

# Conference Minister's Corner

**Every lament is a love song:**

**Three leaders in our conference speak about lament and hope**

*By Rev. Amy S. Zimbelman*



*Hannah Martin*

The Stockdale Paradox has been in the back of my mind recently. The idea is this: You must have the discipline to confront the brutal facts of your reality, whatever they might be; at the same time you must maintain unwavering faith that you can and will prevail in the end.

The Stockdale Paradox arose out of the Vietnam War from the experiences of Jim Stockdale. He was a prisoner of war for 8 years without any prisoner's rights, no set release date, and no certainty as to whether he would even survive to see his family again. He was tortured repeatedly, leaving lasting disabilities.



*Steve Ramer*

And he found that the prisoners of war who fell into despair and hopelessness didn't survive. But those with another mentality also didn't make it out alive: the optimists. The prisoners who glossed over the bad, who falsely reassured themselves: "We'll be out by Christmas. We'll be out by Easter," only to see Christmas and Easter come and go—they died of broken hearts.

This paradox rings true no matter how difficult our situation: to stay healthy and sane, we must lament. We must give voice to the truth that things are not as they should be.

And then we must hope.



*Brenda Fox*

I asked three leaders in our conference how they go about lamenting and hoping in times like these, when the prayer request lists I see and pray over from our 17 churches are filled with individual and collective tragedies. If laments are the love songs of those who have loved deeply and lost, how do we sing those songs well, without falling into either false optimism or despair?

Here are excerpts from their thoughts, first on lament.

Brenda Fox of the Prayerstream ministry based in Boulder said that trauma separates us from our bodies, and that responses like overwhelm, anger, and rage can be ways of not being present and not feeling the depth of our discomfort and grief. One antidote is silence, both individually and collectively.

"When I heard about the Marshall Fire and I could see and smell the smoke, when I heard about Annie [Lengacher Browning]'s son, I felt nauseous. I felt unbalanced," Brenda says.

So she turned to the spiritual discipline of silence.

"Silence was a spot where I could feel this wellspring of grief. Every tear that's been shed is like the ocean—when I'm at the ocean I don't try to understand it. I feel awe or playfulness, or mystery and fear. I feel deeply the solace that was there for me in the silence without having to figure out what to do—it puts that part of my head to bed for a little bit."

“And silence with others—it’s deep and buoyant. My small drop of grief may be indistinguishable from the ocean, but it is carried by the presence of the ocean. [Collective silence] opens a spaciousness so that maybe movement would come from that place.

“Grief needs space,” she says. “It doesn’t need an answer.”

Hannah Martin, the children’s pastor at Beth-El Mennonite, sees lament as a major part of who she is.

“I know it sounds weird, but I am the biggest lamenter,” Hannah says. “I love embracing suffering.”

She says that her lament practices include vocalizing to her community that things are not as they should be, and weeping.

“I weep for others. That’s what Jesus did. When you feel something, I should be able to feel it too, because being able to feel others’ pain and lament connects us and makes us human. Hebrews 13:3 says to remember the prisoner as if you’re chained to them. That’s the way I live out my faith.”

Hannah practices communal lament by sharing children’s books with the small humans under her care. (See her list of favorites at the end of this article)

“I love to share truth, from both history and the present, where our kids can learn that their experiences aren’t the only experiences. Children’s books simplify hard things to grasp and create a space for understanding both what you’re going through and journeys you’ve never been on.” In other words, they’re a starting point for empathy.

Steve Ramer of Fort Collins Mennonite Fellowship is also an experienced lamenter. Most of his sermons contain lament, as he is not afraid to name suffering and call out injustice. The yard in front of the church, and the church building itself, is also a kind of lament—folks are living there rather than in houses. The church’s Director of Outreach Renee Schmidt points out that the yard makes the public uncomfortable as a visible sign that things are not as they should be.

Steve says that it’s important to not be afraid of lament. Instead of running away from it, bring it to God and others through preaching and prayer.

“I think back to my childhood and I’ve faced some difficult times that were, in my mind, hopeless,” Steve says. “My mother who had depression, my own experiences of depression. It’s important to allow yourself to experience hopelessness and name it: ‘Oh God, I have no hope.’”

So where *is* hope to be found in the midst of all this suffering and lament?

Steve often finds that sitting with the discomfort might be a way through it: “What helps me find hope eventually is feeling hopeless and allowing myself to be there.”

Other practices, like appreciating art and music—especially the lyrics of U2 and Bruce Cockburn—and the beauty of creation, are also important to him.

“Being in Colorado and looking at the mountains—how big and old they are, reminds me how little I am and my problems are in the scheme of things.”

And Steve also turns to community: “When I’m connected with others and in distress they can carry me through and vice versa.”

Like Steve, Hannah also believes that lamenting itself is vital: “I find hope *in* the lament,” she says. “When I am feeling the pain, it reminds me that I’m human and I have feelings for other people.”

Hannah’s laments then draw her into community with Jesus.

“I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t have that hope in Jesus, that I had someone with me bigger than me and that I’m not in control of it all,” Hannah says.

And she then looks around and finds herself in good company:

“It is Christ-like to suffer and to suffer with others, and when someone else is upset by this injustice as well, it gives me hope,” Hannah says.

Brenda Fox also emphasizes the importance of dwelling in lament and cautions against rushing to hope too quickly:

“I’m a strong critic of our cultural use of *hope*,” she says, “this idea that *I’ll just go through this little tunnel of grief and get out of it*. I’ve worked a lot with survivors of war trauma, and I’ve seen that the next generation bears the marks of what the last generation refused to do.

“To be alive hurts. To have a body hurts. We bury our loved ones. If hope is a thread of endurance and comfort, then our culture needs to do a whole lot of work to weave a deeper hope. We need to construct a cultural context to grieve with each other. We have an opportunity to come together in new ways and old.”

Brenda describes the beauty of art, and an artist who made paint out of ashes from the East Troublesome Fire. She painted the cross section of a tree’s trunk, and people could draw a line for each person affected by the fire. The lines became the tree’s growth rings.

“When God shows up, it’s beautiful,” Brenda says. “Even in a room with death, beauty goes on.”

Hannah’s top book picks for lamenting and building empathy:

The Rabbit Listened by Cori Doerrfield

The Circles All Around Us by Brad Montague

The Flower Man by Mark Ludy

Strictly No Elephants by Lisa Mantchev

Good People Everywhere by Lynea Gillen

Wishtree by Katherine Applegate (chapter book)

The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane by Kate DiCamillo (chapter book)

