



Lament in the aesthetic

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to look at the function of lament in the aesthetic. The concept of lament cannot be looked at in isolation because what we experience emotionally influences our life in all its facets. Our understanding of the language of hope and lament is quite crucial when we look at lament in the aesthetic. This essay will also go into conversation with some of the work of Johan Cilliers to show how he has argued that the layered and complex beauty of God can be seen, even within lament in the aesthetic. Attention will also be given to the language of hope and lament and how it could function in the aesthetics. Furthermore, I will also argue that an aesthetical practical theology could provide us with an important tool to approach the layered and complex beauty of God. In this essay illustrations will be used to depict the complexity and layers of God's beauty.

Keywords

lament; aesthetic; hope; suffering; emotion

1. Introduction

When I received the invitation to contribute to the festschrift of Johan Cilliers, I accepted with great excitement. I met Johan Cilliers in 2003 when I started my formal theological training at the University of Stellenbosch. He was our professor in Homiletics. From our very first meeting in the classroom we sensed his excitement for what he was teaching, and it was quite contagious. Cilliers was also my mentor and supervisor for my

Master of Divinity (MDiv) thesis as well as my PhD dissertation.¹ During the course of my studies I became intrigued by the concept of lament and Cilliers was one of the few people who encouraged me to do my research about lament in liturgy. He shared my view that we as a society do not lament anymore and his argument aligned with my sentiments when he said that:

if we content that preaching is a language of hope, we will have to relearn the language of lament. There can be no language of hope without language of lament: they are flip sides of the same coin.²

I was in total agreement with Cilliers. People need to deal first with their suffering, and in the suffering, they should be able to “see” the hope of the “not yet”. This is a process and it cannot be forced. We find instances in the Old Testament where God’s people are lamenting before God. It was part of the way that they worshipped. Why then are we of the opinion that our relationship with God should mainly be praise? Why are we as Christians so hesitant to lament before God? Specifically, in our worship services? We are part of a society where we experience so much violence and yet we are hesitant to make use of the process of lament. These were some of the questions which I grappled with in my research.

In this essay I explore lament in the aesthetic. I will look at two paintings and two sculptures to try and discern the element of lament in the aesthetic. I argue that lament can be used as a vehicle to deal with the unthinkable; a way in which we can try to make sense of the hardships of life. The following section explains the term “lament.”

2. Lament

The South African Concise Oxford Dictionary describes lament as “a passionate expression of grief” and “a song, piece of music, or poem

1 The title of the Master of Divinity dissertation was *Prophetic preaching in a post-apartheid South Africa: An URCSA perspective* (2007) and that of the dissertation for the PhD was *Lament in liturgy: A critical reflection from an URCSA perspective* (2015).

2 See Cilliers, J. 2007. “Preaching as a language of hope in the context of HIV and AIDS”. In *Preaching as a language of hope. Studia Homiletica* 6, Ed Cas Vos, Lucy L Hogan and Johan H Cilliers. Pretoria: Pretoria Book House 2007. 159

expressing grief or regret”.³ The concept of lament cannot be looked at in isolation because what we experience emotionally influences our life in all its facets. Some people might even believe that we can only lament in certain spaces. Others could be of the opinion that lament is a very private and personal matter, not to be shared openly. Our understanding of the language of hope and lament is quite crucial in understanding this key concept.

The renowned South African feminist theologian Denise Ackermann explains lament as follows:

a form of mourning but it is more than that. It is somehow more purposeful and more instinctive than mourning. Lamenting is both an individual and a communal act that signals that relationships have gone awry. While lamenting is about past events, it also has present and future dimensions. It acknowledges the brokenness of the present because of injustice and our role in contributing to the troubles of the world. It instinctively creates a link between healing and mourning that makes new just relationships possible in future.⁴

Looking at South Africa, and the rest of the world today, it is quite evident that we are sorely in need of these just relationships. Not just between people but between people and creation as well. Through our interconnectedness via social media we are made aware of the hardships people are facing in their everyday lives. This connection also becomes the mirror in which our own pain is reflected.

Lament is not just for the “ears of God” alone but also for our fellow human beings. Our personal lament could have an effect on our communities as well. Nancy Lee articulates it in the following manner:

Lament, in essence, provides a cathartic vehicle for human beings to express all aspects of suffering and to help maintain the value and dignity of one’s humanity under hardship, if possible. Lament is, and not secondarily, a call to bring attention to injustice, an anguished

3 See Soanes, C. and Stevenson, A. (eds.), 2008. *Concise Oxford Dictionary: Eleventh Edition, Revised*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc. 2008, 799

4 See Ackermann, D. 2001. *Tamar’s Cry: Re-reading an ancient text in the midst of an HIV/AIDS pandemic*. London: Russel Press. 2001, 32

plea for respite and consolation, an appeal for intervention not only to one's deity, but to one's community, and to the world community.⁵

One can easily be so focused on lament being addressed to God that you tend to neglect the effects of our lament on our communities and the world community. Confronted with this understanding of Lee, and also taking the embodiment of lament into account, it makes sense that intervention into our suffering does not only come from God, but it could also come from our fellow brother and sister, whether in my own community, faith community or even the world community.

Claus Westermann, on the other hand, brings to our attention the fact that even though lament plays a significant role in the relationship between God and the people in the Old Testament, we need to distinguish between the lament that is caused by pain and suffering and “the lament of the dead”.⁶ Both these processes are referred to as “lament” and their outward signs are also the same, namely weeping. However, for Westermann, the distinction between the two is as follows:

1. In the lament of affliction, the one that suffers voices his/her suffering to a deity and begs that the suffering should be taken away. The lament of affliction looks forward. This action of looking forward signifies a yearning for the “not yet”, that which we hope for.
1. In the lament of the dead, the lament is uttered by someone who weeps about the death of another. This lament looks backward.⁷

Westermann makes this distinction so that we can understand the theological significance of the lament in the Old Testament.

Lamenting is a process that demands great commitment, honesty and integrity.⁸ It is a process that forces you to become vulnerable before God

5 See Lee, *Lyrics of Lament: From Tragedy to Transformation*. 2010, 27

6 See Westermann, C. 1974. The Role of Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament. *Interpretation* 28:1974,22

7 Ibid., 22

8 See Brueggeman, W. 1974. From hurt to joy, from death to life. *Interpretation* (28): 1974, 4-5. Brueggemann ponders particularly on how we talk to God. Are we so polite and grateful that we forget to be honest? Do we know how to express our anger and hurt, our feelings of betrayal? We need to be honest and dialogical in our conversations with God.

and your fellow brothers and sisters. The process of lament allows us to “verbalise” the feelings of despair that is locked up inside of us. It is a process through which we can be vocal about our hardships; in which individuals and communities, as well as faith communities, can deal with the hardships of life. Even so, we need to be mindful that lamenting about an issue does not guarantee its immediate solution, but it gives an outlet for the cry of anguish and it allows communities to stand together in solidarity. It also allows communities to make known their brokenness about lamentable issues. For individuals it provides a space in which pain and hurt can be verbalised. Through this process we become aware of the eschatological tension that exists between “already” and “not yet”. That which we are experiencing and that which we are hopefully longing for.

Cilliers is of the opinion that we are only able to understand this tension within the “theological framework of hope”.⁹ The fact that we are hopeful does not mean that our suffering and conflict are not real, or that it even lessened. Our hope is rooted in our resurrected Lord and Saviour and this gives us the strength to carry on, regardless of our bleak circumstances. When we hope, we dream of something better than what we are experiencing. We believe, with everything in us, that our circumstances will change for the better. As a faith community, our trust is in the Lord and the promises we have received in His Word. In Hebrews 11:1 we read: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”¹⁰ If we were to see and experience what we are hoping for then we could not call it hope anymore. Despite the fact that we question – even blame – God extensively during our periods of lament, our trust is still in God. This trust is proven by the “yet” that is always referred to, even in the most accusatory of laments. This is a faith in the Holy One and a hope that is expressed through faith that God will respond to our needs.

This hope also needs to be celebrated, despite the fact that we are still lamenting our circumstances. Cilliers understands this as a tension between celebration and lament. He is quite convinced that even though we find ourselves in so much pain in this world we also need “the liberation

9 See Cilliers, J. 2009. Why worship? Revisiting the fundamental liturgical question. *HTS Theological Studies*, 65(1):4

10 Quoted from New International Version

of laughter”.¹¹ Just as the language of hope and the language of lament is seen as being flip sides of the same coin, so laughter and lament is seen as “two sides of the same coin” – complementing each other.¹²

3. Lament in the aesthetic

Can we say “lament and aesthetic” in one sentence? It does not seem logical to have these two words adjacent to each other; they seem to have opposite meanings and effects. Can lament ever be beautiful or appealing? In a sense we can agree that it could be visual but we must take into account that for many lament is a very private process. However, artists expressed what they were feeling and what they believed the world was experiencing on a daily basis, by portraying the injustices experienced by people, through the form of art that they practise.

Throughout the ages, artists have used different forms of mediums to give effect to the message that they wanted bring across.¹³

For Cilliers, the aesthetics in practical theology functions to allow us to experience the “imaginative deciphering of meaning in beauty”.¹⁴ We experience God’s presence amongst us through “certain embodied encounters” and through Practical Theological studies we are trying to make sense of these encounters. Aesthetics provides us with a tool to try and decipher these encounters. Cilliers cautions that God’s beauty is layered and complex and it is therefore not possible to approach it in one way. An aesthetical practical theology closes this gap by providing a

11 Ibid., 4

12 Ibid., 4

13 See Lee, N. 2010. *Lyrics of lament: From tragedy to transformation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. Lee discusses different genres that cultures used to get their messages across. She recognizes and refers to Israel’s lament to the God of Israel. Their lament is one of displacement and of exile. But Lee also speaks of laments by the people of Sudan, India and New Orleans. She refers to the people of Africa, Asia and the Americas. She tries to give insight into the lament of these rich and diverse traditions and cultures. Lee journeys between the Bible and other ancient sacred literature to show how lament was incorporated but she comfortably shows us how we could possibly recover lament as an important expression of our faith today.

14 See Cilliers, J. 2012. *Dancing with Deity: Re-imagining the beauty of worship*. Wellington: Bible Media. 2012, 66

creative approach in which the deciphering can take place. Cilliers provides an illustration in which he tries to explain the approach.

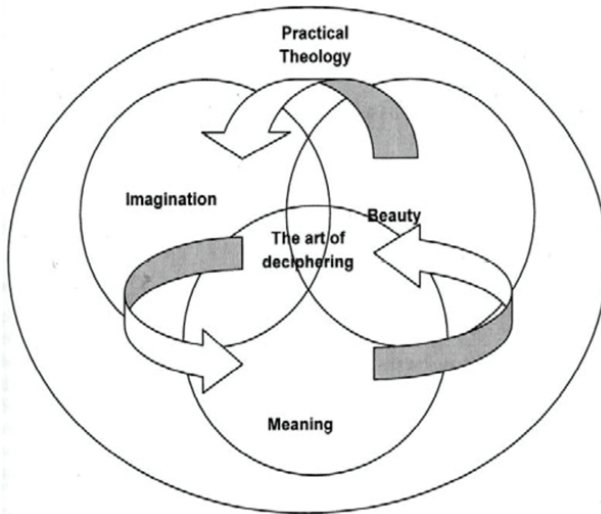


Figure 1. Source: Cilliers 2012:66

The three concepts in question are imagination, beauty and meaning. They do not necessarily follow each other in a chronological order, as indicated in the above figure. However, they do exist in a manner that would equally improve the impact of all the concepts. Cilliers describes it as follows:

We need imagination to decipher beauty, which in turn will ignite imagination. We could therefore talk about the imagination of beautiful meaning, or the meaning of imagined beauty, or the beauty of meaningful imagination, etc. I prefer to call this the beauty of imagined meaning. Whichever way we choose to describe the reciprocal movement, at the centre we find the art of deciphering, which undergirds an aesthetical practical theology.¹⁵

Taking into account that we are a nation that provides a home to people with various cultural backgrounds we need faith that transcends the social

15 Ibid., 67

boundaries in order for people to see God's beauty. In a country where violence has become the "new normal" it asks of us to dig much deeper to find the beauty and meaning around us. We can no longer suppress or deny the suffering our people are experiencing. One of the possible ways in which we could address this trauma is through the process of lament. Through this process a person could verbally construct the world that they are living in. The expression of experienced hurt and pain could in fact be the starting point of creating a different world. The lament articulates what people are experiencing, what they do not want, and it also creates an opportunity to verbalise what they are longing for. This creative process could be done through different mediums such as music, art, poetry, to name but a few.

In his article "Sounding salvation: Theological perspectives on music as articulation of life"¹⁶, Cilliers contemplates sound and how it links to soteriology. He alludes to the fact that "words create worlds".¹⁷ Cilliers conveys the importance of music in our everyday life and he is of the opinion that words inevitably need music to be heard. He refers to the "salvation that comes to us in the rhythms of our lives".¹⁸ These rhythms are made up of sounds and silences. And it is in these in-between spaces, the liminal spaces, that we find comfort. For Cilliers, this comfort is possible because "it corresponds with the realities of our fragmented existences".¹⁹ The sounds that we are exposed to can become divine sounds, through the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit. In this article Cilliers refers to a painting called *The Scream* by Edvard Munch²⁰ and a sculpture by the Brazilian artist Guido Rocha entitled *The Tortured Christ* (1975).²¹

16 Cilliers, J. 2014. Sounding Salvation: Theological Perspectives on Music as Articulation of Life. In: *TD: The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, Volume 10, Issue 2, November 2014, pp. 34-46.

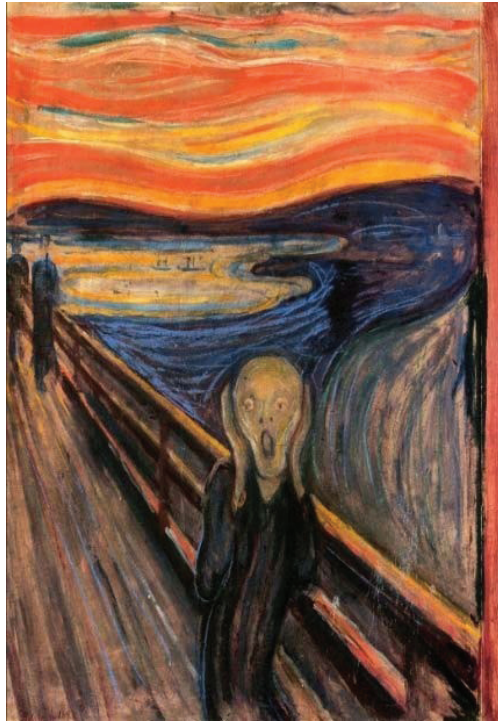
17 Ibid., 34

18 Ibid., 43

19 Ibid., 43

20 Ibid., 43-44

21 Ibid., 45-46



The Scream

The painting depicts fear and terror. Obviously, the painting is without sound but the manner in which the artist portrayed this “scream”, renders it almost audible. From the diary entry by Munch regarding this painting a sense of fear is tangible. The background seems to be in constant movement. Even though this is a painting about the feelings of the artist, it also seems to depict the screaming of the suffering that people are experiencing. Against the background of all the atrocities happening in our country on a daily basis, this painting might be appropriate to what many South Africans might be feeling about their personal and communal circumstances. The *scream* of the masses, the oppressed, and the marginalised seems to break through in this portrayal.

Regarding the sculpture, one realises that the name *The Tortured Christ* seems to be equally appropriate. The tortured body, the open mouth,

obviously screaming, the image of utter despair, recalls the crucified Lord. It gives a glimpse into the sense of hopelessness and despair that was experienced on the cross.



The Tortured Christ

However, Cilliers makes it clear that the screams depicted in these two artworks are fundamentally different. The cry from *The Scream* can be interpreted as fearful and hopeless, while the cry from *The Tortured Christ* is “the Sound of Salvation”.²² This scream by the crucified One takes up our screams of sorrow, of pain, fear and our lament. This scream signifies that all is not lost. This scream allows us to keep on longing for the “not yet”.

In the *Sol Justitiae* chapel at the Theological Faculty of Stellenbosch University, a sculpture is displayed right in the centre at the front of the room. This sculpture was created by the former dean of Theology at Stellenbosch University, Prof. Daniel Louw. He tried to depict suffering and its link with the cross.

²² Ibid.,46



The Disfigurement of Suffering

Firstly, the sculpture is titled “The Disfigurement of Suffering”. The symbols used are explained²³ in the following manner. “The sculpture of rock can represent either a cross or a human body torn apart by suffering. In front of the cross/body, one becomes aware of the fact that Christ did not die ‘on’ a cross. On the contrary, it was the curse of the cross, the woundedness, the guilt and sin of human beings that killed the suffering Christ. The suffering is a divine act: ‘For our sake he made him to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Cor. 5:21). In this cross there is no face. According to Isaiah 53:2 the suffering servant of God had no attractiveness at all, nothing to make us want him.

This man of sorrows was despised and rejected. One would rather turn one’s back and look the other way when one goes by (53:3). He was wounded and bruised for our sins. He was chastised that we might have peace; he was lashed – and we were healed (53:4–5).

23 The detailed explanation was obtained from an information leaflet that is available in the chapel of the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University.

The rocks were gathered in the Ceres district [my place of birth] on the farm Matjiesrivier, just before Karooport. I had to shatter the rocks to discover the colour, texture and form.

It was as if God sculpted this cross from the time of creation and it lay there for millions of years, ready to be discovered. Through re-creation, creation has become a piece of art. According to 1 Corinthians 1:25 the cross is a foolish act. But the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. In this rock installation, disfigurement and weakness are becoming the power of healing. The barbed wire symbolizes all forms of human suffering. Barbed wire has always been used to separate human beings and to tear them apart. In concentration camps, during riots and times of war, during the period of apartheid, the barbed wire impounded people. In this piece of art, the barbed wire represents the aesthetics of God. It binds the different parts together in a new unity; it transcends all isolation beyond forms of discrimination and stigmatisation.

The skull (bottom right) is fossilised sea life. It reminds one of the fact that death fossilises life. Connected to the disfigurement of the dying Christ, the cross “de-fossilise” death. The piece of rock resembles Golgotha – even the continent of Africa. Within the woundedness of Christ human beings rediscover their human dignity: to be accepted unconditionally for who they are without the fear of rejection or isolation. The disfigurement of suffering then becomes the embracement of a compassionate God.”

This broken cross represents the brokenness and woundedness of the world that we are living in. It shows the disconnectedness that we are experiencing in our lives. The artist refers to the fact that he had to “shatter the rocks” in order to see what they are really made of. We experience this “shattering” effect on a daily basis in our lives as we wrestle with lamentable issues, and it is only during the process of lament that we truly understand the impact that our situation has on our lives. When my six-year-old son saw this picture his first words were “Mommy, why is it so untidy?” I tried to explain, as best as I could to a six-year-old. It made me realise that experiencing pain and suffering will never be a “tidy” affair.

The broken rocks, the barbed wire, the spaces between each object all point to the disorder that is experienced by a broken people. It is only through our honesty with God that we can find true healing. The artist also refers

to the history of South Africa that caused so many traumas in the lives of people. Even today, now that we are living in a democratic country, we still have “barbed wire” holding us hostage in our daily interaction with each other. We are still on the road of reconciliation and for some it will take longer than for others. Some may never even experience the reconciliation and peace that they long for.

Another painting that portrays brokenness is that of W Maxwell Lawton, namely *Man of Sorrows: Christ with Aids*. The painting was commissioned by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to mark his new AIDS ministry²⁴ in South Africa. It was first exhibited in the St George’s Anglican Cathedral in Cape Town in 1994 and since then has been taken throughout South Africa and seen by approximately 4 million people.²⁵



*Man of Sorrows: Christ with Aids*²⁶

24 Wola Nani, an NGO, helps people living with HIV and AIDS to help themselves. [Online]. Available: <http://www.wolanani.co.za/> [Accessed: 16 May 2014].

25 See [Online]. Available: <http://arc.episcopalchurch.org/episcopal-life/ASmax.html> [Accessed: 19 May 2014].

26 See [Online]. Available: <http://www.thebody.com/content/art38646.html> [Accessed 16 May 2014].

Lawton, an American artist and Aids sufferer, portrayed Christ with the purple lesions that are usually found on the bodies of Aids sufferers and are symptoms of the medical treatment that they went through. The painting was inspired by a vision he had while in hospital here in South Africa, in which he was sitting on a hospital bed, naked and hooked up to oxygen and intravenous drips. His image then changed into Christ who was sitting with his head in his hands, cancer lesions all over his body while wearing only a crown of thorns. He admitted that his personal experience as an Aids sufferer greatly impacted on his work. Even though this painting created its fair share of controversy, the Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu made it clear that it also challenges us to look anew at our faith and how we perceive God's grace and love. He reiterated that everyone is included in God's love, also Aids suffers²⁷, and therefore no one should be excluded from the faith community or the society at large. Despite these words, people found it difficult to relate this image with the New Testament image of Jesus Christ "who was made sin for us (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21)",²⁸ and found the depiction blasphemous.

This painting targets specifically those who are suffering from the effects of AIDS. However, in a country ravaged by violence, this painting also portrays the brokenness of people and their struggle in coming to terms with what has happened to them. People who are rape survivors, and survivors of abuse in general, carry the visible scars of the abuse on their bodies – just as this painting portrays the lesions of the AIDS sufferer. One example of such a survivor is Alison Botha, who was abducted by two men outside her Port Elizabeth home in December 1994. She was raped, stabbed, disembowelled and finally her throat was slit 16 times. Miraculously she survived this horrific incident and today she is a renowned international motivational speaker. She has found inner strength to triumph over this trauma in her life although she will carry the physical scars on her body for the rest of her life – just as the painting of Lawton illustrates.

27 See Cilliers, J. 2012. *Dancing with Deity: Re-imagining the beauty of worship*. 2012, 169-170

28 Ibid., 170

4. Conclusion

Can we really find beauty in situations of lament? Can lament ever be beautiful or appealing? Is it possible to speak about lament and hope in the same breath? We cannot deny the fact that lament and praise are indeed part of our Christian life. We find ample evidence of lament as part of the Psalms. It would therefore be difficult to say that lament does not have a space in our Christian life. The American Philosopher, Nicholas Wolterstorff, looks at lament in one of the chapters in his book *Hearing the Call*. He is quite blunt in his description of lament. According to him, lament

at its heart, is giving voice to the suffering that accompanies deep loss, whatever that loss may be. Lament is not about suffering. Lament is not concerning suffering. Lament does not count the stages and try to identify the stage in which one finds oneself. Lament is the bringing to speech of suffering, the language of suffering, the voicing of suffering. Behind lament are tears of loss. Lament goes beyond the tears of voicing the suffering”²⁹

What struck me in this chapter was Wolterstorff’s opinion that we should not just name our suffering, but we should in fact *own* our suffering and make it part of our own identity, part of our life story.³⁰ We should not be ashamed of it. We should be able to verbalise our suffering eventually, being able to cry to God and ask about the meaning of our suffering. It might be difficult and embarrassing at first to own it but afterwards we are better equipped to cry to God about the injustices and to ask for deliverance. I am of the opinion that making suffering part of our own identity and part of our life story, as Wolterstorff suggests, does not mean that we must remain in our suffering in a despondent state. Theologically speaking, if our identity and life story is rooted in God, then God is also part of our suffering.

Perhaps it is time for us to re-imagine hope anew. The Systematic theologian, Flora Keshgegian, might be able to assist us in understanding

29 See Wolterstorff, N. 2011. *Hearing the Call: Liturgy Justice Church and World*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans. 81.

30 Ibid., 81

this concept. For her, hope is fundamentally something that needs to be practiced.³¹ It is *a process* and should become part of our habits. It would seem that the miracle of hope lies in the practicing of it. Practicing hope?! Is that even possible? One tends to think that hope is some emotion that gets “imagined” because of our circumstances, something that we yearn for, that is different to our current experience. However, Keshgegian shares the philosophy of a German political theologian, Dorothee Sölle, who explained the idea of hope as a baby that starts to walk by getting up and taking the step.

Similarly, with hope, we will learn to hope anew as we practice hope ... we will gain confidence in hope as we enter more deeply into the practices of hope”.³²

I agree with Keshgegian in her thoughts of hope. Hoping is really an act of faith. Perhaps one could even venture further in saying that without hope, especially in times of suffering, life would have been more difficult. It is this hope, which is so tightly connected in our faith that keeps us going – no matter what! The process of hope does not change our circumstances literally, but it forces us to think about our situation again, anew – to visualize what we want our situation to look like. If we do not have the capacity to imagine – to dream, how are we going to speak about hope? How are we going to imagine a new future? For Keshgegian, “the power and role of imagination is to give voice and content to our heart’s desire. The practice of dreaming helps to connect our desires with our imagination”.³³

We might have to learn the art of imagination again from children. They can so innocently live in their own imaginary world in which they experience contentment and joy. We have achieved so much in our world because of people who dared to dream as well as people who worked hard to make those dreams a reality. The process of hope also makes us acutely aware that we are not happy with what we are currently experiencing and therefore the process of lament allows us to work through these emotions. Just as hope is a process, so lament is also a process – painful but necessary.

31 See Keshgegian, F. 2006. *Time for Hope: Practices for living in today’s world*. New York/London: Continuum. 182–183.

32 Ibid., 188

33 Ibid., 121

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