

EXCERPT



Hopeful Lament *Tending Our Grief through Spiritual Practices*

October 10, 2023 | \$18, 192 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0310-7

Terra McDaniel went through a season of difficulty as her family suffered a series of losses including a house fire, threats to the personal safety of one of their children, loss of financial investments, and more. As a trained spiritual director, along with her personal narrative, she offers in these pages some of the spiritual practices that carried her through this season of loss.

We Owe It to Ourselves to Learn These Lessons

It's never a good sign when people start comparing your life to a biblical figure, Job, known for pervasive suffering. But that's what started happening to my family a few years before our house fire. Things were falling apart, and our once tight-knit family connections were significantly strained.

We had just reached a new, more-settled normal and were trying to embrace hope for the future. My daughter and I had just gotten matching tattoos of the word *hope* alongside a swallow in flight, inspired by Psalm 62:5-6. And then, our house burned to the ground. We had much to lament.

I'm sorry to say that I used to disparage stories of people escaping fires without taking as much as a photo album with them. *If it were me, I'd grab at least a few important papers or mementos*, I'd think to myself, not realizing how cold and unkind or downright wrong I was. When I heard my mother-in-law yelling, clearly frightened, I stepped out of my bedroom and saw a wall of orange flame outside the kitchen window. I raised my eyes further and saw sparks beginning to shower into our study that held a collection of books my husband and I had been carefully curating since we'd gotten married two decades before.

I'd just thrown on clothes after showering, so I was stepping outside with wet hair and bare feet. I had time to make sure my family was outside and to grab my purse and our twenty-five-pound French bulldog. My hands were shaking so badly I struggled to dial 911. Thankfully, a police officer, and surreally a friend of my daughter's, were both arriving at our doorstep as my in-laws and I opened the door to exit. Because the fire was visible from a nearby roadway, they and others, including the bewildered youth pastor, had come to make sure we were getting to safety.

Firefighters, who were incredibly hardworking and kind, were on their way. Kyle was stuck in traffic on his way home from work, and Torey was a few hours away working as a camp counselor. I might have been able to run in briefly for more than my wallet, but as we began to walk away from the flames there was a terrifying moment when we couldn't find my father-in-law. We discovered him trying to put out the fire with a garden hose even though the blaze was clearly well beyond that possibility. We now realize it is likely that he was in the early stages of dementia and had gotten confused in all the commotion.

Between the drought and the malfunctioning hydrant, the fire was catastrophic. We lost almost everything. My daughter's baby clothes and toys we'd saved for her future children were all gone. The roof over her bedroom had been entirely consumed, revealing a bright sky. The contrast between the cheerful blue sky dotted with puffy white clouds above and the charred remains below was jarring.

Everything Happens for a Reason?

People tried to encourage us that "God would work it all for good." About the fire people said, "It's just stuff." They told us, "Aren't you so glad you have faith, you *know* everything's going to be okay? You *know* it happened for a reason." But we didn't know everything was going to be okay. We didn't know that it had happened for a reason. We didn't know what to think.

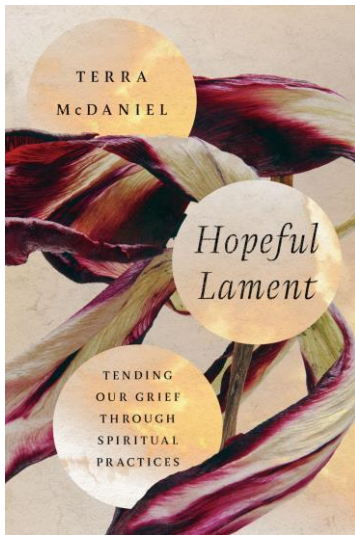


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"We all experience it—death and loss—and yet few of us know what to do with the profound grief. We have few guides. Terra McDaniel gives us that guide in her book *Hopeful Lament*. McDaniel helps us understand our grief and then journey through it with simple yet profound spiritual practices that help us find our way back to hope. She teaches us how to lament." —**MaryKate Morse**, dean of Portland Seminary and author of *Lifelong Leadership*

A few years later, I came across a greeting card that read, "Please let me be the first to punch the next person who tells you everything happens for a reason. (I'm sorry you're going through this.)" I promptly bought the card and have held onto it ever since.

I know they meant well. But words like those didn't do us any good. They were salt in our wounds. We needed to learn to lament, to stay with our pain and our exhaustion and not pretend everything was okay. But we didn't have the language or the tools or the permission. Many people of faith were encouraging us to fast-forward to happiness and joy. It's all too common when people encounter hardship and suffering; they wanted us to trust in God's sovereignty without asking the hard questions that the circumstances of our lives required.

God's greatness is very good news, but it is not the answer to human suffering. God's power and wisdom don't soothe a parent who has lost a child. They don't assuage hunger or sickness. They don't heal war or division. Recognizing my view of how God works needed to shift and grow—it didn't solve my grief or confusion even though it was necessary and important.

In my family's season of disorientation and suffering, I needed to know God as a mother hen who wanted to protect us, as Jesus describes himself in Luke 13:34; I needed to know he would weep with me, saving each tear as if it were a treasure as Psalm 56 describes, more than I needed a towering whirlwind-God bragging about how strong he was. I don't believe God swaggers around boasting about how tough and in control he is, but there are too many pastors and teachers who paint him that way. I needed to know God as the One who would "cry out like a woman in labor" on behalf of the suffering and oppressed (Isaiah 42:14).

Antidotes for Despair

It is time to recover lament as the hard but good gift it is. Lament is a crucial part of the antidote for despair and bitterness. Unprocessed grief hurts those who carry it and others around them too.

And there have been so many unprecedented corporate traumas and losses in recent years that many of us have gotten tired of the word *unprecedented*. The sources of grief have included highly personal and also communal loss. It will not do to try and shake these things off as if they didn't happen. If we try moving on without addressing the layers of sadness and loss, they will get carried forward in destructive ways. Eugene Peterson said anyone who "fails to acknowledge and deal with suffering becomes, at last, either a cynic or a melancholic or a suicide."

We often struggle to face pain. There is a partial exception for those who have lost close family members, but even then there is not often space for genuine lament that unfolds over time, nor a recognition that since grief is experienced in waves, lament must often be revisited instead of being a one-time event. And accessible wisdom on how to do that can be hard to come by. Many, including me, have felt stuck around how to process their own sadness on top of the suffering around them. If we are going to survive and move forward in healthier, freer ways, we must lament.

And refusing to lament bypasses holy chances to honor those whose lives were lost or changed forever by pain and loss, including yours. We owe it to them, to ourselves, and to coming generations to learn or relearn these lessons.

—adapted from chapter one, "Ashes for Beauty"



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