

Day 1: The Gift of Tears

Tears often feel like a curse or a burden because they come upon us at inopportune times when we would prefer to appear *stoic* or *in control of our emotions*. Tears are an outward manifestation of a biological release that is usually triggered by a profound emotional sensation.

Tears are the body's way of experiencing relief. Crying produces tears that relieve the body of toxins and stress hormones. In fact, recent research from the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel discovered that when women cry, men's testosterone levels drop significantly.

Consequently, tears send messages to others, constituting a form of physiological communication. This is a natural, scientific explanation of the value of tears.

Tears are produced for three reasons:

- **Basal tears** prevent the eyes from getting dry. Your body produces 5-10 ounces of these tears every day!
- **Reflex tears** are produced to wash irritating substances – dust, pollen, onion, and smoke – from your eyes.
- **Emotional tears** occur in response to an event that triggers the brain to release hormones that stimulate tearing.

Crying is intrinsic to human nature. Newborns cry *to signal a need* or *to express distress*: hunger, intestinal discomfort, time for a diaper change, or a desire to be held. By the age of 10 months infants learn to cry as a means of getting attention. Boys and girls are taught to comply with cultural expectations of *who is allowed to cry* and *when crying is acceptable*. Crying is a natural form of expression, and yet many people have been trained to suppress this automatic response to the external events of life and the internal emotions that accompany those events.

Tears may be triggered psychologically and you may feel the urge to cry as a result of various events and the associated emotional charge. Consider the things that might create a lump in your throat or tears in your eyes:

- Sadness due to loss
- Remembrance of a loss
- Saying goodbye
- Fear/anxiety/insecurity
- Feeling overwhelmed
- No sense of belonging
- Joy
- Receiving a compliment
- Relief
- Powerlessness

- Confusion
- Frustration
- Being backed into a corner
- Disappointment
- Loss of control
- Feedback
- Criticism/judgment/condemnation
- Unknown
- Remorse/ guilt/shame
- Indecision
- Injustice
- Feeling pain
- Expressing emotional pain
- Conflict/arguments
- Problems that seem insurmountable
- Stress
- Response to hormonal changes
- Worry
- Being victimized
- Feeling ostracized
- Being neglected
- Burdened by responsibility
- Didn't get your own way
- Empathy – compassion for others who are hurt, ill, injured, or psychologically wounded
- When things are beyond your control
- When you can't cope
- When you see someone else crying
- When you speak a fundamental truth or a new insight, especially for the first time
- When you experience a deep and profound intimacy with God
- When you see someone going astray – morally or ethically
- When you witness someone offending God

As noted in the last three items above, tears can be generated from a spiritual source as well. St. Ignatius of Loyola recommended that we pray for *the gift of tears*. This occurs when you become overwhelmed by the presence of God and tears spontaneously flow as a result of your personal experience of God. In such an instance, you are moved beyond your natural emotional state, having no control over the outpouring of tears. This may occur due to an experience of God's all-consuming love as you come to feel it on a personal level. It may result from an acknowledgment of your sinful nature and the ways in which you have offended a God who loves you beyond

measure. You may experience the gift of tears as you realize that you have been forgiven for your offenses. And the outpouring of tears may occur for a reason that is unknown to you at that time. Regardless of the underlying cause, these tears are a gift to you from God and they are to be treasured. They should never be a source of discomfort or embarrassment.

St. Catherine of Siena was a member of the religious order of the Dominicans. She spent a great deal of time in *unitive prayer* – prayer that finds intimacy and communion with God. In her prayer time she would lift *the eye of her intellect* on God whom she called the sweet Truth. Remaining united to him, she would express her desire to know or understand a particular principle. One day she asked to understand “the reason and the fruit of tears.” The following is a summary of God’s response to her.

Types of Tears – *The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena, Doctor of the Catholic Church* (1347-1380)

1. **Tears of the wicked are tears of damnation:** These tears are focused on your selfish desires that have not been obtained – your wants and demands that have not been fulfilled. Your focus is on things that you place ahead of God – the idols that you worship. Rather than being life-giving, these are *tears of death*.
2. **Imperfect tears caused by fear:** These tears are experienced by those who abandon their sinful ways due to fear of punishment rather than confidence in the goodness and love of God. Knowing their guilt, these individuals weep for fear of the penalty they have incurred because of the sins they have committed. They have not yet learned to trust in the goodness and mercy of God.
3. **Sweet tears of imperfect love:** These are sweet tears of those who have abandoned sinful ways and are *beginning* to serve God because they have begun to know and love him; however, their love is still imperfect, causing their tears to be imperfect as well. The person’s life is then characterized by exercising virtue, acknowledging God’s goodness, practicing self-discovery in the light of God’s goodness, and moving away from fear and toward hope in God’s mercy.
4. **Sweet tears of perfect love:** Perfect tears of mature love come from those who have developed perfect love for their neighbor and learned to love God without regard for themselves. These are the people who live the words of the Great Commandment: to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength; and to love your neighbor as yourself. The Lord describes this state to St. Catherine, saying:

“Having thus sweetly traveled by that Bridge, following the doctrine of My sweet Truth, enduring with true and sweet patience every pain and trouble which I have permitted to be inflicted upon her for her salvation, having manfully received them all, not choosing them according to her own tastes, but accepting them according to Mine, and not only, as I said, enduring them with

patience, but sustaining them with joy, she counts it glory to be persecuted for My Name's sake in whatever she may have to suffer. Then the soul arrives at such delight and tranquility of mind that no tongue can tell it."

"When, therefore, she sees herself to be ineffably loved by Me, she loves every rational creature with the self-same love with which she sees herself to be loved. And, for this reason, the soul that knows Me immediately expands to the love of her neighbor, because she sees that I love that neighbor ineffably, and so, herself, loves the object which she sees Me to have loved still more. She further knows that she can be of no use to Me and can in no way repay Me that pure love with which she feels herself to be loved by Me, and therefore endeavors to repay it through the medium which I have given her, namely, her neighbor, who is the medium through which you can all serve Me."

5. **Sweet tears that fall with great peace:** These are joined to the tears at the fourth level. This is a transcendent love that occurs when, as pilgrims on our earthly journey, we are led from the "stormy sea" that exists in this world to the *Sea Pacific*. "Blessed she is through the union which she feels herself to have with Me, tasting the divine love; sorrowful through the offenses which she sees done to My goodness and greatness, for she has seen and tasted the bitterness of this in her self-knowledge,"
6. **Tears of fire:** These tears satisfy those who want to cry but cannot do so. There are no bodily tears from the eyes in this case.

Tears are a means of opening your heart to the wisdom and the love of God. They provide you with a tool that dissolves the stubbornness and hardness of your heart, giving you a new heart that has been refashioned by God. In Ezekiel 36:26 the Lord says, "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

An earthly analogy of this process is offered in a statement made by Abba Poemen, one of the Desert Fathers of early Christianity: "The nature of water is soft, that of stone is hard; but if a bottle is hung above the stone, allowing the water to fall drop by drop, it wears away the stone." So it is with the gift of tears and the impact they have on the hardness of the human heart.

Consider the following questions as a means of helping you understand your attitude toward tears:

- What was the attitude you developed toward tears and weeping as you were growing up? Was it acceptable for you to cry in your family of origin? Was it different for boys and girls? Was it different as you got older?
 - Is there freedom to cry in the culture/community in which you live now?
 - Do you give yourself permission to cry? When? Under what circumstances?
 - Are tears a sign of weakness? Is weakness unacceptable?
 - In which contexts is it safe or permissible to cry?
 - Home
 - Alone
 - Work
 - Church
 - During prayer or meditation
 - With a friend
 - With a family member
 - What prevents you from crying?
 - What types of tears do you cry? Are your tears pleasing to God?
 - After participating in this reflection, what do you feel called to change in your attitude toward tears?
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Day 2: The Gift of Tears

We are born and raised in a culture that not only fails to acknowledge the importance of tears – it teaches us to look on tears with disdain, as something that should cause shame and guilt. In our culture small children may be permitted to cry; however, as they approach adolescence, boys are discouraged from crying by messages from adults or older children that include words such as, “Big boys don’t cry.” Or “Don’t be such a cry-baby.” Male children are so strongly conditioned with this belief that it becomes a reflexive reaction for them to hold back tears. They lose sight of the ability to express sadness or frustration because crying is seen as a sign of weakness and weakness is unacceptable.

As males reach adulthood, they venture into the workplace – a place that was, and still is, a male dominated domain. In this artificially contrived environment men lose touch with any residual sense of their *emotional self*, while becoming more strongly engrained in a pattern of trusting their intellect. They learn that the intellect is the *safe place* from which to act when they are in a work environment; hence, they learn to act exclusively based on what they think in their analytical minds. In this world there is a code or ethos that further reinforces the *manly notion* of remaining reserved and unemotional. Women who enter this patriarchal world are then expected to conform to these same unhealthy patterns and learn to function in ways that rob them of their true self. They learn that their emotions are not wanted and not acceptable in the workplace. Sadly, due to their need to survive, women then adopt the same unhealthy patterns that men have embraced and potentially pass them on to the next generation.

An article by Jenna Goudreau published at Forbes.com states:

Most professional women have fought back tears in the workplace at some point in their careers—many unsuccessfully. A professor of management at the University of California, Davis, Kim Elsbach, Ph.D., has been studying the repercussions of crying in the workplace for over three years. According to her research, women are much more likely to cry at work—and in general—due to their socialization. Because most boys are firmly taught not to cry, holding back has become a reflex, she says. And unfortunately for women, tears at work are almost always perceived with disdain, and the consequences can be harsh.

“Because women aren’t socialized like men,” says Elsbach, “they carry an extra burden of emotional labor.”

In her research, Elsbach discovered that there are few situations where crying is “acceptable.” The worst offenses, she found, are crying in a public meeting or because of work stress, like a looming deadline or coworker disagreement, because it is considered disruptive and weak. Crying in a private performance

evaluation is also considered unprofessional and often manipulative.

The only exception to criticism is crying due to a personal loss like death or divorce, and even that has its limits. “If the crying is excessive—repeated or prolonged, rather than a single episode—it could be considered unstable or weak,” says Elsbach.

The worldly reaction to tears is often harsh, creating guilt or embarrassment. Overtime these feelings can cause a person to hold back the natural flow of tears for fear of being criticized, ostracized or humiliated. On a physiological level, holding back tears interferes with the release of hormones triggered by the brain. How are these hormones released when we hold back tears? On a psychological level, emotional suppression disturbs the free-flow of emotional responses to life events. Emotions that have no path of expression are then stuffed into the body where they create areas of congestion or dysfunction, interfering with the natural energetic flow that sustains balance and maintains health and wellness. Imagine the confusion created in the body-mind when your emotional part fills to capacity due to your current experience and your intellect immediately shuts down the pathway for emotional expression. This is not how the body-mind was designed to function. This is one example of how the cultural beliefs of a worldly society interfere with God’s created design.

Life in this world can be confusing and overwhelming, especially when we attempt to understand our human experience from a strictly *worldly perspective*, and we practice adhering to cultural expectations without recognizing our deepest needs and pursuing ways in which we can have those fundamental needs tended in healthy, life-giving ways. This hunger and thirst for an authentic lifestyle that would allow us to live in ways that are congruent with our true human nature was recognized in ancient times as well. In an effort to separate from the world and strive to live completely for Christ, early Christians began to practice desert spirituality – a spirituality that brought them out of the world and helped them seek God. In pursuing God, they learned to discern what was truly important in life, and their wisdom lives on to this day.

Early in the evolution of the Christian faith there were periods of tremendous persecution of Christians. Following such a time, Christianity was made legal in Egypt and in 270 AD Anthony the Great was responsible for launching a movement that became known as the Desert Fathers and Mothers. They were dedicated to a Desert Theology that was inspired by the Old Testament. It is reminiscent of the 40 years our ancestors spent wandering in the desert with Moses as their leader. This lifestyle served as a testing ground, providing an environment in which they could experience a change of heart and embrace the obedience to which they were being called by God. When the early Christian fathers and mothers lived this Desert Theology, it was built on an ascetic lifestyle – a lifestyle of sacrifice and self-denial. This, in fact, forms the fundamental underpinnings of the liturgical season of Lent. The unique paradox of this Desert Theology is that through our willingness to sacrifice the things of this world, we find the grace-filled abundance of God – just as the liturgical calendar takes us from Lent into Easter.

Those who lived this Desert Theology and practiced religious asceticism were known as monks (nuns). Some lived alone as hermits, while others lived in a community with other monks. They

chose to leave mainstream society and live a life of prayer and contemplation. The traditional community life consisted of common prayer, reading and work. Above all, they valued silence and communion with God. Monks lived in monasteries with a collection of small, private rooms that are called cells. The cell is the sacred space in which a monk (or nun) enters into a relationship with God. The cell exists within the larger context of the monastery which consists of common areas, gardens, and perhaps workshops. However, it is the cell that provides the space in which the monk (nun) has the freedom to be who he/she is without having to worry about conforming to social norms and societal expectations. In this place of sanctuary, one can be natural and authentic, allowing the body-mind to engage in a natural flow that is free of judgment or restrictions.

In such an environment, the Desert Fathers and Mothers attained wisdom and understanding that has been handed down through the ages. Some of this wisdom pertains to *the gift of tears*. In a retreat offered by Christine Valters Painter, she discusses the gift of tears. A portion of her message is stated below.

“It was said of (Abba Arsenius) that he had a hollow in his chest channeled out by the tears which fell from his eyes all his life while he sat at his manual work. When Abba Poemen learned that he was dead, he said weeping, “Truly you are blessed, Abba Arsenius, for you wept for yourself and this world! He who does not weep for himself here below will weep eternally hereafter; so it is impossible not to weep, either voluntarily or when compelled through suffering.” (Arsenius 41)

Tears are another essential element of the monastic way. ...

John Chryssavgis writes in *Into the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*: “Tears and weeping indicate a significant frontier in the way of the desert. They bespeak a promise. In fact, they are the only way into the heart.” This frontier is the boundary between our old way of seeing and believing and the wide new expansiveness into which contemplative prayer calls us.

Compunction (contrition or sorrow for our sins) awakens us to all the ways we have been false to our own deepest self and to the profound longing which is kindled when we pay attention to the heart. Allowing your own tears to flow is a part of the prayer experience.

Consider the vast difference in the attitude held regarding tears as we have seen them from a worldly perspective vs. a monastic perspective.

If the goal of monastic life is to seek God and discern the things that are important in life, then we are compelled to allow the tears to flow. The body was designed to use tears as a form of

release on all levels: physically, psychologically and spiritually. How wrong we are then to suppress their flow! How far have we gone astray from what God intended for our lives?

- Are you called to be a modern-day monk?
- Is this part of your spiritual journey – to develop a new practice that will serve you throughout your life?
- Where do you find sacred space – a space in which you have the freedom to move beyond societal expectations and filter out the things that are insignificant and unimportant so you can focus on the abundant life God has designed for you to enjoy?
- Find your sacred space and enter into the mystery created by the gift of tears. Allow the mystery to unfold as you simply rest with these two very different perspectives on tears. Notice the insight that comes into your mind and the conversion that takes place in your heart as you reflect on the truth contained in the gift of tears.
- What frontier is awaiting you through the gift of tears? What does God want to reveal in your heart? What old pattern is he calling you to let go? What lies ahead for you?
- What is the deepest longing in your heart?

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me. (Psalm 51:10)*

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