PART ONE

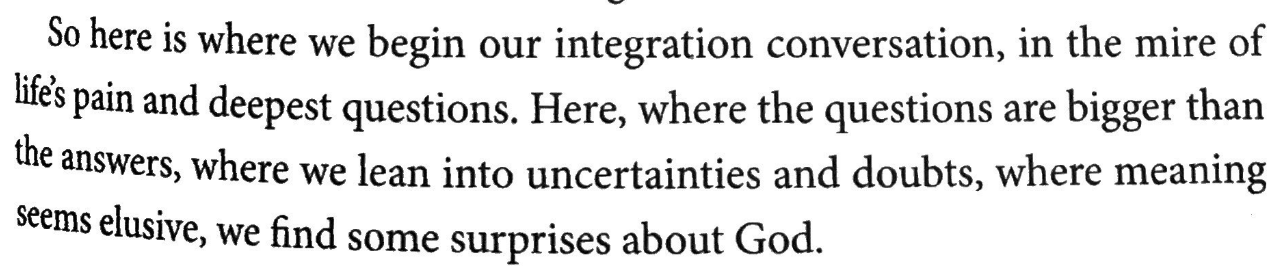
Facing Difficulty

Psychiatrist M. Scott Peck opened one of the bestselling nonfiction books of all time with the now-famous words, "Life is difficult" (Peck, 1978, p. 15). With these three words, he summarized the first conversation that begins almost every counseling and psychotherapy relationship. People come to us in pain, experiencing struggle and hardship and dis-ease of every sort. They come to us for healing and help.

This is our work, perhaps even our calling, as counselors. Because we meet people in pain, we start almost every conversation this way as we create safe spaces where our patients explore life's difficulties. And in some way that still mystifies us (despite thousands of efficacy studies over many years)—something about allowing space for others' difficulties is indeed healing and helpful.

Even as we offer space and healing to others, we quietly notice that we ourselves also find life to be difficult. Years of training bring us into the offices where we live out our calling, but training doesn't fully prepare us to understand the deepest aches of living and dying, to make sense of our years on earth and matters of ultimate meaning.

So here is where we begin our integration conversation, in the mire of life's pain and deepest questions. Here, where the questions are bigger than the answers, where we lean into uncertainties and doubts, where meaning seems elusive, we find some surprises about God.



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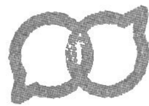
Lament

HOW DO WE MAKE SENSE OF THE DEEP ACHES IN LIFE?



IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL JUNE DAY. We were just leaving the wet, dreary Oregon winter behind and all around me (Megan Anna) the world was thrusting forward with new life. Excited for my first appointment with this new pregnancy and just five days before my daughter's second birthday, there was much to be celebrating. The life blossoming within mirrored the bustling of life flourishing around me. Just three months prior I'd experienced my first miscarriage. This pregnancy felt different, I was nine weeks along and all signs pointed to new life (i.e., lots of nausea, sickness, and fatigue). The beginning of my appointment began with enthusiasm and warmth—excited to reconnect with my nurse midwife, Vicky. The mood in the room shifted when she began the ultrasound.

While I remember my daughter, Grace, grape-sized and enthusiastically bouncing around, this grape-sized baby was not moving. *Perhaps this is a very mellow baby.* Grace being a wild and lively toddler who infrequently slept, yes, I could do a mellow baby. Vicky sunk into silence and began looking more intensively at the ultrasound screen. After a few minutes she explained that this was not the size of baby we would expect to see at nine weeks, and that more concerning she wasn't picking up a heartbeat. There could be a few possibilities: perhaps dating was off and it was too small to yet pick up a heartbeat, or perhaps the baby stopped growing and developing toward life. We needed an ultrasound with higher resolution to confirm. They scheduled me an afternoon ultrasound at the hospital. I knew it in my bones, I saw it in Vicky's face, but the formal ultrasound was policy.

Between my OB visit and hospital ultrasound I returned to my car on the fifth floor of the parking garage. Sitting in the passenger seat in the darkness, I called my husband and told him we were having another miscarriage. Mostly, I held it together; I hold things together under stress. But after hanging up the phone, in the safety of the dark parking garage, I allowed myself space for not holding it together. I contacted the terror, dread, anger, and pain. Warm tears ran down my cheeks as I lashed out in anger. The words I muttered with clenched fists: "Why? Why again? No, not again." I'm not sure who those words were directed to: perhaps God, the universe, perhaps my body which I felt was betraying me. I spoke angry, tearful words of lament. In that moment they needed out, they needed to be voiced.

At one level, some may wonder if this is a story about grief or lament; it can be confusing to differentiate the two. Lament is relational. It's taking our grief and pain and expressing it to one who will listen. It's one thing to feel a sorrow, and quite another to express it boldly. By clenching my fists and crying out to God, I expressed the ache in my soul and trusted my grief to the possibility that someone might be listening. In this, lament is grief, directed at God, with a particular shape or form (Brueggemann, 1995).

So what is lament? It first involves suffering. But suffering itself is not enough. Second, lament also requires crying out, giving voice to the ache deep in our bones. We plead for someone to hear our pain. Third, lament expresses resistance for the way things are, and calls for the other to be moved in sorrow and act to make things better. Perhaps paradoxically, the final part of lament is experiencing some confidence and trust in the person receiving our words. In the wake of his blood cancer diagnosis, J. Todd Billings (2015) writes: "As strange as it sounds, prayers of lament in a biblical pattern are actually a form of praise to God and an expression of trust in his promises" (p. 43). Similarly, M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall (2016) writes, "biblical lament contains an unexpected element that differs radically from 'sorrow, regret, or unhappiness'; it contains sometimes exuberant praise to God" (p. 221). And so, lament contains deep sorrow and suffering as well as its expression and cries for change, but it also holds the possibility of connection and even grateful reflection toward the other who receives our expressions of pain.

Medical settings are often places of lament. Anyone who has spent time in an oncology unit knows the deep questions and longings that stir in the

human soul, and they have witnessed the cries of anguish that emerge from those questions and longings. Kathleen O'Connor (2002) begins her fine book on Lamentations by recounting sitting with her husband in a hospital oncology room, noting the quiet wisdom of the nurses and staff. She writes:

> They accepted fear and rage, along with the physical and spiritual manifestations of disease. They spoke with their patients as human beings, learned about their families, their lives, and treated them as agents in their own care. Together they enacted the theological insight at the core of this book that I call "a theology of witnessing." (p. xiii)

These are poignant words showing how lament brings suffering into a relational space where others bear witness to the weight of the world. And so it is also in the psychotherapy office, whether situated in a medical setting or somewhere else. We are called to be those who bear witness to suffering, pain, struggle, despair, and anger. And if we are to be these witnesses, we desperately need a theology of witnessing.

As counselors and psychotherapists, we might lean toward understanding lament as an individual phenomenon, but it can also be a collective activity. I (Mark) recently listened to a profound sermon by an African American telling his story of living in a country where black male bodies are distrusted and maligned. During the sermon the speaker mentioned "black lament"—words that pierced my heart. In the Quaker tradition we sit in silence for a time—usually between five and fifteen minutes—after a sermon, and it seemed clear to me that day that we were a congregation sitting together in lament. As a predominantly white group, we probably could never fully understand black lament, but we could at least sit before God and cry out for justice and shalom.

In our work as psychotherapists, we encounter both individual and collective lament. Our patients bring their individual pain, but they also bring ways of being wounded in an unjust and difficult world. Many of us are comfortable with grief work, and while lament and grief work certainly overlap they are also distinct from one another. Biblical theologian Clifton Black (2005) suggests that while grief has traditionally been understood by psychotherapists as progressing through stages, lament is not something we move out of, as all of life and joy is intertwined with death this side of Eden. Lament leads us deeper into the "inmost heart of God" (p. 53). When it comes

to lament and grief, Christianity has much to offer the world of counseling, and arguably the whole Western world.

LAMENT AND FORMFUL GRIEF

Walter Brueggemann (1995), a biblical scholar who has written extensively on lament, notes how Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's work on the stages of grief has helped make grief formful. He suggests that lament is similarly formful. In other words, there are particular community standards that make lament bearable and somewhat predictable, and may even make it meaningful. Form helps contain the messy process occurring in the aftermath of loss.

Drawing on the structure of the Psalms, Brueggemann suggests that formful lament consists of an address to God, complaint, confession of trust, petition, words of assurance, and a vow to praise. This formful lament helps "define the experience of suffering" (Capps, 2005, p. 71). It also seems reasonable to argue the inverse—that if lament is given no place, no voice, in our places of worship and psychotherapy offices, then it lacks form, and the experience of suffering becomes undefined and amorphous, easily obscuring whatever hope and meaning could otherwise be found.

A Recipe for Disaster

It seems that for modern, Western Christians we are stuck between a rock and a hard place when it comes to expressing our grievances. Consider that the church has largely lost the prayers and avenues of lament that traditionally played a rich part in our tradition (Billman & Migliore, 1999). There are exceptions, such as the black church and feminist theologies, where lament has been done relatively well, but for the most part we have overlooked lament in our communities of worship. Hall (2016) notes that only about 4% of hymns in contemporary hymnals reflect the sort of lament that is present in 40% of Psalms—the Hebrew hymnal. If the "rock" is the lament-limited church, the "hard place" is increased exposure to crises and conflicts for which lament is the appropriate response. Perhaps the absence of lament has given way to expressions of anger expressed through disembodied forms (e.g., network media, social media, and so on). A fragmented lament finds life in new forms, as poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes: "Killing is one of the forms of our wandering mourning" (May, 1983, p. 125). Because we are not

a culture that knows how to lament, we often let our mourning wander into destructive places. Complaint is one such place insofar as it divorces our grievances from a real relationship with God and becomes more grumbling about God than crying out to God (Hughes, 1993).

Christians who are psychologists and counselors often struggle to know how much of their personal faith to disclose to their patients. This is a complex and nuanced matter that goes well beyond the scope of this book, but one advantage of disclosing something about our faith to patients should be mentioned here. If our Christian patients know we share their faith, then bringing up spiritual struggles allows for the possibility of lament rather than complaint. That is, pain and struggle and confusion and anguish can be voiced in a context where belief is still a firm foundation and where hope lingers, however faintly, on the horizon.

Not having a culture of lament, or collective public spaces for lament, leaves us in a precarious situation of learning how to lament privately, or not learning at all. Given these modern-day tensions, it makes sense that conversing with ancient texts and non-Western cultures is essential to cultivating a framework for lament. Conversation with the Hebrew Scriptures can be especially helpful in providing language and a landscape for engaging lament.

How We Look at a Thing

Perhaps the complexity of the church's history to lament can be illustrated by how we interpret Jeremiah 31:15-17. Here, the imagery is of Rachel lamenting the loss of her children to the Babylonian exile:

> A voice is heard in Ramah,
> lamentation and bitter weeping.
> Rachel is weeping for her children;
> she refuses to be comforted for her children,
> because they are no more.
> Thus says the LORD:
> Keep your voice from weeping,
> and your eyes from tears;
> for there is a reward for your work,
> says the LORD:
> they shall come back from the land of the enemy;

there is hope for your future,
says the LORD:
your children shall come back to their own country.

Where do your eyes land as you read this passage? In many of our Christian traditions we have tended to jump to the end, to the comfort of God's promise that Rachel's children will come back. And, in fact, after seventy years of Babylonian captivity the children of Rachel returned to their land. Read this way, the passage has a happy ending; and it also illustrates our Christian tendency to shy away from the complexity of lament. In contrast, the Jewish tradition and black theology have tended to place emphasis on Rachel refusing to be comforted as an appropriate response to having her children ripped from her breast. They have leaned into the lament tradition as a meaningful source of strength and hope amidst suffering (Billman & Migliore, 2007).

Those of us who are Christians may struggle staying present to suffering. We see the resurrection more than the crucifixion, the forgiving more than the estrangement. If we look for lament in the Bible at all, we're more likely to see the lament psalms, where we typically find a hopeful ending, than the book of Lamentations, where it is difficult to see hope at all. But still, those of us called to being counselors and psychotherapists are also called to be the ones who bear witness to the suffering of the world.

I (Mark) have spent my career as a cognitive-behavioral psychotherapist. For most of these years I have employed second-wave approaches where we evaluate and attempt to modify our patients' dysfunctional thoughts and maladaptive assumptions. More recently, I have been attracted to third-wave approaches to cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). One of the primary differences between second- and third-wave approaches mirrors the Christian and Jewish responses to Rachel's weeping described above. In second-wave approaches we tend to empathize with people's pain but then move them on to places of hope and possibility. So yes, unfortunate things have happened, but there are also good things in life that deserve our attention. These positive ways of viewing a thing are considered adaptive and healthy, whereas negative thoughts are considered dysfunctional and unhealthy. In contrast, third-wave approaches assume that suffering will be part of life. Rather than dismissing suffering or trying to replace it with more positive appraisals, we help our

patients remain present to the suffering, to observe and notice how they experience and respond to their pain, to see how they may have developed avoidance strategies that help them escape their pain but often at great personal cost. We sit with our patients, bearing witness to the pain of the world.

Marla came for help with her depression and within the first few sessions landed on her profound feelings of being unwanted as a child. She described busy parents who seemed uninvested in and unconcerned about her well-being, including stories of being lost in a mall, spending many hours alone as a child, and being left with relatives while her parents vacationed. A second-wave approach might involve helping Marla reevaluate her childhood experiences and conclusion. Yes, her parents were busy, and some incidents could be interpreted to mean a lack of love or devotion on their part, but many other childhood experiences indicated her parents were present and loving toward her. They provided for her needs, attended her school events, and cared patiently for her during times of illness. By changing her interpretation of these childhood experiences, Marla might find her depression eases and she begins to feel more loved and secure in the world.

Notice how this approach has utility but leaves little room for lament. In contrast, a third-wave CBT approach moves right into Marla's pain. What was it like for her that day in second grade when she got lost in the mall? What emotions surged over her then, and how have those emotions continued to visit her throughout the years since? What did she conclude about the world back then, and how have those conclusions persisted? Are there ways she avoids the ongoing risk of being lost again, perhaps by staying out of vulnerable places in her current relationships? And how might those strategies to avoid pain actually be contributing to her current sense of isolation and depression? These third-wave instincts to move into suffering are messy and complicated, but ultimately provide a space for Marla to confront and lament her pain and uncertainty and to see how they may be contributing to her current problems.

There is a temptation in the face of immense suffering to wrap it up neatly and put a tidy bow on it. The temptation may be to bypass the pain and anguish of the years Rachel spent weeping, wondering about and crying for her children who were in exile, by jumping to the happy ending. It's striking that groups of people who have experienced significant suffering and powerlessness gravitate toward the complexity of Scripture and lament, toward the

Jeremiah

Often deemed the weeping prophet, Jeremiah knew suffering. Jeremiah, who experienced his call as a curse (Jer 20:14-18), spent much of his life entrapped between his relationship with Yahweh and Israel. Jeremiah lived and prophesied during the time of the Babylonian invasions and deportations—a time Israel was in havoc. Israel was surrounded by large threats—the Neo-Babylonian Empire had recently become a powerhouse alongside Egypt. With these conflicting powers Israel was divided as to how to respond: some promoted alliance with Egypt while others, including Jeremiah, were pro-Babylonian. Further, the Babylonian invasions led to massive destruction: buildings were destroyed, families broken up, and not surprisingly this led to economic and social devastation (O'Connor, 2002). Amidst this season of upheaval and chaos, the looming question was how to make sense of God.

Jeremiah's role was to warn people. He received haunting visions of the violence and destruction to come. However, when he spoke these warnings he was persecuted. At the temple there were "optimistic prophets" who proclaimed a dramatically different message of hope and prosperity (Jer 14:13). Naturally, the king tended to listen to the optimistic prophets (confirmation bias was a thing even back then) and disregard Jeremiah as a false prophet who ought to be persecuted (Holladay, 1990). In addition to warning people, prophets would often intercede with God on behalf of their people. When the people did not listen to Jeremiah's message, God stripped Jeremiah of this privilege (Jer 7:16-20; 14:11). God declares that if Jeremiah attempts to plead for the people, God will refuse to hear (Jer 7:16). Jeremiah saw the devastation that was coming and yet was powerless to plead to God on his people's behalf.

At the same time, his people were not interested in hearing him either. When Jeremiah spoke the words God put on his lips, he was persecuted. But when he attempted to keep these words inside, they were "a burning fire shut up in my bones" (Jer 20:9). Jeremiah is in a cosmic double bind: if he speaks the words of God he becomes a laughingstock and persecuted. If he does not speak the words of God they burn like fire within him. Jeremiah's bones ached: he saw the pain of what was to come and yet was in a position of utter powerlessness.

As if this were not enough suffering, as a living metaphor of God's nullified covenant with Israel and as a sign of the barrenness that is about to hit Israel,

THEODICIES

As in Jeremiah's time, we are still trying to make sense of God. If God is all-loving and all-powerful, then why do so many bad things happen in the world? This has sometimes been called the "problem of evil," and many theologians and philosophers have attempted to offer solutions. Some have concluded that the problem is too great, and that God must not exist at all. Others have worked to hold onto belief in God while still making sense of suffering in the world. These efforts are known as theodicies.

There are many theodicies, and we highlight just three here. None of the theodicies answer all the questions and quandaries emerging from the problem of evil. Some people find it useful to combine theodicies because many of them can coexist. But still, even with multiple theodicies, questions remain.

FREE WILL THEODICY

God is committed to allow humans freedom, even if it means permitting evil (Plantinga, 1989). Anything less would be to create automatons that knowingly or unknowingly follow divine scripts through life. With freedom comes selfish choices, and with selfish choices pain is spread through the fallen world. A recent variant on this theodicy is open theism, which suggests that God is influenced by human events and may not have a prescribed blueprint for how the future unfolds (Sanders, 2007).

GROWTH

Creation is still in process. As unpleasant as pain may feel, it is also what prompts human morality to develop and grow over time. This is not to say that a particular individual is made better by pain—indeed, this often seems not to be the case. But even here we see the human capacity for empathy and love grow as we choose compassionate ways of being with others in their pain (Hick, 2010).

SUFFERING GOD

God is profoundly present in the hardships of life, evidenced in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. In the Christian faith, the incarnation demonstrates that God will spare no cost to enter into the mire of human experience and suffer alongside us.

Jonathan Sacks (2011), a rabbi and a philosopher, makes an interesting distinction between left-brain (analytical) and right-brain (experiential) explanations of suffering, though he nuances this more carefully than many who write about the two hemispheres of the brain. The logical, philosophical (left-brain) approach begins with the logical question of how the world should be if God is all-powerful and all-loving, leading to various philosophical questions and quandaries. The free will

and growth theodicies seem mostly to emerge out of this tradition. The experiential, meaning-making (right-brain) approach begins with the world as it is. The question then is not how to resolve the logical tensions, but how we can find meaning in a world where suffering exists. The suffering God theodicy, which exemplifies this approach, suggests that God enters into our suffering rather than rescuing us from it.

My (Megan Anna's) senior year of high school, my best friend David was diagnosed with a brain tumor. It was a wretched and painful year walking with David as the cancer slowly overtook his body. During David's progressive sickness he talked about his powerful experience of Christ walking with him. I too felt a palpable and profound sense of Christ's presence amidst the agony of losing David. The week he died I felt the presence of God as I fought to find sleep, as I struggled to get through the words of his eulogy. As I watched his casket slowly lowered into the ground, I felt the weeping presence of God beside me.

If God walks beside me in the hardest places of life, then I feel inspired to walk with others in the midst of their pain as well. This doesn't solve any logic problems about how a powerful and loving God can allow evil in the world, but it does give meaning to the difficult journeys we walk. As Martin Buber writes, "The world is not comprehensible but it is embraceable" (Buber, 1957, p. 27).

God calls Jeremiah to a life of isolation and celibacy (Jer 16:1-9) (Holladay, 1990). Jeremiah is called to social isolation—no longer allowed to attend funerals and weddings, the epicenter of social life (Jer 16:5-9). To call Jeremiah to a life of celibacy was to call for Jeremiah's social extinction. In the Hebrew Scripture people tended to envision themselves as living on through their children and grandchildren. Keep in mind that while celibacy is a theme Paul grapples with in the New Testament, there are no parallels within Hebrew Scripture to celibacy (Holladay, 1990). Given Jeremiah's isolation and sense of powerlessness, it is no surprise he experienced his relationship with God as deeply painful and problematic.

What is an appropriate response to such suffering and powerlessness? Even as Jeremiah is being faithful to God, and ostracized by his community as a result, it seems that God is also pushing Jeremiah away and not listening. Not

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surprisingly, Jeremiah experiences anger and engages in verbal wrestling with God. He simply can't make sense of such a God who would allow massive destruction, and not even allow pleas on behalf of the people about to be destroyed. Jeremiah's accusation against God and protest to God is fantastically bold:

> O LORD, you have enticed me,
> and I was enticed;
> you have overpowered me,
> and you have prevailed.
> I have become a laughingstock all day long;
> everyone mocks me.
> For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
> I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"
> For the word of the LORD has become for me
> a reproach and derision all day long.
> If I say, "I will not mention him,
> or speak any more in his name,"
> then within me there is something like a burning fire
> shut up in my bones;
> I am weary with holding it in,
> and I cannot. (Jer 20:7-9)

Within this passage Jeremiah accuses God of deceiving him. Jeremiah is making a relational accusation: "You have enticed, deceived, and overpowered me, Lord!" These accusations made within the context of an intimate relationship draw on past relational experiences to form his protest (Jer 1:4-19; 12:3; 15:17-20). Jeremiah recalls God's past promises to be with and deliver him (Jer 1:19; 15:20-21). By recalling God's promises, Jeremiah is calling forth the character of God, petitioning God on behalf of God's own character and promises. It's as if Jeremiah is asking, "God, will you be faithful to hold up your end of the bargain?"

Jeremiah's lament is the wrestling through of an inescapable paradox, but this wrestling ultimately births a greater hope and even a celebration of God's presence (Jer 20:11). Jeremiah finds hope on the other side of complexity, but getting there is a messy process. Jeremiah provides a model for how to wrestle with God faithfully amidst crises, he gives voice to those of us who have

wondered if we dare to question God. As Christian counselors and psychotherapists, we likely encounter many of these "but God, why?" moments. As people who sit with the absurdity of suffering, knowing how to faithfully protest and wrestle with God can help us foster resilience in this work and in our faith. We need a theology that can hold the suffering that we hold. Jeremiah can serve as an exemplar for those of us who are seeking faith in what can often feel like a suffering and senseless world.

Implications for Counseling and Psychotherapy

Jeremiah does not find cheap hope; it is in entering into and wrestling with the messiness of lament that he finds hope. Hope lives within the complexity of lament. Hope and lament are intimately intertwined, "without lament, hope is stillborn" (Billman & Migliore, 1999, p. 16). Given the importance of hope in our work as counselors and psychotherapists, it seems important to consider the pathways of lament that may lead to hope. As it turns out, this has profound implications for how we do our work.

AUTHOR DIALOG: LAMENT AND GRACE

Megan Anna: Dad, you've been in this profession thirty-five years. What have you noticed in regard to cultural or social shifts around lament—does it feel like people are lamenting or grieving differently than they were thirty-five years ago? How has your personal experience of lament shifted throughout your career?

Mark: Honestly, I can't recall much conversation about lament at all from those early years of my career. We were all fighting so hard just to get psychologists open to considering religion and spirituality that I don't think we looked at much nuance regarding how people experienced faith. As you say in the introduction, this is no longer the time to develop apologetics for integration, so we can start to look more carefully at how people experience faith. Recently, I've been influenced by Dr. Julie Exline at Case Western Reserve University and her work on spiritual struggle, and also by Dr. Elizabeth Lewis Hall at Biola University and her work on lament. Both of these scholars bring a refreshing honesty to the study of how people experience God.

And oh my, you also asked about my personal experience. It's so much easier for me to talk about research! My most enduring theological interest throughout my life—both personally and professionally—has been the topic of grace. I think grace is

where I have personally struggled the most because my default is to try to earn acceptance from God and others rather than thinking of acceptance as a gift freely given. In my heart, lament and grace are deeply intertwined. Lament requires a sort of confidence that God loves me and accepts me even if I am angry—that God will not abandon me even if I am irrational or emotional. Intellectually, I believe the theology and psychology of lament that we are describing in this chapter, but it is still difficult to let that sink down in the emotional core of who I am and how I understand myself in relation to God.

The question I am inclined to ask in return is whether you have found any connections between grace and lament in your theological studies. But maybe that's not the right question. Perhaps the better question is if you find any connection between these two in your heart.

Megan Anna: Such a good question. I wouldn't have thought to put grace and lament into a dialectical relationship like that. I'm glad you thought of it. Yes, of course, one needs safety before one can be free enough to feel their rage. Perhaps we are cut from the same cloth in that I, too, lean toward working for God's approval. It is hard to be angry at someone who you are frantically trying to win over. And so, of course, how can one be free enough to lament without also holding the experience of grace? This conversation makes me think of something Francis Weller said in an interview about grief and gratitude:

> The work of the mature person is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and to be stretched large by them. How much sorrow can I hold? That's how much gratitude I can give. If I carry only grief, I'll bend toward cynicism and despair. If I have only gratitude, I'll become saccharine and won't develop much compassion for other people's suffering. Grief keeps the heart fluid and soft, which helps make compassion possible. (McKee, 2015)

It makes sense to me that the experience of God's grace makes lament possible, and I also like what Weller is saying—grief makes the heart softer, making compassion possible. I wonder if lament softens the heart, making us more open to experiencing God's gracious presence. And I say presence because isn't that precisely what grace is—the gift of encountering God's *being* in our lives. And how can we possibly thrash and beat our arms against this being, refusing to be prematurely consoled, unless we have first encountered and experienced the gracious being before us?

Creating space for both hope and lament. The first and most basic implication is that we must learn to create spaces for lament while simultaneously holding the possibility of hope. As clinicians, we may tend to tell an oscillating story about hope and lament more than a fully integrated story. By an oscillating story, we mean that it is easy to view lament and hope as opposing forces that alternate in human consciousness: either we hope or lament today, and tomorrow it may be different. But what if we ponder a fully integrated story instead—one that holds hope and lament together dialectically as we move through each season of life?

Philosopher and poet David Whyte (2015) hints at this integrated view in his insightful words about heartbreak:

> Heartbreak is unpreventable; the natural outcome of caring for people and things over which we have no control. . . . Heartbreak begins the moment we are asked to let go but cannot, in other words, it colors and inhabits and magnifies each and every day; heartbreak is not a visitation, but a path that human beings follow through even the most average life. Heartbreak is our indication of sincerity: in a love relationship, in a work, in trying to learn a musical instrument, in the attempt to shape a better more generous self. Heartbreak is the beautifully helpless side of love and affection and is just as much an essence and emblem of care. . . . Heartbreak has its own way of inhabiting time and its own beautiful and trying patience in coming and going.
>
> Heartbreak is inescapable; yet we use the word as if it only occurs when things have gone wrong: an unrequited love, a shattered dream, a child lost before their time. Heartbreak . . . is something we hope we can avoid; something to guard against, a chasm to be carefully looked for and then walked around; the hope is to find a way to place our feet where the elemental forces of life will keep us in the manner to which we want to be accustomed and which will also keep us from the losses that all other human beings have experienced without exception since the beginning of conscious time. But heartbreak may be the very essence of being human, of being on the journey from here to there, and of coming to care deeply for what we find along the way. (pp. 101-2)

If we are to be witness bearers to the suffering of the souls in our counseling offices, then we need to hold the possibility that hope and lament are not so much oscillations in the alternating currents of life, but rather the simultaneous realities of human existence. One is not to be avoided while the other pursued; both bring meaning to the other.

In our first visit, Leanne told me (Megan Anna) about her lifelong desire to be a mom and her sense that God had instilled this passion and purpose on her life. She had a growing sense of confusion about why God would create her with this purpose when God was not coming through for her wishes for a child. Leanne and her husband had been trying to conceive for five years. Leanne had medical complications that made conception difficult, and during our work together her medical complications led to a hysterectomy. After grieving this loss, Leanne turned her eye toward adoption with passion and joy. Much like the last five years had been filled with the infertility roller-coaster of hope and lament, the adoption process proved to be a similar pathway. They would learn about an adoption agency, become excited, and then discover discouraging news dashing their hopes and causing them to cycle back to grief. A person of deep faith, she felt troubled and perplexed by the frequent comments of those in her faith community: "Just have hope, God has a plan." The cycling between loss and hope caused her to question God's plan and involvement in this process.

Leanne found complexity in her experiences of lament and hope, and that led to the sense that she had to choose between the two at any given moment of life. She wondered if her lament was a sort of armor for her, protecting her from hoping and being disappointed yet again. At the same time, her partner found it hard when she lamented because it felt like Leanne had given up hope. And when Leanne allowed herself to hope she felt guilty for enjoying life in the meantime—as if she had an obligation to be focused on the sadness.

Further complicating Leanne's relationship to sorrow, she was having a difficult time expressing her lament publicly. At church she felt pressure to be unrelentingly positive. Spiritually, she felt scared to invite God into the pain—what if she did and God let her down. In a desire to protect her relationship to God, she was keeping God at bay from her pain.

Our work together involved me bearing witness to both her lament and her hope, at the same time. In the process we encountered some meaningful questions together: How do we make space for both hope and lament? How do we hold these together? How are we faithful to our own complex emotions when this is difficult for one's partner? As she progressed in treatment, Leanne moved toward a more integrated view where both hope and lament could coexist in the same moment.

The Bible is made up of a kaleidoscope of voices. These voices in the Bible are engaged in a conversation, at times a heated one. While there is a temptation to listen more closely to one voice over another, these voices of the Bible take on greater meaning and texture when held together. Hope and lament, which may appear antithetical—as they did for Leanne—are intertwined and mingled together. Both become more realized when held together.

Most biblical expressions of lament come from an unflinching frame of hope: it is a hope that God will hear and respond, that God is with us even when such a thing seems impossible, and that God will continue to persist in relationship with us amidst our suffering, pain, agony, and anger. We so often define hope as things getting better, but biblical expressions of hope are rooted in God's being—which is with and for us. Black (2005) writes, "Yet the spine of lament is hope: not the vacuous optimism that 'things will get better,' which in the short run is usually a lie, but the deep and irrepressible conviction, in the teeth of present evidence, that God has not severed the umbilical cord" (p. 54). Despite his anguishing circumstances, Jeremiah's confidence that God had not "severed the umbilical cord" propelled him to put forward a fiery protest before God. In contrast, Leanne was initially terrified of putting forward her anguish before God, unsure she could handle the strain on her faith if met with God's silence.

When we shy away from lament with our patients, might we inadvertently be reinforcing their ideas that God cannot handle such a thing? How might it look different to lean into lament, fully assured that God is prepared to hear and hold our anguish without fleeing or retaliating? At the same time, if we disallow, disembody, or neglect the formfulness of lament, we may inadvertently be encouraging a tepid sort of hope that presumes relationship with God to be so fragile that concerns are disallowed, and quarrels not possible. Locating and holding hope in a God who is not severed from us—who is present with us amidst the pain, and yet who may not intervene despite our concerns—is no simple task. What does it require?

First, this fully integrated view of hope and lament must be modeled by the psychotherapist or counselor. To what extent can we ourselves sit in the room with anguish and still hold hope? And in hopeful conversations, can we still remember and hold the complex places of loss and sorrow? There is an honesty in lament—in naming the brokenness and pain—that makes the

naming of gratitude, praise, and thanksgiving all the more meaningful. In this way the rhythm of psychotherapy is much like the rhythm of prayer.

> Without the prayer of lament the other important elements of prayer—praise, thanksgiving, confession, intercession—atrophy and ring hollow. How can praise be free and joyful if the realities of broken human life are not named and lamented. How can heartfelt thanks be given for healing if the wounds are denied? (Billman & Migliore, 1999, p. 19)

Second, we need to look beyond spiritual defenses that might keep our patients from experiencing the fullness of life in God. By "spiritual defenses" we mean ways that religion or spirituality may be used to shield us from the brunt of our own emotions and lived experiences. These can keep us from fully knowing ourselves, and thus from bringing our whole selves to God. Imagine the following therapy dialog and where you might go next in the conversation:

> **Patient:** I really don't mind this because I know God is bigger than any troubles I may face in life. God has always been my greatest source of hope and will continue to be even with this diagnosis.
>
> **Therapist:** That's a beautiful expression of faith and hope in God. I'm wondering what the other moments look like for you.
>
> **Patient:** I'm not sure what you mean.
>
> **Therapist:** Well, you say you don't really mind this because God is bigger than your troubles, but I'm just wondering what it looks like when those words are more difficult to hold onto—maybe in the middle of the night as you ponder what it means to be diagnosed with Stage IV cancer, or when you see the sorrow in your children's eyes. What's it like in those moments when you *do* mind this?
>
> **Patient:** God has always taken care of me.
>
> **Therapist:** [sits silently as patient looks pensive]
>
> **Patient:** I suppose I do feel afraid sometimes.
>
> **Therapist:** I wonder if we could look at those feelings too.

In this example the therapist doesn't deny the patient's source of faith in God but pushes past what initially appears to be quite a protective understanding of hope toward a more complex and integrated perspective where lament and hope can intermingle.

Third, it can sometimes help for the therapist to intentionally create a formfulness to lament (see sidebar "Lament and Formful Grief"). This doesn't require us to have particular stages or worksheets for lament—it's not that formful! But it does call us to reflect on the nature of lament as we see our patients entering into it. For example, as a patient begins to express anger and uncertainty toward God, the therapist can gently point out the relational form of lament that is seen through the Scriptures.

> **Therapist:** Even in your tears and anger I hear the hope that someone may be there to hear you. Wherever God is, however abandoned you feel, you are crying out as if somewhere, somehow, God may be listening.

This sort of observation puts form back into lament and helps prevent it from devolving into free-floating bitterness. Notice this is not the same as positive thinking, and it is certainly not minimizing the emotions experienced by the patient. Instead, this places the grief, sorrow, and anger back into the relational form of lament.

Holding lament and hope together is the substance of living deeply. In knowing the loss of grief for friends and family who have died, we hold onto their memories with a bit more gratitude, joy, and thankfulness. In knowing the deep joy of loves that have fallen, the loss is all the greater. Pain is ever present with delight, and hope runs through them both.

Integration Conversation Starters

1. During times of turmoil, when do you most naturally lean toward hope or lament? What work might you need to do to hold the two together?
2. How do you make sense of holding onto hope in God while still knowing that God may not respond to your cries of protest as you would desire?
3. What forms do you put in place to keep lament from devolving into free-floating bitterness? Based on the strategies you personally use, what implications do you see for counseling and psychotherapy?

Embracing the full spectrum of emotion in psychotherapy. The first funeral I attended in Malawi was a bit jarring. I had attended a handful of funerals in the United States, which were marked with quiet tears, a quietness that felt respectful of those most intimately impacted by the loss. There were exchanges

of compassionate words, and the occasional exchange of well-meaning platitudes. There is awkwardness in grief—a not knowing what to say.

This was not so in Malawi. When we arrived, I heard wailing as the biblical imagery of "gnashing of teeth" came to mind. A group of women paraded in wailing, hovered together, holding one another. Later in the afternoon I sat on a mat in the grassy field with a group of women as we prepared food for the group who had gathered. Throughout the food preparation there were moments of laughter and tears—deep laughter and deep grief displayed through women's bodies and vocal patterns. There was connection. Malawians are embodied people, willing to encounter the whole spectrum of emotions with their minds and hearts and bodies and voices.[1]

I was reminded of my Malawian friends when reading Brené Brown (2010): "There's no such thing as selective emotional numbing. There is a full spectrum of human emotions and when we numb the dark, we numb the light" (pp. 72-73). I experienced deep joy while living in Malawi, and I have come to wonder if part of this was because I experienced a wider spectrum of emotion—both ends of the continuum were opened up, suffering and pain as well as joy and gratitude.[2] I was touching lightness and darkness more fully.

Then I returned to my home in the United States—a country where pain medication is prescribed more than anywhere in the world (Humphreys, 2018), whose antidepressant use is skyrocketing along with drug and alcohol addiction. I'm grateful for the medications available in our country, and see their value, but I wonder if we have become vulnerable to seeing pain as optional in life. Might that, in turn, make us vulnerable to the sort of emotional numbing that Brené Brown is describing? If we take what Brown says to heart, our lives cannot be partitioned and selectively numbed. When we numb ourselves from the depths of the pain, we also numb ourselves from the height of joy and pleasure.

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[1]This experience in Malawi resonates with philosophical and social scientific literature that has looked at mourning rituals in communities across the African continent. For example, Gladys Ijeoma Akunna (2015) explores the therapeutic aspects of embodied and holistic mourning rituals and rites among the Igbo communities in Nigeria, and Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata (2014) consider cultural implications of an African conception of death.

[2]I juxtapose my cultural experience in the United States with Malawi as this is a meaningful reference point for me. And it's important to note we don't have to go outside of the United States to see similar juxtapositions. For example, as in black lament mentioned above, those coming from "high context" cultures are more connected to embodied experiences than those who come from "low context" cultures, such as most white cultures (Hua, 2013). This will likely manifest itself in how one navigates grief and emotional expression.

This cultural temptation toward numbing and avoiding pain surely spills over into the church. It is manifest in the passages we choose to highlight in the Bible. This poses an intriguing question: do we selectively numb the emotions of the Bible in order to make it more palatable? If we struggle personally with some of the more complex emotions of anger, pain, lament, and protest, might we also tend to pull away from the biblical voices that wrestle with these emotions? Billman and Migliore (1999) suggest it may be the church's hesitancy to go to the complex portions of the Bible that contributes to today's growing biblical illiteracy. Parsing the Bible so that it fails to address suffering and lament is experienced as superficial and disconnected from people's lives.

If we have unwittingly engaged in collectively numbing complex emotions by neglecting part of the biblical witness, then what might be the implications for Christian counselors and psychotherapists? Might our patients fear there is no room to discuss anger, jealousy, lust, and despair? How do we create space for people to talk about difficult emotions?

In a society that struggles to create space for grief and lament, and where our silence suggests to grievers that they "should be over it by now," how do we recall the voice of the psalmist who asks: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Ps 13:1). Will we remember the anguish of a people mourning the destruction of their temple and their city, accusing God in their anger?

> He is a bear lying in wait for me,
> a lion in hiding;
> he led me off my way and tore me to pieces;
> he has made me desolate;
> he bent his bow and set me
> as a mark for his arrow.
>
> He shot into my vitals
> the arrows of his quiver;
> I have become the laughingstock of all my people,
> the object of their taunt-songs all day long.
> He has filled me with bitterness,
> he has sated me with wormwood.
>
> He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
> and made me cower in ashes;

> my soul is bereft of peace;
> I have forgotten what happiness is;
> so I say, "Gone is my glory,
> and all that I had hoped for from the LORD." (Lam 3:10-18)

Even in citing this provocative passage in Lamentations, we find ourselves eager to look ahead to the following verses: "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lam 3:21-23). Why are we so eager to press forward to the happy places that make up our praise choruses when the entire context is one of anguish and despair?

A fascinating website, topverses.com, which ranks all Bible verses based on how often they are used, shows the most popular verse in the book of Lamentations is 3:22 ("The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases"). How interesting that we note and cite this verse when the entirety of Lamentations 3 is, well, a lamentation. "He has driven and brought me into darkness without any light" (3:2). "He has made my flesh and my skin waste away, and broken my bones" (3:4). "He has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation" (3:5). "He has walled me about so that I cannot escape" (3:7). "He is a bear lying in wait for me" (3:10). "He has shot into my vitals the arrows of his quiver" (3:13). "He has made my teeth grind on gravel" (3:16). "You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity" (3:43). "You have made us filth and rubbish" (3:45). We cite the hopeful interlude in the middle of the chapter most often, but the context is one of torment and misery. And so also it can be difficult to create space for our patients' distress and alienation to find voice and to see it as part of the sacred work we do as Christian therapists.

Liz, bright and serious, tended to speak in long-winded paragraphs with rapid speech and immediacy. I recall one session where she began with even more urgency than usual. She had recently started yet another new medication. Over the last year the pain from her endometriosis had made her world shrink: dropping out of school, reducing work hours, and experiencing strained relationships. She had already undergone two unsuccessful treatments in attempts to keep her pain at bay. A month into this medication she was experiencing less pain and beginning to imagine a future that didn't entail being bedridden for hours every day. However, having experienced much

disappointment before, she was terrified of trusting this glimpse of hope. She worried, "What if God is tricking me?" This comment was discreetly embedded within a litany of other words.

When there was a pause, I inquired about God's trickery: "Do you feel like God has been tricking you?"

Liz replied with an enthusiastic yes. She noted how God had given her glimpses of relief before only for the pain to return twofold. Plus, she had experienced a number of other losses in her life, making it difficult to believe in a God who cares about her. She slowly had slinked away from her faith community and gave words to a faith that no longer held any practical significance in her life.

Liz had tried on the Christian answers to her grief: "God won't give you more than you can handle." Those answers rang hollow to her, and so I bore witness to her deep questions without offering any easy theological solutions. We explored Liz's protest and refusal to be consoled. Could this have even been a holy protest to her suffering? If Rachel's work, as Hebrew scholar Carolyn Sharp (2014) suggests, was to "keep watch in her terrible grief, insisting on fierce dissent from any and all platitudes designed to erase her loss" (para. 6), then perhaps Liz's anger was a holy endeavor following in the line of Rachel.

Resistance is part of lament—resisting the world the way it is—but when was the last time any of us sang a chorus about resistance at church? Resistance is rarely encouraged in the church. We are much more likely to emphasize compliance. Liz encountered resistance in her soul but felt she would need to muster a quiet compliance in order to return to church. We wonder what this assumption—that one should attend church only after one is done resisting—does for the individuals who might otherwise be part of a faith community and what it does for the community itself.

> The true believer, especially in the practice of prayer, is expected to exhibit compliance rather than resistance. . . . The exclusion of the lament screens out people who find the services shallow or harmful. . . . A clear consequence of banishing the many moods of the psalms of lament—among them, anguish, remorse, fury, protest, even hatred—is that we lose an essential resource in confronting the very emotions that terrify us, in a context where we might receive some help in admitting them, understanding them, and coping with them. (Billman & Migliore, 1999, p. 14)

Amidst a society, and sometimes a church, that collectively numbs out difficult emotions, Christian therapists can model a different way. We can bear witness to the complexity of the world, creating spaces that offer another way of interacting with anger and pain. We can provide a context to faithfully explore painful emotions. We model this as we help our patients find language to explore their angst and their voices of resistance and protest.

When Liz asked, "Is God tricking me?" she was attempting to voice her distress and alienation. She lacked a theological frame to make this an acceptable question, and so she retreated from the church. But what if we can bear witness to the people like Liz who pour out their emotions in our offices? What if it was okay for Liz to direct her distress *to* God rather than directing it sideways with a flurry of other words?

1. In what ways do you agree and disagree with Brené Brown's idea that we cannot "selectively numb" emotion?
2. Drawing from the psalms, Christian prayer can be viewed as an invitation to full-spectrum living, including all our complex emotions. What forms of prayer have been most useful in bringing you to a full awareness of emotion?
3. We have just argued that resistance as a part of lament might help foster a deeper and richer faith. How might this voice of resistance spiral downward toward bitterness or loss of faith when a community cannot be found to bear witness? Conversely, how might resistance enhance faith for those who can find a community that accepts lament? Where does counseling fit into this conversation?

Embracing whole selves in psychotherapy. Having just discussed the importance of embracing a full array of emotions in psychotherapy, it should also be said that bodies matter. Clearly, our physical health affects our emotional well-being, and vice versa. Having a severe toothache, or being sleep deprived, or having persistent back spasms will almost certainly affect emotions such as joy, sadness, and hope. Conversely, emotional wellness affects physical health. One recent study shows that anxiety and depression predict medical illness as well as or better than obesity and smoking (Niles & O'Donovan, 2019).

I (Mark) recall seeing Eileen early in my career for emotional support, because after fourteen abdominal surgeries the physicians simply could not find a reason for her ongoing pain. We worked together for a year, and she found substantial relief in the process of psychotherapy. Unfortunately, my training rotation was ending and when I left Eileen opted not to see the person I referred her to. When I contacted her several months later for follow-up purposes, I learned that she had just gone through another surgery.

Lament as a spiritual practice is not limited to emotional pain or to physical pain, but is often a complex interaction of the two. We are embodied souls, or ensouled bodies if you prefer, and so when it comes to lament it is important to explore the intersections where physical and emotional pain meet. We are not suggesting that counselors should act like physicians. Of course, it is important to refer whenever new or troubling physical symptoms are disclosed in psychotherapy, but even then, we can remain present to lament emerging from physical suffering.

Christians face the persistent problem of Gnosticism that has plagued us since the early days of the church—a belief that spiritual knowledge matters the most and the physical reality of our existence quite a lot less. But it need not be this way, as Christianity itself is premised on God becoming human and living among us (Jn 1:14). By taking on materiality, God demonstrated its goodness and value. Our bodies matter, and so do the pains we experience in our bodies.

Theologian Kelly Kapic (2017) reflects on how physical suffering and pain influences our experience of God, observing how a person struggling with migraines or chronic pain may experience worship services (e.g., loud music or lights may trigger migraines). Our bodies, including our experiences of pain and suffering, impact our relationship to God and to our communities of faith. Pain causes us to ask God hard questions, and these questions are not only acceptable but are even healthy. Kapic observes, "Heartfelt cries and existential questions operate at the core of healthy theology, and suppressing them is more hurtful than a confession of ignorance" (p. 10). And later he writes, "Lament is a legitimate, even necessary, form of fellowship with God when we are in a place of pain" (p. 29).

Kapic's words serve as a good reminder to counselors and psychotherapists to view the complexity and multidimensionality of persons as we consider

the place of lament in our work. Our patients will bring a complex array of sufferings, some of them physical and some emotional, and all of them worthy of our attention and care.

QUERIES FOR PATIENTS

Consider asking your patients questions such as:

1. You're describing an intense sadness. Can we stay here a moment? What if this feeling could just show up right here in the room with us? How would I see the sadness, or where might it show up in your body?

   This is helpful for patients who prefer to tell a cognitive story without exploring much emotion or bodily sensation. Help patients make the connection between their words, feelings, and somatic sensations so they can enter fully into the present moment.

2. As you deal with this diagnosis, and all the pain, how does this affect your heart? What sort of feelings are you wrestling with most these days?

   This is helpful for patients who tend to focus on physical problems and sensations, but not as much on emotions. Making connections between the two can be important for full-bodied lament.

Attachment and lament. Perhaps it's shared genes, but it seems one of the reasons we are both drawn to teaching is because of the mutually transforming work that occurs between professor and student. Mentoring students, watching them stretch, transform, flourish, and in return go into the world to help others flourish is exciting and meaningful work. As the George Fox University doctoral program shifted toward a conversational approach to integration, I (Megan Anna) began hosting book groups. I sensed students craving relational spaces to explore hard questions. Over the years I have hosted conversations exploring the intersection of grief, Christian theology, and psychotherapy.

As students explore hard questions that come up in the face of grief, a number of them have similar reactions: "I thought I was the only one asking these questions. I didn't know it was okay to ask them." Many students experience a collective sigh of relief upon realizing they aren't the only ones, and even deeper sighs of relief to finally have a safe space to

explore these questions. Within this relational space we explore some very difficult questions. One topic that leads to enlivened conversation has to do with the intersection of attachment style and grief, exploring how attachment to God may contribute to our ability to ask hard questions, and our ability to engage honestly with our pain and anger. We explore how expressing anger can actually be indicative of a secure attachment: we have hope that God can withstand our anger. Our comfort to sit with lament may be related to how much we believe God can hold our anger and continue to be in relationship with us.[3] Seeing the sparkle of wonder flashing across students' eyes as they contemplate that perhaps God can hold their anger is a transcendent moment.

On YouTube one can find a powerful video enacting Ed Tronick's "Still Face Experiment" (University of Massachusetts, 2009). For a minute we see the mother beautifully attuned to her daughter as she mirrors back the baby's emotions and facial cues. Then, following Tronick's instructions, for two minutes the mom sits expressionless—still faced. The baby quickly notices this disconnection. Painfully, we witness the daughter attempt to engage mom, and when these attempts fail she quickly transitions into protest. The daughter furiously attempts to draw mom back into her world, to make contact, to engage mom as before. Then you begin to see fear and anxiety come across the baby as there is a loss of safety and hope in the face of her mom's stillness. Reflecting on this experiment, Gilligan and Snider (2017) write:

> In this brief two-minute window, we recognize how trust depends not on the goodness of the mother per se or the absence of disconnection, but on the discovery by mother and baby that *they can find one another again* after what in the course of daily living are the inevitable experiences of losing touch. (p. 174, emphasis ours)

When we engage in protest amidst our suffering, perhaps this is akin to the baby who is protesting in attempt to reestablish connection. Amidst suffering and moments of losing touch with God, perhaps we are asking: "God, are you still faced?" Protest is a reaching out to God, a reaching to find God's face amidst disorganizing suffering and pain.

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[3]Melissa Kelly's (2010) book *Grief* offers a chapter on attachment style to God and grief.

WHAT IS ATTACHMENT THEORY?

Attachment theory grew out of developmental psychology and explores attachment behavior and the emotional ties binding humans together (Simpson & Beckes, 2018). John Bowlby, one of the early pioneers of attachment theory, believed motivation to be linked to an innate desire for emotional attachment (Bowlby, 2008). Attachment bonds early in life are intimately linked to feelings of security and safety (Worden, 2009). According to attachment theory, an individual's experiences with their attachment figure will impact much more than relationships; it influences their experience of "felt security" (Bretherton, 1985, p. 6). Our attachment system influences not only how we approach relationships but also how we self-soothe and find "felt security" during times of stress.

Mary Ainsworth's Strange Situation study (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 2015) highlighted different patterns of attachment. She observed how twelve- to eighteen-month-old children responded to undergoing a series of separations and reunions with their primary caregivers. Ainsworth noted that children who exhibited a secure attachment tended to utilize their caregiver as a secure base, meaning that while they were upset when separated they were easily soothed upon their return and could continue exploring their world. Ainsworth also noted another cluster of behaviors characteristic of children with anxious-resistant attachment styles. These children, rather than being soothed by the return of the caregiver would continue to be distressed and display behaviors of resentment and anger toward their caregiver. Finally, a third group deemed anxious-avoidant showed fewer signs of overt distress, but often had an elevated heart rate and would be distant and emotionally detached upon reunion with their caregiver. These children preferred to find methods for self-soothing in contrast to looking to their caregivers for comfort (Bretherton, 1985).

Attachment influences how we soothe negative emotion by affecting our beliefs about what sort of support is available. Those who have consistently experienced safety and comfort in others will likely turn toward another when distressed. Those who experienced less available support tend to prefer self-reliant strategies to control and reduce negative emotions. Those who experienced uncertainty about the comfort and availability of their caregivers may cope by hyperfocusing on significant relationships and anxiously ruminating about reasons why their attachment figure will abandon them (Simpson & Beckes, 2018). This, in turn, has implications for the nature and quality of our relationships throughout life.

Protest is a component of lament. The Gospel of Mark tells the story of the Syrophoenician woman—a Gentile who approaches Jesus bowing at his feet and requesting that he heal her daughter. Jesus' response was a bit cold: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Mk 7:27). Shockingly, Jesus uses a religious slur, "little dogs," in his encounter with this woman (Tolbert, 2003). Jesus denies this woman while insulting her religion, essentially responding to her pain with a still face. But the woman has faith and is persistent enough to protest as she undercuts Jesus argument, responding: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mk 7:28). Perhaps it's audacity, perhaps desperation, or perhaps she had enough faith to petition Jesus and trust that he would be impacted, that his face would be moved to respond to her protest.

Similarly, Rachel refused premature consolation and persisted in protesting to God. In the classic Ainsworth Strange Situation study, infants who were securely attached to their mothers protested when removed from their mothers and placed in an unfamiliar environment (Ainsworth et al., 2015). So too, our divine protest can be an indication of our attachment and the trust we experience with God. Protest is birthed in the hope that we believe God to hear and be impacted by us.

Bella learned anger to be a negative emotion during her childhood years, in part because she never witnessed it from her parents and in part by belonging to a performance-based faith community where anger was deemed to be unrighteous. She felt pressure to earn her parent's love through correct and compliant behavior. Perhaps remarkably, as an adult she maintained her relationship with God and continued to draw on God as a source of strength despite her early painful religious experiences.

Six months into our work together, Bella experienced a sexual assault. She felt confused and sad but didn't know how to be angry. She especially didn't know how to be angry with God. At first, she pushed this to the side by taking the anger on herself by believing God must be punishing her, that she did something to deserve this assault. The danger with believing God works in this cause-and-effect sort of way is that someone has to take on the badness: either God (for causing/allowing it) or oneself for doing

something to deserve it. Bella was taking on the badness and internalizing it. She was unable to believe that God could hold her anger and continue to be in relation with her, much as Bella's mother was unable to hold Bella's negative emotions and continue to extend maternal love toward her. As Bella internalized this negative message she sunk deeper into a depression. I didn't directly challenge Bella's beliefs, which would have been too disorienting, but instead I gently probed to see if there was space to bring other voices alongside her theology. One session I brought the following words from Nicholas Wolterstorff (1987), written after his son died in a climbing accident:

> For a long time I knew that God is not the impassive, unresponsive, unchanging being portrayed by the classical theologians. I knew of the pathos of God. I knew of God's response of delight and of his response of displeasure. But strangely, his suffering I never saw before. God is not only the God of the sufferers but the God who suffers. The pain and fallenness of humanity have entered into his heart. Through the prism of my tears I have seen a suffering God. It is said of God that no one can behold his face and live. I always thought this meant that no one could see his splendor and live. A friend said perhaps it meant that no one could see his sorrow and live. Or perhaps his sorrow is splendor. And great mystery: to redeem our brokenness and lovelessness the God who suffers with us did not strike some mighty blow of power but sent his beloved son to suffer like us, through his suffering to redeem us from suffering and evil. Instead of explaining our suffering God shares it. (pp. 81-82)

Together we wondered if there was space in her life for a God who perhaps was suffering with her in this pain. This opened up a space where Bella was able to articulate a deep longing to be held by God and momentary glimpses in her life when she had experienced this maternal sense of God holding her. Not by deconstructing her theology, but by adding to it, we were able to explore a different aspect of Bella's attachment to God, a part of God who was able to be in the trenches with her, not over her orchestrating the drama, ensuring her misery. Together we explored her acute pain, acknowledged in the presence of a loving God. She allowed me to bear witness to her pain, and in some way this helped point her toward a God who will hold her most complex emotions and experiences.

Integration Conversation [illegible]

1. When you think about protesting to God or expressing your anger toward God, what comes to mind? In what ways does the idea of protesting comfort or alarm you?
2. After reviewing the Still Face video on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0), ponder moments in therapy when you may have inadvertently been like the still-faced parent. What does it look like to recover from these moments in therapy and repair the relationship with your patient? How does the recovery remind you of God's relationship with humanity?
3. Considering the relational nature of lament, how does the Christian psychotherapist represent God to patients in the therapy office, especially in the moments of deep anguish and despair? How might a psychotherapist misstep in these moments and fail to represent God well?

Moving away from and moving into human experience. As a part of the conversation book groups, mentioned above, I often open our time together with a poem. This often leads to the creation of shared metaphor and imagery we return to throughout the conversation. Recently, I brought in a poem by Nayyirah Waheed (2013)—a work that poignantly explores how people will constrict or expand when hearing another's story.

This poem became integral to our conversations together; we began exploring what it means to expand in the face of another's story, and what it looks like when we contract. We explored our own tendencies to either expand or contract in the face of grief.

One of the themes we have been exploring in this chapter is the vulnerability within Christian history toward constricting in the face of pain and grief. Christian history is scattered with such stories. We suspect this is partly due to the vulnerability to elevate the spiritual above the material (dualism). And yet, the Christian faith has always been about the eternal Word being made flesh. That is, Christianity—properly conceived—has always held to the dynamic interaction of materiality and spirituality so that the two cannot be neatly separated.

Even the great pioneers of the faith struggled with the tendency to be dualistic at times. For example, Augustine believed grief ought to be reserved

for things pertaining to our relationship to God and saw sorrow over earthly attachments as weakness. Thus, Augustine reserved lament for his sins and held reservations about experiencing sorrow for the other losses life invariably brings. Interestingly, Augustine's conversion to Christianity—chronicled so beautifully in *Confessions*—actually made it more difficult for him to express sorrow (Augustine, trans. 1986). Prior to his conversion he freely grieved and mourned the loss of a close friend (expanding to fully experience and embrace the pain). After his conversion, when his mother died he intentionally constricted, holding back tears and berating himself for weeping, which he managed to isolate to just "part of an hour" (Billman & Migliore, 1999, p. 48). Believing that a Christian's grief ought to be restrained, Augustine lamented that emotions could grab hold of him in such a moment. He saw grief as a false attachment to something earthly, calling him to exert more reason to better control his emotions and affections.

Since Augustine, many theologians and church leaders have followed a similar pattern of thought: the image of God imparted in us is manifest most fully through human reason, and the role of human reason is to keep the body and emotions in check so that we can move toward greater sanctification and holiness. We move further from our experience of this world in order to move closer to the heavens. Holiness is found in constricting in the face of earthly pain.

When I brought in Nayyirah Waheed's poem to my conversation group, we talked about grief and meaning: how our meaning-making system (i.e., our religious or philosophical frame that helps us make meaning of the world) holds grief and at times is shifted by grief. At times, loss fits nicely into our system and we can integrate it in. For example, when an elderly person dies after a full and well-lived life, this can easily fit into many of our meaning-making systems. While this doesn't take the sting of loss away, it gives us a system from which to experience and hold the loss. Other times, the loss cannot be integrated (examples of losses that may be difficult to integrate include the loss of a child, a sudden divorce, and so on). The loss comes skyrocketing down, shattering our meaning-making system in the process. We're left with loss and without a narrative to hold it.

Melissa Kelly (2010), a pastoral counselor, discusses how one response to the loss of a meaning-making system is for a person's narrative to shrivel, to

become frozen. People can become frozen in their shriveled narrative for a lifetime. The sterile, medicalized term we have given to such frozenness: complex grief. Complex grief—this feels like a frozen label. Perhaps we in the medical community, too, fall prey to frozen, shriveled narratives.

Expansion brings healing. The work of the therapist is to help narratives expand—to foster narratives that can take in new life and new meaning,

MOVING AWAY IN THE COUNSELING OFFICE

Lest we be too hard on Augustine, I (Mark) should note that I have faced a lifelong struggle moving away from human experience in the counseling office. It's as if I'm a psychotherapy gnostic. I know enough to look for emotion in my patients' faces, and to encourage free expression of feelings, but when the emotion shows up in the room, I have a tendency to turn and run from it.

Some years ago, I was asked to film a therapy session for the American Psychological Association's psychotherapy series. The focus of this particular series was on spirituality, and my session was to illustrate Christian counseling. By God's providence, I ended up working with a delightful patient named Celeste, who had enormous capacity to handle stress and manage multiple responsibilities. But with all the responsibility she took on, she sometimes felt overwhelmed and exhausted. Near the end of our session Celeste and I went through a brief prayer-based meditation exercise, and when we opened our eyes I noticed tears streaming down her face. Every experienced psychotherapist knows this is a critical moment because the tears indicate that we have truly moved into an important emotional space for the patient. What did I do at that critical juncture? I escaped into a cognitive observation by saying, "Now we only did this exercise for a few moments, but I imagine if you did this at home it might have an even more powerful effect for you." Never mind that this was wrong —the power of doing the prayer exercise together made it powerful—it also distracted from this essential moment in our session.

Fortunately, I have gotten better over the years noticing when I distance from my patients' emotions. I caught myself quickly with Celeste, so the next thing out of my mouth was, "Talk about the tears. Where do the tears come from?" And with this, we were able to move back into that sacred space of human sorrow that she was experiencing in the moment.

expanding enough to take in all of what it means to be alive. As we discussed these ideas, the metaphor of thawing emerged. When we attempt to move with people too quickly this can cause breakage—their stories are icicles. Cultivating meaning starts with thawing. You don't try to shift an icicle or it breaks, fragmenting into pieces. First, you must thaw. Expanding around the icicle, cradling it; this is thawing. Therapy involves thawing, and yet it is difficult to host a thawing space when constricted. This work requires expanding in the face of grief. And perhaps, this is precisely what lament is: expansion in the face of suffering.

Interpersonal Conversation Starters

1. Can you think of a time that someone expanded in the face of your story? What was that like for you? What about a time you shared something vulnerable and the person contracted? What was that like?
2. What does your relationship to grief look like? Do you find yourself more likely to expand or constrict in the face of grief? Do you respond differently to different kinds of grief/losses?

Depression and lament. Freud famously suggested that depression is anger turned inward toward the self. This assertion has been the topic of much scientific research over the years, with about half the studies supporting Freud's conclusion, a quarter contradicting it, and a quarter being inconclusive (Abi-Habib & Luyten, 2013). One of the challenges in testing Freud's idea is that depression itself is a complex array of different experiences that are not contained in a single diagnosis. Whereas a particular virus might cause a predictable set of symptoms—sore throat, congestion, fatigue—depression is multifaceted, arises from multiple causes, and cannot be easily described with particular symptoms.

Recent work in Belgium suggests that the dependent nature of depression—that is, the unhealthy yearning to be taken care of coupled with excessive fears of abandonment—is indeed related to the tendency to turn anger inward toward the self (Abi-Habib & Luyten, 2013). In this sense, anger is turned in toward an isolated, fearful place where the self can feel easily abandoned, alone in the cosmos. It's no wonder feelings of depression are related to this

inadvertently discourage their patients from their feelings of anger and abandonment, as if such expressions are contrary to a life of faith. Fourth, one way forward is to gently help patients give voice to their anguish and feelings of abandonment, to express these openly to God, to expand rather than constrict, to allow a lovers' quarrel so that healing can ensue. This is the way of the Hebrew Scriptures as people experienced deep suffering and anguish, and ultimately found renewed hope in God by walking in the way of lament.

Integration Conversation Starters

1. Can you personally identify with the tendency to pull inward and silence your anger toward God? What would it look like to engage in a lovers' quarrel rather than isolating your feelings in your own interior world?
2. Sometimes counselors encourage patients to move away from their faith or their faith communities in times of deep question and doubt. Can you imagine ways this might actually worsen the problem?

Grief and lament. I (Megan Anna) met Pamela shortly after her daughter, Rose, died tragically during a traumatic birth. Pamela was struggling with flashbacks and trauma symptoms associated with the birth and losing Rose. Pamela described her experience of being in the hospital room holding Rose's body, her own body still out of sorts from the traumatic birth—sleepy eyed and tearful—when a social worker came in and handed her a handout on the stages of grief. Keep in mind that these are Pamela's memories. It's most likely that the social worker did more than this within this terribly awkward and painful situation, but the handout left Pamela feeling like it was an encounter marked by objectification, as if she were a patient needing a fix more than a suffering soul in need of a companion.

Inside of suffering and grief there is often a strong pull to constrict and to distance oneself from the one grieving. Death makes us uncomfortable as it brings awareness of our own mortality and existential terror to the surface. Death, dying, grief—these are mysterious things that no matter how hard we try we cannot control. And the mind likes to be in control. One way the mind tries to exert control is to hide the bereaving in our culture, to distance from the grieving.

attending physician, or me. She had walked the journey of grief and loss with those who loved her and would be willing to give up their own lives if it would have saved hers, but the death was to be hers to bear. In awakening to the reality of death she demonstrated something that strangely resembled joy. It was an enlivening buoyancy, a profound awareness that she was dying but probably not today. Thirty-five years later this remains one of the most memorable encounters of my professional life, not so much because she had completed the stages of grief that Kübler-Ross suggested but because we shared a person-to-person encounter that was meaningful to both of us. Grief cannot be contained in a handout—it needs a relationship to bear witness to what is happening.

Integration Conversation Starters

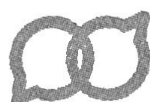
1. Attachment language may be a helpful way of discussing one's relationship to grief counseling. For example, a counselor who relates anxiously to grief may feel pressure to hurry up and "fix" the patient, sprinting through interventions and creating a treatment plan to work quickly through the stages of grief. A counselor who avoidantly relates to grief may be quick to provide a patient with a handout but not engage emotionally. A counselor who securely relates to grief might sit still with the patient, allowing the feelings that are present to be there without a need to fix or run away. Realizing that your relationship to grief is not reflective of your overall attachment style, which mode of relating to grief do you feel pulled toward? What experiences do you notice when sitting with people in pain? When do you want to run, fix, be?
2. In reading through the lament psalms (Psalms 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 85, 90), where do you notice the formfulness of lament? Where do you notice the relational encounters of lament?

Disembodied healing. Art critic Robert Hughes (1993) explores the complex relationship that America has with complaint, observing that "complaint gives you power—even when it's only the power of emotional bribery" (p. 9). In exploring our culture of complaint, Hughes ties this in to what he sees as a larger tendency of American culture toward experiencing a "fetish" with victimhood (p. 11).

2

Uncertainty, Meaning, and Enjoyment

DOES ANYTHING MAKE SENSE WHEN THE WORLD IS SUCH A MESS?



I (MEGAN ANNA) BEGAN WORKING with Kennedy to address anxiety and depression shortly after she delivered her son. Kennedy described her partner, Alexandro, as loving, supportive, and one of the few relationships in her life where she experienced being seen, known, and loved. She discussed her anxiety about Alexandro being a "dreamer" (he immigrated to the United States in childhood, with his parents and without documentation, and prior to 2007). Under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) bill, his ability to stay in the country and have access to streamlined citizenship was safe. Though there had been a number of individuals deported in the communities surrounding us, Kennedy clung to Alexandro's DACA status as her beacon of hope.

One Monday morning I greeted Kennedy in the waiting room, noticing she appeared more visibly sad than previous weeks; she walked a little slower, eyes downcast. When we sat down she informed me of the news that DACA had been revoked that very day. After silently berating myself for not being on top of the news, I was able to catch back up to the moment and sit with her in the face of terror—this fear of the unknown in a climate of uncertainty. One of the questions Kennedy and I sat with that day looked something like this: How are we to be, how are we to live in the face of uncertainty and chaos?

Not surprisingly, these questions enter the therapeutic space. I (Megan Anna) recently heard psychoanalyst Marilyn Charles assert: "We aren't taking seriously that we are living in a destabilized world."[1] Global destabilization is with us in the therapy room. What are our guideposts and anchoring points amidst the destabilization and chaos? Theologically, what is our grounding during times of chaos? Psychologically, when public events are touching and impacting the personal lives of our patients, how do we navigate this—and how does our theology inform how we navigate this?

Questions such as these make us thankful that Ecclesiastes did in fact make it into the biblical canon. At a time when destabilization is causing many to question their faith, isn't it interesting that the sacred text of our faith includes a book about destabilization and disillusionment?

Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes has been described in all sorts of provocative and dark ways, ranging from being the strangest book of the Bible to being an obituary of humanity to having the smell of a tomb (Brown, 2011). So why is this strange obituary of a book that smells of death my favorite book in the Bible? Because this is where I (Megan Anna) can go in the biblical canon to find someone that gives me language amidst existential crises. And more so, the author of Ecclesiastes has an idea or two about how to live well amidst crises.

I experienced my own destabilization while at Wheaton College as I was beginning to rethink cornerstone beliefs of my evangelical faith. I channeled my existential anxiety into study and prayer. Ecclesiastes was soothing balm to my unnerved self. I've always been a sort of "messy" Christian, raising obnoxious questions in my attempt to better understand a thing. I loved the Gospels and portions of the Hebrew Scriptures, and struggled more with Paul's structured, systematic discourse, which felt a little too neat and tidy for my experience of the world. I wasn't sure there was a version of Christianity that I fit into. But while pouring over Ecclesiastes I began to see a version of faith, present in Scripture, that resonates with my questions. Ecclesiastes taught me how to live well and faithfully amidst the uncertainty of my many questions. Ecclesiastes spoke to my experience of being a paradoxical, complex human living in a messy world.

[1]Marilyn Charles, informal lecture, (November, 2017), George Fox University, Newberg, OR.

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WHO IS QOHELETH?

You may notice that we are writing about the author of Ecclesiastes as Qoheleth. *Ecclesiastes* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Qohelet,* which comes from the word *qahal* ("to assemble, gather"). *Qoheleth* is the book's supposed author and is understood as some sort of officer or "gatherer" of an assembly (Longman, 1998). Many have assumed the book to be written by Solomon because the author identifies himself as the son of David in the first sentence of the book. But the name Solomon is never mentioned in the book, and in one place the author refers to surpassing all who were before him in Jerusalem (Eccles 2:9). That would be a strange phrase for Solomon to write because his only predecessor as king would have been David, his father (Limburg, 2006). It may feel uncomfortable to consider authorship other than King Solomon; however, fictional autobiography was a common literary practice throughout the ancient Near East (Longman, 1998; Snell, 2008).

Scholars continue to debate the date of Ecclesiastes, though many agree that the distinctive linguistic features in Ecclesiastes preclude it from being written prior to the Babylonian exile (Longman, 1998; Seow, 1997). Part of the beauty of Scripture is that the various texts reflect God's character, the human personalities of the authors, and the literary styles and motifs of the day, such as linking Ecclesiastes to the wisdom of Solomon by the author identifying as the son of David (Limburg, 2006). The reason we bring authorship into this conversation at all is because the sociopolitical context (and therefore the dating) of this text matters a great deal in understanding the theology of Qoheleth. These are not simply the musings of a king late in life who spent his days living in extravagant luxury and his nights with one of a thousand wives or concubines, but rather the critical insights of a culture of wisdom gathered through centuries of Hebrew history.

writing of Ecclesiastes within the Persian rule (Achaemenid Empire) of Palestine around 450 to 225 BCE. This would have been after the seventy-year captivity in Babylon, after Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon, giving the Jews permission to return to Palestine (Brown, 2011; Limburg, 2006; Longman, 1998; Seow, 1997).

The Hebrew people were transitioning to their homeland: rebuilding homes and temples. This was done in the backdrop of global uncertainty and rapid

political and economic changes. Perhaps the most significant shift had to do with the transition to currency as the standard means of trade.

Some readers may recall the fear and anxiety that occurred at the turn of the century due to the Y2K fear. Given our transition to a digital world with digital calendars and dates, problems arose with how we were going to enter into the next century. Thankfully, there were smart people who foresaw the potential pitfalls and prevented crises from occurring. But what if they hadn't? What might have happened if bank accounts, personal devices, and military software had all fallen off of the rails? It would have been a mess (hence people stocking up on food and water as if a disaster were about to strike)! Qoheleth's audience was living in a similar mess as the transition to a standardized economy was creating uncertainty, chaos, and unpredictability (Seow, 1997). As we know from psychology, the mind likes predictability, it likes taking the guesswork out of our daily lives. This is why habits form such a bedrock of our existence. Psychologist William James (1887) referred to habits as the "enormous fly-wheel of society" (p. 447). When we create habits, we automatically follow a preapproved pathway of actions and steps. Habits are a sort of shortcut for the brain, their predictability and reliability are soothing to the mind.[2] The mind craves predictability; this is part of what is so distressing when experiencing uncertainty. Qoheleth's world was an unpredictable world.

The infusion of money led to an economy that experienced both volatility and vitality. The market was volatile, which meant one could easily lose everything. But on the flip side, those who made lucky investments could become insanely rich overnight. The world Qoheleth spoke into was utterly turned upside down by the monetary revolution. While there was much to fear, there was also the allure of prosperity. It was the combination of being lured in by the fantasy of wealth paired with the likelihood of experiencing economic (and social) devastation that led Seow (2001) to describe this world as one marked with "openings and pitfalls" (p. 242). People were drawn into a fantasy only to find themselves falling into destruction, exacerbating people's existential angst.

On top of the monetary revolution the Persian empire also placed an oppressive tax system on the people. The taxation led to an overwhelming

[2]For more on habits and the mind, check out *The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg (2014).

burden on the common folks. People were borrowing money simply to pay their taxes. And they were borrowing money in an economy where interest rates were unpredictable and could skyrocket without notice, putting people at risk of defaulting on their loans. With no such thing as bankruptcy, to default on a loan meant foreclosure, detention, or even enslavement (Seow, 1997; Seow, 2001).

The dread and anxiety were further intensified because things that used to provide a sense of security and control were breaking down. Social roles no longer offered the security and peace of mind they once did. Even kings could fall into the pitfalls and meet utter destruction! Qoheleth laments this as he writes, "Folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. I have seen slaves on horseback, and princes walking on foot like slaves" (Eccles 10:6-7). In this unpredictable world people struggled to feel secure and safe.

In addition to the social upheaval, keep in mind that the Hebrew people had recently returned to their Promised Land where God had delivered their ancestors, and with a religious conviction that righteousness buffered one from disaster. The wisdom tradition supported by Psalms and Proverbs suggests that God honors the righteous and punishes the wicked, thereby offering a sense of security and safety. Yet in Qoheleth's world it appears not to matter if one is righteous or wicked; all are at risk of falling into destruction. One can imagine Qoheleth simply shaking his head in disbelief as he writes: "There are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous" (Eccles 8:14). The very fabric of their theological code—the wisdom tradition that had brought a sense of comfort and safety—was breaking down.

With the old paradigm fraying (God will bless and protect the righteous, e.g., Ps 5:12), people were left feeling exposed and vulnerable. The more vulnerable people felt, the more they grasped for a sense of control, frantically attempting to cobble together a sense of security amidst an insecure and destabilized world. This fear drove people to engage in all sorts of behaviors in their attempt to find security: hoarding (Eccles 5:13), laboring endlessly out of anxiety or obsessive habit (2:18-23; 4:7-8), preoccupation with money (5:10-11), and envy (4:4) (Seow, 2001). Do any of these sound familiar?

Qoheleth means by *hebel*: "(1) It is without substance. You can't grab onto it. (2) It is not lasting. Now we see the puff of smoke; in a few seconds we will no longer be able to detect it" (p. 11).

Just as smoke or breath is transient and momentary, and the dew on the morning grass evaporates away, so is everything else humans do: nothing is permanent, everything is "chasing after the wind," beyond human grasp (Eccles 1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4; 6:9). Everything isn't meaningless; everything is transient! In an unpredictable world, everything is *hebel*: a chasing after the wind. The obsessive toil we engage in offers an illusion of control, and yet at the end of the day all is *hebel*. The unfortunate linguistic choice to translate *hebel* as "meaningless" has evolved over twenty-six hundred years, involving transitions between multiple languages (Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and English, at least), and has significant consequences for how we interpret Ecclesiastes.

Qoheleth is an early existential thinker, lamenting the human problem of *hebel*. For Qoheleth, *hebel* is central to the very fabric of life. *Hebel* speaks to the tendency for human plans to simply evaporate in the face of life's unknowns only to be replaced with desire and misery (Brown, 2011). Interestingly, *hebel* is identical to the name of Abel in Genesis 4. Abel gained God's approval after offering an honorable sacrifice only to become the victim of sibling jealousy the next moment. Abel gained security but then turned around and lost his very existence (Brown, 2011). Any gain in life, no matter how secure, can be *hebel*: transient, momentary, temporary. Any security one can hope to gain in life is but a temporary sense of security. Through and through, Qoheleth's lens is one of *hebel*.

This might easily drive a person into despair, except for this: God has not abandoned humans in their problem of *hebel*. As adamant as Qoheleth is about the precariousness of our position, he is equally adamant that God has not remained silent amidst the angst of *hebel*. God has responded. The divine response to the human problem of *hebel* is enjoyment (Eccles 5:20). This enjoyment is not a frantic, hedonistic searching for pleasure but a gift freely granted by God in *this* moment (Seow, 2001).

> And here he commends the joy of being together with friends at table and the enjoyment to be found in doing meaningful work. . . . These things, eating and drinking together with family and friends, bring us into contact with God! . . . In fact, good times with friends, days filled with meaningful and enjoyable

Qoheleth reflects on one man so immobilized by fear that he hoards his money only to lose it all through misfortune. Qoheleth observes those "who have hoarded their riches and then lost them all in a bad investment or a stock market crash" (as paraphrased by Limberg, 2006, p. 76). But in this case the crash may have simply been a bank that went under (Seow, 2001). Even in trying to do the responsible thing he lost everything! Similar to what happens in modern-day casinos, the more people risked the more they labored away and hoarded in an attempt to find equilibrium and security. Ironically, the more people worked to offset their anxiety the more anxious they became. The more wealth the more anxiety, as they had more to lose. In fact, it was the anxiety related to losing their wealth that cost these individuals sleep (Eccles 5:12). And even when one did make it to the top, there was no sense of security that they could count on staying there (10:5-7).

One can see that human behavior is not all that different twenty-six hundred years later: obsessive and compulsive work habits, keeping up with the Joneses, compulsive monitoring of 401(k) plans. The human mind detests uncertainty, and left to its own devices will create illusions of certainty and control and obsessively chase after these.

Amidst this destabilization, the old way of seeing the world and understanding their relationship to God and one another was no longer working. This was a new context, and old belief structures no longer fit. They needed a new way of being and thinking in this unsettling climate. This earthy, real-world chaos is one of the reasons Brown (2011) refers to Ecclesiastes as a "theology from below" for the "theologically disillusioned" (p. 15). This is a theology for people in crises.

Despite their desperate attempt to control their situation, people were constantly bumping against the cold reality that the ways of this world were not under human control. And so, they lived in a world where everything is "vanity and a chasing after wind" (Eccles 1:14).

But wait. It turns out that "meaningless" is an incredibly unfortunate translation of the Hebrew word *hebel*. The literal meaning of *hebel* is "breath, vapor, or breeze" (Gibson, 2017). James Limburg (2006), an Old Testament professor, speaks of bringing a cigar into the classroom when talking about *hebel*, slowly unwrapping the cellophane, striking a match, taking a draw of the cigar, and then puffing out the smoke. And in that puff of smoke is what

work—these are the best things in life, and they are God's gifts. (Limburg, 2006, p. 33)

This is not a message of optimistic platitudes, but a message of joy birthed from wrestling with life's messiness. Qoheleth never denies that suffering is part of existence.[3] As Seow (2001) writes, "human life inevitably comes with uncertainties and miseries. Still, [Qoheleth] believes that people may be able to cope with life—with all its miseries and pain" (p. 244). This is the case because God has given the gift of enjoyment to buoy us up amidst the hardships of *hebel*.

In addition to reflecting on God's response to the human plight, Qoheleth offers some insights into how humans may be able to slow down enough in order to be able to accept this gift of enjoyment (Gibson, 2017). When we are left chasing after security and control, it is difficult to slow down and appreciate the enjoyment of this moment:

> Indeed, those who long for perfection and certainty will not be able to function: "One who watches the wind will never sow; one who watches the clouds will never reap" (11:4). Farmers who constantly postpone what needs to be done for fear of inclement weather will be incapacitated by their unwillingness to risk; those who look for perfect conditions before they act will never do anything. . . . The times and seasons are ultimately unpredictable . . . and any attempt to find certainty is but a "pursuit of wind," a grasping of that which is ungraspable. (Seow, 2001, pp. 247-48)

The recipe for living well according to Qoheleth could be summed up in Ecclesiastes 7:14 (NIV): "When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other."

One reason the recipe for contentment is important for Qoheleth is because it helps buffer against the danger of discontentment. Discontentment is depicted as a caricature, as one "whose toil is for his mouth and whose gullet (*nephesh*) is never satisfied (6:7)" (Seow, 2001, p. 245). Discontentment is a grasping monster: the person that takes in greedily but is never satisfied, never full. Seow suggests that this theological imagery would have been recognizable to Qoheleth's audience:

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[3]The following section draws heavily from the work of Choon-Leong Seow (2001) on Ecclesiastes: "Theology When Everything Is Out of Control."

> In Canaanite mythology, Death is an insatiable monster whose mouth is wide open and whose gullet (*npš*) is never sated, threatening to swallow up Ba'al, the god of life. (*KTU* 1.5.2.2–4; 1.23.61–62)

In addition to depicting death, this same imagery is used to portray the "threat of Death" as well as dangers posed by the "insatiable consumption of oppressors" (Isa 5:14; Prov 27:20; 30:16; Ps 73:9, Hab 2:5) (Seow, 2001 p. 245). By using this imagery, Qoheleth is suggesting discontentment can lead to life-threatening, cosmic chaos. However, embedded in Qoheleth's theology is the antidote to this threat. What protects humans from the threat of discontentment is the gift God freely gives—the possibility of enjoyment in this moment (Seow, 2001). This is not about going out to seek pleasure for the sake of instant gratification, but about accepting the gift God has freely granted. In fact, accepting this gift is our responsibility, the appropriate response to the problem of *hebel* (Seow, 2001).

If enjoyment is not about a hedonistic pursuit, then what is it? Enjoyment is "living life with full awareness of its ungraspable nature: eating, drinking, [wearing] bright garments, anointing one's head with oil, and being with one's beloved (9:7-9)" (Seow, 2001, p. 246). Eating and drinking would have been communal activities. Perhaps another way of saying "eat, drink, and be merry" is "be with the people you love, spending time mulling over the meal, conversing, laughing, and being together." The future is unknown, the present moment is here, and we can settle into the gift that is offered in the present. Other expressions Qoheleth uses to describe enjoyment: "find enjoyment" (2:24), "be happy" (3:12), and "be joyful" (7:14). The point here is not that we should all wear rose-tinted glasses—only focusing on the good while ignoring the bad. Rather Qoheleth's message is: "when times are good, 'be in good'; when times are bad, observe" (Seow, 2001, p. 246). We can only really live when we give up a pretense of control; those who seek certainty and control will struggle to function in a world marked by *hebel* (Seow, 2001). He is making a keen psychological observation: the harder we try to grasp security and control the more we suffer, the more anxiety and discontentment we experience. But when we radically accept the uncertainty of life, we free ourselves from chasing the ungraspable, which affords us the capacity to anchor into this moment and the gift of enjoyment that waits for us here. Eat, drink, and be merry: when times are good, be happy.

1. We're about to observe some common themes between the time when Qoheleth was writing and contemporary times. Before you read ahead, what do you notice as similarities between then and now?
2. Ponder the last time you had a delicious meal and good conversation with friends. What felt enlivened in you? How did it help ease disillusionment? How do you feel about seeing times like this as gifts from God?

Ecclesiastes Today

You may have noticed that not many texts or journal articles on the integration of psychology and Christianity discuss Ecclesiastes. Yet here we are diving right into *hebel* in chapter two of this integration book. Some might argue we are making a strange choice, but our view is that Qoheleth's theology has profound implications for our current time and for how counselors and psychotherapists do their work.

Keep in mind that our goal is to model and promote conversation while integrating psychology and Christianity, which means that we will neither attempt nor succeed at giving a thorough theological analysis of Ecclesiastes or any other book of the Bible. Similarly, we can't discuss every possible implication and nuance for how Qoheleth's words apply to counseling and psychotherapy, and we won't build comprehensive integration models based on Ecclesiastes. But perhaps we can generate some conversation that carries forward into how we think about contemporary times and how the wisdom of Qoheleth might help us sit with troubled souls in our offices, and perhaps also with the rumpled places in our own souls. By the end of the chapter we hope you agree that these are important conversations, and maybe even that Ecclesiastes belongs in this book as it belongs in the Bible. If Qoheleth was writing in a chaotic time of uncertainty, we are doing the same. Consider just a few of the parallels.

A time of economic instability. First, economic chaos and upheaval characterized Qoheleth's era; don't we also live in such a time? The so-called Great Recession of 2008 has given way to a new economic confidence a decade later, but who's to say that we won't be in another financial downturn, or even

economic tragedy, by the time you read this? Some predict bear markets, some bull markets, but the reality is that none of us knows, and the potential for rapid economic reversal is part of contemporary life.

While it may seem intuitively obvious, the economic crash of 2008 was one of the first times social scientists actually looked at mental health consequences. Christodoulou and Christodoulou (2013) reported increased rates of depression, suicide attempts, and alcoholism throughout Europe, including increased calls to an emergency crisis line in Greece. They note that for every 1% increase in unemployment, a 0.79% increase in suicides can be observed (among those younger than sixty-five years). In the United States, McInerney, Mellor, and Nicholas (2013) reported that those who lost wealth in the economic crash reported increased subjective feelings of depression and increased antidepressant use. Clearly, the instability and unpredictability of our economic systems has implications for emotional well-being, just as it did in Qoheleth's day.

As part of the baby-boomer generation, I (Mark) wonder if we have made ourselves vulnerable to economic downturns by caring overly much about professional success and accumulating wealth. I watch Megan Anna's millennial generation with interest. They'll spend more on a cup of coffee than my generation, and on Ubers and Ubering—words that were neither nouns nor verbs when I was young (or even when Megan Anna was!)—yet they are also less inclined to mark their identity by aggressive career development. In my generation we set out to make as much money as we could early in our careers and to establish ourselves so that we could progress in a career path. Megan Anna's generation cares more about finding work they enjoy and having a positive influence on society (White, 2015). Millennials have taken their share of criticism for their tendency to lack ambition and switch jobs, but I wonder if Qoheleth might commend them more than criticize them. I can imagine Qoheleth looking at my boomer generation and saying,

> You work hard all your life to build a career, to become stable and established, and then it all goes away with a corporate scandal or an unexpected health crisis. Your 401(k) balances aren't as stable as you think, and neither is the company that employs you. In fact, think of it as vapor that disperses in the wind. Here's an idea: Uber (verb!) to a local coffee shop, spend a ridiculous amount of money on a cup of fair-trade coffee, sit and enjoy the moment with your friends, and let a sense of connection, contentment, and joy wash over you.

Of course, I have overstated and oversimplified here. There is ample reason to work hard and save for retirement, but I sometimes wonder if those in my generation have elevated financial security to a place of idolatry. We have assumed a stability that is simply not true. I have a professional acquaintance who was about ready to retire from Enron with a huge portfolio, and then the scandal of 2000 broke. Three million dollars of stock options turned out to be *hebel*. I remember having this conversation in the locker room after enjoying a game of noon basketball with a group of aging men, and it occurred to me then, as it does now, that the joy of playing basketball with friends may bring more happiness than a large stock portfolio. Now this acquaintance is a Christian college professor with a meager salary and modest retirement account, a good jump shot, and deep joy in his life.

***Life, death, and* hebel.** Ponder again Professor James Limburg's illustration of blowing a puff of cigar smoke to illustrate the fleeting nature of *hebel*. And now consider all those you hold dear who have passed from life to death, or are soon to do so. This is the world in which we live, where life itself is unpredictable, uncertain, and fleeting.

Kate Bowler's (2018a) memoir, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved* describes her diagnosis with stage IV cancer at the age of thirty-five. Bowler is a professor of Christian history at Duke Divinity School. Just out of graduate school and beginning her promising career at Duke, the diagnosis rocked her world. Describing the moments after her diagnosis, she writes:

> It is impossible. It is an impossible thought. I thought this life was only getting started, but now I am supposed to contemplate its sudden conclusion. I am supposed to imagine the end of my whirling mind, the slowing of my breath, a sunken vessel where my heart now beats. But, worse, it would be the conclusion of this thing I have built—a family. (p. 12)

In a powerful TED talk, she states:

> Aren't I good? Aren't I special somehow? I have committed zero homicides to date. So why is this happening to me? . . . I believed that hardships were only detours on what I was certain would be my long, long life. As is [the] case with many of us, it's a mindset that served me well. The gospel of success drove me to achieve, to dream big, to abandon fear. It was a mindset that served me well until it didn't, until I was confronted with something I couldn't manage my

> way out of. . . . Anything I thought was good or special about me could not save me—my hard work, my personality, my humor, my perspective. I had to face the fact that my life is built with paper walls, and so is everyone else's. (Bowler, 2018b)

With each year of living it seems we accumulate more stories about life being built with paper walls. Life itself is like a puff of smoke, like a vapor, like *hebel*.

As I have now entered my sixties, I occasionally succumb to the life-expectancy calculators I find online. How many more years can I anticipate on earth? These calculators ask questions ranging from blood pressure, lifestyle choices, the longevity of my parents, exercise and eating patterns, and so on. At the end, after entering all sorts of information, I click the calculate button and learn I will likely have a long life. And then I remember Kate Bowler's words about life being built with paper walls. Like anyone else, I could be diagnosed with a terminal disease at any moment. We may try to grasp and hold on, and we may even succeed for a while, but life is fleeting. Sometimes the uncertainty of life seems to be our only certainty. Is it any surprise that our patients deal with anxiety about living and dying? What might we have to offer in the midst of these anxieties?

Professor of Old Testament William Brown (2001) offers a compelling anecdote of Qoheleth's invitation to enjoyment amid life's uncertainty.

> Since death, the final sabbath, serves as the starting point for Qoheleth's work ethic, I cannot conclude without reflecting on the untimely demise of a close friend. A gifted pastor and devoted spouse and parent, Lee died in an absurdly tragic auto accident on Father's Day. During the last days of his life, he received the result of an informal survey conducted in his congregation as part of an evaluation process for the renewal of a grant. One question in the survey asked members to identity the most significant form of ministry the church had provided over the year. Lee was disappointed that scarce reference was made to worship, and nothing to his preaching and pastoral abilities. At the top of the list, rather, were potluck suppers! Through Lee's ministry and death, I have come to appreciate anew Qoheleth's sobering message. The giftedness of life, Qoheleth presages, is found at the table and the cross, not in accolades and rewards. If, as the gospels claim, the kingdom of God is a banquet of fellowship, then perhaps the highest form of service, next to hosting, is to help set the table and enjoy it with others. (p. 284)

Disillusionment. Many people in the United States are leaving organized religion. Religious "nones" are a growing part of our population, and 78% of these nones were raised in a religion (Lipka, 2016). And the rate at which people are leaving is growing, with the rate of nones in the United States rising from 16% in 2007 to 23% in 2014. Strikingly, 35% of millennials are nones (Lipka, 2015).

Why people are leaving religion is a complex topic that has filled the pages of many books, but even if oversimplified it seems clear that disillusionment with religious organizations is a substantial reason. Try a simple Google search with "love Jesus" and "hate church" as the search terms, and you will find hundreds of books, blogs, articles, and videos exploring how disillusioned people are with organized Christianity.

Two findings are crystal clear from recent research on the psychology of religion. First, many forms of religion and spirituality are associated with positive health markers (Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012). For example, those who attend church live longer than those who don't, even after controlling for lifestyle differences such as tobacco and alcohol use. Second, despite these general connections between health and faith, many people find religion and spirituality sources of conflict and struggle (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014). These religious and spiritual struggles are associated with all sorts of negative outcomes, including poor physical health, emotional distress, depression, anxiety, and "even higher mortality rates" (Exline et al., 2014, p. 209).

Religion is good for us, but religious struggle creates distress (Exline et al., 2014). Yet this is how many people live today. Frustrated and disappointed in faith, they leave organized religion behind. Our natural inclination is often to woo people back, to remind them that they will live longer if they come back to church or that returning to faith will make them faithful, obedient souls rather than wayward apostates. And here is where Ecclesiastes stops us from resorting to our default. Confronted with similar disillusionment, a book in the biblical canon refuses to woo back the wayward. If anything, Qoheleth validates a degree of disillusionment and struggle.

Ecclesiastes addresses the challenging topic of disillusionment without avoiding it or trying to make it pretty. Qoheleth is discussing the experience of many people today, which means we still need to be listening to what he is teaching us, maybe especially those of us seeking to integrate faith and psychology amidst an increasingly religiously fluid context.

Other parallels could be mentioned between the situation Qoheleth addresses in Ecclesiastes and our contemporary times. We live with political upheaval, where polarization and debate have become the norm. The sociopolitical backdrop of Ecclesiastes was similarly chaotic. In our day we face gross inequalities between the privileged and those who are not. Similarly, in Qoheleth's day property grants (ability to own land) were given based on favoritism and privilege. If any of us were to make a world we would likely reward moral character with financial gain, but does it seem to anyone else that often these are utterly unrelated or maybe even inversely related? In the same way, Qoheleth muses that the righteous get what the wicked deserve, and vice versa (Eccles 8:14).

The chaos, uncertainty, instability, and disillusionment of Qoheleth's day feel familiar to us both inside and outside the counseling office. And this has implications for how we integrate Christian thought with our professional work.

Implications for Counseling and Psychotherapy

We began this chapter with Megan Anna sitting with a woman whose partner was in peril the day DACA was revoked and Mark sitting with a pastor whose longtime spouse had recently left him for a former high school flame. Each of us sat with our patients in a place of deep disillusionment, profound questioning, and struggle. *Hebel* shows up often in the therapy room, and Ecclesiastes has implications for integration conversations. We begin with the importance of empathy.

Deep empathy. Empathy is the first concept taught in almost every graduate program in counseling and psychotherapy. We distinguish it from sympathy, we debate whether it is both necessary and sufficient, as Carl Rogers (1957) argued. We teach skills to communicate empathy, including reflections, acknowledgments, restatements, and so on. We may even learn appropriate body posture to communicate empathy—how to lean forward in our chairs at strategic moments to communicate our concern for what the patient is experiencing. With time we learn to connect various theories with empathy. Client-centered therapists see it as freeing the patient to grow, cognitive therapists say we're paving the way for effective therapy techniques, psychodynamic therapists believe we're creating a new sort of relationship that will help our patients heal.

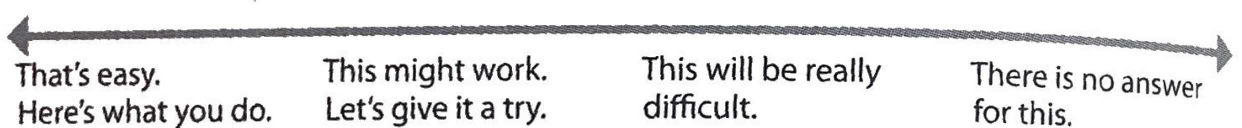
This is all good, but notice that empathy is typically conceived as instrumental. In other words, we see empathy as a means to a therapeutic end of helping a patient become less depressed or anxious, less bound up by shame and more connected to others. Empathy is a therapeutic strategy.

Ecclesiastes causes us to wonder if there is a deeper sort of empathy that is not intended as a means to an end. This is an empathy of presence, just being with one another amidst *hebel*. This sort of presence acknowledges the pain of the other, even shares in the pain, but without invading the other by tidying anything up or imposing hope when hope is hard to find.

If you have ever had this sort of deep empathy connection with another, you'll likely recognize that it could not be easily taught in an interviewing skills class. There may be body postures that help, and it may or may not connect to particular diagnoses or treatment strategies, but all this misses the point. This is a deep experiential connection between two souls sitting together in the unanswerable questions of life.

WHEN ANSWERS ARE HARD TO FIND

Imagine going to a physician and describing a problem you are having with your health. The response you get back would likely fall somewhere on this continuum:



Of course, we hope for answers on the left side of the continuum, though we recognize that someday we will likely hear something on the dreaded right side. I (Mark) recently lingered on the right side of the continuum while sitting with an older adult with congestive heart failure, noting the desperation in his face as he described his shortness of breath and then asked, "What do I do?" I had no answer. No one did.

Psychologists and counselors find themselves sitting with people in anguish and sometimes having no answers to ease the pain. Perhaps this is why we learn client-centered skills first in graduate school—to keep us from rushing toward easy answers when there are none.

When we find ourselves on the right side of the continuum, this is an Ecclesiastes moment, when we accept hard questions about life's fleeting and unpredictable nature, lean into deep compassion and empathy for one another, and somehow learn to look for the gifts offered us in whatever precious moments remain.

AUTHOR DIALOG: SITTING STILL WITH DISILLUSIONMENT

Mark: Megan Anna, I recall a time in your own faith development shortly after your seminary internship in Ghana where you had some profound questions about your faith. You seemed deeply disillusioned at the time. I'm curious about what you found helpful and not so helpful during that time.

Megan Anna: Indeed, in Ghana I contacted deep and unnamable darkness, which led to some difficult and painful questions. Previously I had experienced crises of faith that were cognitive in nature. However, this was a different sort of crisis. These questions arose out of touching terror and darkness and being unable to find God in the middle of it—I suppose in a sense they were emotional questions. "Questions" is likely a misleading label, because "question" implies there were words and names for my experience. Perhaps it's better to say I had unformulated emotional responses to the darkness I'd touched. And the theological frames I held at the time could not hold this level of tension and pain. During this period it felt more honest to identify as agnostic than as Christian, and in fact opening myself up to the possibility of "not knowing" was incredibly freeing and healing. Giving myself a break from attempting to make sense of the senseless was what I needed to heal and restore my soul. I found it incredibly painful and difficult to sit with people who attempted to "prove" Christianity to me. Their arguments rang like deep, empty echoes through my body. It made me feel missed and my pain unseen. I recall a conversation with you that felt very different. At the time I hadn't been to church in a few years, and I was informing you about my identity as agnostic, something I imagine was incredibly painful for you. Somehow you created space for my pain amidst your own and you reflected, "Perhaps leaving your faith for this season is the most consistent—and perhaps even the most faithful—thing you could do right now." I don't know if you recall that conversation, or if you recall saying those words. I have often wondered what compelled you to give me your blessing to leave even when it must have caused you so much pain.

Mark: As you know now that you have your own children, the love between a parent and child has no measure. I imagine this is the way God loves us also, only much more so than what we can ever imagine. I have never questioned God's grip on you, which made it clear that my job was simply to be present with you in a place of deep empathy and connection.

Megan Anna: One thing I'm reflecting on as we write this is that it became uncomfortable to talk about religion with many people at that time. Likewise, when I was returning to faith you were one of the few people who felt comfortable to discuss this with. Your openness to my leaving made it so we could continue the conversation of my return to faith when I was ready. I imagine you aren't aware of what a meaningful gift this has been for me.

Mark: Thank you, Megan Anna. At the risk of being sappy in the pages of a published book, I also imagine you aren't aware of what a precious gift of grace you have always been to me.

At first this may seem contrary to Christianity. Isn't the Christian message one of hope and fulfilled promise? Shouldn't we always be bringing a good report of the active and present work of God in our universe? Perhaps. But as Qoheleth reminds us in the most famous part of Ecclesiastes, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Eccles 3:1). And every seasoned clinician knows there is a time just to be present in a deep place of empathy and connection as tears stream down the cheeks of the one sitting with us. This is sometimes the work God calls us to—simply being present to the disillusionment of a confusing world and to the other who is nearly drowning in it.

In the biblical story of Job, his friends saw his great suffering amidst unparalleled *hebel* and they experienced deep empathy, sitting silently with no words for seven days and seven nights (Job 2:13). Then they opened their mouths and didn't do so well. Perhaps one of the most important starting points in clinical integration is simply knowing when to sit quietly and when to say something. And when we do speak, we do so in ways that acknowledge the uncertainty and disorderliness of life rather than trying to tidy up or explain away anything.

In the Gospel of John, when Jesus was confronted with the death of his friend Lazarus and the anguish of the community surrounding Lazarus, Jesus did what friends do: he wept (Jn 11:35). He then provided some amazing evidence of divinity by raising Lazarus, but first he wept. Those observing remarked how much Jesus loved Lazarus, not because he raised him from the dead, but because he wept.

[illegible]

1. Think of a time when you didn't know what to say in a counseling session. What were you feeling and thinking at that moment? What might it be like to release any feelings of being incompetent or stuck in order to simply be present with the person you are sitting with?
2. What is it like to experience your own *hebel*? Try spending some time quietly sitting with your own disillusionment and questioning about life. Notice what feelings and instincts bubble up in the process. To what extent must a counselor learn to sit alone in uncertainty before competently showing deep empathy to another who experiences uncertainty?

The first task of good clinical work is to learn to sit still in the presence of pain. Qoheleth creates space for a deep sort of empathy rooted in presence more than solutions. This space is big enough to tolerate existential disillusionment.

Existential disillusionment. Toni first came to see me (Megan Anna) when she was sixteen, having struggled with crippling depression and anxiety for the last four years. Likely related to her early life trauma, Toni was hypervigilant about anything that might threaten her safety. Then just a week into our treatment a massive school shooting occurred in another part of the country. She found herself constantly scanning her classroom throughout the day and startling at loud sounds.

As I sat with Toni, I noticed an inner tension for how to approach treatment. Part of me wanted to offer reassurance, focusing on statistics to help her see how unlikely it is to be shot at school, even with the alarming increase in school shootings and the media attention it garners. But another part of me wanted to simply honor the pain and terror she experienced amidst life's unpredictability. Predictable pain is hard enough, but unpredictable pain has an excruciating quality.

Even if it's illusion, the mind likes to have a sense of control. The angst that comes with a terrorist attack or random violence can knock us on our knees in fear because of the unpredictable, chaotic nature of such pain. It reminds us of our existential vulnerability. This is part of being human—to touch this unpredictable pain that we would prefer to spend our life avoiding.

We need theology that can hold us when we touch this sort of pain, that can sit with us in the questions that arise when wrestling with the internal and external chaos.

Qoheleth gives voice to the uncertainty, lament, and pain of his people and to the vulnerability that inevitably results. Our patients also experience this sort of vulnerability, as we do as counselors and psychotherapists. My inclination to give probabilities and statistics may have been coming from my own sense of vulnerability and desire to help contain and control distressing thoughts. Part of the sacred work we do as therapists is create space where people can speak their disillusionment, where they can talk about life's paper walls. In a society otherwise obsessed with the illusion of control, having a space where one can put down illusion and address the existential terror that comes with being human can be healing.

[illegible]

1. People often initiate treatment after an unexpected life event (e.g., relational, situational, onset of mood disorder). For many, in addition to the stressor they're facing, they may be feeling disillusioned about how the world works, either living in the disillusioning aftermath of realizing life is made of "paper walls" or working tirelessly to find an explanation to the life event so they can protect their sense of order. Both embracing life's fragility or working in overdrive to defend against it can cause problems. What is it like for you to work with these two very different responses to the human problem of *hebel*? Is one more comfortable to sit with? What does it evoke in you? How does this connect to your own experience with life's vulnerability?
2. In your counseling work, do you ever experience tension between wanting to help reduce a patient's angst versus simply being present to your patient in the present moment of intense emotion? Assuming there is an appropriate time for each of these approaches, when do you find it most useful to help reduce troubling feelings in a patient? When is it best to simply be present with the patient's deep questions and disillusionment?
3. Counseling often happens at the intersection of collapsing paper walls. What is it like to spend so many hours in the debris of *hebel*? What have you found to be helpful anchors in this work?

The renowned neuroscientist Daniel Siegel describes the experience of being empathetically connected and attuned as "to feel felt" (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003, p. 61). Science arising from interpersonal neurobiology is telling a compelling story: powerful things take place when a person feels felt. As we open up a space where people feel seen, heard, and felt this in return opens up a space within the individual to experience greater internal integration between their feelings, thoughts, and sense of self. It turns out external connection and internal integration are related to one another (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003).

Radical acceptance. At first glance, the conversation with Toni we just described may seem to pit cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) approaches against more relational and process-oriented approaches. Certainly the relational approaches to psychotherapy have always emphasized being present to the other without rushing to offer solutions, but as one who has written a couple of books about Christian approaches to CBT, I (Mark) also want to suggest there is ample room for CBT therapists to be fully present with whatever experiences and emotions patients bring, including those who come with deep existential disillusionment.

One third-wave approach to CBT is called acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT; see Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012). ACT is not a form of therapy affiliated with any religion but can be easily adapted for Christian approaches to therapy (e.g., Knabb, 2016; Nieuwsma, Walser, & Hayes, 2016; Sisemore, 2014). It is a complex theoretical system based on relational frame theory, but to simplify it here consider just the descriptors in the title: acceptance and commitment. Commitment is about living according to our values. Acceptance is about giving up our various ways of avoiding life's pain and struggle and allowing ourselves to accept whatever is happening in the moment. So, if a patient like Toni is sitting with tears of anxiety, the ACT therapist is not likely to use a second-wave CBT strategy to get her to change her thinking and reassess the likelihood of getting shot at school. Rather, the therapist will sit with Toni just as she is and help her "feel felt" and validated, and more able to integrate and accept her feelings rather than deny or repress them. Rather than running away and avoiding those feelings, it is better to sit right in the middle of disillusionment with her, and even to see how these feelings make sense. Given her early life trauma, and in light of the prominence of school shootings these days, of course she is feeling hypervigilant

and anxious. Her brain is doing just what brains do. Therapist and patient work together to radically accept whatever feelings show up in the room, and to stop avoiding them. It turns out these feelings don't have to run a person's life (thus, the commitment part of ACT), but still the first part of ACT is always to accept and be present to whatever is being experienced.

Recently I (Megan Anna) attended an intensive ACT training where the leaders engaged in "real plays," inviting participants in the training to volunteer to do real therapy work in front of some two hundred people. I squirmed in my seat a bit as I watched Dr. Robyn Walser work with volunteers on creative hopelessness. Creative hopelessness is about maintaining hope for the human being while giving up all hope that anything the person does in an attempt to control the problem will result in different outcomes. This involves a radical acceptance that there is no avoiding, outrunning, outsmarting, or outperforming our pain. Pain is unavoidable. Moving toward an enriching, meaningful life involves accepting this reality. It also involves transitioning the hope we have so that it's not about trying to *control* the pain but being able to *carry* the pain.

QUERIES FOR PATIENTS

Consider asking your patients questions in the following ways:

1. I see you working really hard to save this relationship even when she tells you it is over. What does that feel like on the inside to be working so hard with not much hope of bringing her back?

   Rather than directly confronting a patient to move toward radical acceptance, sometimes it is best to gain a glimpse of the inner experience first, which allows for a deep sort of empathy. In a safe place of empathy, patients are more willing to set down their strivings and accept the reality of the present moment.

2. When you called this week, you were punching in her name on your phone, wondering whether she would answer, and what she would say. You describe the vulnerability of that place. Can we take a closer look at that right here in the office? What is it like to feel so vulnerable?

   Bringing the patient into the present moment in the office can be a good way to help carry the pain rather than trying to control the circumstances that contribute to the pain.

Qoheleth spent a great deal of time and depth reflecting on humanity's plight: What are we to do in the face of this overwhelming uncertainty and chaos? How are humans to live in a world that is utterly out of human control and where everything that humans do is ultimately transient? What are we to do with a world that appears senseless and incomprehensible? How do we respond to *hebel*? His message is by no means that life is meaningless. Rather his message is one of radical acceptance, that there are "no fail-safe rules, no formulas that will guarantee success, nothing that one can hold onto, for everything is as ungraspable as vapor" (Seow, 2001, p. 243). According to Qoheleth, all of these unfortunate, unpredictable events will continue to occur despite how much humans toil and work to plan for the future and create a sense of security. People will be stuck on this treadmill of attempting to attain security, thus preventing them from abundant living until they are able to give up any illusions of control.

Those who cling to perfection and certainty will struggle the most, paralyzing them from action. "Whoever observes the wind will not sow; and whoever regards the clouds will not reap" (Eccles 11:4). Here Qoheleth is seeing that some farmers are postponing the work that needs to be done for fear of bad weather. In their attempts to avoid risk they are immobilized by fear. Qoheleth's message is that in accepting the conditions of *hebel*, people ultimately experience greater freedom; his message is essentially an ancient text about radical acceptance of our human predicament.

In Ecclesiastes we confront the inherent vulnerability of our humanity. Out of this vulnerability Qoheleth draws a deep appreciation for the gift of the present moment—gifts of relationship, food, drink, and joy. Only when one radically accepts their vulnerability do they become free to fully experience the gifts of any present moment.

Toni has difficulty contacting the present moment due to her desire to control future moments. She desires to control the chaos of her emotions, but the illusion of control causes her to toil ceaselessly. Toni is trapped: she wants to control her environment so that she feels safe enough to be present, but the more she works toward an illusion of control the more difficult it becomes to be present. If Toni were able to reach a place of radical acceptance of the human condition of vulnerability and the realization that control is but an illusion, it could help her become more present in her life, which would move her closer to her desired values of being in relationship with others.

1. What are some of the things your patients do to keep an illusion of control? What are some things you do? What do these things cost us?
2. What are some of the ways that our profession falls into the trap of creating an illusion of control (e.g., manualized treatment plans, symptom reduction checklists, etc.)? What does this cost us as a profession?

Valuing the present moment. I (Megan Anna) met Sam when he was struggling with his adjustment to married life. As a result of a tumultuous and abusive childhood, he formed some powerful defenses to protect himself. In addition to tending toward avoidance in relating to others, he also developed some obsessive and compulsive patterns. His home, and life in general, needed to be a certain way or he would become anxious and irritable. Similarly, he needed to stay busy. Slowing down was incredibly painful, as evidenced by the speed in which he talked in our sessions. His desire to control situations and environments was bleeding over into a desire to assert control over his partner's choices. In moments of vulnerability it was clear how desperately he wanted to be able to slow down and appreciate and be with his wife who loved him. When he did, he became paralyzed with pain and fear. Put simply, Sam had learned to avoid the present moment, but the avoidance increased his emotional and relational pain. One of our goals in therapy, then, was to slow down and help him identify ways he protected himself by staying busy and overly focused on the future, and to help change his relationship with the present moment.

Sam is not alone in having an anxious, future-oriented relationship to time. The industrial and technical revolutions that shaped modern society have leaked into how we think. It has become so much a part of contemporary life that we can hardly recognize it unless we have opportunity to step outside of our own culture for a season.

I anticipated that living crossculturally would change me—that it would affect some of my thought patterns and ways of understanding the world. However, one thing I didn't suspect is that it would change my relationship to time. After living in Malawi for two months, I began to notice my dreams shifting from future-oriented dreams to present- and past-focused dreams.

I also noticed my daily mind chatter began to shift. In the United States my thoughts are often preoccupied with the future: articles to write, papers to grade, goals to be achieved. In Malawi my mind became more focused on the present moment, as well as meaningful reflections of past events. Malawians tend to be much more present focused in their way of thinking about the world. It turns out this can be an incredibly powerful antidote to anxiety, as it is often said, "anxiety usually lives in the past or the future."

Another place where we might experience dissonance between present and future is in the work we do. Qoheleth was not opposed to work, but he rearranges our relationship with it. Rather than toiling to achieve monumental future results that in the end are like vapor, it is better to enjoy our work in the present moment:

> Unlike gain, which is gleaned *from* one's labors, enjoyment is found *amid* the toiling. Qoheleth's point is that the quest for gain invariably reduces work to the level of means and, thus, to toil. But stripped of the toiler's obsession with gain, toil takes on a different character. As enjoyment of the momentary pause comes to replace the ever elusive prospect for gain, work, thereby, is restored as gift and vocation. In other words, enjoyment resides beyond *and* within the realm of work. (Brown, 2001, p. 281)

Ecclesiastes reminds us that to escape the toil, the rat race, and the persistent anxiety, one needs to slow down and show up to the present moment. Qoheleth's call to "eat, drink, and be merry" is an invitation to be present. So is the invitation to enjoy our work: "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God" (Eccles 2:24). Anchoring ourselves to the present moment can be one of the best responses to our future-oriented anxiety that is beckoning to us and tempting us toward endless toil and illusions of control.

Integration Conversation Starters

1. Listen to how your patients talk. Where are they located in time? Where is their anxiety located? How do they respond to slowing down?
2. Where are your thoughts typically located during a therapeutic session: the past, present, or future? What pulls you into the past or the future? What is it like for you when you stay in the present with your patient?

In the introduction we identified our preferred approach to integration as conversation, which is done in the present moment. This sort of integration seems particularly fitting for clinical settings—where conversation is our primary means of treatment—and for a time in history where people are experiencing Qoheleth's wisdom that is born out of disillusionment. This is a wisdom to be present to the moment. Yesterday is gone, tomorrow flits away like the morning dew, but right here, right now, we have this moment of life to experience fully. Nouwen (1990) puts it beautifully:

> It is hard to live in the present. The past and the future keep harassing us. The past with guilt, the future with worries. So many things have happened in our lives about which we feel uneasy, regretful, angry, confused or, at least, ambivalent. And all these feelings are often colored by guilt. Guilt that says: "You ought to have done something other than what you did; you ought to have said something other than what you said." These "oughts" keep us feeling guilty about the past and prevent us from being fully present to the moment.
>
> Worse, however, than our guilt are our worries. Our worries fill our lives with "What ifs": "What if I lose my job, what if my father dies, what if there is not enough money, what if the economy goes down, what if a war breaks out?" These many "ifs" can so fill our mind that we become blind to the flowers in the garden and the smiling children on the streets, or deaf to the grateful voice of a friend.
>
> The real enemies of our life are the "oughts" and the "ifs." They pull us backward into the unalterable past and forward into the unpredictable future. But real life takes place in the here and now. God is a God of the present. God is always in the moment, be that moment hard or easy, joyful or painful. When Jesus spoke about God, he always spoke about God as being where and when we are. "When you see me, you see God. When you hear me you hear God." God is not someone who only was or will be, but the One who is, and who is for me in the present moment. That's why Jesus came to wipe away the burden of the past and the worries for the future. He wants us to discover God right where we are, here and now. (pp. 17-18)

Cracks in our meaning-making systems. Human beings make meaning out of the ambiguities of life. These ways of making meaning can be roughly divided into global meaning-making systems, such as how religion helps us see the world, and situational meaning-making systems, such as how

SOME WAYS OF GETTING PRESENT

Learning to attend to the present moment can be challenging, perhaps especially for the goal-oriented people who are most likely to read (and write!) a book like this. Here are some strategies for learning to stay present to the moment.

1. Wash your hands with warm water, specifically focusing on the sensations of the water and the soap. Many might find washing dishes to be the ideal time for this.
2. Sit quietly and pay attention to your breathing. Notice the rhythm and sensations as you inhale and exhale.
3. Contemplative Christians have practiced centering prayer for the last several decades. This Trappist practice was suggested by Thomas Keating and M. Basil Pennington in the 1970s but has roots that go back to the earliest times of Christian history. Centering prayer involves sitting quietly in God's presence and releasing any distracting thoughts (Bourgeault, 2004).
4. Try eating a meal mindfully. Slow down and notice the tastes and sensations of each bite. What sensations do you experience in your mouth and other parts of your body?
5. Gregory Boyd (2010), author of *Present Perfect: Finding God in the Now*, suggests putting sticky notes on your bathroom mirror, the dashboard of your car, your fridge, and computer screen that simply ask, "Are you awake?" as a reminder to attend to this present moment.

to understand parenting or financial practices (Slattery & Park, 2011). In Christianity, our global meaning-making systems have emphasized the triune God, the importance of Scripture in knowing God, the fallenness of all creation, being separated from God by our sin, the atoning work of Christ to end our separation from God, and our eternal hope of heaven. To many Christians throughout the world these are unquestionable foundations of our faith upon which meaning and hope rests.

But some Christians experience cracks in this foundation of faith. People debate whether Scripture should be considered inerrant or inspired or authoritative. Embedded in this is a sense of vulnerability and threat. If we were to question the inerrancy of Scripture, would our entire faith system crumble? We're not trying to address this question here; we are simply

observing this crack in the foundation of how Christians construct a global meaning-making system.[4]

Similarly, we could look at almost any major Christian doctrine and see that questions are being raised now, and have been throughout Christian history. How do we understand sin? How big is grace? What about heaven, hell, and salvation?

We will see in chapter four that the atoning work of Christ can be viewed in various ways, and this may feel threatening to some who have always assumed one view of the atonement. Rather than fighting against the threat, can we radically accept and sit with the dissonance, seeking to learn from the wisdom traditions in our Christian past?

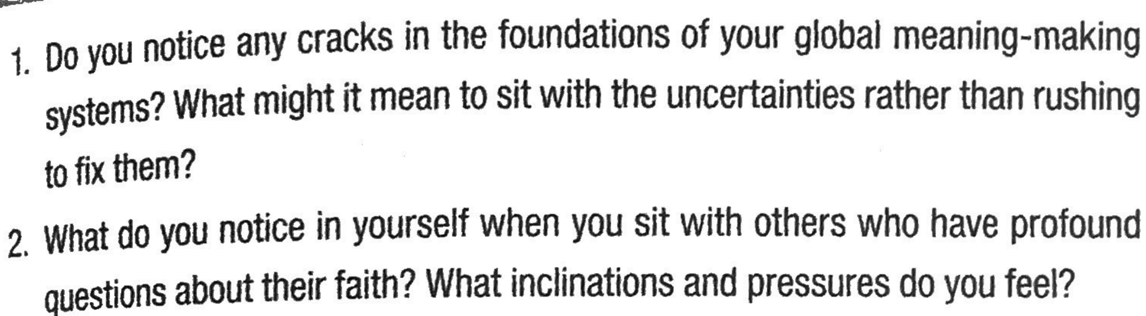
We're not arguing for particular views of theology but simply showing that the global meaning-making foundation of Christian thought can be easily cracked. It is important to remember that the students we teach and the patients we see may well be coming with profound questions and uncertainties, whether historical, generational, regional, or cultural. One option would be apologetics—to shore up the foundation by teaching what has been taught about evangelical Christian faith for the last hundred years. Another option would be the one Qoheleth took in Ecclesiastes—to allow, and perhaps even welcome, the deep, hard questions of life and death.

Several years ago, I (Mark) sat with Joy, a first-year doctoral student who had given up on faith. Raised in a Christian home, she attended a Christian college, then a faith-based master's program in counseling. Through all this she held onto faith, but as she began seeing the profound challenges of clinical work, she started questioning how God could be good amidst the chaos and suffering of life. She chose a Christian doctoral program, but mostly because she wanted to understand her patients who talked about faith and not because she herself held faith anymore. I recall sitting outside on the patio of a local coffee shop feeling heartbroken that this dear soul had lost her faith, wondering what I could possibly do to bring her back. Then I realized my job wasn't so much to bring her back as to stay present with her. She didn't need any proofs of faith I might have been ready to offer—she already knew all that and had rejected it. Instead, she simply needed my presence.

[4]Vanhoozer and Treier (2015) look at implications of divergent thought within evangelical theology in their book, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture*. They explore the meaning of evangelical thought "now that (faux?) Reformed hegemony is over" (p. 35) while modeling a way forward.

These stories don't all have a happy ending, as Qoheleth would be quick to tell us, so I am hesitant to write what happened to Joy. Still, I will. After a couple of years of doctoral training, she discovered that an Eastern Orthodox view of Christianity resonated with her deeply, and she returned to faith. I remember the day Joy stopped by my office and invited me to her baptism in her new church. Tears of gratitude welled in my eyes, as they did in hers.

Back at that coffee-shop patio I could have tried to persuade her about one doctrine or another, but the greater gift was to simply accept the cracks in her meaning-making foundation and to be present with her in that moment, enjoying the Oregon sunshine on a warm autumn day, sipping good beverages, and enjoying one another's company. It turned out to be an Ecclesiastes sort of day.



1. Do you notice any cracks in the foundations of your global meaning-making systems? What might it mean to sit with the uncertainties rather than rushing to fix them?
2. What do you notice in yourself when you sit with others who have profound questions about their faith? What inclinations and pressures do you feel?

Life as gift. Qoheleth doesn't leave us hanging after painfully describing the plight of humanity in gory detail. Though we live in an unpredictable and uncontrollable world, Qoheleth also outlines how God has responded to this problem, by offering us gifts to be enjoyed. The point of living well is not acquiring or obtaining, but learning how to notice and value God's gifts.

> So the picture is beginning to look like this: neither the world nor your own life is completely within your control. If you spend your whole life refusing to accept that the day of your death is approaching, if you live and work 24/7 thinking that by doing so you can get ahead of the game and have a better life by making money or that you can understand the world by getting the right degrees or reading the right books, or if you think you can really leave a lasting mark on the world through what you do, then you are spending your life trying

1. Does it make you nervous that a book of the Bible places such a high premium on sensory pleasure? If so, reflect on where these types of discomforts may be rooted and how they may have been formed. It's interesting that some treatments for depression, such as behavioral activation, also focus on introducing more pleasurable experiences into people's lives. Also, the ancient word *acedia* (apathy) seems to be related to not spending enough time engaging in the gifts life offers. How might these various observations affect the way you sit with depressed patients?
2. One of the persistent heresies in Christian history is Gnosticism, which is the belief that the material world should not be trusted because it is prone to deception and evil, and that the world of the mind is more pristine and trustworthy. What does the book of Ecclesiastes have to say about the problem of Gnosticism?

Gratitude. Despite the instability and disillusionment of contemporary society, we seem to be living amidst a gratitude explosion. Gratitude serves as a fitting conclusion for this chapter because it brings together radical acceptance of life's circumstances, awareness that we cannot control much of what happens to us, and rich appreciation for the gifts of daily life. If Qoheleth were writing today, we suspect he might be quite taken by today's fascination with gratitude.

Positive psychology is the study of what goes right with people, as compared with psychology's more traditional emphasis on what goes wrong. The growth of positive psychology in the twenty-first century has been phenomenal, and the topic of gratitude has been one reason for this. Researchers Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough pioneered the idea of gratitude journaling in a series of studies published in 2003 and found that those who keep gratitude journals experience all sorts of health benefits when compared with others (see McMinn, 2017, for a summary of this study and other gratitude research). Since this landmark study, and scores of others that have followed, gratitude research has been touted in major media outlets, and gratitude journaling has become a mainstream practice (see Emmons, 2013, for a helpful look at gratitude practices).

Much of positive psychology has remained in academia as a topic for researchers, but gratitude is also finding its way into clinical offices. More and more we are seeing counselors and psychotherapists using gratitude interventions as part of their clinical work with patients (e.g., Emmons & Stern, 2013).

A GRATEFUL DAY

David Steindl-Rast is a Benedictine monk involved in gratitude work and interfaith dialog. He has written a number of books (see http://gratefulness.org/brother-david/about-brother-david/), and has also developed and narrated a short video on gratitude called "A Grateful Day" (Network for Grateful Living & Gnarly Bay, 2017). Brother Steindl-Rast encourages people to enjoy and share this video, which is available at http://gratefulness.org/grateful-day/.

Theologians and biblical scholars are weighing in on the topic of gratitude also. It turns out that gratitude and grace are closely connected, and the link between the two is the word *gift*. The New Testament word for grace can be translated as "gift," and gratitude is a natural response to a gift. Diana Butler Bass (2018) and John Barclay (2015) both challenge the quid pro quo manner of giving and receiving gifts that has been common throughout history. In this view we may receive a gift, but it is always with an expectation that we return the favor. The Christian view of gift and gratitude is different—we receive a gift and nothing is required in return. This is grace, and the most reasonable response is gratitude.

Gratitude is not just for our patients. We counselors and psychotherapists also are invited to enjoy the gifts life offers, and the more we do the more we can introduce our patients to the gift of each moment. Returning to Qoheleth's advice to eat, drink, and be merry, it seems important to notice this gratitude connection in the way we counselors live out our days. The point is not simply to eat or to drink, but also to be merry—to live gratefully in this moment because of the gifts God offers us. Theologian Norman Wirzba (2011) is fond of referring to food as "God's love made nutritious" and "God's love made delicious." Every time we eat or drink we have the opportunity to gratefully receive God's love.

FINAL CONVERSATION

Facing Difficulty

If you are reading this book as part of a class, a counseling staff, a study group, or in some other group context, consider having this final conversation before moving on to part two.

Early in my career, I (Mark) often came home from a day of clinical work with sharp headaches. After several years of this, a wise supervisor helped me figure it out. We live in a world where we expect solutions, but we work in a field where there sometimes are no solutions. If we expect to be able to fix the problems of our patients, or even to fix all our own problems, we are creating unreasonable expectations for ourselves and others. That amount of responsibility creates mountains of stress, and in my case, headaches.

Don't get me wrong. It's great when there are solutions to problems, and sometimes there are. The right medication can often fix an infection. Sometimes a strategic counseling technique can fix a relational or anxiety problem. Deep forgiveness truly can heal a broken relationship at times. These are beautiful to behold, but if you have over thirty-five thousand clinical conversations in your career (see the introduction to be reminded of the math), only a small fraction of these sessions will involve fixing anyone. Most of them will feel more like sitting with people in pain, bearing witness to their journeys. And here is where my supervisor was so helpful.

Often it is better to help people grieve well than to try to resolve their problems. Some problems can't be fully solved. Maybe an adult patient had a parent who struggled to express love or grace well, and while that can be grieved, it cannot be fixed. Perhaps the patient is struggling with anxiety or sadness about an irresolvable health problem, touching the reality that Kate Bowler describes—that life is built with paper walls. Sometimes a depression is so persistent that no treatment can fully resolve it. Or consider how often we sit with those who have lost a child or a partner or a meaningful love

relationship. Grief work will help, but life will never be exactly the same after such a thing.

The problem is that people typically come to us thinking we can fix them when we cannot. Christianity can sometimes add to this by teaching that if we try the right spiritual practice, or adopt particular beliefs, or memorize certain Scriptures, or find the perfect church, then all will be well again.

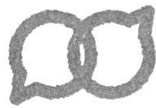
We need lament and Ecclesiastes. Sometimes our patients need to cry out in anguish to God (or to us) more than they need the latest therapeutic strategy or optimal spiritual advice. Sometimes we all need to remember that life is like a puff of smoke, that it is unpredictable and uncertain. In these times, it doesn't matter so much whether we are trying a twelve-week treatment protocol or even what approach has the most empirical evidence. These are times simply to sit with a person in pain and to see the gift of this moment, the gift of tears, the gift of grief, the gift of being together in uncertain times.

Final conversation: How much pressure do you feel to fix people in your role as a counselor or psychotherapist? When is this helpful? When is it not?

3

Imaging God

WHAT DOES MY VIEW OF GOD HAVE TO DO WITH MY WORK AS A COUNSELOR OR PSYCHOTHERAPIST?



AT TIMES SEMINARY FELT TO ME (Megan Anna) like walking in the Chamber of Secrets (yes, a Harry Potter reference in an academic book). We learned the nitty, gritty, and sometimes dirty details of how Scripture, orthodoxy, and the church came to be. I often wondered why we don't teach these things in church. A professor once commented that seminarians tend to learn the complex background of faith and then not know what to do with it when they get to the pulpit. Pastors might find the complexity intimidating, and many feel a tension as they walk the delicate line of prophet, truth teller, and comforter.

Perhaps another reason we keep some of these things quiet is that it feels disorienting to think of the human dimensions of how Scripture was developed. Many times, I experienced this peek behind the curtain as shocking—for example, when I learned that the creation stories found in Genesis drew from imagery and themes from older Egyptian and Mesopotamian creation stories. While I was increasingly comfortable encountering the humanity of Jesus, I felt less comfortable encountering the human dimensions of Scripture. In her book *Wrestling the Word*, Hebrew scholar Carolyn Sharp (2010) draws on the story of Jacob wrestling with God (Gen 32:22-32) as a useful metaphor for interpreting Scripture. It is arduous and challenging, and a big part of the struggle is understanding how the cultural context of both writer and reader is interlaced with divine authority as we make sense of Scripture.

Understanding the Bible calls us to acknowledge "the situatedness of authors, textual forms and languages, and readers in particular historical contexts" (Sharp, 2010, p. 5). Scripture is embedded in culture and draws from particular historical imagery, metaphors, and literary devices.[1]

While threatening at first, this way of looking at Scripture eventually opened up new avenues of meaning, creativity, and theological poignancy. As I became more comfortable with the Bible as a cultural document, I was freed to be curious about ways the Bible is both similar to and distinct from the dominant culture of its time—and it turns out this has exciting and rather profound theological significance. Hebrew Scripture transforms common cultural imagery to say something distinctively different about God. By exploring how the God of Israel differed from dominant concepts of gods, I gained a deeper appreciation for God's distinctively loving and gracious essence. Seeing the juxtaposition between the Genesis creation accounts and other ancient Near Eastern (ANE) accounts, I stood in awe of the bold countercultural claims presented in Genesis. We see a God who creates from abundance, who creates in freedom and love. It turns out this is a radical, audacious claim. When we read the Genesis creation narratives from within the context of the ANE cultural backdrop, the significance of being made in the image of God takes on new life. For this reason it may be helpful to meander through the Chamber of Secrets and explore some of the ANE creation stories.

Interpersonal Conversation Starters

1. I just shared about feeling disoriented when learning that the Bible is a culturally embedded document. What are your reactions to this idea? How does this fit or not fit with what you've learned about the Bible?
2. How does this fit within your faith tradition? This is a great chance to notice and be curious about your reactions to some of these ideas. What is at stake for you in this conversation?

[1]To learn more about the Bible as a culturally embedded text, see Jared Byas and Pete Enns's podcast episode "God's Children Tell the Story" found in further listening at the end of the chapter.

Substitute Workers

The creation stories arising out of the ancient Near East (including Mesopotamia, Egypt, Canaan) tended to borrow from and build on one another, often sharing imagery and themes. While there are different iterations, many of these creation narratives follow a similar arc (Dalley, 1989). At the risk of oversimplifying and condensing these creation accounts, the narrative goes something like this: This is a world with higher gods and lesser (worker) gods. The worker gods labor to meet the needs of the higher gods. They become tired of toiling and rebel, declaring that they are done serving the higher gods. This leaves the higher gods in an uncomfortable predicament, as they are kind of lazy and don't want to do any work. The solution to the predicament is to create humans to do the work. The humans are created as substitute workers for the gods (Brown, 2001; Clifford, 1994). Humans exist to bear the toil that the gods refuse. In other words, the gods create humans to serve their need. In *Atrahasis*, one of the more developed creation accounts, human beings succeed in being helpful, but also in procreating, thus becoming noisy and disturbing the gods. Because of the pesky noise the gods send a series of plagues to wipe them out. Only Atrahasis, who is clever enough to build a boat, escapes the last plague—a flood. However, once most of the humans are gone the gods realize that despite their noise they were quite useful, and they revise the human population by setting limits. In this new, limited world, humans can die, have limited fertility, and so on. But notice that the gods were happy to wipe out the humans until realizing they needed them.

This devaluing of humanity continues throughout ANE creation narratives. In the Egyptian account *Instruction to King Merikare,* humans are referred to as "cattle of the gods" (Clifford, 1994, p. 116). The role of the king and the temple also take on special meaning within this narrative. In order to keep these worker-humans in line, there is need for a king. In the Akkadian creation narratives—and later in Egyptian creation stories—the king is created to oversee the "human servants." And the temple is imperative to the gods because this is where they come in order to collect their goods from the humans. Batto (2013) writes: "A temple was less a place of worship than a palace from which the deity ruled and maintained right order in the world" (p. 17). Humans and their sacred spaces are all intended for the service of their gods.

Another significant distinction is that in Genesis humans come from life not death. In the Akkadian account humans are created out of moistened clay mixed with the blood and flesh of a slaughtered god who had rebelled. Human life comes from mixing the flesh of a sacrificed god, whose ghost forever intermingles and intermixes with human life (Simkins, 2014). The Judeo-Christian account in Genesis 2 has God creating humanity out of dust, but the additive ingredient that brings life is Yahweh's life-giving breath or spirit. God brings clay to life through *life*, not *death*.

AUTHOR DIALOG: CREATION AS SCIENTIFIC HISTORY OR MYTH

Mark: It seems like you're talking about the creation account as mythical. Is that right?

Megan Anna: I'm cautious using the word *myth* as I think it can easily seem dismissive. I'm also cautious reading creation as scientific history. What I find most helpful is thinking about how the Hebrew people would have heard the creation account, and to think about the questions that were important to them. Brueggemann (1982) says that within modern epistemology there is a pull to place the creation narrative within a binary (either scientific or mythical), and yet the story doesn't fit either of these two camps. The Israelites were more concerned with exploring God's intentions than God's methods or techniques. Thus, the text is neither scientific history nor myth, but *theological proclamation*. This is news about God's gracious and powerful transforming Word. God has chosen to bind Godself to the world for the purpose of the creation's wholeness, redemption, and growth. The creation account is declaration of the gospel: the good news that God's mysterious, gracious presence now transforms and changes creation.

Mark: I wonder if modernism has inclined us to ask questions such as whether the stories in the Bible are true or not. It seems like you're suggesting the creation accounts in the Bible hold important truth even if creation didn't unfold in exactly the way the words suggest. Do you ever worry that this perspective undermines the authority of Scripture?

Megan Anna: One of my struggles with modern thought is the narrowing of truth that has happened. Truth became reduced to factual information. In order to keep up with the pressures of science, we began applying the same criteria to Christianity—most notably Scripture. We

Given this cultural backdrop, one can see how dramatic the theological statements of the Hebrew creation narratives are! *God created humans out of surplus of goodness, not out of need.* Human life comes from God's life, not from death. The Hebrew creation narrative is not a story of deficit but one of abundance. While other ANE accounts serve the purpose of the gods, the Hebrew creation narrative explores a God who is distinct from creation and yet *chooses* to be intimately bound to creation by graciously moving toward creation (Brown, 2001; Brueggemann, 1982). God is both transcendent

made Scripture jump through modernist hoops to prove its authority (Catholicism did this less than Protestantism). Biblical authors were less concerned with factual truth than with getting at essential truths—broad truths about the world and about who God is (relational truths, truths about God's character and essence, how to be in the world, and so on). I think this narrowed view of truth can be detrimental to how we view the authority of Scripture.

The Bible is not a modern text, so when we apply modern criteria to it we do it a disservice and potentially miss some of the beauty of the essential truths it offers us. I also think we make it easier for people to dismiss the Bible altogether when we insist on a modern criteria of truth for this premodern book. When I first learned about factual discrepancies in the Gospels, I felt pulled in one of two directions: either engage in mental gymnastics to explain away the factual discrepancies or disregard the idea of authority altogether. I did some of both, and neither felt very satisfying. Similarly, many of my peers who have difficulty trusting Christianity can point to moments where they discovered factual discrepancies in the Bible. Sadly, they lacked a framework that would allow them to remain interested in and engaged in the truths of Scripture.

Through the work of Karl Barth and others I was introduced to a way of thinking about Scripture that held the tension—a human book, divinely inspired, that does not align with scientific facts yet speaks to profound human truths. This is a view that takes seriously the authority and sacredness of Scripture without requiring it to meet the criteria of a modernist framework.

There are many other views on this, which makes me glad the goal here is to stimulate conversation and not argue for a particular perspective on how to approach Scripture. See the further reading list at the end of the chapter for people I recommend engaging with on this subject.

(above and beyond creation) and immanent (invested in and present to our material world). In Egypt, humans were the "cattle of the gods," but for Yahweh humans are worthy of being imprinted with the image of God. The Hebrew creation narrative inverts the common cultural conceptions of God and humans. Rather than being mere cattle, humans become representatives of God on earth—agents called to do God's good work (Brueggemann, 1982, 2002).

EUGENE PETERSON AND THE GOOD CREATION

The creation story held by Christians affirms that creation is good. Throughout the Genesis 1 account, God stops to reflect multiple times, consistently concluding, "This is good."

At the memorial service of renowned Christian author and pastor Eugene Peterson, his son Leif Peterson noted how God stopped at the end of each day of creation to pronounce that it was good, and then reflected on a similar pattern in his father:

> I think my dad did that a lot. He was always looking around, at the mountains, at the flowers, at the birds, and at the relationships forming and playing out all around him, and you could tell from the twinkle in his eyes what he was thinking. "Oh man, that's good. That's really good." (Peterson, 2019, p. 2)

With all the complexity and challenge life offers us, it is helpful to return to this original truth as often as we possibly can, remembering that everywhere around us is the sort of beauty that reflects God's favor, and that we ourselves are part of this good creation.

This has implications for the practical lived reality of our faith. Later in the same service Leif Peterson mused that his father really only had one sermon and that he simply found different ways of saying the same thing week after week for thirty years. What was his sermon? "God loves you. He's on your side. He's coming after you. He's relentless" (Peterson, 2019, p. 4).

Notice the stark contrast between this message and the ANE accounts. We are not here as substitute workers. We have nothing to earn. God's goodness is seen all through creation and in every human heart. God is with us.

Imaging God

Being created in the image of God is distinctive of the Hebrew creation account (Gen 1:26-27):

> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."
>
> So God created humankind in his image,
> in the image of God he created them;
> male and female he created them.

Jewish and Christian scholars have spent thousands of years sorting out what this means. And it turns out there is good reason for confusion, as the Bible does not speak much about the image of God (*imago Dei*) after this initial passage in Genesis (Middleton, 2005). Thus, the construct has been left to theologians and philosophers to muse for a couple millennia, which is always a good way to stir up a variety of opinions.

While the theological implications of *imago Dei* are profound, neither of us has ever had a patient seek therapy to better understand what it means to be created in God's image. Most people, including the patients who seek our help, are much more likely to question how they view God than how God's character may be imprinted in their lives and relationships.

Theology informs the work we do in the counseling and psychotherapy office, but when it comes to imaging God, we need to consider both the psychological work of how humans image God as well as the theological work of how God's image shows up in humanity. One option is to look in the theological direction: the triune God creates humanity to reflect God's image. This is the arrow pointing downward from God to humanity in figure 1. The other direction—a psychological one—is also important. How do we infer particular ideas about God based on our own experiences, beliefs, and sociocultural context? This is what many psychologists have referred to as "God image" and "God concept," represented by the upward arrow in figure 1.

I (Mark) recently attended a lecture where religious scholar and bestselling author Reza Aslan (2017) began by stating that throughout all human history, we have created God in our image. While I felt dissonance with much of his lecture, I often return to that opening line and nod. Psychology has a lot to

VIEWS OF THE *IMAGO DEI*

Views of the *imago Dei* (image of God) offered by theologians, philosophers, and biblical scholars have emphasized different qualities over time. These are known as the functional, substantive, and relational views. Rather than try to argue for a particular view of the *imago Dei*, we are taking a different approach. Because the *imago Dei* has meant many different things throughout Christian history, we suspect it may, in fact, hold multiple meanings—or at least the various perspectives make for good conversation that does not require firm resolution. We offer a brief reference map here and provide additional resources for those interested in a more in-depth conversation on the philosophical and biblical underpinnings of these concepts.[a]

Functional. Many Hebrew scholars hold to a functional view of the *imago Dei*, emphasizing that humans image God through how we function in the world. The Hebrew worldview was an incredibly concrete worldview, so locating the meaning of *imago Dei* within concrete actions seen in human behavior made a lot of sense within this cultural context. This view understands humans as representatives of God's rule here on earth, invited to participate in ushering in shalom.

Substantive. Perhaps the most dominant view throughout Christian history, this view of the *imago Dei* holds that humans share essential or ontological characteristics with God. The likeness to God is located within ourselves (such as human reason, our ethical nature, the ability to be relational).

Relational. In the last half century, since the writings of Karl Barth, many theologians have begun to think about relational components of the *imago Dei*. Here, the emphasis is not on the ontological capacities we humans may share with God, or on the functions we are asked to carry as God's stewards, but on the dyadic, relational nature of being human. Humans emerged from a relational God ("Let us make humankind in our image" [Gen 1:26]), and humans are created as relational beings, flourishing in the context of relationship. Here the emphasis is not on our capacity for relationship (that would be substantive), but the relationship itself is what images God.

Emerging views. Trying to pinpoint views of the image of God can be challenging because new ideas emerge quickly. One recent attempt is what might be called a proleptic view, which suggests that the image of God is still unfolding through the long, slow process of theistic evolution. The *imago Dei* is an invitation forward toward transformation and fullness that is the ultimate telos of the process of becoming that God set in motion

[a] In an earlier draft of this chapter we described these different perspectives of the *imago Dei* in some detail. At some point we determined this deep dive into theology might cause some boredom in our readers, and boredom is never good for meaningful conversation. If you would like to see and consider more about these four perspectives, feel free to download it at meganannaneff.org/embodyingintegration.

(Peters, 2018). As Ecclesiastes reminds us, "there is nothing new under the sun" (1:9), and so it should be noted that this proleptic view bears some resemblance to the work of Irenaeus in the second century and Origen in the third century.

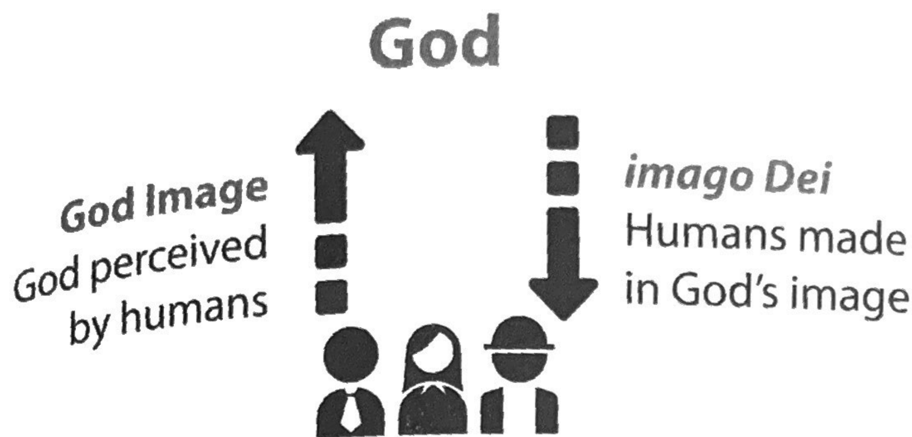


Figure 1. *Imago Dei* and God image

IMAGE OF GOD AND EMOTIONAL VALENCE

Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship between *imago Dei* and God image, demonstrating a sort of relational and perceptual loop between God and humanity. It is worth noting that the emotional valence shifts in different parts of the loop.

The arrow pointing downward from God to humankind reflects the theological notion that humans are made in God's image. We argue throughout this chapter, as we do throughout the book, for a positive emotional valence here: creation is good, God creates us from life rather than death, we are made to be in relationship with the divine and not merely to be substitute workers, and God is always with us.

The arrow pointing upward, from humanity to God, reflects the psychological notion that we humans image God in particular ways that are related to our own backgrounds, worldviews, and relational history. Whereas the arrow from God to humanity is overwhelmingly positive, the arrow back the other direction is complex and multifaceted. Sometimes this upward arrow is characterized by gratitude and love and awe, and sometimes it is tinged with anger and disappointment and frustration (see chapter one on lament).

This is not so much a problem to be solved as an observation to be made. Love flows downward from God to humanity, and the circle closes with a host of emotions—both positive and negative—being directed back toward God. This paradox of unequal valences is often the work faced by Christians in the counseling office.

say about the ways we create God in our image. This need not be a matter of shame or embarrassment; it is simply how we perceive everyone and everything in our world, and indeed it is made possible because of the capacities God has given us. We do our best to perceive the other, but we typically transpose and project our own experiences and expectations in the process. We do the same thing with our friends and spouses and parents and children. We presume we understand the other based on our insights and observations, but we also bring our personal histories and assumptions into the process. Psychologists and counselors know the concepts of transference and countertransference, which refer to our natural tendency to place the expectations and emotions of past relationships onto current relationships in the counseling office. In the same way, we tend to transfer past experiences onto how we understand God. To explore the notion of God image, we need to take a brief detour into how we know what we know.

Over the last thirty years, social and cognitive scientists have learned a great deal about how we process information—rather automatically it turns out (Hofmann, Gschwendner, & Schmitt, 2005). It's a bit like getting in the car and driving away, knowing the car works, and knowing there is a good deal of complexity under the hood, but not needing to understand much of the complexity for our daily purposes. Similarly, when we think about something we engage in complex processes quite automatically without much need to stop and ponder what the processes may be. Mechanics and neuroscientists make their livelihood looking under the hoods and working with the complex parts of systems that seem quite automatic in everyday life.

Current neuroscience research suggests we have two different ways of knowing: explicit and implicit (Hall, 2007). Explicit beliefs are the things we consciously know we believe, even as implicit beliefs, attitudes, and biases hum along beneath our consciousness. Neurocircuitry is complex and defies simple taxonomy, and some have grossly oversimplified the brain by attributing particular ways of being to precise neuroanatomy. But whether it is metaphor or neurology, explicit beliefs seem to involve the prefrontal cortex and left side of the brain. These beliefs include linear, abstract, verbal, and analytic thought processes. Explicit beliefs are sometimes called "high road" brain circuits. In contrast, implicit knowledge tends to be more experiential than cognitive, often showing up as emotional states and unconscious stories that weave through our lives. This "gut level" knowledge may involve more

right-side activity in the brain, and perhaps structures that exist at a lower level of evolutionary development, such as the amygdala. Because implicit knowledge is storied and experiential, it both emerges out of relationships and influences our present relationships. These templates, emotions, and unconscious stories influence how we are with others, and how we are with God (Hall, 2007).

Many have had the experience of holding a positive or negative attitude about someone even before knowing the person. Perhaps we know the person's name and it reminds us of someone else we have known with a similar name, or we see a certain facial characteristic that reminds us of someone else. Maybe the cadence of speech or tonal qualities of the other remind us of a beloved grandmother, a fierce competitor, or a belligerent former neighbor. These implicit ways of knowing the other affect us even without us deliberately deciding about the trustworthiness, safety, or character of the other.

Hall (2007) explores the concept of "unthought knowns," first proposed by British psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas. Unthought knowns refer to a deep sense of relational knowing that is not accessible through linear, rational thought. Our implicit knowledge is a world of these unthought knowns—knowledge that is not yet consciously accessible to us yet influences much of our daily existence and relational patterns. This implicit system involves templates and filters that influence our everyday life, often without our awareness of their presence. Not surprisingly, our relationships with one another are deeply influenced by implicit knowledge, though we have no words or thoughts to adequately describe the implicit things we know. While we are quite aware of our explicit beliefs, and many of us assume these beliefs drive our decisions, it turns out that implicit beliefs are also quite influential in shaping our daily decisions, relational patterns, and behavior.

This distinction between implicit and explicit knowing has implications for how and who we imagine God to be for at least four reasons. First, because language is the economy of explicit beliefs, we can talk and write quite a lot about God's character, and these theological discoveries and propositions help shape what we know while also creating a cognitive frame for how we want to live in the world. This is a good and important way to form and transmit a God image to future generations, but it can be misleading if we presume it to be the primary or exclusive way we come to know God.

Second and related to the first reason, the explicit knowledge we use to understand God has implications for both forms of knowing. That is, cognitive beliefs are held, discussed, and lived out in particular ways that shape both explicit and implicit ways of knowing God. For example, a devout Christian couple may hold particular faith beliefs about virtuous living. These explicit beliefs will, in turn, guide their daily interactions with their children. They may attend religious services, pray before meals, and read devotionals after. Their family beliefs will likely also shape how the parents view obedience and discourage disobedience, and how they model honesty, self-restraint, patience, and love. How their children come to know God will be both a function of the explicit beliefs they are taught and the implicit, lived stories emerging from how this family interacts with one another.

Third, if explicit knowing has implications for implicit knowing, the opposite is also true. Though we like to think that we base our daily experiences on the rational beliefs we hold in our heads, hundreds of studies in social cognition demonstrate that it often works the other way around: we shape our ideas based on our experiences. With something like God image, we will likely be drawn to explicit beliefs and doctrines that seem consistent with our implicit experiences of God. For example, let's start with an assertion with which most Christians agree: God forgives our sin. People who hold implicit beliefs about God's commitment to justice may be more prone to emphasize the word *sin* in this assertion. Those who experience God as benevolent and gracious may be more inclined to emphasize *forgives*. So often we sit side-by-side talking about God without recognizing that each of us has a story that undergirds our words and our beliefs.

Fourth, even as we try to match our implicit beliefs with our explicit ones, and our explicit beliefs with our implicit ones, the gap between explicit and implicit beliefs remains (Moriarty & Hoffman, 2007). Our explicit theological beliefs and ideas about God make up our God concept, whereas our felt, embodied and lived relational experiences make up our God image (Davis, Moriarty, & Mauch, 2013). To the extent that our relationships with God and others match or do not match the frame of our explicit beliefs, we ourselves will be shaped and influenced. Often in the work of counseling and psychotherapy we see patients who have quite a large gap between their implicit and explicit God image.

God creates humans in God's image (*imago Dei*), humans create God in their image (God image), and counselors and psychotherapists sit in this complex interplay with their patients and help them find meaning and direction for life. Both theology and psychology are essential parts of this conversation. In contrast to ANE creation accounts—where humans are substitute workers for the gods, where human life emerges out of death—the Christian story calls creation good and directs us toward harmonious relationships with God, others, and nature (Hoekema, 1994). This is a story of abundant life (e.g., Jn 10:10), experienced through connected relationship.

We also see this instinctual, God-given call to relationship in human attachment and relational neurobiology. Infants are born to connect with their caregivers through gazing into their eyes and expressing pleasure in their presence, and this instinct to connect never goes away unless it is beaten out of a human being through unspeakable trauma. Both our explicit and implicit ways of knowing, but perhaps especially our implicit ways, call us to be in harmonious relationships with one another.

We make it sound easy to be connected and singing in harmony, but we all know better. The German word *Sehnsucht* has no perfect translation in English, but it speaks to a deep yearning for something that is elusive and impossible to fully attain. Even as we are created for harmonious relationships with God, others, and nature, we still notice a gnawing within us that things are not fully right. Almost anyone with even a casual gaze toward the events of the world would agree that things are not right. This is the context of counseling: in the absence of harmonious relationships, we have the good sense to feel unsettled and upset. Each of us comes from families and communities with unique struggles and areas of brokenness. We come to one another and to God with our implicit and explicit ways of knowing, yearning for wholeness and completeness even as we question whether these ideals can be fully attained. And so we face spiritual struggles, emotional pain, and relational turmoil, even as we glimpse the possibility of harmony and shalom. Poets, artists, novelists, musicians, ministers, spiritual directors, physicians, teachers, and many others join with counselors and psychotherapists to help attune people to their inner desire for harmony and the impossibility of fully attaining their deepest longings.

Integration Conversation [illegible]

1. What are some of your explicit beliefs about God? How do they differ from your implicit beliefs?
2. How have you seen counseling and psychotherapy influence your patients' implicit beliefs about God?

Implications for Counseling and Psychotherapy

One of the basic assumptions we make in writing this book is that theology and psychology both matter for how we sit with people in the counseling and psychotherapy office. For many hundreds of years Christians have pondered the *imago Dei*, and in recent years we have learned a great deal about how humans perceive and experience God. But how are these findings from theology and behavioral science relevant for the day-in, day-out work of counselors and psychotherapists? We offer five suggestions in the remainder of this chapter.

A theological and psychological anthropology of goodness. What do you do for a living? When we hear such a question, many of us respond that we are a counselor, a psychologist, a clinical social worker, or a pastor. But implicit in this answer are many other roles that we play. We ponder human nature. We form theories about what makes for healthy living and unhealthy living. We transmit our beliefs about how people become healthier. We choose particular tests to assess health and ignore others because they do not align with our views of health. We work with our patients to determine goals for the outcome of our work together. We help people consider which relationships are worth pursuing and which are not. In sum, we are continually evaluating human nature and exerting benevolent influence for how to make the world a better place.

We may hear in ethics workshops that we are not to impose our beliefs onto others, and certainly it is true that we need to be exceptionally cautious not to take advantage of others for our own sake, but if we honestly look at our work, inevitably our beliefs guide every interaction we have. We transmit our values to others despite our best efforts to respect them as autonomous agents. As Christians doing this work, it behooves us to know our view of

persons, what makes for health and unhealth, what helps people move toward health, and how we can best be in relationship with one another and with God in this process. These worldview assumptions are contained in our theological anthropology (i.e., our view of humanity in relation to God). In turn, our views about the *imago Dei* form the core of our theological anthropology.

Just as theology offers us a particular anthropology, so also our psychological theories give us a particular way of looking at humanity, including what goes wrong (unhealth), what goes right (health), and how to help people to places of health. Client-centered therapists focus on self-actualization, third-wave cognitive therapists on psychological flexibility, second-wave cognitive therapists on right thinking, psychoanalytic therapists on restorative relationships, and so on. Each of these approaches contains an implicit view of persons, and so does Christianity. Some have viewed this as evidence that psychology and religion are competing worldviews, but we prefer to think of this as one of the intriguing adventures of integration. How can we bring the anthropology implicit in Christianity together with the anthropology of a particular psychological theory in a way that transforms both? It certainly involves more than sprinkling a few Bible verses atop a psychological theory or using a little psychological jargon while pronouncing a theological anthropology. True integration involves working from theological and psychological anthropology. This is why the arrows in figure 1 go both directions, with both theology and psychology informing who we are in relation to God and one another.

The starting point for a theologically grounded view of persons is that humanity is fundamentally good, even if not entirely good. We are both created in the image of God and fallen creatures, struggling to love God and neighbor as much as we naturally love ourselves. But the first truth of humanity is that God is delighted with us. The Hebrew phrase *tov, tov, tov meod* reflects the language of God in the first chapter of Genesis, reminding us of God's assessment that creation is good, good, very good.

During times of complexity and pain, it can be hard to hold onto this belief. During the exile the Israelites faced despair, bombarded with messages of their worthlessness. One of the truths that anchored the community during this time was that God had promised to preserve the *imago Dei*. Despite the huge challenges and struggles humans caused in the first eleven chapters of

Genesis (e.g., expulsion from garden, sibling murder, flood), the *imago Dei* persists. It has been stamped onto humanity and cannot be washed off. The construction of Genesis 1:1–2:4 is commonly dated among this exile and postexilic period (Brueggemann, 1982). So precisely when the world attempted to convince Israel of their worthlessness, this beautiful theological proclamation of the dignity, worth, and goodness of all humanity, even the Babylonians, arose.

This goodness, at times, can be difficult to remember in the counseling office. Benjamin came to my (Megan Anna's) office shortly after enduring a contentious divorce. He had struggled with anger and depression for years. Still, I wasn't expecting the chilling story that came next. Through shame-filled tears, Benjamin described the hours after his wife informed him that she wanted a divorce. Benjamin, unable to imagine life without her, described taking his gun from the safe and loading it with the intention of shooting his young son and then himself. He went to gather his sleeping son, but as he held his son in his arms he began sobbing and aborted his plan.

Here, in some of the greatest complexity I have ever encountered in another human being, I was left pondering the notion that humans are fundamentally good. Sitting right in front of me, in the person of Benjamin, the choice of whether to believe in human goodness or not confronted me.

As I sat with Benjamin, I noticed fear creeping in. Part of my mind busily scrolled through liability, ethics, and safety issues: Will he do this again? Is his son safe? Another part of my mind questioned my own safety. Will Benjamin ever experience me as abandoning him like his wife? If so, how might he respond?

While these safety concerns had merit, it is right to see the image of God in others even when flooded with fear. I needed to let Benjamin know I wasn't repulsed, afraid, or scared of him. I needed to be able to see his badness while also holding onto his fundamental goodness. I suspected Benjamin rarely felt comfortable with himself, and so I wanted to communicate that I felt comfortable with him.[2]

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[2]While it is rare, there are times in this work that clinicians come across personal safety concerns. In this case there was no indication of imminent danger. If you are in imminent danger, it is critical to listen to these cues and respond appropriately to protect yourself and others who may be in danger.

Benjamin was having difficulty holding onto any semblance of belief in his goodness. The Hebrew people likely also faced difficulty holding onto their sense of goodness during the Babylonian exile. The thing about being held captive is that there is often an overt mission to break one's humanity and sense of dignity, but in the words of Scripture we see God's unrelenting commitment to humans as created in the *imago Dei*. Perhaps there are times we hold the hope of the *imago Dei* for our patients—to see the sacredness and honor that they cannot currently see.

Psychologist Carl Rogers (1957) used different language while identifying a similar concept. Rogers identifies the importance of having unconditional positive regard for the people with whom we work, in part because this regard from the therapist helps the individual cultivate self-regard. It's hard to imagine one could ever have positive self-regard without first experiencing positive regard from another. Similarly, we can hold hope in the sacredness, dignity, vocation, and relational goodness in our patients while they are developing the capacity to remember and hold onto these truths.

Stepping into Benjamin's chilling moment of planned homicide and suicide was dreadful, but I needed to step into that moment in order to glimpse his terror. Perspective taking increases empathy (Hooper, Erdogan, Keen, Lawton, & McHugh, 2015). By experiencing his mind, as best I could, I could sense the intensity of betrayal, pain, hurt, and chaos churning inside him. While the image of him lifting his son and moving him toward the garage brought chills, the image of this hurting man who felt utterly powerless at the thought of losing his family brought me to a place of deep empathy and compassion and enabled me to give words to what had gone unnamed for Benjamin. I experienced positive regard for him, believed in his desire for relationship,

Integration Conversation Starters

1. Do you find it difficult to see a fundamental human goodness in certain people? How do you hold a belief in the *imago Dei* in these times?
2. Some views of the *imago Dei* suggest the image is contained within each person. Another view, called the relational view, sees the image as existing in the relational space between two persons. How might this change the way you perceive human goodness in the counseling office?

and saw in his tears an implicit awareness of life's sacredness. I held the belief in *imago Dei* for Benjamin, inviting him to borrow from my belief until he, too, had the capacity to have hope in his sacredness.

Trauma as a bridge between implicit and explicit beliefs. A psychologist, colleague, and mutual friend of ours, Kenneth Logan, explores implicit and explicit belief structures with particular interest in how trauma can be a transformative event in integrating the two. During trauma we largely operate from our fight-or-flight or sympathetic nervous system. During these moments our brains don't spare precious energy for explicit meaning-making activities, so we tend to operate from more automatic, implicit perspectives. Recalling moments of trauma in an experiential way can break through our explicit beliefs, revealing our core implicit beliefs. By being exposed to these moments we increase our awareness of implicit beliefs, and this greater awareness opens up the possibility of transformation (Logan, personal communication, May 30, 2018).

Ken's ideas are fascinating, and the implications far-reaching. What does it mean to have both a God concept (theology) and a God image (relational-experiential) that influence how we experience the world, ourselves, and God? How do these come to bear on the daily experience of life in stressful times? In calm times? How might we as counselors and psychotherapists adequately empathize with the awful traumas our patients face while still holding the possibility that these same traumas might lead to growth and self-awareness?

As awful as trauma is (no matter the cause), it is remarkable that those who study trauma are also beginning to pay close attention to the experience of growth and positive change that sometimes occurs in the wake of these horrific experiences. Two psychologists at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, initially suggested the concept of posttraumatic growth in the mid-1990s, and the concept has grown rapidly in the scientific literature (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Tedeschi and Calhoun suggest that life crises can sometimes result in "increased appreciation for life in general, more meaningful interpersonal relationships, an increased sense of personal strength, changed priorities, and a richer existential and spiritual life" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). Spiritual writers allude to something similar—that suffering can bring growth and even joy. While an intriguing construct, posttraumatic growth research is still in its infancy and

is beset by a number of methodological and concept challenges (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014). Still, it is worth considering that growth and increased spiritual awareness may be an indirect outcome of experiencing trauma, and perhaps one of the mechanisms at play might be that in crises we glimpse our implicit beliefs in ways that everyday experience does not allow. Growth is not an automatic outcome of trauma, but counselors and psychotherapists are often blessed to see a surprising beauty growing from the ashes of past trauma.

Jenny came to me (Megan Anna) following an acute crisis that left her destabilized. As a first-generation college student and the glue that held her struggling family together, she worked tirelessly yet felt she was never good enough. She tended to find herself in asymmetrical relationships where she was the giver, and yet in her mind, she was never a good enough sister, daughter, friend, or partner. While introducing her to the concept of self-compassion, with tear-filled eyes she reflected, "That's impossible, I could never do that." She received strength from God, she believed God loved and delighted in her, yet she was functioning from an implicit belief that she could never be good enough for God, that God's grace was not *for her*. She was working hard to please God and gain God's favor, just as she was doing with everyone else.

Trauma had been a constant backdrop in Jenny's life, from disjointed memories of childhood trauma to reexperiencing sexual trauma in adulthood. Jenny tended to minimize the role trauma had played in her developing sense of self. Her mentality was, "It's in the past, people have it much worse, this shouldn't still be impacting me." In these words, we see a wide gulf between Jenny's implicit relational knowledge and her explicit knowledge and beliefs. The implicit relational patterns were continuing to disrupt her life—impacting her relationship to self, others, and God—but lacking the ability to talk about these experiences with words, she was not able to bridge her intrinsic and extrinsic beliefs. This gap left her with fragmented and jarring symptoms of anxiety.

Ken Logan's concept is encouraging—that perhaps through gaining access to our implicit beliefs, as happens when reexperiencing times of crisis or trauma, there is space to have these beliefs opened up to bridge implicit and explicit beliefs, and thus to redemption and transformation. In times of pain our belief structures are cracked open and we gain access to deeply held internalized beliefs.

There was nothing glorious about Jenny's acute stress, and yet, it was the current crisis that was opening up space for her to explore the disconnect

between her implicit and explicit beliefs. As a child Jenny didn't have anyone to help her consolidate her story, leading to increased fragmentation and terror. Lacking the ability to integrate her implicit stories of relationship with her explicit knowledge, Jenny found it difficult to construct a coherent story about herself, others, and God. But now as an adult, in the context of a safe psychotherapy relationship, she could go back and retell the stories of trauma. Especially as she learned to move past a cognitive telling of the stories, and into an embodied, visceral reexperiencing of her pain, this opened up the possibility of her intrinsic and extrinsic beliefs looking each other in the eye. Telling stories is an ideal way to integrate intrinsic and extrinsic beliefs because it creates a sort of knowledge spiral where explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge are interpreting and building off one another (Hall, 2007). And it turns out this knowledge spiral is key for revising our patients' spiritual stories (Hall, 2007, p. 40).

Jenny had the good sense to be anxious when things started spiraling out of control. This may seem a strange way to think about emotional distress, but recall that we humans are drawn toward flourishing and harmony. This is how we are made, so it seems quite good and reasonable that we have warning signs when things are going poorly. For Jenny, her anxiety served as an alarm system. Her intellect could not deliver her from the angst she experienced. Notice how the discrepancy between Jenny's explicit and implicit beliefs raised important questions about how she experienced God. While Jenny explicitly believed life is sacred and that she is made in God's image, she implicitly held a view more akin to ANE creation accounts—that her worth was found in being a substitute worker, that her life emerged out of death. Her self-concept was ridden with shame, causing her to find herself in a constant rat race of "never good enough" as she frantically attempted to prove her goodness.

Jenny had internalized the message of her shame, her badness. As we opened up space for her to explore her story, her implicit beliefs came to light, opening up the possibility of transformation. She began opening up to the possibility of a God who could look upon her with love and grace, enabling her to be more compassionate with herself.

Conversations such as these can lead to difficult places where trauma and self-doubt lurk, but these are also places that can be transformative. Becoming aware of our implicit beliefs can be liberating and empowering, freeing us to live into the life-giving power of our Creator.

Integration [illegible]

1. In your own clinical work or personal life, how have you seen encountering or recalling trauma as helpful in bridging implicit and explicit beliefs about God?
2. Talking about a belief isn't the same as encountering it. What helpful ways have you found to help patients access their implicit beliefs about God?

***The self-offering nature of the* imago Dei.** As depicted in common creation cosmology in ANE accounts, humans existed for the purpose of the gods. The gods coexisted and intermingled with humans; they weren't worried about having "multiple relationships" with their servant-humans.

In contrast to the ANE accounts, in the Christian creation story we meet a God that can satisfy God's own needs—God creates out of abundance not deficit. God is separate and exists independent of creation. And yet, from this distinctive, separate place God chooses to be connected to creation. The creation account is not a story of coercion or tyranny. God invites rather than obligates (Brueggemann, 1982). Humans are ushered into a noncoercive relationship with God for the betterment of all of creation, not for the purpose of meeting God's needs. God does much more than the Babylonian gods who simply put up with the pesky humans. God delights in humans (Ps 149:4).

In this Christian account, humanity emerges out of God's generosity, not God's need. This, in turn, has implications for how we live in the world. As those created in God's image, do we relate to one another from a generous, self-offering place, or do we slip back to a more primitive place of seeing others as means to our own ends? Counselors and psychotherapists occasionally hear stories of colleagues who take sexual advantage of their patients. These situations feel akin to the Babylonian creation story—gods who created for their own pleasure. And one need not look to such extreme examples to recognize our vulnerability to thinking first of our own needs even as we care for others. Both Alice Miller (2008) and Michael Sussman (2007) have explored the unconscious motives of therapists and the tendency for "wounded healers" to be drawn to the field with a desire to be needed by others. For many of us being needed provides a source of meaning that helps us navigate the world. It can be captivating and enticing to have others need and desire us. Why else would we be crazy enough to submerge ourselves

in people's darkest moments repeatedly? We aren't suggesting this is inherently wrong; it is, however, important to be aware of underlying motivations and what we gain from the therapeutic relationship.

The self-offering God who creates humanity to reflect God's own image teaches us about balance as we walk in the psychotherapy room. God is distinct and yet committed to creation, in grace. As representatives of God we are invited to remain distinct from one another while also being bound together in grace. As we hold hope for our patients and invite them into nourishing, supportive relationships, we embody God's image, representing and extending God's way of being in relationship with the world.

Experienced counselors know the nagging tension between self-focus and self-offering. Perhaps you have just received a text or phone call with disturbing news, maybe your car is in the shop and costing way more than you imagined to repair, or it could be that you have just received a troubling medical result that requires more tests. When you walk to the waiting room to greet your next patient you have a choice to make. Will you remain in the mental space of recounting your troubles, or perhaps even look to your patient for some comfort (a role reversal that can be quite harmful to patients)? Or will you set down your own personal worries and enter into that generous, self-offering place of hosting a meaningful conversation about your patient's concerns?

As we ourselves become accustomed to living from generous, self-offering places with patients, we can also invite them into similar places in their relationships with others.

QUERIES FOR PATIENTS

Consider asking your patients questions such as:

1. What is it that your partner/friend/child most needs from you right now?

   This question helps get one's mind off of personal needs and desires, helping them focus on another.

2. I notice how deeply concerned and compassionate you are for [name]. What is that like for you?

   This is a way of noticing compassionate self-offering in a patient, and allowing the patient to notice as well. We are about to explore relational selves, and this question may also help a patient feel connected in a larger relational web.

Relational selves. What is a self? And how does our view of God inform our answer? How has culture impacted how we think of selves? How does the intersection of culture and Christianity influence this? How we answer these questions has a significant impact on how we sit with ourselves and other selves.

Western philosophy is heavily influenced by Descartes' famous words: "I think, therefore I am" (Descartes, trans. 2016, p. 10). This modern, self-contained understanding of the self marks a dramatic shift from how humans historically thought. Contemporary theologies in Africa, Latin America, and Asia are translating Christianity through a contextual lens that bears similarity to many of the biblical contexts.[3] In juxtaposition to Descartes' words, an African understanding of the self is more akin to "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1990, p. 141). This distinction provides a glimpse into how culture influences our understanding of Christian anthropology.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (2007) captures the shifts and turns that have occurred in how we conceptualize the self in his book *A Secular Age*. Taylor identifies the premodern to modern shift as highly significant when it comes to the understanding of selves. Prior to modernity, the self was seen as more of a "porous" self (p. 27). These selves existed in an enchanting, magical world where the boundary between the self and outside was permeable. The self could be taken ahold of by external forces such as passion, excitement, depression, sickness, and external spirits. The porous self was linked to other selves: "I am because we are."

After the Enlightenment we experienced a shift to more "buffered" selves (p. 27). These are self-contained beings with impermeable boundaries separating one person from another and from the external forces in the world. There is even a boundary between mind and body. Emotional states, beliefs, and thoughts originate through internal processes. Given that psychology was birthed in modernity, many of its core concepts are built around this idea of a buffered self, where each individual is self-contained and distinct from others.

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[3]Kwame Bediako (1994), for example, has brought forth significant theological contribution reflecting on Christianity from within a primal worldview, a worldview that holds many similarities with the Hebrew worldview. Philip Jenkins (2008) also explores the importance of this in *The New Faces of Christianity*.

The strongly rooted assumptions of the buffered self are beginning to be challenged in the behavioral and neurosciences, and the premodern view of the porous self is regaining momentum. For example, scientists have discovered mirror neurons and the power of relationships to reduce perception of pain and regulate difficult emotions (Coan, 2010; Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006). It seems we are rediscovering that humans are intrinsically relational. Our nervous systems are connected; they are not buffered from one another but are porous, impacting and being impacted by the other. To describe this as new knowledge is perhaps simplistic, or maybe even silly. Lisa McMinn, our sociologist spouse (to Mark) and mother (to Megan Anna), points out that we have always known this truth, even before neuroscience discovered it. Whether of a laboring mother or a dying soldier, pain and emotion is reduced and regulated by a companion who is actively present. It seems we have intuitively known and practiced this through most of human history.

Psychiatrist Daniel Siegel has been at the forefront of much of this contemporary research. I (Megan Anna) learned from Siegel and Bryson (2012) that when my five-year-old becomes upset the best thing I can do for him is not to establish a firm external boundary around his self, but rather to link my nervous system to his, allowing him to borrow my executive functioning. And so I kneel down, looking him in the eye while naming his experiences and emotionally attuning to him. As we connect selves, I am making the intensity of his emotions more tolerable as we metabolize them together.

Siegel isn't suggesting we ditch the buffered self completely and return to porous selves. In fact, there may be some risk if we were to embrace a completely porous self, such as losing a sense of personal responsibility and agency. For example, imagine the difficulty if patients were to start reporting that the external force of depression had so engulfed them that they could no longer be responsible for personal choices. There is something important to hold onto about the embodied self who holds agency. Siegel (2014) beautifully integrates a buffered self with a porous self by highlighting the importance of holding onto both a "me" and a "we." He even suggests a clever "MWe" to describe how the self is shaped by both. On one hand, we have an embodied internal identity (me), and we also have an interpersonal and interconnected identity (we). These both shape our sense of self.

Powerful things happen when we refuse the temptation to reduce our sense of self to either the *me* or the *we* and embrace the integration of the

two (Siegel, 2014). This marks a shift in thinking about the human mind. Rather than simply being a self-contained object that is reduced to the brain's activity, the mind is active and changing as it is influenced both by energy within and without. The mind is both embodied and relational. It is this relational component of the mind that makes joy so contagious, causes us to yawn when another yawns, and makes deep empathy possible.

In a talk given at the Wisdom 2.0 conference in San Francisco, Siegel (Wisdom 2.0, 2017) tells the story of visiting a village in Namibia. While in a country stricken with drought, famine, and diseases, he felt amazed by the amount of joy and happiness in the village he visited. One night sitting around a campfire with villagers, Siegel asked his translator: "Can I ask you to ask this tribesman a question: They've got drought, they've got famine, they've got disease, and they are so happy. . . . Can you ask him why his fellow villagers look so happy? Are they really so happy?" After a moment the translator responded: "He says his people are happy because they belong. They belong to each other and they belong to Earth." After a pause the villager asks Siegel: "In America, do you belong?" In his talk, Siegel goes on to suggest that in America we have cast ourselves out of belonging.

With industrialization and modernization we have gained much freedom: from being at the mercy of the weather for food, from diseases and many hardships. And yet there may be some hidden costs to these advances. Is belonging one of those hidden costs? Have we pulled ourselves out of belonging as Siegel suggests?

> We have pulled ourselves out of belonging in the most unhealthy way you can imagine. . . . We've created this culture that has a lethal lie that the self . . . is separate and that relationships don't really have anything to do with it or maybe they're icing on the cake. They're not icing on the cake—they are the cake. (Wisdom 2.0, 2017)

How does one find deep, enriching selves living in a society built on the assumption of buffered selves, a society that has pulled itself out of belonging? Perhaps belonging to others, belonging to land, and belonging to community requires a level of porousness, a sense of "MWe."

The relational view of the *imago Dei* can be difficult to wrap our minds around (see sidebar "Views of the *Imago Dei*"), but perhaps there is some

"MWe" happening at the heart of the *imago Dei* that doesn't quite fit into our modern binary of "me" versus "we." And this may have profound implications for counseling and psychotherapy.

Traditionally, the psychologist or counselor is the expert in the room: a self-contained being who holds knowledge and passes it along to the other self-contained person in the room. With the rise of interpersonal therapy, relational psychoanalysis, and third-wave cognitive-behavioral therapy, we are seeing more discussion of relational, intersubjective spaces. Relational psychoanalysts use the language of "cocreated space"—the idea that two selves are always bringing something to the room and together create something new. There is a willingness to be impacted and affected by the other. As we meet with our patients we link our nervous systems together, and our linked nervous system takes in difficult emotions, metabolizes them, and offers them back to our patients in a way they are able to better integrate with their other experiences and emotions.

Being mindful of how our nervous systems are linked is also helpful in establishing safety within the therapeutic room. Geller and Porges (2014) explore biobehavioral explanations of how therapeutic presence works in cultivating a sense of safety. Safety is cultivated at a neurological level—a process that often takes place outside of our awareness. Our safety systems are constantly evaluating tone of voice, facial cues, and gestures, assessing for safety and risk. When presence is detected on a neurological level we lower our defenses, creating a space of vulnerability where meaningful therapeutic work can occur. Geller and Porges describe these encounters as cutting through all therapeutic orientations. Creating presence for others—linking our nervous systems to theirs—is sacred work. And, of course, it is work that affects us also as we are deeply present with other souls.

Integration Conversation Starters

1. How might the notion of porous and buffered selves translate to your understanding of God?
2. How we think of selves may influence what theoretical orientation we are drawn to. As you think of your own theoretical persuasions in counseling or psychotherapy, how might your view of selves be related?

BUFFERED SELVES, POROUS SELVES, AND BURNOUT

Christina Maslach (1982) and her colleagues developed a widely used scale to measure burnout among helping professionals. They identified three main components to burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Burnout has been an extremely useful concept in the helping professions, and we applaud the work that has been done. Still, it is interesting to note how closely tied each of the three dimensions of burnout is to the modernist understanding of the buffered self.

The notion of emotional exhaustion is related to a sense of being overextended and depleted by the demands of human service work. Implicit in this is an assumption that energy and compassion are primarily located within the self and then flow outward to others who are in need of services. When the self is depleted, we are told it needs to be recharged by sitting by a fire and reading a novel (for introverts) or spending a weekend with friends (for extroverts). This is not all wrong, but notice how much the notion of a buffered self is assumed: we charge up our individual selves and then spend down our emotional energy helping others. If we spend more than we recharge, we are vulnerable to burnout.

Depersonalization occurs when we stop having compassion for the people we serve. We become impersonal and unfeeling, as if they are a needy object more than a precious human being. Again, notice the isolation of the self from the world around: "I am a helper, and you are a need that must be met."

Decreased personal accomplishment is the sense that one is no longer competent or that whatever is being accomplished is trivial and unimportant. The word "personal" even shows up in this description, marking how self-contained we perceive our presence in the world to be. We have resumes and degrees and honors to demonstrate our accomplishments, and when we start questioning their importance, we are vulnerable to burnout.

Both premodern views of the person and contemporary neuroscience point us toward more cocreated spaces in our helping efforts. Yes, the work can be depleting, but when we are fully present to the other, we also open the possibility of deep emotional and spiritual connection that is life-giving to both the helper and the one being helped. The *we* joins the *me* in the counseling office and something beautiful emerges. These moments cannot be marked by lines on a vita, but they leave both the helper and the one being helped with a sense of standing together in a place of grace and hope.

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Grasping and sabbath. We have reflected on the *imago Dei* and on God image, and we close this chapter by considering how these may be impacted by our pace of lives. Living into God's image almost certainly requires reflection beyond the production mindset of contemporary life.

In ANE accounts, humans were created to work for the gods, but in the Christian narrative God is fully sufficient without humans. Creation emerges from a self-offering God rather than from gods who need more workers. This must have some bearing on the lives we live as mental health professionals.

Honestly, this does not come naturally for either of us. Even as we write this section of the book we recognize a tendency to take on multiple projects, work feverishly to meet our commitments and deadlines, and be available for anyone who may need us. Like so many in our academic and cultural contexts, we are worker bees. We admit our vulnerability here, imagining that many other counselors and psychologists may resonate with this struggle. There are always more patients to see, more articles and books to write, more classes to teach, more bills to pay. Meanwhile, even as we struggle to keep from pedaling too fast, we find pondering God's character calls us to slow down and seek places of perspective and rest.

Our colleagues and patients struggle with this too. Have you noticed if you ask a friend in the coffee shop, a colleague in the hallway, or a patient at the beginning of a session how they are doing you are likely to hear about how busy they are, perhaps followed by a litany of activities that currently feel overwhelming? This reflects an anxious restlessness to how we live. The technological advances that were supposed to free up our time and capacity have somehow made us busier and added to our stress load. If we're lucky we frantically squeeze "self-care" and "personal time" into our busy lives. Even the way we frame these respite activities as utterly separate from ordinary life suggests how restless regular life has become for many of us, even for counselors.

Our externally busy lives often contribute to increased internal noise that is difficult to escape. Poet and writer Christian Wiman (2010) reflects on how this contributes to the scattering of our very selves and ponders the following question:

> How does one remember God, reach for God, realize God in the midst of one's life if one is constantly being overwhelmed by that life? . . . But the reality of

contemporary American culture—which often seems like a kind of collective ADHD—is that *any* consciousness requires a great deal of resistance, and how does one relax and resist at the same time? (p. 63)

How do we remember God when we can barely keep up with our lives? How do we cultivate a restful, embodied presence?

The gods of the Babylonian creation narratives were grasping gods: grasping for more, grasping for power (Brueggemann, 1982). Similarly, when the Hebrew people escaped slavery in the exodus, the culture of Egypt was a grasping culture: more, more, more. Build the bricks without straw, work seven days a week. Do more. Do it faster. Be productive. Do it now (Brueggemann, 2017).

The Hebrew God does not grasp. This is also seen in Jesus, the one who did not think of equality with God as something to be grasped (Phil 2:1-11). Early in the creation account humans are called to vocations of shepherd and gardener. This calling stands out against the backdrop of a culture marked with exploitive grasping and invites us into a new way of being—to live into our vocation modeled after the "Good Shepherd who does not grasp" (Brueggemann, 1982, p. 38). And when God gives Moses the Ten Commandments, after the Hebrew people left the grasping culture of Egypt, sabbath shows up in the middle of the list, right after three commandments about how we ought to relate to God and just before six commandments about how we are to treat one another (Brueggemann, 2017).

An alternative to grasping is sabbath: a rest from work, a reprieve from grasping, a deliberate resistance to the ubiquitous assumption that more is better. Taking a day of rest during the exilic period was a powerful statement. While the Babylonian gods were anxious about creation, the Hebrew God rests in the knowledge that creation is *tov* (good). This God is at ease (Brueggemann, 1982).

When we practice rest we proclaim that "life does not depend upon our feverish activity of self-securing, but that there can be a pause in which life is given to us simply as a gift" (Brueggemann, 1982, p. 35). This is much more than an activity engaged in once a week, and in fact history is replete with examples of how we humans have turned sabbath into a feverish set of rules rather than an invitation to rest. Sabbath infuses the totality of a person's way of being in the world. Instead of grasping, there is rest. A

sabbath-infused existence is a reflective, grounded life. Sabbath is relaxing our grasping hands, our clinched fists, and trusting the hands of God. It asserts that the deepest life is one of peace and satisfaction, not exhaustion. Sabbath is devoted to awareness.

> We parcel out our moments of devotion—a church service here and there, a walk in the woods, a couple of hours of meditation a week—all the while maintaining the frenzy of our usual existence outside of those moments. This is inevitable . . . but it is not sustainable, for the soul is not piecemeal. (Wiman, 2010, p. 69)

Sabbath rest is not something we simply do, but something we embody. Psychology uses different language, but it also identifies the power of embodied rest. In psychology we often talk about this in terms of regulation and being grounded, and what we are learning is that our centeredness can help create an environment where our patients find a calm repose. The image of God involves adequate space for rest. Out of this rested place we can offer centered relationships where feelings of safety and security arise as the therapist is present and fully engaged (Geller & Porges, 2014). In this, we image God in relationship with one another.

While we often equate rest with sleep, and this is partly right, another dimension of rest is balance. As Heschel reminds us (1951), sabbath is not a method by which we "recharge" so we can keep sprinting through life, sabbath is "for the sake of life" (p. 14). A Christian view of persons, founded in the theologies of the *imago Dei,* suggests we are created to experience connection with God, others, and nature (Hoekema, 1994). These connections form us; they grow us into the wholeness of what it means to be fully alive and human. For those of us who are counselors and psychotherapists, how are we resting in ways that promote connection with God, others, and nature?

I (Mark) have been finding rest in nature over the past decade. Lisa and I love to walk and hike and grow plants. We have even developed a small farm where we grow vegetables, berries, apples, chickens, and goats. At this stage of life we find ourselves talking quite a lot about "downward mobility," which means we write fewer books than we once did and spend more time on the porch, in the kitchen, and in the hammock. I am trying to learn how to be a better friend, and to make better friends. Lisa is becoming a spiritual director after years of being a sociologist, and I am

learning a lot from her as she quiets herself before God. My mental pace can still be a problem—I'm always generating new ideas and new projects—but my aging body is reminding me to slow down, to be quiet, to notice the breeze, to see a cedar tree in ways I have failed to do before, to be present to the gifts of the moment.

As I am at the beginning of my career, I (Megan Anna) notice how difficult it is to transition away from a "grasping" mentality. While navigating clinical training and the start of my career with young children, it's taken considerable resistance to keep from succumbing to a sprint mentality (my husband would likely tell you I often fail at this). Personally, I have found sabbath in reading, creative writing, and moving my body in ways that feel pleasurable, such as shooting baskets after a long day. My husband, Luke, and I have made choices to try to embrace sabbath as a family by protecting our weekends as a time for our family to reconnect, slow down, and anchor ourselves between busy weeks. In a culture where it would be easy to spend our weekends shuffling kids from activity to activity, we limit our family commitments and enjoy one another's presence as we all slow down together.

What about you? How are you finding ways to experience sabbath despite the complex lives that mental health professionals lead?

Integration Conversation Sta[illegible]

1. How do we cultivate rest within ourselves so that we can provide our patients with a different kind of experience when they step into our offices?
2. Is it possible that you have particular views of God that make it difficult to rest? If so, can you imagine another way?

Further Reading

Brueggemann, W. (2017). *Sabbath as resistance: Saying no to the culture of now.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox.

McMinn, M. R., & Campbell, C. D. (2007). *Integrative psychotherapy: Toward a comprehensive Christian view.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. Chapter one considers *imago Dei* as a foundation for an integrative approach to psychotherapy.

Sharp, C. J. (2010). *Wrestling the Word: The Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian believer.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox.