



Brian, Elsie, Kristen, Karen & James



Jetta Meyer, the organizer



Jeff and Lynn Gibson

When Grief Gets a Voice

Sedona Women's Psalms Retreat February 2018

Karen Dabaghian

The door is open to go through
If I could I would come, too
But the path is made by you
As you're walking start singing and stop talking

U2, Songs of Experience
Love Is Bigger Than Anything In Its Way



Sedona United Methodist Church

She is already on her feet when Brian asks, "Who wants to go first?" If she could, she'd run down the aisle but she can't because she's old, her hips locking and swaying as she careens towards the front of the sanctuary. Her hair is white and thin, teased and sprayed into her preferred style. Her face wrinkled, sun-spotted, she is almost a fairy-tale crone, except that her whole body teems with energy, her eyes lit with the determination only found in the young. She has something to say, and not even hell itself could prevail against her.

She is one of 30, 40 perhaps, women who, over the course of the next 3 hours, will grip a crumpled scrap of paper, stumble forward to a hot mic, and tell the rest of us the secrets that have been hiding in plain sight for years, sometimes for a lifetime. These 3 hours are the culmination of a weekend long study in the Hebrew psalms, a retreat dedicated to the holy sacrament of processing pain. The women have come to learn how to lament, to give grief a voice, and thus wrestle with the ineffable truth that God was, and is, and always will be, present in their pain — bearing witness to it, shouldering the unbearable weight of it, redeeming it.

All 100+ of the attendees laugh when Brian announces at the beginning of this, our Women's Psalms Retreat, that in less than 48 hours they will not only write their own lament poem, modeled after a psalm, but will eagerly read it to a room full of (mostly) strangers. Theirs is a polite, uncomfortable laughter. Its meaning, unspoken, is not hard to discern: "No way. Not me."

And yet.

The seed of lament, its potent promise to heal and restore, has been planted. Immediately, it begins to take root in fertile female soil. The Spirit is at work. She has been for months, as the prayers of the retreat planners and speakers have risen like incense before God's throne. And so, as the initial shock sinks in and women absorb their terrifying, exhilarating assignment, there is a palpable shift in the room. It moves electrically, person to person. *Is it possible to heal? Is it possible to be broken but loved anyway, and then invited in? Is it possible, for me?*

This particular Psalms Retreat is set among the red-rock buttes and towering canyons of Sedona, Arizona. It is a rigid beauty. Rust-stained sandstone layers on top of white limestone, creating mesmerizing striations in the canyon walls, themselves shaped by elemental pressures of water and wind to produce an unearthly landscape. Encircling the town like sentries, the buttes proclaim a glorious message to those with eyes to see: that the destructive forces of erosion and tarnish produce a unique glory, an otherworldly glow. As with the red rocks, so too with us; from our wounds, beauty. For the next two days, the topography will be a map for the soul's journey, from grief and pain, through lament, to an unbearable grace.

The retreat opens on a sun-drenched Friday morning. Light streams in through floor-to-ceiling glass panes at the front of the sanctuary. Women begin to arrive, to-go coffee cups in one hand, bibles and notebooks in the other. Introductions are made, friends find each other amid the hustle of registration, and everyone roots around for a comfortable seat. The sanctuary ends up looking like a scatter graph — extroverts in front, introverts in back — betraying the forced intimacy of this opening salvo. Strangers, coming from 20 churches across Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and beyond, are being thrown together for the next 48 hours, not as spectators but as participants in a drama that will leave no one untouched, no one unchanged.

As the retreat gets underway with a word of welcome from Jetta, our host for the weekend, one detail begs to be addressed. Although this is a women's retreat, our company includes a number of men: Brian, of course, our rabbi, teacher, and poet-mentor for the weekend; James, our worship leader, who has set almost two dozen psalms to music for congregational singing; Fred, the pastor of our host church, who will run sound and cover us all with his prayers and an enveloping hospitality; and Kelly, wheelchair bound with piercing blue eyes, a husband and father, who came to see what his wife and daughter were up to, and just decided to stay for the weekend. To the uninitiated, it might seem that these men believe they are here to lead; the truth could not be more subversive: they believe they are here to serve, and throughout the weekend, their gifts will wash like a flood over all of us, baptizing us in words and tears of truth, vulnerability, and prophecy, and bringing such dignity to women and honor to God that all will tell of it for weeks to come.

So, what is it that can take a motley group of strangers from different ethnic groups and economic strata, men as well as women, representing different Christian faith traditions, and within 48 hours form in them a community so safe that individuals will share their deepest pain, in weakness and through tears, in a public forum?

In a word: poetry.

Not just any poetry. The poetry of the psalter, that ancient hymnal of God's chosen people. In Brian's studied, passionate hands, the psalter comes alive as an anchor for our theology and inspiration for our art. With the psalms as our guidebook, the sanctuary will soon

become liminal space, sanctified by a resounding theophany as we sing our praise and our pain heavenward, and Heaven responds in blessings showered down on daughters and on sons.

In practical terms, the retreat is an exercise in emotional stamina. That's somewhat to be expected, considering the subject matter; no one is going to coast through a weekend of public lament. But it's more than that. The format of the weekend matches the ideological structure that Brian uses to teach the psalms. His dominant metaphor is "mountain climbing," step by step up the mountain that forms the topography of our lives. It is a journey replete with ropes, carabiners, guides, and traveling companions. Along the way, we stop to rest, take in the view, make sense of the journey to that point. The promise that inspires our rest and motivates us to start climbing yet again is simply this: that if we look long and hard at the horizon, we can, by faith, apprehend the kingdom God – in our own lives, in the lives of our friends and families, and even in the world writ large.

This spiritual rhythm of climb and rest, climb and rest, is mirrored in the interplay between story (the narrative telling of our experiences) and poem (the deliberate forging of meaning from those experiences). As Brian explains, "The story pulls us in to a drama that is bigger than ourselves and shows us that our life is a journey. The poem causes us to be still and allow musings and stirrings that have been brewing deep within our soul to surface and then they find shape and form through memory and metaphor." So it is that the weekend takes on this same shape: climb and rest; story and poem; experience and theology.

It takes five sessions, from Friday morning to Saturday afternoon, for it all to land. Each session, running about 2 hours in length, follows the same format. James starts by leading us all in worship, skillfully guiding us to set our gaze firmly on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. From there, Brian takes over. Over the next 50 minutes he will methodically unpack a psalm by first tethering it to the corresponding narrative in 1 or 2 Samuel, and then explaining the arcane Hebrew terms and poetic structures, thus teasing out both the artistry and the meaning of the poem. Each psalm that Brian teaches throughout the weekend taps into a unique dimension of grief. So, for example, Psalm 142 helps us deal with suffering when we are innocent, when our path is riddled with traps set by our enemies, and God does nothing to protect us. Psalm 63 comes at grief from a totally different angle – the pain of knowing you are in a wilderness of your own making, gutted by your own flawed decisions. Psalm 51, that most famous of lament psalms, teaches us how to grieve and start over when our sin threatens to overwhelm our very lives, and we feel beyond God's forgiveness and restoration. *The Song of the Bow*, King David's gripping lament for Jonathan in 2 Samuel chapter 1, is a master-class in grieving the loss of our beloved.

Somewhere during Brian's teaching, he unexpectedly pivots our attention to James, who although he knows *theoretically* this will happen, is never quite sure exactly when. (It is an understatement to say that Brian is not really a master at keeping to a schedule). James's task is to perform his unique arrangement of the psalm from which Brian is teaching. So, in the course of the weekend, our assembly will hear *I Cry to the Lord* (Psalm 142), *God You Are My God* (Psalm 63), *Create In Me* (Psalm 51), and *Song of the Bow* (2 Sam. 1:17-29).

But there is more. Not even James knows in advance how holy the space is about to become, as he steps to the mic to sing a song he hasn't performed for more than a decade. The song is titled, *The Blue Bench*, and it tells the story of an encounter he had years before with a young woman who had been molested as a child, and who's petite frame was breaking, finally,

beneath the weight of a shame and a grief that should never have been hers to bear. The encounter, for James, was transformational, as it gave him a window into the heavy burden bravely shouldered by his wife for many years. As he tells us the story, of writing the song and sharing it with his wife, of his growing, empathetic grief at her vulnerability and his powerlessness, his voice drops to an almost guttural level. Breath comes hard. Here is a man flaying himself before a roomful of women – a raw, restrained masculinity reminiscent of Jesus Himself – saying: *It's not your fault. You are infinitely more than what was done to you. We will stay here, with you, in this grief, as long as it takes.* We collectively, instinctively hold our breath as he sings, partly because dozens of us have lived the violence of *The Blue Bench*, and partly because those who fortunately can't say #metoo, nevertheless know someone who can, who's soul and body bear the scars of an unrestrained evil. There is not a dry eye in the room, and silence sits heavy when he finishes, the last strum of the guitar dancing off the walls and resonating in our hearts. We, all of us, wrestle to make a tentative peace with this blessing, bestowed from brokenness. Brian calls a recess and we break, to catch our breath in the crisp afternoon air, to eat a meal together as no-longer strangers, and then to begin again.

Each session concludes with an example of the story-to-poem spiritual rhythm. Each of four women – Elsie, Karen, Kristen, and Lynn – Brian and James's teammates for the weekend, will take turns sharing parts of their stories and reading aloud the poems they have written to process their grief and find God's heart in their pain. For Elsie, it's a winding tale, traversing deep territory from childhood hunger for a mother's embrace, to the role reversal that so many women face as they care for aging parents and decide how to honor, serve, and love someone when your wounds at their hands can still bring you to tears decades later. For Karen, lament is a story told in the present perfect tense, where wounds can't heal because closure is impossible, and because God needs someone to prove His strength is perfected in weakness. For Kristen, the story gets writ large, of having stepped out in faith to host a Psalms Retreat a year earlier in Durango, Colorado, to watch God not only transform her community of women into singers and poets, but then gently but firmly reopen her own poorly-healed wounds to stitch a clean scar and lasting hope. And for Lynn, a breast cancer survivor facing down a howling horde of demons tempting her to believe she's not enough, that she'll never be enough, her tale resonates in real time with an unfinished story and an unfinished poem, showing in words and tears that lament is a journey of a thousand suns.

Shadowing all the sessions is The Assignment, and by Saturday afternoon, this company of women is ready. No. They are more than ready. They are eager. The seed of lament, planted and cultivated, is ready for harvest. The sanctuary descends into holy silence as women spread out in pews, on the floor, hunched over notebooks, soaked tissues tossed aside unceremoniously. There is work to be done, and they are here for it.

90 minutes later, the white-haired woman will get to her feet, step into the aisle, and walk forward to meet Brian at the mic. He drapes a prayer shawl over her shoulders, a gesture he's done a thousand times and still, sometimes, misses just how powerful it is, in that moment, to be ordained. She is first woman among many.

And then the stories start. Woman after woman comes forward, dons the prayer shawl, steps to the mic, and gives her grief a voice. They are old and they are young. Some have walked by faith for decades, some for days. Grief doesn't discriminate between the beautiful and the homely, and so both come forward to sing their lament. Some voices ring out strong

and true, telling stories that have long needed an audience to bear witness. Other voices falter, deep wounds that feel as fresh today as they did they day they were first inflicted. One by one, they name the thing that has been with them, festering in deep and dark places where they believe no one wants to enter.

Molested by an uncle, a brother, a father, a friend.

Sister murdered.

Abandoned by father first, then mother.

Anorexic.

Broken dreams.

Broken heart.

An unfaithful husband.

An addicted husband.

Divorce.

Financial ruin.

Two dead daughters on the side of a road.

Suicide attempts.

Disabled children.

Stillborn children.

The list is as long as the afternoon, as story after story is told, and with each new voice we all of us bear up, willingly, under an expansive sorrow. It's why we are here.



Sedona

Kristen Chen

I got lost on the drive home
Even now, I can't remember
Time or space or location
In those 6 hours, 7?
Solitude
Finding my way back home

I lost my Vision.

I spent weeks preparing for this one:
Sedona.
My groundwork: carefully sealing every crack
Cementing this heart shut
No risk penetrating this shell
No way
I will hide behind facts
Change the subject
Make a joke (and miss the blessing)
Anything
So they won't see me cry.

Sedona.
I've arrived all used up.
I've got nothing to give.
The fact that I'm perfectly ok with that
is obvious, but I hardly notice.

I was doing Just. Fine.
Except that I forgot
To blind my eyes and stop up my ears
To pack my protective straightjacket
In my vigilant precautions.

Gentle arrows aimed right into my breast
Began to chip away the cement:

James. A long lost brother to everyone
He opened the retreat like a family reunion
He treats everyone like he already knows them.
Then, the music. Oh, no sweeter music.

Lynn. Such a quiet humility, kind and gentle eyes.
I could jump right into those pools.
I know I'd be safe there.

Elsie. It's like she has blinders and can only see the other
person
Each carries a story, and she know this,
Always encouraging, always noticing.
A seer.

Brian. He sees something bigger, holy,
in every moment, grabs it.
Somehow he senses the scent, the mist,
before everyone else
Before it fades away, he captures it.
Every time.

And Karen. I watched her.
I was smacked awake by her attention to
Every Woman who crossed her vision.
How easily she connects soul to soul;
They open to her, secrets laid bare in an instant.
How does she do that?
And her freedom.
If only I could be so unbound, undressed.

When he pushed me onto the stage, like he does
I still thought I could hide.
Read a poem? Sure!
Those words are numb to me.
I can barely feel them anymore.

I didn't anticipate anyone else feeling them
Until Brian called my Friend up there
To hold me up, to bless me
He named us.
I knew it was over for me then.
I began to unravel.
All my careful preparation, cracking, threatening.

The women I hadn't taken time
To love or even see
Touched me, forehead to forehead
Embraced me, a stranger
"Thank you" and "Me too"
They showed me how to love
Scarlet threads intersected for a moment
I became one of them

And then
A movement by the Spirit
A banned song, sung for me
The final penetrating arrow
Hits the mark, shattering sealed cement
And i am undone
No hope for control here
The Blue Bench

When Her voice broke,
I knew I was on Holy Ground.

By now I'm broke open, too
There's a feast ahead
And I am invited
A guest, welcomed in
Then Brian *does his thing*
And I realize I have no choice.
But a voice.
My heart rate goes up, but I know.
I will not squander this opportunity.

This public platform feels awkward
Yet without it, I'm not sure I could do it
Take her hand, look into brimming eyes, say the words.
(Intimacy in public? Who does that?)
All of us, risking in our own ways.
And then she chugged the wine,
Sealing our words and blessings
Shattering awkwardness
And we are all one in that moment.

Zero-dark-thirty
Morning arrives, barely.
The wind whips my hair, stinging
I can't see, but I realize two things:

- I lost my vision, but now I know.
And *lost* is where I'm supposed to be.
For now.
- Sedona is over.
It aches, but as deep as my longing is,
I know it is well-spent. Complete.
Time's up.

The winding drive out is silent
Yet pregnant with swirling thoughts and emotions
A new depth for us.
That unrelenting ache.
Yet the Spirit is hovering
And I know it.

Final embrace and there's nowhere left for me to go
So I turn the car and head north
One last stop: a cappuccino, my only companion.

I will go home now.
Changed