

TEARS: A TIME TO WEEP

As I have been writing essays about ageing and dying these past six months, I have thought that they could be read in any order, as long as "In Its Time" is read first, as that one explains and sets the stage for the project. Last week I finished "Eat This Bread; Drink This Cup." Near the end I mentioned that since I could no longer eat communion bread, I would have to make a change. Then I said, "Is it loss that I am feeling, or just a change, a spiritualizing, a deepening of the ceremony? I need more time to think about this."

Little did I know that God was not going to let me put this issue off indefinitely. I must write about what happened yesterday, the first Sunday of February, 2005. And I must admit that tears, designed by God, have a place in the process we go through as we face drastic change. Before I left the church, I knew a whole essay entitled "Tears" would have to be written before I returned to any of my other works in progress.

For me, the time to weep has come. Hopefully it won't last long, but I will leave that in God's hands. I know from experience that it will be cleansing for me and perhaps for others as well. I am considering this essay to be a sequel to "Eat This Bread; Drink This Cup."

My mother did not want her children to see her cry. I don't know why, but I'm sure her motives were good. Mom's father died when I was ten years old. She allowed me to go to the funeral service but not to the cemetery. My cousin Louise, two years younger than I, did go to the burial of our grandfather. Afterwards she gave me this report: "Aunt Florence cried at the cemetery." Teasingly, I went to Mom for verification. "Louise says you cried at the cemetery. Did you?" I really can't remember how Mom answered me, but I clearly recall that for years I would cry when I thought of how I had trampled on Mom's privacy. Even at ten I should have known it is normal to cry when your loved one dies.

Three years later I did see my mother cry. I had had mastoid surgery at age twelve. Afterwards some people had told me how serious that surgery was: You can die from it, they said. And now, eleven months later, the problem had returned; I would be going to the hospital the next day for an operation that I knew I might not survive. Needing to cry, I headed for the privacy of my bedroom. But Mom had gotten there first. I found her mopping my floor and crying. Stifling my own tears, I consoled Mom. It was a tender moment that we never mentioned again.

I'm sure Mom shed many tears behind closed doors through the years, but eventually she could no longer hide them. By the time she moved into assisted living in the Lebanon Valley Brethren Home and for the next couple years, Mom's chin would quiver and her eyes fill up easily. Once she came out of the bathroom crying and apologized for "breaking down" in front of me. I gave her a hug. "It's all right to cry, Mom," I assured her. And then she revealed the source of her distress. "When will I see you again?" she asked. "I'll come when I can," I answered, keenly aware of the 210 miles that separate us. (It's interesting that recently my own children have hugged me and told me it's okay to cry. I know that it is.)

Mom and I have something in common: We both have things going on in our brains that affect the control of our emotions, though in different ways. PLS, my disease, is destroying the muscles in my throat and tongue that are involved in talking, singing, laughing and crying. I used to be able to do something I called "crying inwardly." My throat would constrict and I would feel the appropriate emotions, but there would be little outward evidence that I was crying. Now when I cry all sorts of strange noises – loud ones! – come out of my mouth and it gets much worse if I try to talk at the same time. When this happens I am not so much embarrassed for myself as I am concerned about how those around me – those who don't know my situation – are responding to my unusual wailing. I don't want to upset others, especially children. Might I have just stumbled on Mom's reason for hiding her tears?

In Ecclesiastes 3, which tells us that there is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the sun, these couplets are found: “[*There is*] a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.” I really miss being able to talk and sing; to have a hearty laugh or a good cry. Even my ability to cough well is impaired! And I certainly can’t dance; my legs would collapse in a moment if I tried. (The last time I danced was at my nephew Matthew’s wedding in September, 2002. My brother Bob, father of the groom, asked me if I wanted to dance and we did, for the first – and last – time. Happy memory!)

Trying to live in the present, accepting things as they are, and not wanting to complain, I have avoided thinking about how much my life has changed in recent years. Now I feel I must list some things that I miss. It may make me cry, but there is a time to weep and mourn, right? I miss (among other things) ...

- talking on the telephone. I used to have “phone visits” with so many people!
- clipping my own fingernails;
- being able to easily hold and turn the pages of a book or newspaper;
- playing the piano;
- being able to write with pencil and pen;
- visiting my mother;
- going to visit my children and grandchildren. (I do appreciate their visits to me!)
- being able to toss trash into a waste can;
- being able to read aloud to my grandchildren;
- teaching Bible classes. (There are opportunities here at Drum Hill that I cannot take.)
- being able to “briskly stir”;
- the ability to wring out a washcloth;
- sitting in a rocking chair or sofa;
- Annville, PA – my home town.

Something wonderful happened as I was writing that list: I thought of things that I do not miss since I had to give them up. We would not be living in Drum Hill Senior Living Community were it not for my illness. Here I do not have to cook or do housecleaning; I don’t miss them! Nor do I miss the clutter that we disposed of during our move. I don’t miss the problems that come with owning a house and property, either. And I like the time to write that I have since I’m homebound. I am so relieved and grateful every time I finish an essay; I feel as if a gift has been given to me to share with others. I am blessed!

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An abundance of tears were shed throughout the Bible narrative. Two extreme stories haunt my memory, demanding attention. The first is the account of Jephthah’s daughter, found in Judges 11. Jephthah, one of the judges who would lead the nation of Israel in battle from time to time, was about to face the Ammonites in war. As he advanced against the enemy, *Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: “If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord’s and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.”* I wonder what Jephthah had in mind – the family dog?

The Lord did help the Israelites subdue the Ammonites. *When Jephthah returned to his house in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, “Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break.” “My father,” she replied, “you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me just as you promised, now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites. But grant me this one request,” she said. “Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry.” “You may go,” he said. And he let her go for two months. She and the girls went into the hills and wept because she would never marry. Clearly, it was a time to weep.*

Can you imagine what those two months were like for the girls? In a few weeks their circle of friendship would be broken. Adding to the sorrow was the fact that their friend would die without having a chance to marry, apparently very important to them. Crying is contagious, isn't it? I picture one girl starting to cry and the others joining her, all weeping their way through the two months. I can hear the hills reverberating with the cries and wails of these girlfriends, as the ground was saturated with their tears.

After the two months, she returned to her father and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin. I wonder why someone did not intercede on her behalf, as people did when, in a time of battle, a foolish vow of King Saul's almost cost the life of his son Jonathan (1 Samuel 14)? What do you think of her faith, of her compliance to the vow? She stands high in my esteem. I wish we knew her name.

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The other story is told in Matthew 2. It is a part of the visit of the Wise Men that we usually omit in our church pageants. King Herod, with ill intent, had told the Magi to go to Bethlehem and find the infant king that they were seeking and then report back to him so he could go worship him too. God let the Magi know they were not to go back to King Herod, so they took another route home. *When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.*

This turn of events had been prophesied by Jeremiah long before, and so was the reaction of the bereaved parents. *Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."* These poignant words rip at my heart. All those boys, dear little infants and toddlers, beloved sons – gone because of a wicked king's jealousy.

Jeremiah called the combined weeping and mourning "a voice." As I get older I sometimes think we could hear "a voice" of mourning on the earth, if we would just listen. There is a lot of sorrow around, whether corporate, as in the horrific death toll from the recent tsunamis to the carnage from wars, including the holocaust of the 1940s, or private, as when an individual is killed, raped or otherwise brutalized. When Cain killed Abel, God said to him, *"Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground."* Think how much human blood has been shed on the earth since then! Do you think Adam and Eve cried when told that one of their sons had killed another? I'm sure they did. Yes, there is a time to weep, a time for tears.

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In the years when I was teaching a course entitled "Set Free," I included a section about how our culture can harm us, if we are not careful. One example is the way we in our country admire those who do not cry under stress (a discrete dab of an eye might be understood, but that's all) and ridicule those who do. Politicians, especially, may have their careers cut short by crying at the "wrong time." Worst of all is the pressure we put on men and boys not to cry.

My dad was different. I often saw him with tear-filled eyes, sometimes overflowing. The first incident that I remember took place when I was nine. It was the winter of 1942-43, a bitterly cold, extremely snowy winter in Pennsylvania and the only year our family lived on a farm. It was located about twenty miles from Annville. Dad continued to work in the Hosiery Mill in Annville while also farming, commuting five days a week. This particular day his car skidded off the road and got stuck in a snow drift. He had no choice but to walk more than a mile to our house. He was wearing boots (called galoshes back then) and gloves in addition to his heavy coat and hat, but by the time he crossed the porch and entered our front door his hands and feet were practically frozen. I can picture him now sitting in our dining room near the Heatrola, his extremities in basins of warm water that Mom had provided, crying.

But mostly when Dad's eyes would well up, it had to do with spiritual things. He had a tender heart and loved to go to church, including to the weeks of revival meetings held semiannually. Mom seldom went to any church meetings and I enjoyed them as much as Dad did, so I became his companion at these times. The visiting preachers who spoke at the revival meetings had a supply of very touching stories (such as death-bed conversions) that could make almost anybody cry, especially one as sensitive as Dad. When someone walked down the aisle at the end of the service, responding to the altar call, Dad's joy sparkled in the water in his eyes. I can only imagine his reaction when I was that someone! In his later years, I associate Dad's tears mainly with his listening to old time hymns. How he loved them!

In the Set Free classes, I used the example of Jesus as a basis for teaching that there is nothing wrong with crying. If Jesus were ashamed of the times he wept, he certainly could have seen to it that those stories were omitted from the scriptures. Many people know that Jesus wept at the cemetery where his friend Lazarus' body lay entombed and that he wept over Jerusalem near the end of his earthly ministry because its people had not responded to him as he had wished. But the passage that touches me the most is Hebrews 5:7-10:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.

Certainly Jesus was not trying to get out of his Father's will, but he was also very human. It sounds to me like tears were a normal part of the life of Jesus on earth. He needed to develop and learn while here, and suffering was part of his training. When he needed to cry, he went to his Father (who could have changed the plans he had for Jesus) and there he found comfort until the next time he had to cry, a repeated cycle. And in the end, how Jesus was rewarded! How the Father and the Son loved each other!

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I certainly recognized in my own life that there was a time to weep. I don't mean only the times tears come unbidden; I mean times when I deliberately cried, knowing it would be healthy for me to do so. Five such occasions I can immediately recall. The day before each one of our children moved out of the house – George, David, MaryBeth and Marty to attend college, and Paul to join the army – I found a private place and began thinking of sad things until I was really crying. I thought such a change demanded to be acknowledged by tears. Also, I thought tears shed in advance would alleviate the need to cry when the goodbyes were said. For the most part, it worked.

When I was preaching on material that deeply touched my soul, I would do my crying while preparing the message, hoping that the spent tears and God's grace would allow me to give the sermon without crying. More often than not, that worked as well. Never did I want unshed tears to clog my emotions and cause trouble later. And never did I think my tears were inappropriate.

I was criticized several times for crying upon hearing the news of a loved one's death. My critic felt that I should be rejoicing instead that the deceased friend was in Heaven. Well, I was, but that was one side of the coin; the other side was that I would miss having the person around. It was the latter that triggered my tears.

The apostle Paul gave the Thessalonians good news about the reunion we will have with our loved ones in Heaven so they would not grieve like those who have no hope. Notice that grieving was not forbidden; it was just tempered by hope. Whenever I think of this, Joanne's mother comes to mind. Joanne was a childhood friend of mine who died at the age of 22, just after giving birth to twins. One of her sons went to Heaven with her. When I read her obituary in the newspaper, I was shocked and my tears readily flowed. For months I mourned Joanne's death. Then, more than a year later, I met

her mother after a church service. With eyes full of tears, the dear woman said, "I miss Joanne, but I would never wish her back." Hope was what I heard in her voice. She knew Joanne was alive and well in Heaven. Now they are together again, never to part!

I was totally unprepared for what happened in church on the first Sunday of this month, February, 2005. Everything seemed normal during the adult Sunday School class. Afterwards someone wheeled me up the ramp and into the sanctuary, placing my chair in its usual spot. I had arranged with Cliff that we would do the same as we did the previous month when the time came for communion. He knew I could not eat the bread, but I thought the congregation might be encouraged by seeing me go up front; I always like to set a good example. But writing "Eat This Bread; Drink This Cup" had opened up a tender spot in my soul. I looked at the communion table, all set up, and pictured myself being pushed down the aisle. In a moment, I was crying. Some friends came by to console me. I tried to explain, and that made things worse. The noises began. I tried to stop them, and did gain a measure of control. Shirley decided to sit by my side and throughout the service she lightly massaged my back. It was soothing and much appreciated.

As the time for communion drew near, my crying started up again. I told Cliff I could not go up front, nor did I want to have the pastor come back to me with the elements. Then I asked Shirley to have someone remove me from the sanctuary. She did, and then she pushed me into our Fellowship Hall, where refreshments are served after the service. "May I get you a nice cup of tea?" Shirley offered. "I may not have it," I answered tearfully, knowing I had no thickener with me. I used to enjoy going to the tables to sample the goodies offered there. That's a thing of the past now.

Hardest of all, conversations are all but impossible also, and I liked those much more than the food! Mike came to say goodbye to me, as he would be moving to California in a few days. My response was to cry some more; I could not talk. I saw a young boy shyly looking at me from his mother's side. I smiled at him the best I could (even my ability to smile has been affected by PLS). I gratefully received the hugs and sweet, encouraging words from the women who protectively gathered around me. That Sunday was a time to weep for me. Eight days have passed since I started this essay about that day. I still well up when I think of it, not from embarrassment, but from the memory of all the kindness and love I experienced from my church family.

Must there always be a reason for tears? Or, do we have to know the reason in order to make our tears legitimate? I have often said, "I do not know why I am crying. I am not in control of my emotions. Certainly, I'm not sad." Would it be all right if I were sad? Is sadness the emotion people associate with tears? What else can provoke tears?

In Fellowship Hall this past Sunday, the second Sunday in February, Mike's mom gave me a red rose for Valentine's Day. "This is what Mike would have done, had he been here," she said. Missing him, my face began to contort, a precursor to tears, when his mom said – kindly, softly and oh, so firmly: "No tears! You can do better than that!" I was shocked! What did she mean by that? Is not crying somehow "better than" crying? My urge to cry left me, and instead I had something else to ponder. Amazing!

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Having now spent a week and a half writing about and pondering what happened on the first two communion Sundays of this year, the situation is much clearer in my mind than before. God is taking me on an inward journey to a place where I can experience truths I have believed for a long time. One has only to read the book of Hebrews to see that the things of earth are pictures of the realities that exist in the spiritual realm. I have believed that the whole universe was designed by God to be a parable, drawing our hearts to him. It's true! C. S. Lewis called the place where we live Shadowlands; I agree with him. Truly I have thought of Heaven as a real country where my citizenship lies and where I have a permanent home. My heart is centered in Heaven because that's where my treasure is stored. The invisible is becoming more real to me than the visible.

Of course Jesus needed to eat and drink when he was living on earth, but that was not his “real” food. He said, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about. My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.” He spoke of water we could drink that would quench our thirst forever, a spring of water welling up to eternal life. He mentioned a cup he had to drink, the cup of his Father’s will. As my enjoyment of foods and drinks wanes due to restrictions, I can still revel in the same spiritual food that satisfied Jesus. And when my taste buds are bypassed through use of a feeding tube, I will still be able to taste and see that the Lord is good.

Jesus gave us the elements of bread and wine to remember him. I am in constant communion with my beloved Lord. He showed me in January that I did not have to partake of the elements in order to remember him. Then in February I planned to take communion in the new revised way I had discovered, and God said no; no turning back. There’s no doctrine in this. It’s just a statement of what I believe God is telling me. Things have changed!

Writing “Eat this Bread; Drink This Cup” and this essay has been a very emotional experience for me. I’m glad it is nearing an end. As a conclusion, I want to write a dialog between God and me, liberally sprinkled with some of my favorite verses from Isaiah and the Psalms.

God: Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.

Verna: I paid a visit to the past, Lord, to see how things were before my illness struck, but I will not dwell on the past. I would much rather live in the present, looking toward the future. I know you are doing a new thing with me. I don’t know all the details, but I know it involves much change. If I have to spend time in the desert or wasteland, I know you will make it bearable for me.

God: Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.

Verna: Lord, you have been my Dwelling Place for more than fifty years and I know I shall dwell in your house forever. I am so aware that you know me, that I belong to you. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. On the other hand, I am glad that you are holding my hand, offering to help me through these last adventures of my life. I can imagine that there will be times when I will need to hear you say afresh, Do not fear; I will help you.

God: Be aware every morning that this is a day that I have made. Will you rejoice and be glad in it?

Verna: By your grace, Lord, I will. And when night time comes, I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety. Thank you. Amen.