have many common features that are adaptable to a range of research settings. They tend to

utilize flexible, less structured, instruments for data collection. Their goal is to gather the personal stories of the research participants along with the participants' subjective interpretation of the reported events. Information is examined by organized, but intuitive, analytical processes in order to relate the individual experience to a wider collective reality (Polit and Hungler 16). In light of this, we reviewed the work of a number of qualitative researchers, gaining insights and ideas which contributed to the development of our design.<sup>6</sup>

Charlotte Caron in To Make and Make Again: Feminist Ritual Theology describes a feminist theological/theological method of inquiry which incorporates five components which are interwoven and non-linear. These begin with story-telling and spiral through processes of examining and describing, analyzing, acting on values and strategies, reflecting and formulating theory. She stresses that this method begins with personal experience but is a collective process with theory arising in community (6). This resonated for us as an approach which would enable the hearing and honouring of silenced voices and seemed to mirror expectations contained in the learning spiral, a key symbol of diaconal ministry. This action/reflection tool assumes that learning is an ongoing process which begins with concrete experience. When this experience is examined and reflected upon, new understandings emerge. Out of the new understandings come new actions/experiences and the spiral begins again. We believe that when we share or lament our pain, we can move from the concrete personal experience toward a place of collective reflection and new action. Thus, we see the process of lament as an important component in the learning spiral.

Another researcher who contributed significantly to our design was Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz. Isasi-Diaz utilized a qualitative approach called ethnography in her work on *mujerista* theology. She suggests that this research method provides "understandings and techniques that make it possible to discover, organize, present, and interpret . . . lived experience" (73). While our study was not focussing on the culture of a group of people, as is assumed by this approach, her techniques for conducting interviews that engage people in conversation with the goal of learning from, as well as about, them (66) seemed very applicable to our situation. This model requires the development of open-ended questions that invite free-flowing answers rather than the moulded and limited answers elicited by tightly structured questionnaires. These questions need to be formulated in a way that move from a request for general, less threatening information to an invitation to reflect on and share the details of intense personal experiences and processes. In addition, Isasi-Diaz suggests that in-depth interviewing is enabled and enhanced when the researcher has an ongoing relationship of trust and mutual commitment with the participants; she lifts up the benefits of interviewing a group of participants who in her experience "sparked and challenged each other to become more and more reflective and explicit about their experiences and understandings" (67); and she stresses the importance of the researcher testing reflections and conclusions with the participants before assuming their validity (67-78).

Although we were assisted in the development of our research design by the spiralling process described by Caron and the interview techniques suggested by Isasi-Diaz, the methodological approach which was most relevant for our study was a form of phenomenology called heuristic inquiry. Polit and Hungler describe the phenomenological approach as focussing on "what people experience regarding some phenomena and how they interpret those experiences" (197). Heuristic inquiry includes the personal experiences and insights of the researcher, as described in the work of Kirby and McKenna, as well as those of the participant (Patton 71). This approach expands the central question that guides the researcher to ask, "What is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of others who also experience this phenomenon intensely?" (88) Insights from a variety of sources confirmed for us that open-ended interviews could offer an effective vehicle for exploring with people, either individually or in small groups, their process in moving through times of healing and change. Several of these researchers also outlined similar processes for developing interview questions and guides, raised common cautions with regard to validation processes and ethical issues, and proposed comparable techniques for organizing and analyzing the data.<sup>7</sup>

With these tools to guide us and concurring with Isasi-Diaz's position that the research is enhanced when the researcher already has a positive and trusting relationship with the participants, we built our sample from a range of friends, acquaintances and colleagues and began an awesome journey of hearing and sharing stories of pain and suffering, abuse and injustice. In this process, we discovered what is required for lament to be a transformative vehicle on the road to healing and right relationships.

## CHAPTER III

### MAPPING THE JOURNEY

#### Design

The research design which we utilized to explore the role of lament in the healing/change process was based on a phenomenological methodology called heuristic inquiry. Specific concepts of conducting this kind of research from the margins, as described by Kirby and McKenna, were incorporated. Heuristic inquiry includes the personal experiences and insights of both researcher and participant (Patton 66-73). Kirby and McKenna's approach falls within this methodological perspective but is specifically aimed at hearing the experience of living on the margins. It is committed to giving voice to those who have not been valued and heard and assumes the need for change (64-65). Believing that lament as a prayer form has been pushed to the margins of Christian liturgy and theology, we chose a methodology that called for listening to voices from that marginalized position. Through this research, we sought to understand how lament can function as a catalyst in the transformation and change required by both individuals on the margins and by the systems which contribute to them being there.

Our sample was selected by inviting participation from friends, acquaintances and colleagues who had been silenced or exploited, or had lost control in some area of their lives as they had dealt with issues such as addictive behaviour, sexual abuse, sexual orientation, residential school experiences, death, illness and unemployment. As noted in Chapter II, we wished to learn from people who had worked through experiences of pain and struggle. Therefore, to be eligible to participate in our research, individuals needed to identify themselves as having experienced suffering as well as some healing or change and be willing to talk about the dynamics of this process in their personal experience. Diversity within this sample was sought by approaching individuals who represented both genders, as well as different cultures, religions, levels of education and socio-economic status.

We gathered data by using an approach which combined in-depth, open-ended interviews with a general interview guide. The interview guide was designed to use the participants' particular experiences to examine the process of healing and change. Issues to be explored were outlined in a set of general open-ended questions. Suggestions for more in-depth probing questions were included. These were used in a flexible manner as appropriate and served to deepen the sharing as each interview proceeded. The final interview guide can be found in Appendix III. All interviews were audio taped.

As participant researchers, we initiated the interview stage of this study by interviewing each other. This step served a dual purpose. It enabled us to pretest the guide in order to evaluate the clarity of the questions and assess their effectiveness in eliciting reflections about the process of change. In addition, it provided a vehicle for collecting information about our experiences of healing and change to include in our data.

Prior to beginning interviews with other participants, a few revisions were made in order to clarify confusing and misleading questions.

### **Data Gathering Procedures**

Eleven prospective participants (eight women and three men) were contacted by phone or in person, and given some initial information about our project. Each of these individuals was known to at least one of us, some as friends, others as colleagues or acquaintances. They were chosen because, during the time we have known them, we had witnessed in them significant healing and/or transformation.<sup>8</sup> Two people had been part of a support group facilitated by one of the researchers, so also knew each other. Prospective participants were asked if they would be willing to receive more detailed written information in order to consider participation in this study. All agreed and a letter was sent to each person asking for their involvement in the research project and indicating that one of us would be contacting them (Appendix I). A Consent Form was sent with the letter (Appendix II).

Upon follow-up, ten people agreed to participate and one man declined. The individuals from whom we gathered our data, including ourselves as researchers, ranged in age from late twenties to early sixties and in educational level from grade eleven to doctoral degrees. Eight of the twelve of us were employed outside the home. One participant was gay and another was an Aboriginal person with residential school experience. Three people were survivors of childhood sexual abuse, one had experienced domestic violence and another had been a complainant of clergy misconduct. One participant was a recovering alcoholic, several had experienced serious personal or family health crises, while all had struggled with painful losses at various points in their lives.<sup>9</sup>

Eight of the participants were interviewed individually by the researchers. The two who knew each other well agreed to be interviewed together and this took the form of a small focus group. Both researchers were present in all interviews but enacted different roles depending on the situation. In the individual interviews, one researcher played an observer role while the other led the interview. We shared equally in guiding and facilitating the focus group.

We began our interviews acknowledging that our reason for coming together was to talk about times of healing and change and explore the role of lament in the healing/change process. The interviews were scheduled for up to 2 hours. Most of the interviews took approximately 1 ½ hours with only one extending to 2 ¼ hours.

All interviews were conducted in the form of guided conversations with the interviewer and those being interviewed sharing information and contributing to the research process. The interviews began with some basic demographic questions intended to ground the conversation through the sharing of a few concrete and, hopefully, non-threatening facts. These included: age, place of residence, education, employment and



non-paid work. The conversation then moved into the theme of loss/grief/change through some general sharing about personal experiences of loss, grief or change by both the interviewer and the person being interviewed. Interviewees then were asked to choose one of their experiences as a focus for more in-depth sharing and were led through a series of questions that focussed on their process of healing or change with regard to the specific area they had selected.

Immediately following each interview, we, as researchers, journalled individually about our personal responses to the content and process of the interview, identifying and recording our feelings, insights and reflections. We then debriefed together, sharing our written observations and reflections and building together on the insights which we had heard from each other. These conversations were taped and transcribed and became the first step in the analysis.

The interviews were conducted over a three month period. Following completion of the final interview, the nine interviews and debriefing conversations and the two pretest sessions, during which the researchers gathered data from each other, were transcribed. Throughout the whole process, we, as researchers, continued to record our insights, feelings, thoughts and actions, in order to identify and note our own "conceptual baggage" (Kirby and McKenna 32). These reflections along with the transcriptions of the interviews and debriefing sessions became part of the data to be analyzed.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was organized and examined using inductive analysis based on Grounded Theory. This approach offers a means of exploring complex questions, patterns and problems by organizing a large volume of data to reveal, describe and explain the links and connections among the relationships being studied. By utilizing strategies outlined by Julie Corbin ("Qualitative" 91-101) and Kirby and McKenna (128-154), themes were identified, the data was coded, sorted, questioned and compared until no further themes emerged and consistent patterns were recognized.

The researchers' recorded reflections and transcribed debriefing sessions and the corrected interviews were all reviewed. Themes were identified through an initial brainstorming. Each theme was given a descriptive name and designated as a category. These included: acceptance, anger, being heard, companions with similar experiences, companions with different experiences, analysis/critique of the ideology, depression, fear, God/church/faith, hope, isolation, private lament, public lament, powerlessness, rejection/abandonment, reflection, self-worth and trust.

Coding the data involved reviewing all material and dividing it into portions or pieces of data according to category. As the data was coded, some categories became very dense and saturated while others began to appear less significant. In order to evaluate and compare the categories, we examined the data in each one, describing the

characteristics or properties that they contained and developing a summary description of each category. These summaries were then reviewed and compared and links between them identified. Through this process two new categories, power and authority and risking action, emerged. Other categories, however, were combined, including companions with similar and different experiences and private and public lament.

As we linked and diagramed the connections and relationships between the categories by an interactive process between the summaries, we recognized that some categories were blocks to transformation, some enabled it and some functioned in both roles. These will be described in the following chapter. Gradually it became clear that four categories--acceptance, analysis/critique of the ideology, power and authority and risking action--were of central importance with the others contributing to the process through them. The four central categories all were densely saturated and revealed consistent patterns of complex interaction with each other and all of the other categories. The supporting categories demonstrated varying levels of significance. One category, hope, appeared to be saturated and seemed particularly significant and important. However, throughout the analysis we found very few interactions between hope and the other categories. We will consider the implications of this more fully when we examine the role of theology in the healing/change process. One additional category, depression, was unsaturated in our data and therefore, could only raise questions for consideration in future research. This analysis led us to posit a substantive (Kirby and McKenna 137) or grounded (Corbin "Qualitative" 101) theory which we believe helps to describe and explain the complexity of components required for lament to function as a catalyst that enables the transition from situations of pain and injustice to healing and right relationships. This theory will be described in detail in the next chapter.

### Validations

We have ensured the quality of our data and the credibility of our analysis and conclusions by following several procedures throughout the research. Undertaking this study as a joint thesis has allowed us to practice investigator triangulation (Patton 187 and 468-69). Both researchers were present for all interviews, providing a means of decreasing the potential bias that could occur with a single researcher. Following each interview, the researchers journalled individually prior to engaging in a debriefing session. Written observations and reflections were reviewed in order to expose different perceptions about the content and the meaning of what was shared. The findings of the study were also reviewed with participants before the report was finalized.

Throughout this investigative process, both researchers continued to record "conceptual baggage." This acted as a means of incorporating our own experiences into the research. It also helped to prevent our personal biases or assumptions from interfering with our ability to hear and understand each other and the participants or overly influence our analysis. For example, frequently, our initial perceptions and the meaning that we

attributed to what we heard in the interviews were quite different. One of us usually identified more strongly and quickly the significance of the information for the process of personal healing, while the other tended to see the implications for social change. By beginning our debriefing sessions by recording our "conceptual baggage" individually, we were able to make conscious our differing assumptions and increase the depth and accuracy of our perceptions before proceeding with the analysis of the material.

Conducting a focus group interview as well as several individual interviews provided a form of data source triangulation (Patton 467). In the focus group, each participant had an opportunity to share their own experiences and to hear and build on each other's responses (335). This offered an additional way of clarifying and confirming patterns common throughout the interviews. The diversity of life experiences in our sample participants also strengthened the validity of the patterns that emerged consistently in all of the interviews.

As researchers, we brought our differing views and opinions to the process throughout the analysis phase. This occurred as we reflected on the data in light of our individual experiences and the ideas that we had encountered in the literature. It continued as we applied the theoretical model which emerged to current global and local situations and events. Following identification of patterns, linkages and potential theories, we reviewed the data with our advisory group, looking for alternate ways to organize the information that might lead to different conclusions. This group consisted initially of three women who had agreed to work with us through this research project, providing wisdom, guidance and experience and offering an outside perspective to the work of discerning the meaning and implications of our study. They included an English professor from a local university, the co-director of a training program for Aboriginal ministers, and a United Church minister trained in marriage and family therapy. By the completion of the analysis phase of the project, one of these women had moved away from the region, but the other two remained involved and continued to provide feedback and support. We believe that attention to these processes throughout the study has ensured reliable results.<sup>10</sup>

### **Ethical Issues**

This research project was designed to engage people in exploring and sharing experiences of healing and change. We anticipated that these experiences would involve intense and often painful emotions. Both researchers and participants were making themselves vulnerable. Throughout the project we were careful to include steps and practices that would minimize risk and ensure justice for all involved.

### ***Informed Consent***

All participants were provided with detailed information about the goals of the project when they were invited to participate. Those who were willing to take part were

asked to sign a Consent Form (Appendix II). Following their interview, each person was asked if they would be willing to have a trained typist transcribe the taped interview and, upon agreement, signed another consent form (Appendix IV). A typed copy of their transcribed interview was sent, with a letter, to each participant for review and correction. They were encouraged to remove or change anything they did not wish to have included in the data (Appendix VI). Some participants corrected statements that were unclear or removed material that they did not wish to have used. Others gave us permission to proceed with their interviews without any adjustments. Transcripts were amended as necessary before being coded. At the conclusion of the study, all participants were again offered the opportunity to review the findings for correction or amendment of their particular stories prior to the completion of this final report.

### ***Confidentiality***

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, each participant was identified by a number code. Files were then organized according to these numbers and the names were kept in a separate location. This system was used throughout the data collection, analysis and reporting procedures. The typist who assisted with some of the transcribing signed a contract agreeing to maintain complete confidentiality with respect to all the information contained in the tapes and the resulting transcriptions (Appendix V).

### ***Power and Authority***

Throughout the interview process, efforts were made to minimize the power differential between participants and researchers. Participants were invited to choose the location of the interview with options provided by the researchers when requested. Locations for the interviews included participants' homes, offices of both participants and researchers and a church lounge. Participants were also informed that they were free to terminate the interview at any point. The researchers shared equally in facilitating the focus group. However, in each of the individual interviews, the researcher who was best acquainted with the person being interviewed played a passive, observer role while the other one was the active interviewer. The goal in choosing this approach was to try to avoid using the influence of friendship to pressure the participant into sharing more than felt safe or comfortable. In all cases, the interviewer shared some of her own experiences of loss and grief, making herself vulnerable before asking the participant to do so.

### ***Emotional Risks***

At the beginning of the interviews, we clarified with each participant that this was not to be a counselling situation and ascertained that they had supports in place if they needed them. We recognized that telling their story might raise painful feelings. However, our role needed to focus on listening and gathering information and could not extend to assisting them to work through these feelings. We were prepared to provide

referrals, if necessary, but this was never required. Throughout the project, the researchers received support from one another and from their advisory group.

The methodology that has been outlined in this chapter formed the framework for an awesome journey of listening and sharing, discerning and discovering, learning and changing. The insights which emerged from this experience gradually came together to form the theory or model which is outlined in the next chapter and we believe helps us to understand how lament can be a catalyst in the healing/change process.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCOVERIES ON THE JOURNEY: A MODEL EMERGES

Our research confirmed our belief that lament is a catalyst in the process from pain/injustice to healing/change. However, like any chemical reaction, more than the catalyst is necessary for the action/reaction to happen.

With the completion of our analysis, we recognized that 17 different factors appeared to be significant in this transformative process. These included: acceptance, anger, being heard, companions, analysis and critique of ideology, depression, fear, hope, isolation, lament, power and authority, powerlessness, rejection/abandonment, reflection, risking action, self-worth, and trust. However, their function and level of importance within the process varied.

Acceptance, being heard, hope, lament, reflection, risking action, self-worth and trust helped to enable transformation while isolation, depression, fear, rejection/abandonment and powerlessness frequently acted as blocks. Anger, critique of the ideology, companions and power/authority were seen to function in both roles at different times.

In seeking to understand the ways that lament was functioning as a catalyst, we discovered that while it was integral to the process, it had to be accompanied by four additional factors if healing and right relationships were to be realized. Acceptance, critique of the ideology, power and authority and risking action emerged as central, essential components with the other factors contributing to the process through and with them to varying degrees in complex patterns of interaction.

Therefore, arising out of this research and grounded in the lives and experiences of the researchers and study participants, we would propose the following substantive (Kirby, McKenna 137) or grounded (Corbin "Qualitative" 101) theory as an explanation of the dynamics of the transformative process and a description of the complexity of components required for lament to function as a catalyst which enables the movement from situations of pain and injustice to healing and right relationships.

Lament acts as a milieu within which healing and change can occur when it is accompanied by four additional factors in a dynamic and recursive process. These factors are:

- ▶ **acceptance** of one's self and the reality of one's pain and suffering by self and others;
- ▶ **analysis and critique of the dominant social and cultural ideology** that defines contemporary reality and value systems;

- ▶ embracing of a **power and authority that affirms change in the direction of justice and healing;**
- ▶ **actions that can be risked** and engaged in that contribute to movement in a new direction.

All four factors are significant in enabling engagement in lament. They also contribute to enabling the movement through and beyond lament toward healing and right relationship.

### *Acceptance*

The role of acceptance in this process is very complex. It involves the validation of feelings, thoughts, and experiences in a way that communicates that they are real and acceptable. While the particular situation may also contain the possibility, perhaps even the hope, that something will change, acceptance means feeling recognition and affirmation of oneself in the present reality, with the current mixture of feelings, thoughts and responses, without condition, requirement or expectation of change. Many of our study participants reported that they remained immobilized by the grief of a family death until the deep pain and loss they were feeling were not only voiced but also accepted and validated. A new vocation became an option for another person only when the sorrow she felt about letting go of the old one was recognized and accepted.

A crucial piece of this acceptance is acceptance of oneself. Jesus taught: "love your neighbour as yourself" (The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Mark 12:31). Without self love and acceptance, our capacity to accept one another may be severely challenged. The journey to healing and transformation requires a deep acceptance of self, both the positive and the negative, recognizing that we do not deserve pain and suffering but we do participate in it, often contributing to the victimization of self and others. One participant described the beginning of the journey toward healing being centred in accepting himself as loved by God and therefore, a loveable, valuable human being. Only then could he begin to question and gradually reject the belief that he was evil and sinful because he was gay.

In our relationship as co-researchers, we discovered the significance and importance of self-acceptance while working in team. At various times, our different learning styles and conflicting perceptions caused one or both of us to experience stress and tension. After considerable conversation and reflection, we recognized that, for each of us, this was rooted in lack of self-confidence and self-acceptance. We had attempted to tell each other that we accepted and respected our differing points of view but when we felt threatened, we were not able to hear this acceptance. The recursive nature of the relationship between acceptance of self and acceptance of and by others makes this a very

complex and challenging part of the process. As long as we were unable to accept ourselves, we were unable to feel the acceptance of the other. As long as we were unable to hear acceptance from each other, we found it hard to feel confident enough to accept ourselves.

Our research also revealed important reciprocal relationships between acceptance and several other components of the healing/change process. Lament was a key vehicle through which those feelings of pain and loss, which required acceptance, could be named aloud. Acceptance by self and others contributed to many participants' ability to engage in new forms of action and led to hope. Experiencing acceptance both enabled and was enabled by companions, trust, an increase in self-worth and embracing a power and authority which offered acceptance and affirmed self-acceptance. Being heard contributed to feeling accepted. In addition, fear, depression and isolation seem to have been overcome for some of our study participants through the process of being heard, especially if this progressed to validation and acceptance.

### *Analysis and Critique of the Dominant Social and Cultural Ideology*

Analysis and critique played very major roles in most of the stories incorporated in our data. As long as victims of abuse accepted the social assumptions that held them responsible and failed to acknowledge the injustice of the power relationships that were enabling and supporting their oppression, they were unable to see themselves as worthy. Unless an expectant mother could critique and reject the cultural norm that denied the loss and pain involved in miscarriage, she could not grieve and heal. Until our gay participant heard and accepted the right to critique and reject the theological teaching that judged his god-given gift of sexuality and orientation as evil, he remained a victim of injustice, unable to embrace himself as loved by God or others; unable to journey toward healing and right relationships.

Analysis and critique are essential pieces of this transformative process but in ways that are intricately interconnected with various other equally essential components. They can both lead to and be enabled by lament. Lament may be one of the places through which we connect the pain in our gut with the analytical ability of our brain and recognize why the pain is there. A number of study participants indicated that through lament and critique they began to recognize that some situations which were initially labelled as personal problems were, in fact, unjust systemic issues. These included abuse, unresolved grief, violation by those in power, unhealthy family systems, marginalization by power groups and systems that were structured to benefit some at the expense of others. This dawning awareness, enhanced through analysis and critique, led to and was enabled by embracing a new power and authority which affirmed both this analysis and healing/change toward a more just reality.



Analysis and critique can also lead to the discovery of new companions and/or be enabled by already existing companions. It can feed and be fed by anger and may contribute to the overcoming of depression. In addition, we heard about it leading to new actions and a new definition of self which then resulted in acceptance. Some participants, however, shared stories of analysis and critique being prevented or discouraged by authorities in their lives and by particular companions. In some cases, it also seemed to be prevented by fear while, in other situations, it led to experiencing rejection and isolation.

***Embracing of a power and authority that affirms change in the direction of justice and healing***

We found that for most of the folk we interviewed, there was some power and authority which greatly influenced the way they viewed the world and themselves. Whether this power and authority was God, the church, the culture, family or friends, it was a force in their lives that either enabled or impeded healing and transformation. The healing/change process was blocked for people when something that held power and authority for them prevented critique of their situation, stifled their cries of pain, inhibited acceptance of themselves, and led to a sense of rejection, isolation and powerlessness.

However, when they were able to adopt a power and authority or belief system that was grounded in the vision of justice and abundant life for all, movement toward healing and transformation became possible. Again and again, we heard stories from our study participants that illustrated the importance of embracing a new power/authority/belief system. This new power/authority/belief system needed to be one which offered and enabled the acceptance they were previously unable to feel, facilitated the lamenting of the pain they were experiencing and encouraged the ability to critique the systemic injustice in which they were caught. This often led to discovering companions on their journey and enabled the taking of risks which previously would not have been possible. As a result, feelings of powerlessness, isolation, and depression were also relieved to a greater or lesser degree.

For one person, this new power and authority was the culture and spirituality of his ancestral background which the dominant culture rejected. As he was able to risk participating in traditional rituals and ceremonies, he gained a new sense of himself and his roots.

For another participant, AA became a new power and authority in her life. It enabled her to stop drinking and face the grief and loneliness from which she was trying to escape. Power over her drinking helped to lessen her sense of powerlessness and her need to isolate herself from the world.

For several folk, it was a counsellor who became a new power and authority in their life and who enabled the systemic analysis of the abuse which they had experienced.

With the acceptance and support of the counsellor, they were able to risk feeling the pain of the abuse, confronting their abusers and moving toward healing and right relationships.

### *Actions that can be risked*

The risking of action was an essential piece in the process to transformation and healing. It often enabled connecting with companions of both similar and different experiences and therefore involved a complex interaction with the role of acceptance. Some of the new actions which participants reported as significant in their change process included attending an AA meeting, going to a counsellor, moving into a group, talking with those in positions of authority in their lives, participating in traditional non-Christian rituals, revealing one's sexual orientation and confronting one's abuser.

We found that folk were able to risk these actions when they felt that they were being heard, when there were companions with whom to journey, where they felt a level of trust with, and acceptance by, a significant power and authority in their lives, as well as by those around them. Analysis of the power dynamics of their situation was often a motivating factor in the decision to take action, as was anger.

It appeared that there is a reciprocal relationship between lament and risking action. Sometimes lament itself is the action to be risked. In order for lament to lead to healing, new actions are a necessity. Such new actions may often lead to new lament.

Hope was another factor which seemed to have a reciprocal relationship with risking to act. In addition, the very act of risking enabled an increased sense of self-worth and the facing of fear. However, fear, along with powerlessness and rejection, could also be an inhibiting factor.

### *Depression*

One theme, depression, was unsaturated in our data and therefore, could only raise questions to consider in future research. For a few participants, it was clearly a stage to be travelled through on the journey toward healing. One of the women who shared her story of healing from childhood sexual abuse expressed it this way:

All of a sudden [I got] a phone call and the abuser wanted to talk about it. . . I got pretty emotional around the family at that time. . . . I started to get sort of anxious and entered a depression. . . . I had gotten into counselling and I was going through enough of the process so that [I] was going to come out the other side

For others, depression appeared to be a recurring theme as the following description of ongoing struggle suggests:

I've had a really bad weekend and . . . I just realized how very quickly I start to measure myself again--I start to measure how I'm failing, how I'm not doing everything I need to be doing--and how fast I get into that really depressive cycle again. It's a constant challenge for me.

Unfortunately we did not hear enough from our interviews to clarify how depression functions within the overall process. Future study of the relationships and interactions between depression and the key factors in this theoretical model, especially lament, acceptance, analysis and critique, power and authority, and action, are required to deepen knowledge and understanding of the role which depression plays in the transition from suffering to healing.

### *Theory and Practice*

In applying this model to the range of stories that we heard through our research, we saw again and again how varied and complex the patterns and interactions between the key factors can be. For several of our participants who shared stories of healing from experiences of childhood sexual abuse, an initial pivotal action was entering into counselling. Although all these participants reported being in a state of pain, the motivation for seeking counselling varied. Some were dealing with intense grief at the death of a parent, others were struggling with issues of substance abuse. In all cases the counselling became a place where lament was encouraged and pain was heard. The counsellor became a helpful new authority in each person's life, validating feelings of pain and anger, accepting the person and encouraging acceptance of self. In the words of one woman:

[The counsellor] is the best thing that happened to me in my life. . . . She's able to sit there and receive you completely for who you are in that moment. . . . I've never seen anybody able to do that. . . . she's able to keep her heart open.

And for another:

[The counsellor] was very important for me . . . I really needed to talk about [the abuse] with someone else. . . . to feel like I was being heard and not feeling so alone. . . . and that it wasn't my . . . fault. . . . That really was the turning point for me.

Over time, the content of the lament changed. Individuals were assisted to remember experiences of abuse and began to recognize, analyze and critique some of the social assumptions and systems that contributed to this abuse. In addition, several of our participants became members of therapy support groups. This provided them with new forums for sharing lament and new companions who contributed to the process of critique as well the acceptance of feelings and finally of self as we heard so powerfully in these words:

It was good. It was a safe place for me to get my anger out. . . . it took a long time but . . . I was able to sit there and be exactly who I was and nothing changed. It was okay to voice all this anger and hatred, I got it all out and even though I didn't feel safe . . . I was safe. . . . there's just a sense of togetherness. When someone cries, when someone's in pain, everyone in the group is healed at the same time. . . . [everyone can] see clearly that none of this pain is deserved.

Gaining the courage and confidence to trust others and share painful stories was of central importance for all and led to additional important actions. Some were able to confront family members with their experiences of abuse and challenge any denial. Others terminated relationships or discontinued their involvement with family members who refused to affirm and respect them. The journey toward healing and transformation is ongoing for all of these folks. Crucial components in the life-giving change they all experience include: lament; acceptance; analysis and critique of their social and cultural values and assumptions; opportunities and places to risk new action; and the embracing of a power and authority which affirmed and supported this process.

Another story that illustrates clearly the interactive roles of these factors was shared by a gay participant. The transformative journey began for him when, as a young adult, he recognized his sexual orientation. At that time, the values and belief systems that held authority in his life all defined homosexuality as sinful, offering no room for acceptance of this new understanding of self. He was consumed by pain and guilt and sought professional help. When he was told by the first psychiatrist he visited, "You're gay. . . . there is no hope for you to change," he left the office in tears. A second doctor offered him two treatment options: to learn to accept himself as gay or to try a new process that had been used to help some people change. The old authorities were so strong that he was unable to imagine learning to affirm his orientation. He remembered saying, "No, I can't learn to accept my homosexuality. This is wrong. It is evil. I can't do this, I've got to change."

Neither therapist offered any tools for analyzing the abusive nature of the beliefs that he had been taught by his family and the church of his childhood and he chose to act by participating in therapy designed to "cure" him of his homosexuality.

Although this therapy never accomplished a permanent change, it seemed at the time to be having some effect. He persisted with it until several factors came together to alter the direction of the healing he was seeking. He risked a visit to a gay group where he met some new companions who shared experiences similar to his own. He encountered a critique of the theology that defined him as evil and of the religious institution that rejected him as a beloved child of God. He opened himself to a new authority which told him that he too, as a gay man, was created in the image of God. During our interview, this participant described the point at which he recognized that God had not rejected him:

It was one of those re-birth moments when I realized that I am not alone. I don't have to change me but I have to change my understanding of my relationship with God. . . . And so I was determined that I would do whatever I needed to do so that other gay and lesbian people wouldn't have to go through the mess that I went through.

This began his journey toward acceptance of self and a life commitment to work for liberation and justice for other gay and lesbian people within and beyond the church.

If we return now to the question posed by Karen Tjaden, to which we referred in Chapter 1, when she wondered if inner-city folks struggling with chronic poverty could ever lament enough to reach a place of healing and transformation, our model can offer us some new insights. People caught in chronic poverty and surviving on social assistance are both confronted with and in many cases have internalized the cultural stereotype that insists they are responsible for their poverty. The significant power and authorities in their lives create and reinforce this belief. These authorities include: a theology which teaches that suffering is punishment from God and that God helps those who help themselves; social stereotypes that name the poor as lazy freeloaders, unwilling to work; cultural values that promote competition and limit the work on human rights to individual rights. The power these beliefs hold over their imaginations limits analysis and prevents critique of the ideology and the systemic injustice in which they are caught. This in turn leads to a passive acceptance of their reality, discouraging or preventing engagement in actions which might enable the change of this reality. People living in poverty can often express their situation as painful. However, this tends to be perceived and described as individual suffering disconnected from that of others in their community. Further, this suffering is ignored or even denied by those outside of their community. Thus, even sharing or lamenting the pain of this reality is discouraged and when it does occur, the other factors needed to move it toward transformation are rarely present.

Our current global reality and response to terrorism offers another situation on which to ponder the role and significance of the various components of this theoretical model. Two days after September 11, 2001 and the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Towers in New York City, the chief economist of one of Canada's largest brokerage firms was interviewed by CBC television. She shared her deep pain at the impact that this tragedy had on her family and most of her colleagues. Many had friends and family who

had worked in the World Trade Centre and were now among the missing. She described the shock and fear, the horror and anger that had taken over her office and the rest of the financial community, immobilizing everyone. She cried out against the suffering and the violence that had caused it, but then went on to say that what they needed to do was get back to work, to immerse themselves in the *normalcy* of life again.

This interview, along with others that were aired around that time, provided a forum for a range of individuals and community leaders to lament the horror and suffering that these attacks had caused. In light of this study project, we must then ask: In this situation, was lament a catalyst which enabled the transition from pain and injustice to healing and right relationship?

In reflecting on this situation, we recognize its complexity. As our model would expect, response to this lament and the analysis and critique which it contained played an important role in shaping the activities that soon emerged in response to this tragedy. The financial community quickly focussed its energies back onto the management of the *free market*. The terrorists who planned and implemented the attacks against the United States were deemed to be the enemy, the other, and therefore, appropriate targets for further violence. The western powers declared a "war on terrorism" to be waged first and foremost by military action against Afghanistan. Transition from that place of deep shock and pain did occur but rather than moving in the direction of justice, we would suggest that it has resulted in further violence. In addition, there appeared to be a double standard concerning those who died as a result of this conflict. For some people, the occupants of the World Trade Centre were considered innocent victims, while civilians killed by the western military in other parts of the world were described as collateral damage or deemed a necessary sacrifice. If lament is to be a catalyst for healing and change, this situation raises further questions to be considered: If the laments and cries of some are being heard, are there other cries of pain that are being silenced? Does the analysis and critique consider the perspective of all the world's people or is it limited to only a few? Are there dangers in ignoring situations of suffering and injustice? As noted in Chapter 2, Brueggemann claims that terrorism is "a desperate, hopeless act of those without access or prospect of access to dignity or influence" (Hope Within History 91). Viewing these terrorist acts through the lens of our theoretical model helps us to understand how terrorism could be perceived to be an appropriate response in the struggle for transformation from an oppressive reality. Moslem extremism may have acted as a new authority in response to the people's cries of anger and pain. Leaders, claiming the power of this belief system, validated the people's perception that they were victims of unjust suffering, affirmed their laments, provided a critique of Western ideology and practice and invited violent actions in response.

A distressing parallel may also be seen when we examine the dynamics of Winnipeg's inner-city gangs. Caught in the spiral of chronic poverty, struggling at school, despairing of any future success, increasing numbers of young people are being recruited into gangs. Gang leaders have filled a void and are responding to their cries of pain,

offering acceptance and becoming a new authority that defines the wider community as the enemy and invites action that uses crime and violence as a way to achieve success. We often ask the same questions of local gangs as we do global terrorists, such as: What makes them so angry? Why do they hate us? Why do they want to hurt us? When we utilize critical analysis to examine both our local and global situations, we discover a number of parallels. In both cases, roots can be found in poverty and hopelessness. Those in power have refused to hear the pain or help relieve the suffering. This has resulted in anger and an intensification of the lament along with an openness to a new authority that offers a form of success through acts of violence against those seen to be responsible.

Perhaps we ignore or deny the laments of our sisters and brothers at our own peril. There are no easy answers to our global problems in our current reality. However, our research leads us to wonder if our world would be in such a desperate place if the cries of pain of all of the world's citizens were heard and validated, an analysis of the wider social reality undertaken and actions proposed based on a vision of justice and abundant life for all instead of an ethic of competition and war. The use of our model as a lens through which to view the complexity of our interpersonal and our global relationships reveals that the vision, the beliefs and the ethical framework that we bring to the various components of the healing/change process will influence and shape the transition that results. The following chapters will explore the ways in which the vision, beliefs and ethics expressed through our theology and practice of ministry within the church impact the journey of people of faith toward healing and right relationships.

## CHAPTER V

### JOURNEYING WITH THE HOLY: POWER AND AUTHORITY RE-DEFINED

The theme of power and authority, which we found to be one of the essential factors necessary to enable healing and transformation, was evident in our research both explicitly and implicitly. Although we are not always conscious of it, power and authority greatly influence the way in which we see the world and, subsequently, the way we act in the world. Through our research, we recognized that beliefs about God, theology, whether as part of a faith community or not, are a strong influence in people's lives. This chapter will acknowledge the theology which we, as researchers, have brought to this project, briefly look at the range of theologies which impact upon us both individually and culturally, explore the impact of the belief systems of the folk we interviewed on the transformative processes in their lives and begin to articulate the theological implications our research holds for the church.

In the religious community, there has always been great debate and discussion about God, about who has the "truth" about God and about how we are called to act in response to that "truth." As researchers, we are aware that our understanding of God has been growing and changing throughout our lives. At the present time, our understanding is that God is a presence which lives within and among us, infusing all with creative energy, seeking relationship with us and companioning us in our seeking. This God is radically inclusive, loving each one of us and calling us to love in return by loving one another. God's love calls us all into right relationship based on love and justice requiring us to "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God" (The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Micah 6:8). God is against oppression, takes the side of justice and stands with the oppressed and victimized, calling for repentance and transformation in order that the promise of abundant life might be realized by all. God shares in our brokenness, walking with us and crying with us in our pain and suffering, trusting us, honouring us, and forgiving us and waiting for us to share in healing the brokenness and in making new life a reality. As expressed in the "new" United Church Creed, God is with us "in life, in death, in life beyond death," sharing our joys and our pain, being both our intimate companion and more than we can ever know or imagine. God is also the energy which can be glimpsed in the dynamics and interactions as we share and work together.

The participants in our research group came from a broad range of Christian perspectives both theologically and experientially with roots in Catholic, Methodist, Mennonite and United Church denominations. Six were order of ministry and six were lay folk. Of the six lay people, only one is still actively involved in the institutional church.

The work of Soelle gives us one possible lens through which to understand the range of theologies we, and those we interviewed, brought to this research. Writing in 1990 Soelle describes three "discernable theological tendencies." These tendencies, we would suggest, are to be found, both explicitly and implicitly, in our North American



culture and may influence an understanding of God whether or not one is aware of them. Soelle names these theological tendencies conservative/orthodox, liberal, and radical/liberation:

Faith [in the **conservative/orthodox theology**] means acceptance of the truth revealed in the tradition. . . . Revelation is only through the hearing, trusting and obeying of the tradition. Other events and powers, beings and truths . . . *cannot* be recognized as revelation. . . . Sin is localized in the heart of the individual and not in economic structures. Peace is to be realized in the family and in the upbringing of children. Everything outside the narrowest circle of individual and family life . . . is rejected. . . . It is a vision for the haves, not for the have-nots. It will ensure that we keep what we have.

A key point about **Liberal theology** is its individualism . . . [It] regards the human person as a separate being that finds comfort and peace of soul in believing . . . [The] kingdom of God is totally suppressed in favor of individual salvation. . . . [This] theology is the work of the androcentrically thinking middle class: white, relatively well-to-do, shaped and determined by men. It disregards the suffering masses of the earth; the starving appear, if at all, as objects of charity.

**Radical/Liberation theology** [is] a way of living, hoping, and acting. . . . [It] is happening among the poor, in the South African townships, in the refugee camps in El Salvador, among the women textile workers in Sri Lanka. . . . [It] is not a theology that we can take or leave alone. It is God's gift to us today, an expression of the faith of people . . . the foundation of faith is the praxis of [the] poor man from Nazareth who shared his bread with the hungry and made the blind to see, and who lived and died for justice . . . [The] poor are the teachers. . . Radical theology goes to the roots of our fear of powerlessness and assures us that "all things are possible." (Window 105-15)

This thumbnail sketch offers a theological continuum upon which to understand those involved in our research. It also is indicative of the range of theological understanding in the religious community.

The Western Field Based Training Program in Diaconal Ministry, through which we trained, used a feminist/liberationist approach which very much fits within the radical/liberation tendency. We uphold the theology and requirements of praxis from this perspective. As such, we see ourselves to be in the process of "becoming" theologically, willing to learn from continuing conversations and experiences with those with whom we both agree and disagree.

In addition to our training program, other places through which our theology is informed is participation in conferences such as the 1993 Re-Imagining Conference held in

Minneapolis. This conference, with over 2,000 participants, was an opportunity to connect with folk from around the world, to learn about their experiences and their understanding of God, Jesus and the church. Their stories offered us another perspective through which to be in theological conversations and by such connecting, be changed.

This conference was a case in point in terms of the topic of lament because we were able to witness and experience that one of the most poignant places of connection with one another is in the sharing of pain. Even if such sharing is only for a short instant, it may enable a bridging of the gap between those with whom we differ or disagree.

We would say, however, that the other two theological tendencies which Soelle describes do not offer permission to be in such conversations or processes of "becoming," theologically. Conservative/orthodox theology is hierarchical in nature—the truth has been decided upon by the tradition. What's there to talk about? The litmus paper by which one is deemed faithful is whether or not one subscribes to the edicts of those in power. Those in power will have advanced to such positions by agreeing to maintain the status quo. Liberal theology might be described as having its head in the sand. Individualistic in nature, the only reason to look at the poor, starving masses would be to offer a bowl of soup or a drink of water. There is no expectation that there is a story from which one might learn. Lament, therefore, would not be a part of either the conservative/orthodox or the liberal theological tendencies described by Soelle. There would be no permission or willingness to cry out in the conservative/orthodox theology because that would be an admission of weakness, of not being faithful. So, too, in the liberal perspective. A cry of pain would be to admit that one had not achieved the comfort and peace which is supposed to come with believing. Therefore, neither of these approaches are effective or supportive of lament and the wider healing/change process needed in our troubled world.

As we continue to "become" theologically, we have known many times of lament, transformation and change in our understanding of God and our actions which that understanding enables. As with any change, these new theological understandings carry with them loss as well as exciting new possibilities. Each loss includes some pain. It is a complex, dialectical process. Central to our experience of lament is the belief that there is a God, that God hears our cries, shares our pain and accepts and affirms our complaints against injustice. Therefore, we have found that our beliefs about God have had a major impact on, and been influenced by, our experiences of the healing and transformative process.

This was not true for many in our research group. It soon became obvious that the theological environment in which they were raised often meant that the healing process was hampered or blocked by their beliefs about God. For those who had been raised in a denomination or home which espoused either a conservative/orthodox or liberal theology, the church, the numinous power of clergy and/or the control of parents was at some point in their lives, an oppressive, abusive force which prevented change. It was only after being able to see God, and thereby see themselves, from a new perspective that they were

able to achieve some move toward healing. This process was very clear for two of the interviewees who were from marginalized groups—the gay community and the Aboriginal community.

The gay man had grown up in a Christian church which preached that homosexuality is a sin. It was only after learning about a group in his denomination for gays and lesbians, that he could even begin to question his denomination's position on this issue:

I started to re-read an article about [the group] which is one of the . . . groups for gays and lesbians. And how it was saying that the churches' position was wrong, that God made us in God's image, and that regardless of orientation, we are still God's children, we are still created in God's image, we are still loved, we still have a place in the church, we still have a relationship with God.

It was only then he could believe that, in spite of orientation, he was a child of God, just as we are all children of God. He realized that it was not his orientation which needed changing but his belief that God judged his orientation to be a sin. Coming to understand that he was a child of God, enabled him to accept himself for who he was.

This new understanding also enabled him to see his father through new eyes. He could understand that his father has been indoctrinated by the church. Although his father does not totally accept him and his partner today, he observed, “[my father] is doing his best to stay faithful to the church and open to me. He can't do more.” He can also see that his father is growing and changing in the process. The way in which his father now ends a conversation, “Blessings to you and [your partner],” is an indication of acceptance which has not been there before.

The Aboriginal person was able to gain a new perception of himself and to see the world in new ways after reconnecting with the sweatlodge and going to other communal ceremonies. This has been a complex journey, but he now sees himself as Aboriginal Christian—a place which he says is “a major test of faithfulness . . . because it means standing between two worlds.” The polarity of those two worlds range between the Aboriginal communal life on one hand and the “Christian” salvation for the individual on the other. This growing consciousness has not happened overnight. Rather the Aboriginal person noted: “the movement that I had to make from my [denominational] upbringing and [from] some of the formative church language . . . about salvation for the individual has been a long journey for me.”

The understanding of “Christian” salvation described by the Aboriginal participant resonates for us with the one which Marcus Borg identifies within an older, “popular-level Christianity” of a previous generation. He defines this perspective as “the Christianity of most Christians.” This Christianity, Borg says, was

doctrinal, moralistic, literalistic, exclusivistic, and oriented toward an afterlife. . . . It typically affirmed that Christianity was the only way of salvation. And it defined salvation as “afterlife”—as going to heaven. Basically, then, Christianity was about believing in central Christian teachings *now* for the sake of heaven *later*. (2)

We would suggest that as the theology and spirituality of this Aboriginal person changed from that of individual salvation to that encompassed in the Aboriginal communal life, he also began to see his culture and his rootedness in it in a new way. He was able to make connections with the spirituality of his Grandmother and to remember the way in which she had encouraged him to look at his own spirituality. He was reminded that his great-grandfather had been a medicine person and that his grandmother had also known about traditional healing. He says that it has also made a difference for him in where he finds hope, how he deals with anger and in enabling him to find “some balance within” and to understand that “all experience is connected in a very basic traditional value system.” This experience has also led him to recognize that “in many Aboriginal communities even when the ceremonies are gone, our system of community way of life carries on some of the culture, the language itself.”

Borg’s writings are also relevant in understanding the experience of a third participant whose sense of God was drastically changed from that of a distant God to a more relational, immanent entity. After a fall down the basement stairs, she lay for several hours before being able to drag herself upstairs to telephone for help. As a result of the accident she had temporary paralysis and was in hospital for six weeks in order to learn to walk again. While in the hospital she kept questioning why that had happened to her. Several months later she was on retreat. She realized that one of the things that was bothering her was where God had been while she was lying at the bottom of the stairs. “Where were you? I kept praying that you would send somebody to help me and nobody came, where were you?” During that time of retreat she had the image that God had been there, “I was there, brooding over you . . . I was there weeping with you.”

Borg describes the understanding of the distant God as “supernatural theism.” This is the God who cannot be known or experienced, but only believed in. He says that biblical passages and much of the language of worship and devotion may contribute to this understanding of God. Until recently the majority of Christians thought of God within this framework. While this may have posed no serious problem for Christians in the past, in this day and age thinking of God as a supernatural being “out there” has become an obstacle for many. It makes the reality of God seem doubtful—God seems very far away.

The more relational, immanent concept of God Borg describes as “panentheism.” This is the God who is not somewhere else, but “right here.” This is the encompassing Spirit; “we (and everything that is) are in God . . . God is a nonmaterial layer or level or dimension of reality all around us, God is more than the universe, yet the universe is in God.” These are not necessarily new concepts of God, says Borg. They are found both in

the Bible and in the Christian tradition (11-12). However, when this participant's understanding of God shifted from that of the God "out there" to the God "right here" she was able to see herself in new ways.

One participant shared stories of her experience of sexism and marginalization as a lay woman in leadership in her home congregation. Her reaction to a meeting in which she felt criticized and demeaned was to have a long chat with God as she tried to figure out her responsibility in the situation. This was the God whom she went on to describe as a little voice which has been deep inside her from childhood. It was not until she had grown up that she had consciously connected this little voice with God; but she was aware that it had been a support and guide for her throughout her life. This understanding of God, we would suggest, is in keeping with Borg's description of "panentheism." This sense that God was within appears to have contributed to this woman's ability to trust her own intuition and analysis. It enabled her to feel affirmed and accepted. It also enabled her to risk actions to address the oppression she was experiencing.

Our analysis of the research data suggests that whether the divine power in the lives of our interviewees was conscious or unconscious, whether it was primarily an enabling or a blocking force, transformation and healing took place through the ongoing change in understanding of that power. It was changed for the gay man and the Aboriginal person from that of the dualistic God who set limits on who is "in" and who is "out" to being a loving, caring God who considered all beings to be part of the whole creation as good, lovable and acceptable. God was no longer distant, but rather was immanent and could be discerned in the Aboriginal ceremonies, in the lives of gay men and lesbian women and in the communities which these two men discovered with their new understanding of God. It was a time for new life.

To realize that God did not relate with her from a distance, but rather that God was there weeping in the midst of her pain was a life-changing, life-giving movement for our subject who had lain at the bottom of the stairs calling out to God. Her sense of herself shifted when she no longer saw herself as a failure, cursed by the God who measured to see who deserved what. Although not a permanent shift, on the difficult days, she can now remember that there have been times in her life when she experienced being held and loved by God. In sharing her story, she commented that

if your being has any meaning, then your being has meaning because you are held in God and in God's love. So for me . . . none of this is complete, this is an ongoing thing. But I think the transformation of that is being able to come to the point of instead of having to earn, instead of having to achieve, instead of having to be something which is all a part of that sort of living under the curse and "the God has forsaken me stuff," [to] come to the point of being able to accept that my being has meaning, not in terms of the length of my life, not in terms of whether I am complete or whole, but

in terms of simply the love of God that God is literally the only thing that can sustain you.

Although one of our participants did not specifically name a new understanding of God, we would suggest that part of her healing process has been the shift in the models of God which she has experienced. The home in which she was raised would have perceived God through the conservative/orthodox lens, a hierarchical theology which decrees that the parents rule over the children. Much of her life experience included the suppressing of emotions because the family rules did not allow them:

Strong, strong messages from when I was a kid that “Smile and the world smiles with you, cry and you cry alone.” . . . if I got upset . . . if I wanted to cry I was sent to my room. You did not do that in front of [my Mom]. I never saw my Mom cry. I never saw my Dad cry. Not even a whole lot of raging or anything, that way. I knew my Mom was really uncomfortable with strong emotions and so I think I learned really at an early age that that was not o. k. to do.

These family rules greatly impacted her during the time of her father’s death when she was only able to cry when her mother was not around.

In contrast with that was an experience she had at a December 6<sup>th</sup> memorial service in the church where she had been married. During the service the invitation was given to talk about violence, especially in significant relationships. The invitation and the setting enabled her to talk about the difficulty of her marriage relationship and how hard it had been over the years to come to the church and always carry the appearance that everything was all right. By providing this invitation in the context of worship, the church implicitly offered to this woman a new sense of acceptance by the community and the holy. She describes that evening as having taken place in “sacred space,” which contributed to an important transition in her life: “going to that . . . significant place . . . and naming the brokenness . . . out loud to other people, meant that I left the place with a kind of integrity and wholeness that I didn’t enter it with. . . .”

The impact of such implicit holy activity on our theology is not always immediately evident. It may take some time, if it is ever possible, to put into words the new ways in which God is understood as a result of such an experience. Although this participant had previously glimpsed this sense of acceptance and of the holy in some of her supporters or “spiritual guides,” this evening enabled her to understand and to own it for herself.

The sense of the holy was also perceived as we heard about groups in which several folk had participated during their healing process. Gathering with other women who had known the pain and suffering of sexual abuse was helpful to the two women in our focus group. During their experience of the group, the location changed from a university setting to a church. For one of the women in the focus group walking into the

church the first evening they met there was a struggle because of her experience in a conservative, fundamentalist denomination. By the time she came for the interview to the same church building a couple of years later, she claimed that it was no longer an issue for her. Although it was not explicitly stated in the interview, we would wonder whether her understanding of God might also have been changed through the experience of the group and the relationships which developed within it.

Although another of our participants had been raised in the church, the spiritual component of AA has obviously enabled a new understanding of a "higher power" in her life and the spiritual aspects of the relationships in which she has become involved.

I: when you were feeling really low . . . what helped you to hang on?

#7: Well, since I have joined AA, like its actually quite a spiritual program. And I say my prayers morning and night. Which is something that I never used to do because I never used to think about them.

I: Is that something that's helpful for you?

#7: Oh, yeah.

Not only does she have a new sense of spirituality personally, the AA program has also enabled the fostering of her reaching out beyond herself:

I: It sounds like that is a place of real support.

#7: Oh, it is.

I: And a place where you can offer support, too.

#7: Well, that's the 12th step.

For many of the folk we interviewed, God, the divine power in their lives, could now be understood as an entity with whom they could be in relationship. Just as our Hebrew ancestors were able to cry out to God as they named and shared the pains of life, there is the trust that God can hear their pain and protest and somehow be active in the movement toward healing.

According to Brueggemann, our Hebrew ancestors understood that new life does not come from avoiding the darkness but from embracing it (Message 53). Christianity, however, has driven the hurtful side of experience either into obscure corners of faith practice or completely out of worship into various forms of psychotherapy and growth groups (Psalms 68). Instead of acting as the people of Israel had in meeting the hurtful

dimensions of existence head-on and considering them to be faith crises through which to wonder about God and God's fidelity, many contemporary church members wish to withdraw from life as it really is and see faith through the romantic notion that life is all sweetness and joy, even delight. Brueggemann observes that rather than dealing with hurtful issues through open and honest dialogue with God, any dialogue occurring within the church is expected to be polite, and positive, and filled only with gratitude. There is little acceptance of the expression of anger, hatred, betrayal and absurdity. As a result, in the church, folk are seduced into nondialogic forms of faith in which they sense that they are alone and so settle for meditation, reflection or bootstrap operations of resolve to alter their situation (Psalms 67-68)

What we hear from Brueggemann, is that by limiting the interactions within the church to nothing more meaningful than the weather or what we have to be thankful for, we are denying the possibility to become a "faith community." By not being able to acknowledge and share the difficulties we encounter along the road of life, we resort to individualistic activities which may make us feel better at the moment by treating the symptom, but we fail to deal with the problem. One of our participants certainly agrees with Brueggemann that actions such as "bootstrap operations," the action by which we are to pull ourselves out of our pain and/or discomfort, don't work. Her experience suggests that when one is in the depths, "You can't pull yourself up, you can't do anything for yourself, you can't achieve anything."

Why does Brueggemann suggest that the church has come to this? He says that this has happened because lament can "lead us into dangerous acknowledgement of how life really is . . . lead us away from the comfortable religious claims of 'modernity' in which everything is managed and controlled" (Psalms 53). Perhaps we are no longer sure that we can trust God to hear our cries and complaints. Perhaps those in power in our religious communities do not want to have to hear the pain of others because then they might have to acknowledge their own pain. Or perhaps what we believe in our heart about God does not always connect with what is in our head. This disconnection of heart and head was a piece of the dissonance for an interviewee before her understanding of God changed from the distant God "out there" to the God who is "right here":

One of the things that I learned was, that you can feel as if you are being punished, even though you don't theologically believe it. . . . I felt as though I was shark shit even though I didn't really literally believe that with my mind . . . I felt as if God had abandoned me, even though I didn't believe that with my own mind.

It was through a time of reflection and crying out to God that she came to realize that God had not abandoned her in her difficulty. Rather that God had been there brooding over her . . . weeping with her.



If we care about authenticity and justice, the recovery of these lament psalms is urgent, according to Brueggemann (Psalms 111). The structure of these psalms, as described by Westermann, is one which moves from plea to praise, because of the intervention of God (Praise 33). There is a sequence of five components to this process: a situation of distress, a cry of distress, a promise of deliverance, an act of deliverance and the response of those saved (Praise 259-60). Brueggemann describes this process in a variety of ways, one having the three components of petition, response and thanks (Psalms 80).<sup>11</sup> Whether a five or three part process, this transition is one which we saw echoed in our research time and time again. Reflecting on Brueggemann's three components in light of insights gained from the stories offered by participants in our research, we would suggest:

1. The petition was expressed as **lament**. In describing their situations, participants were able to acknowledge their pain and through **analysis and critique**, recognize the injustice they had experienced;
2. The response involved the recognition by the participants that there was a **power and authority** in their lives which gave them hope. This was described by many as feeling the presence of, and **acceptance** by, God. This also enabled them to **accept** themselves and believe that they had been heard and were **accepted** by others.
3. The thanks included the capacity to **risk new actions**, to be in the world in new ways.

We would therefore agree with Brueggemann that if we care about authenticity and justice, the recovery of these lament psalms is urgent. We would also suggest that if we care about healing and wholeness, recovery of these lament psalms and/or other rituals of lament is essential. Essential because the recovery of the lament psalms helps us to understand how God is in our midst as we journey through the pain and discomfort of the difficult times of life and that God is with those who are isolated on the margins of society.

As Christians we have been given the promise: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" (The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Luke 6:21). Brueggemann states that promise in another way when he says, "God wills the dismantling of our world, for that is where promise has a chance" (Interpretation 319-20). It is this kind of hope which we witnessed in the folk whom we interviewed. For all, there has been some "dismantling" of the world they knew, some death or letting go of the familiar to come to a new place, a new creation—resurrection.

Hope, therefore, is a very important component of this process. Although it was one of the original themes in our analysis, and although the data appeared to be saturated, we were not able to make enough connections to the other themes to name it as one of our central components. However, we would now suggest that it, like lament, is integral

to the whole process. Without hope, one would probably never have the energy to enter into the process or to stay in it.

A parallel to this seems evident in the diagram of Kübler-Ross's stages of grief. This diagram shows how the stages exist next to each other and, at times, overlap. Hope, although not one of the stages, is at the top of the diagram, like an umbrella over most of the process. It is active in all of the stages except denial (264). Dr. Carl Nighswonger has refined this understanding in his suggestion that in Kübler-Ross's stages of anger and bargaining, hope equals cure. While in the last two stages of depression and acceptance, hope equals meaning—the hopeful person will attempt to make sense out of her/his experience. For the Christian, Nighswonger says, it means recognizing that the new testament community began with Easter, not Christmas. For Jews it is the solid sense of God's love and concern for God's people that is evident throughout history and eternity (Cassette).

Once again we are reminded of the words from Isaiah: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined" (The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Isaiah 9:2). We believe that one of the theological implications of this research for the church is that we need to not fear the darkness, but to enter and embrace it in order that we might see the light.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE JOURNEY CONTINUES: EXTENDING BOUNDARIES IN MINISTRY

Through our research we observed that the church played a significant role for most, if not all, of the folks that we interviewed. At some point in their lives, it had been a significant power and authority, and so in situations of crisis, pain and suffering acted as either an enabler or a block to healing and change. As Diaconal Ministers within the United Church of Canada, we understand ourselves to be called to a ministry of accompaniment which enables mutual empowerment and creative transformation through our specific responsibilities in the areas of education, service and pastoral care.<sup>12</sup>

We see the church as the body of Christ in the world. We believe that it is a community of God's people who accept the call to live in relationship with God and commit themselves to witness to the gospel and care for one another with respect, compassion and justice. The purpose of the church, therefore, is to continue the ministry of Jesus so that our broken world might be healed and God's realm might become real in the here and now. This involves engaging in concrete pastoral actions which include: walking, with compassion and acceptance, with those who suffer; enabling and supporting protest against pain and injustice; facilitating analysis and critique of the social, cultural, political, economic, and religious context; encouraging personal transformation of unhealthy behaviours, patterns and relationships; risking actions aimed at transforming unjust systems and oppressive structures; and working for the healing and restoration of broken relationships. This chapter will explore the implications of our research for this ministry which is aimed at facilitating healing, liberation and the growth of right relationships.

The model that has emerged from our research and experience suggests that if pastoral care is to be healing and transformative, it must be rooted in a perspective that critiques the status quo and the beliefs that undergird and reinforce it. This approach is consistent with Brueggemann's position. He states that "Pastoral Care informed by the gospel is entrusted with a ministry of transformation. . . . [I]t is to permit, legitimate, and evoke change toward life in the kingdom and away from life with the 'rulers of this age'" (Interpretation 161). Pastoral care that heals and transforms must also proclaim and model the understanding that God affirms and enables transformation by walking with us through times of suffering and struggle. This means promoting and supporting activities and processes that encourage the embracing of the darkness with all the feelings of fear and pain that it contains. These activities and processes must also develop skills in analysis so that the roots and causes of the suffering become visible and critique becomes possible. In addition, they must facilitate the imagining of concrete changes in beliefs and relationships that will support further actions that promote healing and justice.

The story shared by one of the participants in our research of her long journey toward healing in a context of violence in the home illustrates how all of the components

in our proposed model interact. In addition, it offers insights into pastoral responses which help promote healing. In Chapter V, we shared some of this woman's story, describing how her theology and the family relationships out of which these beliefs developed, worked together as power and authority in her life to keep her problems private and hidden, to deny her pain and prevent her from claiming the right to lament. We also identified a December 6th memorial service as a turning point in her healing process. Within the context of worship, her family's congregation offered her an opportunity to name her pain and engage in lament. Through this process, the church, another important power and authority in her life, contributed to the transformation of her theology into a belief system that supported her to share her story, protest her pain, lament the injustice of her situation and engage in analysis and critique of her family relationships. Prior to this service she believed she had to pretend to the congregation that all was well. She felt affirmed and whole in a new way when, during a service, she was able to name her brokenness and pain and receive acceptance and support in response.

Another crucial component of her healing was finding supports, both friends and a counsellor, who believed in her and her ability to change but also accepted her as the person she was at that moment. As she began to critique her situation and name the issues, she became open to new ideas and started to recognize some alternatives and choices. The journey toward healing was facilitated by those who could hear her, accept her, as well as her feelings of fear and anger, and assist her to identify ways to act while leaving the control in her hands. Thus, we observe all the components of our model—lament, acceptance, analysis and critique, power and authority and risking new action—playing essential roles in the process that led eventually to healing and right relationships for this woman and her family. The church, through both its pastoral and theological roles and responsibilities, has tremendous power and authority in the lives and beliefs of its members. It can respond as this woman's congregation did and become an enabler of healing and change or it can act in ways that block or stall this process. It cannot remain neutral.

As outlined in Chapter I, we perceive that we live in a death-denying, pain-avoiding culture where the common response to suffering is the expectation that people should put on a smiling face and be strong, assuming that if pain is ignored it will go away. This approach, we believe, hinders the sharing and acknowledging of pain and loss. It prevents the receiving of support and companionship during the darkness. All experiences of change bring with them loss and grief as well as the possibility of new life. However, without the opportunity to share the pain of the loss, it is difficult, sometimes impossible, to move through the pain and reclaim life.

The importance of being able to share the feelings generated by any experience of loss was illustrated by the story shared by another one of the participants in our research. She described the trauma she experienced when her congregation refused to acknowledge her family's struggle with three preschool children, one of whom was seriously developmentally challenged:

I was disappointed with [our congregation]. I didn't feel that they really acknowledged our struggle. We were still to come [to church] in our Sunday best and when we talked about family, they only wanted to hear good things. . . I can remember sitting in Session and writing "help me" across the paper just as a doodle. And I didn't feel they helped me.

The pretense that all was well, the denial of the pain they were feeling, served to increase the suffering of these parents and made it more difficult to grieve the loss of the dreams they had at the birth of their child. Gradually with the support and acceptance of their extended family, they came to delight in their relationship with this child and celebrate the gifts that he offered to the whole family. However, the church missed an opportunity to participate in this transformation and instead acted as a barrier to healing, likely delaying the whole process and increasing the pain and isolation for all involved.

If the church is to be an enabler of creative transformation, it must question and challenge our current cultural and pastoral practices that devalue the healing power of tears and instruct people to get "back to normal" and "on with life" as quickly as possible after a loss. In addition to engaging in critique, it must offer an alternative approach that recognizes and models an understanding that people of all ages need to be supported and enabled to voice their pain and share their suffering. Janice Berger in Emotional Fitness: Discovering Our Natural Healing Power argues that we will carry repressed feelings of grief, loss and hurt into our adult life if we have not been allowed to express this hurt and grieve these losses during childhood (149). If as adults we continue to be denied opportunities to express, explore and protest both past and present pain, we will become ever more firmly caught in destructive patterns both personally and collectively. We heard this echoed in the stories of several participants who described extended struggles with grief following the death of a parent. One person talked about not being allowed to share her feelings or tears as her father was dying or after his death. Now, many years later, she continues to find herself in deep distress on his birthday.

An understanding of the dynamics of the grieving process is important for caregivers who wish to develop an approach that facilitates healing and transformation. In Grief Ministry: Helping Others Mourn, Donna Reilly Williams and JoAnne Sturzl describe grief as "the emotional, physical, and spiritual response to the loss or anticipated loss of someone or something in whom or which one has been invested" (35). They describe a series of phases of grief, similar to the five stages of grief experienced by the dying patient in the work of Kübler-Ross (263-64). They argue that these are all part of the journey to healing after every loss. These phases involve differing responses and require varying durations of time for different people (35-67).

Our research offers insights into the dynamics of this healing process and the components that are necessary if our ministry is to be supportive and compassionate as people journey through this time of transition from pain and loss to new life. The healing power that can be generated when an individual or group with power and authority in a

situation risks facilitating the expression of hurt, anger and grief was also evident through our study. Several abuse survivors described the importance of participating in therapy groups where this occurred. Another person talked about her AA group and the type of lamenting that was possible there:

My name is \_\_\_ and I'm an alcoholic. That's how you start anything when you are in an AA meeting. And I started to say it, and then, I didn't even get alcoholic out, I couldn't, I couldn't speak the word. But I cried, and cried, and cried, and cried, and that was the best thing that ever happened to me. It is just as if everything kind of came out that I had been, I guess I had been hiding it and, you know, trying to put it away, and not really resolving anything.

One participant described her experience of being part of a group that was laid off from an organization that had been immersed in conflict for an extended period. During the process of closure, the group was invited to gather for a day of debriefing and sharing. They were supported to tell stories, to share their feelings of pain, anger and loss and to cry together:

[we] spent that day as a staff really talking about where the pain was; what kind of things we would celebrate; what was the unfinished business; what was the pain in it for us all; where was our anger. You know, we cried and talked and told stories and laughed and held each other and did all sorts of stuff . . .

For this respondent, the time of sharing, "made it possible for [her] to walk out of that place." Feelings of sadness and loss were still a reality after the debriefing day but the healing had begun. This story illustrates that the church can be a power and authority which encourages and offers opportunities for shedding tears and lamenting loss and affirms this as an appropriate action for as long as it is needed. In so doing, the church shows its acceptance of the grieving person and validates their pain, implicitly critiquing the culture that pressures people to move on before they are ready.

The expectation of stoic silence in the face of pain and suffering contributes to keeping grieving or abused individuals isolated, blinding them to the reality that many others share similar experiences and preventing them from recognizing when their suffering is caused by oppressive systems rather than personal inadequacies or problems. By enabling the sharing of pain, not only on a one-to-one, but in group settings, the possibility of exposing abusive systems and relationships is increased. Thus, the connections between the pain and the injustice in the situation are revealed.

Poling comments that in providing pastoral care, we are "under constant pressure by our privileged social location to maintain the established systems of power and the suffering that is endorsed and hidden by these systems" (306). As professional caregivers, we are expected to maintain cultural norms and practices which continue to hide and deny the abuse of women, children, ethnic minorities, the poor. Poling challenges all

who share responsibility for the church's ministry with his claim that "the ethical calling of the pastoral care movement is to attend to suffering as a critique of a social order that is unjust" (306).

It would appear, then, that if the church is to commit itself to this form of transformative pastoral care, it must engage in social analysis and critique of our social, political and economic systems that distribute resources and power unequally. If it is to preach the gospel and proclaim the kingdom, it must also be willing to call us, its members, to repent, to turn away from those structures and practices that enable some to enjoy wealth, privilege and power at the expense of others who suffer injustice and are the victims of violence and/or inequities.

One of the commonly used practices within the life of the church community for inviting people to change their ways is embodied by the prayer of confession. Christine Smith, Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship at United Theological Seminary in Minneapolis St. Paul, argues that confession, as profound truth-telling, is an important component of calling the faith community to work for justice in the face of evil. However, she also is critical of the way in which it most often has been used. She observes:

Much of the Christian community has come to understand confession as speaking about the sinfulness of our lives and receiving God's forgiveness and grace. For many individuals this liturgical act is neither clarifying nor empowering. Far too often confessional acts happen in our worship services as empty ritual moments at best, and guilt-inflicting individual and communal experiences at worst. (4)

In order to understand Smith's caution against using the church's liturgy in ways that induce guilt and thus provide an unhelpful approach in the search for justice and healing, we examined the role of guilt in the healing/change process and the implications that this holds for the practices and liturgies of the church.

Berger distinguishes between rational and irrational guilt. Rational guilt occurs when "we go against our own code of ethics, our own values. . . . when we subvert our own integrity" (98). It contributes to our ability to be accountable and responsible and is emotionally healthy. Irrational guilt, on the other hand, is rooted in self-blame and self-reproach for things for which we bear no responsibility, for situations where we have no power or control (99). It is a defence that covers over deeper painful feelings and tends to subvert attempts to journey through these feelings to health and wholeness, justice and liberation. This observation is consistent with what we heard clearly from several survivors of childhood sexual abuse who shared that they were not able to begin the healing journey as long as they felt they were to blame for the abuse they suffered.

Historically, prayers of confession that have been commonly used in worship have been much more likely to focus on irrational rather than rational guilt. A classic example

can be found in the order for Holy Communion, Book of Common Prayer, authorized for use by the Anglican Church of Canada in 1962. Prior to receiving the gift of grace represented by the bread and wine, priest and people were required to kneel and say together:

We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, Trusting in our own righteousness, But in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy So much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy: Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, So to eat the Flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, And to drink his Blood, That our sinful bodies may be made clean through his Body, And our souls washed through his most precious Blood, And that we may evermore dwell in him, And he in us. Amen. (83-84)

The focus of this prayer is on the personal inadequacy and sin of the individual worshipper. The systemic injustice and radical evil that infects our world is completely ignored. The understanding of God walking with us in our pain and struggles, calling us to be partners in the healing and transformative process, is totally absent. Rather than providing a vehicle for repentance and empowerment to new actions, this prayer invites the worshipper into a passive, hopelessness in which, regardless of effort, human beings are merely sinful creatures incapable of living the gospel or reflecting the image of God through their lives. Hope is rooted solely in the goodness of God and the assurance of God's compassion and grace. Humanity has no role or responsibility and therefore no reason to become actively engaged in working for change.

A less obvious example that we believe can also block healing and change can be found in a more recent United Church resource, "A Healing Service for Use with Individuals" in Pastoral Liturgies and Prayers for Special Occasions: for optional use in the United Church of Canada (21-23). The outline for this service suggests the inclusion of a prayer of confession and assurance of pardon. Two options are offered. In the first, all are invited to join in saying:

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. Forgive us, renew us, lead us we pray, that we might delight in your will and walk in your way. Through Jesus Christ our redeemer. Amen.

The second suggestion is a prayer to be said by the presider.

Almighty and everlasting God, more ready to hear than we are to pray, giving more than we desire or deserve; pour down upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving those things of which our conscience is afraid; and those good things for which we are not worthy to ask grant us, we pray, through the saving work of Jesus Christ, our redeemer. Amen. (21-22)



Both of these prayers focus on the individual's inadequacy; neither prayer acknowledges or addresses wider systemic injustice or the present pain and suffering of those who have gathered to seek healing. People are depicted as sinful and unworthy which may contribute to a "blame the victim" approach, especially for people who are questioning the cause of their illness or suffering. In these prayers and throughout the service, God is portrayed as loving and forgiving but wholly other, distant and transcendent. No images of God as walking with or empowering are offered. There is no opportunity suggested for expressing feelings of anger or fear or for lamenting the reality of pain and grief.

Receiving support to protest and lament, to rage and cry at God and know God's presence and acceptance in the midst of the terror was clearly important for several of the folks that we interviewed as they struggled to come to terms with physical conditions and health problems. One participant described her experience of being given a dreaded diagnosis. Her initial response was to want to run away. She felt overwhelmed and could not imagine how she could return home. She remembered: "It would have been too great to be in the hurting place and then have to go back into normal life." She was fortunate in having a minister who offered her acceptance and support and provided a safe place where she could express her feelings, cry and protest. This response from a key authority figure in her life was for her an important factor in enabling her to move on from this immediate pain, to return to her family and embark on the treatment recommended for her condition.

Similarly, another participant reflected that in order to find healing she had to have an opportunity to be honest with herself and God about the pain. She had to allow herself to know and acknowledge the sadness, loss and emptiness of living in a body that was no longer complete and to discover that God was there with her, sharing her pain and offering love. She had to recognize that healing was about accepting her body as it was and discovering that this offered her a way to be in solidarity with others who suffer. She was not able to begin this process as long as she was wondering if she had done something to deserve the pain.

Brueggemann claims that if pastoral care is to lead to healing we must take the reality of evil, sin and guilt seriously. Referring to the writing of Robert Lifton, he observes that "healthy guilt, when properly discerned and resolved, can empower one to new actions" (Interpretation 171). However, without the capacity for criticizing both the system and themselves, people risk becoming numbed, depressed or cynical, incapable of caring or engaging in transformation or liberation. The church could utilize confession as a vehicle for such analysis and critique. Instead, according to Brueggemann, it has tended to use the power of its liturgy, through its hymns and symbols, to control and limit creative imagination and maintain the status quo with its power structures of social, political and institutional dominance.

Over the past two decades, a growing body of literature focussing on clergy professional and sexual misconduct has made visible one of the areas in which the church

has tended to use its institutional power to maintain and reinforce existing power relationships.<sup>13</sup> One of the participants in our research shared a story of being part of a group of women who lodged complaints of clergy misconduct against the minister of their congregation. She reported feeling further victimized by the church structures when her pain was not heard or accepted.

It was a real struggle going through some of the meetings at the church where I was absolutely vilified and going home and thinking, well maybe they're right. You look up to these people and they're saying that you're a piece of garbage, possibly they're right and you're completely off your rocker. I can remember going through that stuff was really hard. . . . We were told never to talk to anyone else, that it was all confidential.

She also pointed out that this was not a new occurrence, explaining: "that wasn't the first time, that's about the fifth time [the congregation] has had that kind of a situation, one way or another." It would appear from her story that the concept of confidentiality, the concealing of information in order to protect the vulnerable, was confused with that of secrecy. Secrecy is achieved through silencing vulnerable individuals by instructing them not to tell their own story. As a result, voices were silenced, long term patterns remained hidden and the accused was protected. When our participant was told not to share her own story she was dis-empowered, treated unjustly, and expected to support and maintain the current power relationships which she had experienced as abusive.

Healing began for this individual when one person within the church structures was able to recognize the injustice not only in the original abuse but also in the church's response. However, there was never any public acknowledgment of this, no analysis or critique of the power and authority in the relationships and no consequences for the perpetrator. Thus healing and transformation for both the complainants and the institution remained limited with regard to this particular situation.

Over the past 15 years, The United Church of Canada has put significant resources into the development of policies and guidelines for responding to allegations of abuse and/or misconduct, seeking to establish just and appropriate ways for stories of violation or mistreatment to be shared and justice and healing to be realized. The National Church has developed the policies and the Conferences have put in place committees and consultants with the mandate to inform and educate about the guidelines and to respond with compassion and respect to all those involved in and/or affected by complaints. The goal of all these structures is to protect the most vulnerable members of our church and to communicate that it is okay to share stories of abuse and pain and expect that they will be dealt with in a healing manner. However, times and processes of change are painful and challenging for all involved. The journey is not a smooth one. There have been accomplishments to celebrate, as well as detours and barriers to lament along the road.

This process is not a new experience for the United Church. Throughout its history, there are many examples of its attempts to embrace healing and transformation at the margins. As an institution, it has heard the laments of women who wished to be ordained; it has heard the cries of gays and lesbians in their wish to be in ministry as openly gay or lesbian persons; it is in the process of responding to the pain of the Aboriginal men and women who suffered greatly because of their experiences in residential schools. It has accepted folk who have shared their pain by taking that pain seriously; it has critiqued and analyzed the injustice inherent in the institution in which these experiences took place; it has acknowledged the power and authority of those experiences; and it has made decisions to risk acting in the journey toward justice and healing. These decisions have often meant division in the church, as well as a loss in membership and financial support.

The work of transformation in these ongoing struggles continues to be very controversial. Attitudes, assumptions and ethical positions about values and relationships, power and status, priorities and loyalties have been challenged and in some cases changed. There have been many painful moments during these journeys when individuals on various sides of the particular issues have felt silenced.

As the church itself attempts to engage in transformation and healing with regard to unjust activities within its own life and practice, our research would indicate that it will be essential for all involved to have opportunities for lament. Whatever the pain and its source, it needs to be heard and accepted. As long as pain is silenced or rejected, no healing or transformation can begin. We saw this in the case of the participant in our study who had lodged the complaint of clergy misconduct. When she was told by people with power and authority in the congregation and in the wider church, that she was "never to talk to anyone else," she felt like "a piece of garbage" who was "off her rocker." The concept of confidentiality was misused. As a result, she felt silenced, controlled and shamed. This may have been an attempt by those in power to hide their own shame, to keep the world from knowing what had taken place in their community.

Reflecting on our own experiences, as friends of people who have been complainants and/or accused, and on conversations as researchers during this research project, we can identify several occasions when we have felt silenced and/or judged for attempting to raise questions about approaches or decisions which appeared to us to be unjust. Like our participant, we too felt diminished, put down, and perceived our experience, intellect and analysis to be minimized.

For those who experience the church as an authority in their lives, it is seen to be infused with a holy power. Our research revealed the significance of power and authority in the process of healing and change. If the ministry of the church is to be an enabler of healing and creative transformation, its liturgy and all other pastoral actions must reflect God's presence at the margins, sharing the suffering and the struggles. When the church is willing to use the power and authority of its story, its symbols and its prayers to encourage

the protesting of pain, to name systemic injustice as evil and to call upon the people to confess and repent their participation in these unjust structures, it is engaging in lament and in analysis and critique. It is helping all who participate to recognize and acknowledge rational or healthy guilt. It is avoiding the cultural tendency to blame the victim. And it is inviting all to risk committing themselves to new and just actions. In order to realize justice and liberation at the margins, we would suggest that it will be necessary for the church to risk giving up stability and control at the centre, to stop maintaining the status quo and to embrace healing and transformation as its priority and goal. This approach is going to be controversial and painful for many. The pain of all needs to be heard and accepted. However, the differences in power and privileges cannot be overlooked in the individuals and the relationships that are represented in each struggle. In developing new policies and practices aimed at enabling transformation, healing and justice, there must be vigilance in assessing who is being protected and who is benefiting in each situation.

For example, one of the important components in Sexual Abuse (Sexual Harassment, Pastoral Sexual Misconduct, Sexual Assault) and Child Abuse: Official Policy and Procedures Document of the United Church of Canada is the high value the church places on confidentiality (31). This is intended to provide a safe place for all to share their stories. However, in maintaining this commitment to confidentiality, it is important that it not be confused with secrecy. To ensure justice for those in positions of vulnerability and to avoid further abuse of the less powerful, it is important to leave one in control of one's own story. The confusion between confidentiality and secrecy, which we encountered in our study, is a common mistake in our culture. It has been seen at various times within our church, particularly concerning issues of clergy misconduct. Confidentiality protects the vulnerable; secrecy protects those who have misused and abused their power and control. Confidentiality puts appropriate boundaries around people and keeps them, and their stories, safe.

We believe our model makes transparent a way to enable communication within the church as it embraces the call to transformation and healing. It is not a way which is easy, or comfortable. It means living in the chaos of pain and suffering. It means supporting and encouraging people to lament their own experiences of pain and suffering such as: the pain of grief and death, the isolation and hopelessness of addictive behaviour, the trauma resulting from sexual abuse, the demonizing of their sexual orientation, the demoralizing experiences of racism, the fear of illness, feelings of being punished and/or abandoned by God, of isolation and rejection, vilification and abuse by family members, partners, and the church. It means facing the risk of touching, discovering and exploring our own pain. It means encountering the courage and strength of human resilience. It means witnessing and sharing the holy ground of healing and hope. We offer this model with our desire and our faith that the church will be willing to embrace the chaos of pain and suffering in order, as Nietzsche says, "to give birth to a dancing star," the dancing star of justice, healing and wholeness for all.

## ENDNOTES

1. According to Donald L. Griggs, the Book of Psalms contains both individual psalms of lament—3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 13, 17, 23, 25, 28, 35, 38, 39, 41, 42, 43, 51, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 69, 70, 71, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, 139, 140, 141, 142, and 143—as well as community psalms of lament—12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89, 90, 94, 129 and 137. Prayers and expressions of lament are found in other Hebrew scriptures, including, for example, the Book of Lamentations, Jeremiah, Job and Isaiah.

2. The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language defines "public" as "of or pertaining to the community as a whole;" and "in public" as "in the state of being visible or accessible to the public." In defining lament as a public act, we assume that its content is being expressed and/or made visible to other(s). The other(s) may be one person, a community or God.

3. Many contemporary authors have commented on this situation, including Noam Chomsky, Susan Faludi, Marc Tucker, Armine Yalnizyan, and the twenty authors who contributed essays to Power and Resistance: Critical Thinking About Canadian Social Issues, Second Edition. The United Church of Canada has recently released a study To Seek Justice and Resist Evil: Towards a Global Economy for All God's People which examines various aspects of both the Canadian and the global situations.

4. Authors who have described and challenged this social reality include for example: Brueggemann, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, Ched Myers, Carl Nighswonger, Dorothee Soelle, Donna Reilly Williams and JoAnne Sturzl.

5. These understandings are reflected in the Statement of Belief adopted by Diakonia of The United Church of Canada in 1992.<sup>54</sup>

6. These qualitative researchers included individuals from several different disciplines such as nursing, sociology and theology. The following were particularly important in helping us to design different components of our methodology: Charlotte Caron, Julie Corbin, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Kirby and McKenna, Michael Quinn Patton, Polit and Hungler.

7. Corbin, "Qualitative Data Analysis for Grounded Theory" and "Coding, Writing Memos and Diagramming" in W.C. Chenitx and J.M. Swanson, From Practice to Grounded Theory, 91-120; Alice S. Demi and Nancy A. Warren, "Issues in Conducting Research with Vulnerable Families" in Western Journal of Nursing Research, 188-202; Kirby and McKenna, 63-154; Patton, 277-436; Polit and Hungler, 517-54.

8. This approach is consistent with the methodology employed by Isasi-Diaz in En la Lucha/ In the Struggle: A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology. She argues that drawing her sample from people that she has known and worked with has helped her to better understand the experiences and perspectives they shared with her.

9. When one of the men declined to be part of this study, our final sample consisted of two men and, including ourselves, ten women. In addition, both men are part of marginalized groups. In reflecting on this reality in light of the insights that emerge from the research process, questions can be raised about the role of gender and marginalization in the ability to engage in processes of healing and change. Such questions are not addressed in this study but could be a useful focus for future research.

10. This “advisory group” formed as we searched for a thesis advisor. The first two people we approached were unable to fulfill the official role, but were interested in participating in a less formal way. As with the recruitment of our sample, gender diversity was not a priority. The potential influence of including men in this group is unknown at this time.

11. Psalm 13 offers an example of this three part process of petition, response and thanks. The petition is articulated in vs. 1-3, the response in vs. 5 and the thanks in vs. 6.

12. This understanding of ministry is reflected in the 1992 Statement of Belief by Diakonia of The United Church of Canada.

13. Writers, such as Marie Fortune, Peter Rutter and Lebacqz, have written extensively about this issue. Examples include: Fortune, Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin and Is Nothing Sacred? When Sex Invades the Pastoral Relationship; Rutter, Sex in the Forbidden Zone, and Lebacqz & Ronald G. Barton, Sex in the Parish.

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## APPENDIX I

### LETTER TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Date

Dear

Further to our recent telephone conversation, thank you for your willingness to consider participating in the thesis project which we are doing to fulfill the requirements for a Masters of Theological Studies degree. The goal of our project is to understand the connection between lament and healing, and to make that process more visible.

We will be interviewing up to ten people whom we believe have experienced times of healing and change in their lives. We believe you to be such a person. We will be conducting the interviews together and they will take the form of a guided conversation in which we will all share such experiences. The interview will be audiotaped. We ask you to decide the location of the interview and to set aside up to two hours.

We realize that this interview may trigger strong emotions. We encourage you to have supports in place in case you find them necessary and to plan time after the interview for such debriefing. You are free to end the interview at any time if you so wish. We invite you to review the findings of the project prior to the submission of our final thesis. We will make all attempts possible to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

We appreciate your willingness to contemplate being part of our thesis research. One of us will be in touch with you the week of \_\_\_\_\_ to determine your decision and, if affirmative, to set up an interview time and place.

Enclosed is a Consent Form which we would ask you to bring with you to the interview, should you agree to be part of this project.

Thanks again.

Yours sincerely,

Irene Rainey  
941 North Drive  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
R3T 0A9  
452-8610

Anne Duncan  
933 Munroe Avenue  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
R2K 1J4  
663-1331

**APPENDIX II**

**CONSENT FORM**

In signing this document, I am giving my consent to be interviewed by Irene Rainey and Anne Duncan, students in the Master of Theological Studies program of St. Stephens College, Edmonton, Alberta. I understand that this interview will be part of a study focussing on the transformative quality of lament in the process of healing and change. I further understand that this study will form the basis of a research thesis for their Masters of Theological Studies degrees.

I understand that I will be interviewed at a place of my choice, at my convenience; that I will be asked questions about my experience(s) of healing and change; and that the interview will take one to two hours.

I understand that I have been selected to participate in this study because the researchers believe I have experienced times of healing and change in my life. I agree to be part of this research project voluntarily and I understand that I can refuse to answer any specific questions or can terminate the interview at any point. I also understand that my answers to questions will not be given to anyone else. Every attempt will be made to maintain my confidentiality.

I will receive no direct benefits as a result of my participation in this study.

I understand that I will be given the opportunity to review the findings of the project prior to the submission of the final report.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Respondent's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewer's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewer's Signature

Code # \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX III

### INTERVIEW PROCESS

#### Preamble

- ▶ Introductions as necessary. Clarify the roles we will each be taking.
- ▶ We are wanting to explore the way that healing and change happen in people's lives. (We assume that healing is a process, for many people a life-long process, that involves transformation and change.)
- ▶ We wish to explore with you some of the content around the process of healing and change for you by hearing your stories of healing and change.
- ▶ There are no right or wrong answers - we just want to hear your story.
- ▶ The specific focus of our work is to look at the place of lament and how it affects the healing/change process. (We understand lament to be a public crying out against the pain of grief, loss, misery, and/or injustice.)
- ▶ This interview may trigger strong emotions. Have you arranged to have support available for debriefing following the interview? We hope you realize that this is not a counselling session. (We can provide a referral if necessary)

#### Warmup

Check-in: acknowledgement of how interviewee might be feeling  
acknowledgement of how we are feeling.  
do you have any questions or concerns before we begin

#### Categorization:

How long have you lived in Winnipeg?

Where else have you lived?

Age: We have 3 age groupings. Would you be willing to tell us where

you fit?

1. 25 - 40
2. 40 - 55
3. over 55

What formal education have you had?

Are you presently employed?

What kinds of non-paid work are you involved in?

We all experience times of loss/grief/change in our lives. (Identify some of our own)  
From the time you were young can you identify landmark experiences of  
change/grief/healing?

### Questions

1. Of all these experiences, is there one that for you has been particularly significant which you would be willing to share with us? (check-out, Are you o.k. to focus on that experience with us?)

Prompter for one word or very brief answers: Can you tell us more?

2. Can you identify a moment/a particular time when this process started for you?  
(when you started grieving/working on this issue?  
when you identified this experience(s) as an issue for you?)

Prompter: Can you identify the point at which you first decided that you wanted to start responding differently, head in a new direction?

Probing questions: How old were you when this process started?  
What was going on in your life before this process started?  
Was there a point when you knew that there was no turning back? That you were on a different road, going in a different direction?

3. Can you identify the things that kept you going in the hard times?
4. Can you identify what helped you to move through them?

Probing questions: What helped you to grow and change?  
What helped you to move to a new place?  
What helped you to see meaning in this experience?

5. Were there things that blocked, got in the way or made it more difficult to move through them?

Probing . . . what do you suppose . . .

6. Are there particularly significant aspects of your healing and change experience(s) that you would identify even now as you/we talk about it. . . ?

7. Can you identify how your feelings changed through this experience?

8. Are there things that you will do differently in future experiences of grief/loss/change?

9. In what ways do you think "lament" has been a catalyst in this experience of change/healing/transformation?
10. Is there anything you want to share with us that we have not asked you?
11. Are there new things that you are discovering as we talk about this experience?

We will be transcribing this tape sometime in the next ..... and will give it to you to review and amend, if necessary, before we proceed. You can expect to hear from us by

.....

**APPENDIX IV**

**CONSENT FORM**

In signing this document, I am giving my consent to Irene Rainey and Anne Duncan, students in the Master of Theological Studies program of St. Stephens College, Edmonton, Alberta, to contract with a third party to complete the transcription of the interview I gave them as part of their study focussing on the transformative quality of lament in the process of healing and change.

Yes, I give my consent to have a third party transcribe my interview

No, I am sorry that I cannot give my consent to have a third party transcribe my interview

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX V

CONTRACT

I hereby agree to transcribe tapes, at the rate of \_\_\_\_\_ per hour, as requested by Irene Rainey and Anne Duncan, students in the Master of Theological Studies program of St. Stephens College, Edmonton, Alberta.

I understand that this material is part of a research project that involves the sharing of personal experiences.

I also recognize that this material is confidential and I hereby agree to maintain **complete confidentiality with respect to all information** contained in the tapes and the resulting transcription.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Transcriber

\_\_\_\_\_  
Irene Rainey

\_\_\_\_\_  
Anne Duncan

## APPENDIX VI

### LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS WITH TRANSCRIPT

Irene Rainey  
941 North Drive  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
R3T 0A9  
452-8610

Anne Duncan  
9 - 2655 Main St.  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
R2V 4V8  
338-8405

February 12, 1999

Dear

At long last, here is the transcription of our interview with you!!! As we indicated when we wrote last June, the transcribing process was a much bigger challenge than we had anticipated.

The next piece of this process is to invite you to review the transcription. We would ask that you:

- ▶ correct or remove any mistakes which you find;
- ▶ change anything with which you are not comfortable, and
- ▶ fill in any blanks, if you are able.

As we are hoping to proceed with the analysis of this material in the near future, we would appreciate your returning the transcription, with the above noted changes, within two weeks, if possible. We will be in touch with our findings, for your review, before submitting them to St. Stephen's College.

Again, many thanks for your participation and cooperation. We couldn't do this project without you!

Yours sincerely,