Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



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February 22, 2023
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A friend and I often go to lunch at a nearby fast food restaurant. The other day two little girls we had seen before were sitting in a booth. Their mother works at the restaurant and —apparently without sufficient income for child care — brought her daughters to work with her.

This time the oldest girl, about 5, was holding roses and a 'Happy Birthday' helium balloon. We asked if it was her birthday. Without hesitation she said no, it was the birthday of her sister, who had been shot and killed. She planned to release the balloon into the sky so her sister in heaven could enjoy it. She then said that her father had been killed as well and was in heaven taking care of her older sister.

How can it be that violence so permeates our society that little children matter-of-factly say that someone they loved had been shot and killed? Recall Sandy Hook where 20 children between 6 and 7 years old were murdered in 2012. Many of us thought that would be the mass shooting that would turn our nation away from violence and create the necessary groundswell to enact good gun legislation and address mental health in this country. Sadly, that has not been the case. The Gun Violence Archive reports that as of Feb. 15, 75 mass shootings had occurred in the United States so far this year. Mass shootings in the United States have nearly tripled since 2013, the year after Sandy Hook.

We encountered this little girl the same week that we heard about five Memphis police officers who savagely beat to death Tyre Nichols, a young Black man they pulled over for a traffic violation. Nichols was beaten to death by the very men we expect to protect us.

Violence does not stay within our nation's borders. The Feb. 24, 2022, invasion of Ukraine by Russia has escalated the threat of nuclear war. Military budgets are increasing and weapons and other military equipment are sent to both nations by their allies. We hear of destroyed power grids, blocked transport routes and bombings of civilian areas that cripple the ability to provide food and water, thereby intensifying people's suffering.

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We live in a culture of violence — despite millennia of experience that shows wars and violence do not bring a lasting peace.

We can act to change this culture of violence. We can support policies and legislation that address access to guns, eliminate nuclear weapons and address mental health concerns, to name just a few responses.

We must attend to another dimension as well. The violence that surrounds us and the suffering it causes erode our inner life. Hopeless, angry, powerless, we can't make sense of it all. We feel alone in this violent world of our making. We acknowledge our complicity and don't know what to do. We wonder where Divine Mystery is in all this.

Perhaps our ancestors in faith can offer us some help. What did they do when they couldn't make sense of things? They lamented.

The Hebrew Scriptures' Book of Lamentations is a poetic book that mourns the destruction of Jerusalem and the suffering of the Jewish people at the hands of the Babylonians. As a prayer form, a lamentation is a passionate expression of grief, sorrow and repentance.

The original author of Lamentations minced no words to give voice to what was happening, to which this translation (from The Inclusive Hebrew Scriptures) attests: A once-great nation is being plundered and all are affected and bear some responsibility.

Listen to these laments:

- I cannot see through my tears; my gut wrenches in anguish. My bile is poured out on the ground all because of my people’s wound. Children and infants lie languishing throughout the streets of the city (2:11).

- To tread underfoot prisoners anywhere on earth; to deny people their rights in opposition to the Most High; to twist justice in the courts — do you think Our God does not see? (3:33-36).

- The land, our inheritance, is now in the hands of strangers—our homes belong to outsiders. We wander like orphans without parents, and our parents grieve like widows and widowers. We buy our own drinking water-water rightfully ours! We pay for it with the few sticks of kindling we have in our possession. Shackles weigh down our necks —there is no relief. We are exhausted (5:1-6)

Recall how Jesus lamented the day he died, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" — "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). Even in the midst of acknowledging that pain, Jesus surrendered in love and gave up his spirit. Jesus trusted Love in the midst of it all, even when it looked hopeless,

When we lament, we cry out: Weep, howl and mourn. We speak our sufferings aloud to God, however we experience Divine Mystery.

Lent is an appropriate time to lament. We can get in touch with the suffering of the world, our culture, within ourselves and cry out. We can write our lamentations using language and words that embody what we feel Pray it aloud. Let it be loud in you. Get exhausted with your weeping.

Grieve the reality. When finished, take the time to sit. Feel your tiredness and emptiness. Begin to breathe deeply; allow the air to enter and move down deeply into your belly. Continue breathing, allowing more air to enter and expand within you. Set the intention to be present to God, Divine Loving, and continue to breathe for 5 to 10 minutes. Allow space to open within you.

Simply be present, sensing and trusting, as Jesus did, love in the midst of it all.