

Episode 3: The Power of Lament

Jessica David: Is it okay to mourn for the damage we've done and continue to do to our planet? What does it mean to lament in today's world? And what do I do with all of these feelings? I'm Jessica David, a Harvard Divinity School student. I'm an intern at The BTS Center, which basically means I ask a lot of questions. I'm really curious about The BTS Center's mission to cultivate spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world because it seems so worthy and necessary. So I asked a huge question. Can I take over the podcast for a few months to learn more about what you do? And, well, here we are.

Welcome to the Climate Changed Podcast Behind the Scenes edition with me, Jessica David. I am thrilled to be here today with two members of The BTS Center's team.

Nicole Diroff: Hello, listeners. I'm Nicole Diroff. I serve as associate director at The BTS Center. I am an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, an amateur naturalist, a mom, and as you might know, I'm one of the co-hosts of the first three seasons of the Climate Changed Podcast.

Alison Cornish: And I'm Alison Cornish. I'm the coordinator of The BTS Center's chaplaincy initiative. I've also worked in historic preservation and architectural history, and I'm an ordained minister in the Unitarian Universalist tradition. Right now I live in Western Massachusetts in the town of Buckland and the Deerfield river watershed. And I also work with my own town on issues of local resilience.

Jessica David: So happy to be here with you both.

So, Nicole and Alison, let's start with an easy question. What is a fun fact about you that most people might not know?

Nicole Diroff: I am loving on my fish tank. Recently, I am a fish tank mama. My practice before going to bed is putting in some food and then pulling over a chair and sitting and watching. I have four different species of fish in my tank. It is my Zen moment for the day.

Alison Cornish: I love that. And I've had a chance to visit Nicole and her fish. A fun fact about me is that I spent a lot of years in my youth being an ice skater, being a figure skater. Know the east coast somewhat from going up and down it and various competitions and visiting various skating clubs. But now I look for natural ice to be outside on the ponds in Western Massachusetts and skating with elements. Nothing makes me happier.

Nicole Diroff: I love it. I am not a very natural ice skater. So I would be out there with you, but kind of clunking along.

Alison Cornish: Oh, we'll have to fix that, Nicole. No problem.

Jessica David: I have memories of taking ice skating lessons when I was very little. And the only thing I remember about it is after the lesson, my feet would be so cold, and they would be defrosting and they would hurt, and I would cry in the car. That's the extent of my ice skating.

Alison Cornish: Oh, my goodness. No fun.

Jessica David: Okay, so shifting gears a little bit, I'm gonna dive right into today's topic. So I noticed that The BTS Center uses the term ecological grief. What is that?

Nicole Diroff: So grief is our response to loss and sadness and sorrow. Ecological grief is within the context of the environment and the ecological connections of the systems of our bioregions. And ice skating could be a space for experiencing ecological grief and loss. In the town I live in, in Maine, there is a community ice skating rink. There are some winters where it's hardly open these days because of climate change. So ecological grief can be in response to particular moments or particular situations. Our state encouraged many farmers to use municipal sludge as fertilizer in the late 1900s. And we have now discovered the ways in which enduring PFAS chemicals are in the soil in ways that farmers are losing their livelihoods. Our ecosystem has become full of toxins. So that's a particular situation that we might experience ecological grief around. The other thing that's really unique about ecological grief is the way in which anticipated future losses are very clearly a part of this as well. My kiddo, who is now a fifth grader, when he was young, we had an encyclopedia of animals with beautiful pictures and descriptions of animals, and he loved it. And I remember showing him one day what the different colored dots meant on the different images. There was a key at the front that said that green dots meant those animals were thriving, yellow meant they were threatened, and red meant they were facing extinction. We learned the key, and then we turned the next page we turned to was the one with the apes. And my child burst into tears. Just complete sorrow, imagining that these incredible creatures, all of them on the page, were facing extinction.

Alison Cornish: Oh, Nicole, thank you for bringing this really big, broad topic right down to such a tender story and such a personal one, too. And I think that is something that I have learned in working with ecological grief. It can be very personal and it can be very broad. But in our understanding of grief in the past, we've really looked at grief as a loss that relates to people, first of all, not ecosystems or other species, and that the proximity of the loss is important. You

lose a parent or a sibling dies. But the idea that we can have grief beyond the very personal and extend that beyond our known universe is really, really important. And normalizing that sense. Just as Nicole was talking about, I don't know, the farmers in Maine, but I viscerally felt what it is to think about losing your livelihood because of a practice that was normal and destroyed something that we're trying to use today in a healthy way. So honoring our grief is really authentic. It frees up something inside of us. We do a lot of work at The BTS Center around Joanna Macy and the work that reconnects. And something that the work that reconnects teaches us over and over again is that if we push down grief and don't acknowledge it, it's still there and it's still a powerful force in our lives. But if we express it, if we allow it to emerge, then it offers opportunities for solidarity. Because if I'm feeling grief about something, more than likely you too are feeling grief about something. We can meet in that place, in that space and support one another. There's also something about grief that underneath grief is love. There's something, when I was a minister in a congregation that I would say at every single memorial service, because I think every one of us needs to hear it over and over again, that life means that loss will come in time and love means that grief will come in time. All that we have in our world that is so precious to us, if we open ourselves up to the love, then we're opening ourselves up to the grief as well.

Nicole Diroff: Yeah. Amen.

Jessica David: So I hear that. And of course it makes so much sense. And I think. Yes, yes. And I've also grown up like many people, I think, thinking of grief as something that's very private and something that we each process in our own ways and we shouldn't interfere with other people's grief and we shouldn't impose our grief on other people. In other words, you don't talk about it.

Nicole Diroff: Uh-huh.

Jessica David: But I think The BTS Center is suggesting something very different, which is about constructively processing grief. Well, first of all, constructively processing grief, period. But also doing it in a more collective way. Is that right?

Alison Cornish: Oh, that's really true, Jessica. And I think many of us had an upbringing like the one that you describe. That grief was very privatized something, if it was even acknowledged, it was acknowledged in a very small circle of a family or very, very close knit family. But really, when we look back at our spiritual ancestors, and I use that term very, very broadly, because even if we're not affiliated with a faith tradition in our lives right now, there are spiritual ancestors back eons and eons, and they knew a lot about lament, they knew a lot about grief.

That's where we get our psalms in the scriptures. That's where lamentations comes from. That is the litanies that we experience in our various faith homes. There were public ceremonies and a liturgical calendar and anniversaries that all sort of put markers into people's cyclical lives. That said, okay, now it's time to acknowledge that there was a loss. Maybe that loss was 2,000 years ago. It continues to live inside of us because we're the descendants of real people. Real people experienced real loss and real grief. It's really important to reflect on the rituals that have been gifted to us to remember that there are teachings, there's wisdom, there's help available from those rituals and ceremonies and processes that we don't have to reinvent. They're actually there for our engagement. This is so common in our society. We keep things to ourselves and don't ask even when we're sensing that someone else is holding a grief. I have found, though, being honest about what I'm holding and sometimes just asking a gentle question that someone can choose to answer in whatever way they want, but acknowledges something I know to be true about their reality, leads to this beautiful way of connecting honestly around loss and grief leads to really a special type of connection and relationship. What I just described would be between two people, but there is this incredible power in communal, in collective acknowledgement of really that which is beyond our understanding. For The BTS Center, touching that together builds the sort of community we think our climate changed world needs.

Jessica David: Yeah, and what I hear really from both of you is it's about connecting with other people and also, as Alison said, connecting with our past and with people and creatures and spirits that were here before us. So really connecting across time as well, which is not something I would have thought about. I love the word lament. I, may be in, you know, a minority there on that. But I think it's a great word. And also I think part of the reason I love it is it feels like an old fashioned word. I imagine that there are listeners like me who, you know, might really not know what that means or might have different ideas of what it means. So what is lament and what is it? What does it look like?

Alison Cornish: I'm really interested in how Nicole and I might paint similar and slightly different pictures in response to this. It's a great, great question. So we often think about lament as something that relates to the past, that we have a sense of ruefulness or sadness about something in the rear view mirror. But I'm so glad that Nicole talked about lament about something that hasn't yet happened. That anticipatory loss that we know given the climate crisis is baked into what's happening to our world. We're looking at things that will not be here. They will not be our companions. An important part of lament is that we also look at our role in that loss. I mean, in what ways are we complicit? We have to keep ourselves in the grief and we have to keep ourselves in the lament too, and say, this is not just about somebody else's actions. I'm here too, and I'm participating in these systems that are causing these losses. I've sort of

combined some ideas from a couple of real teachers. For me, there are different movements to lament. If you think about it as something that's active, not passive, and that moves us through a series of feelings, a series of formal scenarios. First of all, lament is usually addressed to someone or something outside of ourselves. So, that might be a divine source, it might be the universe, it might be the past and the ancestors, but it involves as, as Nicole said, it's bigger than just us, right? And, we have to recognize and name the damage and the harm. And really taking that good, hard look at reality is incredibly important because that helps open up the space to feel deeply. And obviously grief is an emotion. But, opening that space and holding that space safely for emotions to be expressed is part of the lament process. So that the grief and sorrow actually can be expressed that it's not held inside. And that can take lots of forms. It can take the form of movement, it can take the form of wailing and a verbal expression. It can take the form of writing and journaling. But we have to get it sort of out there and then there's an opportunity for repentance or turning. That too is part of lament that in recognizing what has brought us here, we make some sort of determination to do things differently going forward, that there's a change involved in that change could be forgiveness, there could be gratitude, there could be praise. But there's a real spiritual turning that allows us to move into the future in some real way and that praise that gratitude again. Brings us out of ourselves and into something larger, that we're stepping into something larger, the larger stream of history, et cetera. And I love this quote from a rabbi friend that says, how will your heart break? Will it break in a thousand pieces or will it break open? Lament really offers the opportunity to do that. It could be either one of those, depending on the situation, depending on what it is that we're lamenting. But to do that in company and in public allows us to accompany one another through these movements of lamentation.

Nicole Diroff: As you were sharing, Alison, the image of our faith ancestors wrenching, ripping cloth and clothing came to me really powerfully. There's something very embodied, very physical in the way that someone would engage in lament, in wailing and wrenching. One of the people who actually has been on the Climate Changed Podcast in season one, who is a trusted guide for me in these matters is Hannah Malcolm. She's edited, pulled together a compilation called Words for a Dying World with pieces from people around the globe. She says the difference between grief and lamentation is two things. Lament is directed to the divine and that it's collective. And I go back to those two guideposts again and again. And I love what you added, Alison. In terms of being very aware of our entanglement, very aware that I feel like that's like the depth of the wrenching is that this is happening and I'm a part of this. I'm a part of the harm. I imagine rivers flooding because of the ways that humans have. We use this word called terraforming, have turned the landscape into something that we as humans desired, but we are truly not in control of.

Alison Cornish: Exactly.

Nicole Diroff: And so to watch a river do something it maybe should not be doing, and just to direct that to the divine, to acknowledge our entanglement, to do it with others, there is a real power in terms of the ecological consequences of our actions and bringing lament to bear.

Nicole Diroff: For The BTS Center, where we're focused on spiritual leadership for a climate changed world, this is also a place where the role of spiritual leaders and religious traditions throughout history, this is a piece that they have held for their communities, honoring loss. Regardless of whether or not you might be a member of that tradition or go to that church, this is spiritual leadership at its best. Spiritual leaders hold a deep well of wisdom that I would argue is quite, quite unique. And practices in this realm of communal living which are needed now and will be in the future in a climate changed world.

Alison Cornish: I couldn't agree more.

Jessica David: So how does an organization like The BTS Center encourage or practice Lament?

Nicole Diroff: I'm happy to share about an initiative that Alison actually was really at the foreground of creating for The BTS Center and now has become quite a shared endeavor for our staff team. And this is an offering called Lament with Earth. It's the fourth year that we are offering seasonal online worship filled gatherings. So five times a year we bring people together. And The Many, an incredible group of musicians and liturgists, have created video productions. Each of them is maybe 40 minutes long that we witness together and engage with together through chat, communication. So we gather, we say hello to one another, we bring our grief to one another, to the community. We watch this video production and then afterwards we linger. We have some conversation with partners about what grief looks like and why it matters to do it together. And I wanted to share a few of the words from one of the songs that's in this public ritual, this Lament with Earth offering. The song is called Is this How the World Ends? And you can find this by The Many on YouTube and we'll include it in the show notes. So the beginning of the song says, what are we doing? What have we done? We can't say we didn't know. And the music then brings us to a place where the lyrics say, Help us love the way you do. Every time I watch this video, I cry. It's so powerful. And so for us, Lament with Earth is not just talking about engaging with grief and Lament, but experimenting with it in community and trying to offer a sacred communal experience.

Alison Cornish: Wow, Nicole, you brought me right, right into the events that been going on for, as you say, four years, just with your description there. And I would just add, I've been delighted to learn that some faith communities have started using the videos from Lament with Earth

within their own congregations. And we encourage that and we offer support for that. So the idea that church, a synagogue, a mosque, a meeting house might want this in their own space, with their own community, and to be in person with the material feels to me just like a huge step towards, again, normalizing grief, normalizing Lament as a practice. I've also been involved in creating, uh, a program called Earth Hospice Rites. And we also will include that in the notes for this podcast that happens every two weeks. People from around the world come together for just 20 minutes to express their own sadness for what is happening right here, right now. And also recognizing the beauty that Earth gives to us each and every day. So we, in a very hospice like way. Yes. The Earth as we know it is dying. And from hospice we know that we want to be with our beloveds, and we want to be with our beloveds in particular ways, even if they are facing some premature ends and the ending of their role in our lives and us in theirs. So I think all of this, what we're trying to say, Jessica, is that The BTS Center recognizes the need to make and hold space for all our program participants who are carrying grief and to give opportunities to metabolize that safely and to learn practices to bring to others. And we're continuing to do experiments with grief rituals and our chaplains conversation circles. They are so rich and so creative. I feel like we're really on the beginning stages of a journey around this work.

Jessica David: And I have to say I've participated in Lament with Earth and you know, for myself, grief feels uncomfortable. And I have to say, the first time I logged in, I thought, oh, I'm not sure about this. I don't know if I can do this with a group of people on Zoom. And it was beautiful, beautiful experience. And it has continued to be. But how do people react to this area of your work? Am I the only one who might have that little bit of standoffishness at first?

Alison Cornish: Not at all, Jessica. Not one bit. You know, it's really important to say we don't grieve like on demand. You know, it's like, turn it on. It's time to grieve now and turn it back off. It's really important to recognize that everyone grieves differently. Everyone, Everyone. There is no formula. There is no timeline. Grief can look like so many different emotions. It's not always sad. Sometimes grief shows up as anger. Sometimes it shows up as numbness. Sometimes it shows up as distraction. The research that's been going on in grief since Elizabeth Kubler-Ross did her work is just really, really expanded. And we know so much more about the human experience of grief. I will say that most people who come to BTS center programs are looking for affirmation of something they're feeling, but they also feel very lonely with that feeling. And I'm just one of the words, the words of one participant who came to our Navigating Climate Spiritual Care, wrote to us, "I'm not hearing from people around me that they are grieving the climate." So where we spend our time, with our families, in our friendship Circles, maybe even in our colleague and co worker circles, people may not be expressing this, and it can really

increase the sense of loneliness. So I feel like The BTS Center is always creating spaces where people can feel less alone and more in solidarity with others.

Jessica David: Yeah, the solidarity aspect again. So, Nicole, paint a picture for us of a society that respects and makes space for grief and lament what is different than what we have now.

Nicole Diroff: We've talked maybe about the discomfort or the tendency to avoid grief, but there's also a way in which our society has said it's something sort of diagnosable and a problem and something to be fixed as compared to an honest response to a real situation of loss. The ecological grief that is here and is coming. We don't have enough physicians and therapists for that trauma and that loss, but this may not be a diagnosis. This may be the appropriate response to harm that's being done to people and to planet. So The BTS Center, we believe in creating caring communities where mourning is respected and where possibilities are imagined. And if you've ever had the experience of a really honest conversation or a really honest setting leading to connection and compassion and then real meaning and purpose and courage and action, those are the kinds of communities we are hoping to create. We hope that someone suffering from asthma because of air pollution might attend church and hear a prayer specifically targeted to that challenge, that loss, that situation. We imagine that young people, as they move through the natural world, they might greet their fellow beings, they might ask permission of an insect before they try and learn from it. And if they happen to squish something that they say, I'm so sorry and my heart breaks that I hurt you. That's the sort of world we're trying to create.

Jessica David: Beautiful. Then also, what I hear there, Nicole, is in the same way that Alison said, we don't turn grief on. There's no switch. There's also no off switch. We don't just turn it off all of a sudden when our three days of bereavement time are done or according to some schedule like that. Well, thank you. Thank you so much, Nicole and Alison, for this beautiful and really, really important conversation. I am just so grateful to learn from both of you about this topic and for all the work that you're doing here. So, listeners, it's your turn now. How do you practice lament? I hope you'll share with us by emailing us at podcast@thebtscenter.org or calling and leaving a message at 207-200-6986.

Thank you for listening to the Climate Changed Podcast Behind the Scenes Edition with me, Jessica David. Many thanks to my guests today, Nicole Diroff and Alison Cornish. Thanks to producer Peterson Toscano for producing this episode and to Nicole again for your support of the entire series. Climate Changed Podcast is a project of The BTS Center in beautiful Portland, Maine. Please contact us about this episode or any other questions or thoughts that you might have. You can call, text or email us. Leave a voice message 207-200-6986 that's 207-200-6986 and of course plus one if you are calling from outside the US and you can also text that number

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