

Biblical steps for working through trauma

Introduction:

It's just now a month since a plane and helicopter collided over the Potomac. Over these last four weeks my heart and prayers have been with the families of the victims I met at the airport that night. Even more so with the men and women of MPD's Harbor Patrol. The courageous response of that fateful night was a team effort to be sure. Multiple agencies came together in a collaborative effort amazing to behold. But as an MPD Chaplain, my heart is particularly attached to our members.

Saturday was *exactly* one month since the crash and I found myself praying with the psalms as priests do each day. One of the assigned texts was Psalm 107, a song of both lament and thanksgiving... my mind's eye turned again to our members. the Psalm repeats a pattern several times: It identifies a group in need; recalls how that group cried out to God; and advises them to thank the Lord for his mercy. With this reflection I'd like to meditate on each of the groups, on what exactly it means to "cry to the Lord," and just why thanking him for his mercy is worthwhile. In this, I hope to propose a way forward for all of us, but particularly for our harbor officers so viscerally involved in this traumatic mass casualty event.

The groups identified:

Vv 4-5

*Some had lost their way in a barren desert;
found no path toward a city to live in.
They were hungry and thirsty;
their life was ebbing away.*

How often our officers, the servants of the city, feel lost with no city to live in. Our members can often feel marginalized / isolated from citizens, even from our families. It's not just about the hours worked, or the distances covered between our homes and duties. It's also an experiential isolation. How does one, how can one commune with civilian friends and family when our experiences involve words like, "gun shot wound," "body-matter," "accute traumatic stress," and "near death experience." How do you describe to a loved one swimming through the inky darkness of the Potomac with six inches' visibility to discover the shattered remnants of human life. One feels lost, cut off from the very inner nourishment provided by close family and friends. "They were hungry and thirsty; their life ebbing away."

Vv. 10-11

*Some lived in darkness and gloom,
imprisoned in misery and chains.
Because they rebelled against God's word,*

Most often these words call to mind suspects/prisoners with whom our officers work. In our present context I'd like to propose that the dark imprisonment is something we can all feel because our limited faculties. Religions frequently acknowledge some sense in which mankind is fallen from paradise, usually due to an original sin. Aristotelian philosophy, expanded by Thomas Aquinas, suggests that our senses, capacity for rational thought, even our physical life force are all hobbled/impeded by this fallen state. One notices how in the Judeo/Christian Hebrew Testament the life spans of protagonists continually shrink from the time of Adam to Moses... finally reaching what we would consider an average human life of "seventy years, eighty for those who are strong..." (cf Psalm 90:10).

We feel those limits most keenly when we face the mystery of evil in the world, the suffering of good people (on the plane, in the airport)... and when we can't even make sense of our own feelings, so strong do they come on and so limited is our ability to understand.

Vv 17-18

*Some fell sick from their wicked ways,
afflicted because of their sins.
They loathed all manner of food;
they were at the gates of death.*

How many times have I been caught off guard, ill prepared for a situation. "If only I'd got to bed earlier last night." "I knew I shouldn't have had that second drink." "Why didn't I listen to my doctor sooner." When it comes to trauma, and especially mass casualty trauma, the truth is that we're never really prepared; it's the nature of the beast. And afterwards we may indeed loathe any attempt at nourishment/assistance. After all, if I am suffering this greatly, and I know my own head/heart, who could possibly help me. The ensuing depression paralyzes us, making us feel as if we are indeed "at the gates of death."

Vv. 23

*Some went off to sea in ships,
plied their trade on the deep waters.*

Finally, the psalmist describes those who set out into the deep... did God have our harbor patrol in mind? Perhaps, but we can certainly apply this category to all our officers... Centuries later, Jesus would advise Peter and Andrew to "put out into deep waters, (Lk 5:4)" where it would be challenging to catch fish; thus their surprise at a huge catch! Throughout history "deep waters," have been identified with the most challenging of human experiences. Leaving the safety/comfort of civilian existence our officers set out into the deep every day, never knowing just what the deep will throw back at them.

Crying out...

Ok... that's who Psalm 107 addresses. Now... what are they to do who suffer so greatly? "In their distress they cried to the Lord." Here, the Latin of the Scripture may give us a deeper sense of meaning: *et clamaverunt ad Dominum in tribulatione sua*. *Clamaverunt*, they "clamored" to the Lord in their *tribulatione*, that is their "tribulation."

Clamor is not neat and clean. It's the same word used for a disorderly crowd or a riot. Clamor doesn't fit neatly on a form or come off looking great... but clamor is honest! It's a raw exposed nerve that is radically true. I think about the many veterans of recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous. They speak frequently and beautifully about the honesty of *the program*. We're all familiar with the introductory phrasing, "Hello, my name is ... and I am an alcoholic." This polite formalized version only comes after the recovering addict expresses the same sentiment at *rock bottom*, when it's not neat and clean at all. The start of recovery is a messy, raw, exposed, clamor, "HELP!"

Our members so often fear this radical honesty. It's normal. We worry about others' opinions, about official repercussions, stories we've heard, etc. I can't guarantee that radical honesty will be received the same by every friend / family / superior, but I can promise you with absolute certainty that without radical honesty, without clamoring, healing is impossible. Forget for a moment... just a moment... your superiors in the department and think about your ultimate superior, GOD.

God completely and totally respects human freedom: that is, the freedom to make choices. Rational choice is what distinguishes us from the animals. Like any doctor, the Divine Physician can't heal the wound we don't show him. Can't prescribe the right meds if we aren't honest about where we

fall on the pain scale. So... Clamor! Whether it's before God, or a white shirt, your chaplains will be there to support you.

Giving thanks:

OK, we know the experiences out of which we're emerging... we know where we're at: clamoring... now what does the psalmist advise we do to move forward? *Confiteantur Domino misericordiam eius...* "Let them thank the Lord for his mercy."

Here again, there is a broader meaning to the words of the Psalm than that typically rendered by English. *Confiteantur* can mean, "thank," certainly, but its literal definition is "Let them *confess or acknowledge*." *Misericordiam* is a compound word typically translated "mercy." Breaking the word open reveals more. We typically understand, "mercy," to be a matter of juridical forgiveness, but the Biblically meaning is much more. *Misericordiam* yields *miser-* or "movement," and *cordiam*, "of the heart." So the psalmist advises us that after clamoring to God, we do well to acknowledge the movements of his heart for us.

You see, dear friends, even outside of the Christian understanding, looking to classical philosophies absent of divine revelation, God, the higher power, "the universe," however one renders that which is highest in our scheme of things... God is always about substance, being, life, goodness... God is ever and always about putting *positive* into the world. Whether by men's actions, fate, or chance, that *positive* can be thrown off course causing a privation where it ought to be. Example: a loved one dies of disease leaving an empty chair at the dinner table where he/she should've been. When we perceive that empty chair, that *lack*, how will we respond. We may be tempted to sit and stare at the void where our loved one, should be, but this yields no new substance. Or we can re-direct our attention to the origin of all positive being/substance/goodness. We can *acknowledge* God whose heart is the origin of all the positivity/substance yet to come. And this becomes our hope.

Conclusion:

Friends, after a trauma, the body/mind typically take about a month to begin coming back to their pre-trauma chemistry. That said, our healing and progress isn't limited to... can't be limited to... simply "balancing our internal chemistry." We need to keep working together for healing and growth beyond this tragedy. The teamwork of that night didn't end that night. From a chaplain's point of view, I advise listening to the psalmist: Acknowledge how and to what degree you are in need. Cry out, whether to God, to a chaplain, a doctor or a friend... but cry out! It's important to let your wound be known. If you are nervous about that, your chaplains have your back!! We'll stand with you at each step. Then having cried out, let's work together to turn our eyes back to the source of positive LIFE, substance, being, goodness... and together continue our pilgrimage through this world.