

Political Dimensions of Pastoral Care in Community Disaster Responses

Larry Kent Graham

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Abstract All caregiving takes place in multiple political contexts and assumes or actually furthers various political agendas, whether acknowledged or not. When strategically incorporated into pastoral and spiritual care, politically responsive actions may enhance the practice of care. When disaster strikes a community, ritual engagement of the larger public context provides a significant opportunity for pastoral caregivers to function as public pastoral theologians and to influence the corporate response to communal challenges. In these circumstances of community vulnerability, pastoral caregivers and communities of faith are positioned to provide spiritual care that combines solace and safety for the victims with guidance and shaping influence on the ritual practices and rhetorical interpretations called upon to assist the community to endure, respond, and heal. This article examines some central political aspects of the pastoral caregiver’s repertoire that might further a stricken community’s ritual and rhetorical resources necessary to sustain life, share loss, reclaim goodness, and rebuild for a strong future. Drawing upon a view of lamentation as a tri-partite process of sharing anguish, interrogating causes, and reinvesting in hope, I suggest how the spiritual and pastoral caregiver may collaboratively participate in a “disaster-response matrix” that organizes corporate responses to catastrophic disaster. This article pays particular attention to macro-, meso-, and micro-level political negotiations necessary to ensure respect for diversity and shared responsibility in creating rituals, memorials, and public narratives at the onset of disaster and in its aftermath over the generations. Illustrations from the experience of religious caregivers at Columbine, Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, Aurora, Newtown, and Boston are presented to guide pastoral engagement of civil society in disruptive times.

Keywords Disaster · Political · Lamentation · Memorial · Disaster-response matrix

The political core of care

Everyone knows by now that the personal is political. What everyone doesn’t know is that at its core, pastoral care is political too. Try as we might to extricate ourselves from political

L. K. Graham (✉)

Iliff School of Theology, 2201 South University Blvd., Denver, CO 80210, USA
e-mail: lgraham@iliff.edu

vicissitudes swirling around our caregiving, it simply is not possible to do so. I hope in this article to show how the link between the personal and political is in the DNA of caregiving. Political engagement is not an addendum tacked on to care. Neither is political engagement an intrusion of the caregiver's political or moral agenda into caregiving. Rather, religiously based and spiritually oriented caregivers are an indispensable part of the political culture in which care is taking place. Effective spiritual care includes an astute response to the political realities comprising the caregiving situation. In this article, I will provide a brief overview of the various ways political realities intersect with pastoral and spiritual care. I will propose that "public pastoral theology" is an organizing center within the field of pastoral care and counseling that braids political dynamics into the caregiving task, especially in relation to interpreting and responding to corporate disasters such as school shootings, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters. I will show that religious leaders and caregivers are an integral part of a disaster-response matrix that calls for astute political engagement and various forms of ritual and rhetorical response. I will demonstrate how a pastoral-theological approach to "memorializing lamentation" will enable pastoral caregivers to effectively move between the public, political, and personal dimensions of care in these challenging events.

Political noses in the caregiver's tent

One of the greatest hallmarks of pastoral and spiritual care,¹ in keeping with many mental health approaches to caregiving, is the commitment to foreground the careseeker's situation without imposing the worldview of the caregiver on vulnerable people seeking assistance. Certainly it is hard to imagine that a Republican Catholic chaplain would try to convince a careseeker that in order to receive care they must vote against a Democratic candidate for president or to lobby for pro-life social legislation about abortion. Nor would a Democratic caregiver say that a lobbyist member of their congregation has to give up their National Rifle Association membership to receive pastoral guidance from their minister. Political agendas such as these have no place in the caregiving contract; both the careseeker and the caregiver must take pains to see that the noses of political camels such as these stay out of the caregiver's tent.

At a deeper level, however, there are many ways in which political dynamics impinge on the caregiving relationship. It is essential in these cases to recognize that the political camel's nose is indeed already in the tent, and sometimes room must be made for the entire beast to be given a place inside as well. Some examples may be helpful.

Political differences may be the presenting issue for seeking care. My research on how families experience war over the generations has uncovered significant conflict and pain

¹ I use the terms "spiritual care" and "pastoral care" regularly throughout this essay. They are interchangeable but not identical. Pastoral care is more narrowly defined as the total range of care provided by pastors and laypersons set aside to represent a religious community. When focused on "spiritual," that is to say, "meaning-making" and "religious understandings," pastoral care is also a form of spiritual care. But a "spiritual caregiver" may not be a pastor or even a representative of a religious community, and the care provided by spiritual caregivers may not reflect or be accountable to any specific religious tradition. In these cases, the terms "spiritual care" and "spiritual caregivers" reflect the more non-sectarian turn taken in health care, therapeutic, pastoral, chaplaincy, religious, and other settings where attention to the spiritual or "values and meaning" side of life is prized. In the Iliff School of Theology context of teaching pastoral care and counseling, we use the terms "spiritual and pastoral care" to recognize that not all our students and caregivers are pastors by role or identification with a Christian tradition, but that they do work with religious meanings and resources in providing care to those they are training to serve. This is our best attempt to recognize the complexity and diversity of the identity, context, and accountability of pastorally and spiritually oriented caregivers.

because of political differences in views about particular wars held by family members. Seeking care to resolve or contain these differences can keep marriages from ending and help families heal. In these situations, political considerations become the focus of care.

Dissonant political commitments between the careseeker and the caregiver may require respectful negotiation if care is to become possible. Again, in my research on families and war it was evident that Serbian, Muslim, and Croatian families in Bosnia and Herzegovina would not disclose their difficulties to a caregiver outside their own groups unless they first established that there were political affinities between them concerning who was responsible for the war and how to respond to the post-war political situation. Without this negotiation, caregiving would not be possible. In less extreme examples, the identification of the caregiver or careseeker with certain public political debates or conflicts may challenge their capacity to build the working alliance necessary for effective care to take place with careseekers of differing political orientations.

For example, military chaplains are currently struggling with the political consequences of the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” the governmental policy that allowed gays and lesbians to remain in the military as long as their sexual orientation was neither queried nor disclosed. Since the repeal, many religiously conservative chaplains are in conflict with the political requirement to provide (or provide for) ministry to gays and lesbians in the military. These chaplains must engage in considerable political negotiation to harmonize contending values between their denominations, their own consciences, the specific needs of military service members, and the laws of the land. Gay and lesbian military personnel, in turn, may choose not to seek out chaplains to help them whose political and moral convictions will be experienced as judgmental or harmful.

Another place where political matters may focus the caregiving is when counsel is sought about moral and political options in themselves. A careseeker may be trying to understand what they think about certain political processes. They may want help clarifying how to vote on certain matters of importance to them, or whether to engage in various political activities to bring about change they desire. One place I have seen political issues focus care is in decisions about whether to enlist in the military and/or whether to support a nation’s decisions about engaging in war. Closely related is the politically charged experience of care for those who return from war with various levels of shame and guilt and a sense of estrangement from their country on whose behalf they took up arms. Helping soldiers deal with moral guilt and “soul repair” involves paying attention to the ways the personal and the political come together in acts of care.

The political elephant in the room

There is more than a camel or a camel’s nose in the spiritual caregiver’s tent. There is also an elephant in the caregiver’s room. That elephant is the U.S. Constitution and the political sanctions, warrants, and contentions that it has generated concerning the relationship between religion and politics in the United States. All caregiving in the United States is housed in the context of the Constitution. The Constitution is a political document that structures spiritual discourse and religious practices in the United States. As such, everything the spiritually based and pastorally oriented caregiver does is politically grounded as well as politically limited. There are two poles of permissions and constraints in the Constitution. One pole protects the free exercise of religion and the freedom to believe what one wants to believe as individuals and members of a group. Another pole constrains the government from establishing and/or imposing a particular religious faith or practice on any individual or

social group. These two poles in the Constitution have generated a vast amount of political, legal, and theological discourse on the relation of religion and the state. Our pastoral and spiritual care is informed by this larger discourse and, whether knowingly or not, positions itself within these cultural meaning systems. Deciding how we will situate our care is in itself a political and ethical matter, within the constraints and warrants of our legal system.

So, then, how might the caregiver embrace this religion and politics discourse and fashion it into a viable dimension of caregiving? It seems that several possibilities are available, depending on the spiritual or religious communities on behalf of whom care is offered, as well as the conscience and values of the caregiver and the careseeker. Specifically, I identify three macro levels, three meso levels, and three micro levels organizing the discourse of religion and politics in the United States. Each has serious consequences for the shape of spiritual care that is offered. When taken together, including the various relationships among them, they give contour to the political elephant that has joined the camel in the spiritual caregiver's tent.

By macro level, I mean the large-scale attitudinal stance toward the free expression of religion by individuals, groups, and communities. At the macro level, religion may function as the legitimizer, the critic, or the battleground on which to fight out the values that will organize the common good. By meso level of discourse, I mean the mythic frames that mediate conflicting options between the macro and micro levels of discourse. The meso-level mythic frames are always contested personally, socially, and communally.² By micro level of political and religious discourse, I mean the personal values that become enculturated into individual and group identities that organize moral values, spiritual meanings, and political actions (Haidt 2012; Westen 2007).

At the macro level, the caregiver may function in three dominant modes. First, as a legitimizer of the political norms and predominant discourse of civil society, the caregiver attempts to resolve dissonance between careseekers and the dominant political order. There may be little difference between default cultural beliefs and the values and meanings mediated through the spiritual care process. Hence, when spiritual caregivers guide young men and women to take up arms on behalf of their country, a form of legitimizing the social and political order is taking place in the context of spiritual care. Conversely, when the caregiver and careseeker agree that the country's policies should bend toward their interests—for example, in support of marriage equality for lesbians and gays—a legitimizing political strategy is influencing the concrete shape of care.³

Second, on the macro level the caregivers and the caregiving community on whose behalf the caregivers operate may be critics of the political norms and predominant discourse of civil society. Rather than seeking congruence, there is assumed dissonance between the secular state and the religious vision for human life. Libertarian political stances and radical religious sectarianism embody this orientation.

² See Dionne (2012) for a superb example of contending values at the heart of contemporary U.S. political discourse.

³ Many military chaplains and a large number of religious bodies in the United States serve to legitimate macro-level U.S. nationalistic mythologies about the relationship between war and religion. Gunn (2009) demonstrates that the myth that America needs a strong military to ensure freedom and our economic way of life is legitimated both by religious and political discourse. He contends that the political discourse creates the religious legitimation for militarism rather than vice versa. Gunn is quoted in a press release from Emory University's Center for the Study of Law and Religion (February 24, 2009): "My original intent was to write about how religion has influenced foreign policy, but I ended up discovering instead how American foreign policy shaped Americans' understanding about religion."

Third, the macro level may be construed as a battleground in which religious communities and believers are in a struggle with political forces to instantiate laws and civic practices compatible with their viewpoints. There is considerable contemporary debate about the relation of religion to healthcare policies around abortion, contraception, and other reproductive rights. Many secularly oriented political activists see religious views as a hegemonic attempt to mold the social order to the values and beliefs of religious communities. Many religious communities see public policies as inimical to their cherished beliefs about human life and their right to exercise their religious beliefs without constraint in the public square. Thus, for example, spiritual care for a woman seeking guidance about abortion will inevitably enter a battlefield between religion and politics that has enormous consequences for the nature of the spiritual care that will be provided.

Along with the macro-level options of legitimizing, criticizing, or contending with the religious and political imaginary of the United States, the caregiver is immersed in meso-level considerations about the mythic framing of what it means to be human and what values and social organization best serve the common good. Questions about when life begins, how it should be cared for and terminated, and how we ought to live together are constellated beliefs that organize individuals at the micro level and shape our stances toward religious and political orientations at the macro level. In this context, the caregiver and careseeker are struggling with whether to think of human life and the human good as individualistic or communitarian and whether to emphasize values such as self-reliant independence or shared interdependence and social responsibility.⁴ In the center of the struggle over which mythic framing will predominate, theological and political questions about what it means to be human and the relation of individual freedom to human community come to the foreground. Current examples of these contending political, religious, and mythic frames are the debates on gun safety following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012, and the debates about funding clean-up efforts after Hurricane Sandy in October 2012. Families needing spiritual and communal care in the aftermath of these catastrophes found and (at the time of this writing) still find themselves in the middle of highly contentions deliberations in the political sphere. Caregivers are part of this maelstrom, as well as its shapers and responders. Spiritual care and political dynamics generated at the macro and meso levels co-constitute one another within the microsystemic arena of religion politics where care is mediated. In these circumstances, the camel's nose and body are in the tent, and the whole political elephant is in the room.

In summary, politics structure care and often guide its direction. And while there are modes of introducing political elements into care that work against positive spiritual assistance, on the whole political realities can best be regarded as a potential resource for bettering human life. What I hope to show in the discussion ahead is that there is no place where the positive link between politics and care is more apparent than in the private and public response to tragedy and corporate disaster.

Disaster and the politics of public pastoral care

When thinking explicitly about politics and pastoral care, as a pastoral theologian my mind turns immediately to cases, or pastoral situations. In Pastoral Theology the practice of care in

⁴ Haidt (2012) contends that there are various typologies, mediated by five moral foundations, for construing personal and sub-group moral orientations within one's political and social culture. Once set, they tend to be rather permanent templates for evaluating political, legal, economic, and other public policies.

specific contexts is theologically generative as well as spiritually healing, sustaining, and guiding. Pastoral Theology is a theological discipline that fashions theory and practice for providing care and counseling in pastoral or religious contexts. Pastoral Theology becomes “Public” or “Political” Pastoral Theology when it expands its horizons to engage critically historical events and cultural meaning systems related to war, natural disasters, violence by domestic and international terrorists, and other corporate crises such as school shootings.⁵ The public pastoral theologian becomes immersed in various public tragedies and works with others to identify and evaluate the multiple (and sometimes contending) core meaning systems giving rise to and seeking to address the devastation disasters bring upon communities. As a public pastoral theologian, I strive to identify the ways these value systems and political contexts mediate practical strategies for healing, sustaining, guiding, and liberating individuals, cultures, and the natural order ravaged by various catastrophic disasters. And, at times, the public pastoral theologian suggests ways to modify some of our core theological commitments, moral assessments, and political dynamics between particular religious communities and the larger common good. In all these endeavors, the pastoral caregiver, as public pastoral theologian, is deeply immersed and politically situated to make a difference at all levels of the community’s discourse, rituals, and meaning-making. As I hope to make clear in the discussion of lamentation and memorials, political engagement is an important aspect of what takes place when pastoral caregivers function as public pastoral theologians.

My work as a caregiver and public pastoral theologian has been influenced by my involvement in various community disasters. When catastrophe strikes a community, many things immediately take place.⁶ Disasters are, at base, cataclysmic intrusive events that tragically kill individuals and destroy, rupture, or render ineffectual the personal, communal-cultural, ecological, governmental, and economic structures necessary for life to be viable. Because they directly rupture and reverberate through a broad network of interconnected persons and community structures, catastrophic disasters are comprehensive in scope and their consequences can be expected to continue impacting individuals and communities over several generations. No one escapes their influence. Victims are not able to prevent or stop a catastrophe. Naturally generated disasters such as Katrina or Hurricane Sandy, and socially produced disasters such as 9/11, the Newtown shootings, and the Boston Marathon bombing, unleash relentless, implacable, and remorseless destructive power. This power comes with a cruel force that is indifferent to the lives and welfare of those caught in it. Human vulnerability and helplessness rise to paralyzing proportions, at least in the acute phase of the disaster. Disasters indiscriminately impact the total environment, as well as individuals, families, and other business, social, and governmental systems. Persons, communities, and environments struggling to survive catastrophic disasters are powerless on their own to remove the conditions resulting in their demise. They require rescue or assistance from external resources if life is to be maintained or restored. In worst-case scenarios, the fabric of life is either torn to shreds or removed altogether. Whatever the source of the tragedy, victims of tragedy have had something impact them that challenges their assumptive world and moral universe. The disaster seems unfair and excessive and raises acute questions of why this is happening to people who don’t deserve it. Why were some spared and others taken? Why did our government and political leaders not prevent this catastrophe or respond better?

⁵ On public pastoral theology, see Ashby (2000), Graham (2000), Leslie (2008), and Miller-McLemore (2004). The “publics” in “public pastoral theology” are the clinical settings, the educational institutions, the economy, the state, and the media, among others. Taken this way, public pastoral theology is broader than politics, but political considerations are a part of all public pastoral theology.

⁶ For a fuller description of catastrophic disaster, see Graham (2006).

While the conditions leading to tragedy may in principle be avoidable, the questions raised when tragedy occurs are unavoidable. Tragedy therefore inaugurates a very complicated mixture of living with unwanted and unexpected loss and confronting the perplexing challenge of assigning proper accountability, facing unanswered questions, and searching for positive meaning. Catastrophic disasters bring about enduring evil consequences.⁷ It may take generations to recover and rebuild from tragedies. And even then, whatever gains that may have come about are not justified by the losses that the catastrophe brought into history. Catastrophic disasters mobilize a huge amount of material and human resources, including massive media attention and involvement, and elicit multiple levels of interpretation and evaluation. They engender a fundamental human need to help one another and force us to come to terms in a new way with the question of meaning and moral accountability for the tragedy that has intruded into our lives. Put succinctly, disasters set into motion human caring, human thinking, human speaking, and human ritualizing.

The public pastoral theologian, being responsive to the multiple political vectors at work in disastrous public events, is called on to care, to think, to speak, and to lead as well as to participate in various ritual responses to the disasters upending our communities. We care for individuals in trouble and we care for our devastated communities. And, of course, we seek care for ourselves and our families who are captured by the crisis as well. But we do more than care. We also think about ways to help persons and communities better understand what these catastrophic circumstances mean and how we together might fashion a life-giving interpretation of our world and its events. When pastoral care takes this public turn, it engages macro-, meso-, and micro-level political force-fields. There are many ways to be politically engaged as caregivers, as I have tried to briefly outline above. In the remaining part of this article I want to demonstrate that in times of corporate trauma and public grieving arising from tragic catastrophic disasters, the public pastoral caregiver and theologian has a unique opportunity to link the communal processes of lamentation and memorialization to the political dynamics focused on the public good. This pastoral action is a form of political pastoral care to the community.

Lamentation and the politics of care

When tragic disaster befalls us, two things occur at once: an instantaneous shattering of the world and an instantaneous survival reflex that responds to the shattering. The world that is coming apart is also a world that responds to hold itself together. Put one way, those shattered by disaster must adapt or die. Put another way, we humans must find life-giving means of coping with existential threat and traumatic loss if we are to survive and thrive as individuals and communities. Put still another way, a new history, a new drama, has come into being and no one can escape the plot. We are all writing a plot whose ending will be in question for a long, long time. The lamentation and memorializing elements of the plot come relatively late, but they also inform immediate survival responses.

⁷ The term evil as I am using it comes from process theology, though I use it to describe empirical historical realities rather than abstract concepts. Catastrophic disasters are by definition genuinely evil since they bring about both discord and triviality and accordingly make the world a poorer place than it otherwise would have been. Evil, in this view, is not a matter of malevolent intentions or negligent actions; it is entirely measured by outcomes or consequences. Hence, the consequences of a hurricane may be evil without intentionality toward harm by a hurricane. Sin is the theological category that most describes the intentionality of evil and is more appropriately ascribed to human agency, both individual and collective.

The first question the story raises is, “What is going on? Where are we needed?” The community’s mind is inducted into a new awareness of threat and loss and the need for an immediate and massive response.

The second question in this plot is, “Will we survive?” In the midst of great anguish and shock at the death and destruction brought by the onset of disaster, there is the animating survival response to stop the mayhem and to rescue those in peril.

Once survival and basic safety are ensured, the third question in the disaster story is, “How shall we recover?” A certain amount of safety and security is required before the recovery plot can be written.

We see, then, that disaster initiates a new history, comprised of three linear processes that also feed back on one another. These three elements are shattering, safety, and recovery. Religious communities and religious leadership are intimately inscribed into the shattering, survival, and recovery plots. These are public plots; they proceed by discourse, rhetoric, and ritual practices. Pastoral caregivers and religious leaders are often in the forefront of the community’s survival and recovery plots. Lamentation and memorializing are among our greatest contributions to the plots that our communities are writing to recover from disaster and build a future worth having.

I find the work of theologians Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore (1999) and biblical scholar Kathleen O’Connor (2002) to be very instructive for understanding lamentation as a politically engaged mode of helping our broken communities to endure the shattering, find safety, end the mayhem, and engage a recovery process. The central purpose of lamentation according to these writers is to provide a personal and communal way to express truthfully the sorrows of the world that have come upon the community and to register protest, complaint, and anger at those responsible for it. It is in the immersion into the truth of one’s affliction, paradoxically, that affliction becomes bearable and the way is opened toward healing and meaning-making (O’Connor, pp. 3, 96). According to O’Connor, when we reflect back the suffering we hear from one another, “it restores the humanity of the victim because it validates their perception of the way the world has fallen away from their feet” (p. 102). Billman and Migliore (1999) argue that

lamentation helps us to acknowledge the truthful reality of our pain and to reconnect with the innate goodness of our personal and corporate lives by offering a needed language of pain; confirming the value of embodied life; granting permission to grieve and protest; challenging inadequate understandings of God and preparing the way for new understandings; strengthening our self-understanding as responsible agents; purifying anger and the desire for vengeance; increasing solidarity with others who suffer; and revitalizing praise and hope. (p. 104)

As I have worked with memorials and lamentation, I have learned that the two come together. Memorials are a public, politically engendered context for personal and communal response to disaster. Lamentation is the mechanism that provides the memorializing process with spiritually based resources to commemorate and move forward with strength and renewed perspective. I have identified three discrete but interacting phases of lamentation at work in public memorializing: sharing anguish, interrogating causes, and reinvesting in hope. In providing leadership in public memorials, the pastoral caregiver becomes overtly involved in the political dynamics behind the scenes, as well as in the rhetoric and ritual practice that take place in various ceremonial contexts. In other words, memorializing lamentation is one of the more public settings for politically sensitive pastoral care; the camel’s nose is not only in the tent—the camel is in the tent and the elephant is in the room! Let me highlight and provide brief examples of each phase of lamentation.

Sharing anguish

Sharing anguish in the context of response serves the survival as well as the recovery plot. The instant disaster strikes, the community is gripped by fear and anguish and bands together spontaneously to support one another and to rescue and protect others. The role of religious communities and leaders becomes critical at this point. I will examine more fully in the next section how these roles might be fulfilled. By offering refuge and providing rituals to articulate loss and to support efforts to stabilize and respond, the pastoral leader and religious bodies help us bear the unspeakable anguish that now binds us together.

At the onset of disaster an incredible human unity and solidarity comes into place. We saw this most recently in the Newtown, Connecticut, shootings and the Boston Marathon bombing. News accounts and media portrayals were constant in their coverage, and the nation was mesmerized. Large numbers of people were driven or drawn together by the rupture of the personal and social membranes holding their lives in place. Although the membranes are ruptured, the connective ligaments are tightened and, perhaps for the first time, a society feels for a while like a bonded community. The visual portrayals of the catastrophe showed the massive togetherness but also foregrounded the intense individualization that we each feel when our lives are in peril and something threatening has come upon us.

In this context of initial sharing of anguish, spontaneous shrines creatively pop up. At Columbine, for example, someone erected 15 crosses in a local park for all those who died. Flowers and other mementoes were brought. In Newtown and Boston we saw many examples of formal and informal occasions for the community to bond together, memorialize the dead, celebrate the lives of the victims, honor the heroes, and affirm one another in the face of terror and violence.

Interrogating causes

Lamentation is more than providing a place to cry. It also gives us the place to question, to complain, to protest, and to assess responsibility for what happened. Many questions seep into the mind or erupt into speech. “What happened?” “Who did it?” “Why did this happen?” “What is the relationship of these deaths to gun control, domestic or international terrorism, and mental illness?” “Who should be held responsible?” “What penalty should they receive?” “How do we prevent this from happening again?” “Is there something in the dominant narratives and practices of our nation or political group that might contribute to the origins of the disaster?”

One of the strongest contributions that memorials and lamentations make to recovering from disaster is their support of the angry and intense interrogation responses that inevitably come into play when disasters shatter our views of what the world is really like. These questions become more hostile and accusatory, demanding clear answers, when the tragedy is at the hand of fellow human beings. Interrogating causes and focusing complaint at underserved disaster adds theological strength and moral force to the lamentation and memorializing process. It leads to very large theological and philosophical questions such as, “Is the universe a moral place?” “What is human nature if humans can do this?”

One of the central questions for monotheistic faith is God’s relation to the tragedy. Is God responsible? If so, “O God, hear my complaint against you for this adversity.” If not, “Where are you, O God?” “Is your power too feeble to prevent this?” “Do you intend for us to learn something important from this cataclysm?” “If so, what is it?” Religious communities and their leaders are expected to engage the many forms these questions take, or to at least acknowledge the integrity of those sincerely asking for guidance about God’s place in the dissolution of God’s world.

I have wrestled hard personally and professionally with the question of God's responsibility for tragic disasters in history.⁸ I would like to share something of the understanding I am coming to. It is from the standpoint of what is actually experienced in the middle of disaster that I have found ways of constructively responding to the interrogating questions about God that disaster inevitably evokes. It is from within disaster, not outside or above it, that the question of God's goodness and power has become clarified for me.

As we have already seen, it is at the very moment when disaster crashes into us that there is also engendered an acute life-giving sense of our community being bonded together with one another to save, protect, and preserve life. This compassionate bonding is the power of life responding to death. This compassionate bonding is the power of love in the face of violence. It is the energy of hope combating hopeless circumstances.

Many survivors of catastrophe and their first responders and caregivers report that this intense sense of harmony and compassionate service was life-changing for them. They felt that they were more themselves and more vitally connected to one another and to the most important values of their lives than ever before. Indeed, the 9/11 Memorial and Museum combines a recognition of absence while articulating a renewed commitment to the life-affirming power of dedicated and sacrificial service given to one another at the very point in time when life was being brutally extinguished before one's very eyes. Some persons say that they have never felt the presence and power of God more clearly than when responding to the extreme needs of disaster victims (Swain 2011; Graham 2012).

How can it be, theologically speaking, that the same event that horrifies and disgusts us is embraced as an occasion of renewing what is most sacred and important to us? How does a life-destroying event become a life-giving event for those surviving it? It is here, within the horizon of the disastrous catastrophe itself, that we find the keystone for thinking of God's relation to the catastrophic moment. At this point the public pastoral theologian bridges the divide between his or her religious heritage and the outcries of the suffering public community. As a pastoral theologian seeking to provide religiously informed resources for public discourse and meaning-making, I identify two major theological options for addressing the question of God's relation to tragic disasters and human evil.

One option, theologically speaking, is to affirm that the God who is in control of the universe orchestrated these horrendous circumstances for the very purpose of engendering the positive values of compassion, community, and hope that they make possible. The spiritual call, then, is to affirm these strong values while incorporating the losses into the greater spiritual advance that the losses make possible in the immediate and long term. He or she who has lost much loves more and hopes more joyfully. True, the losses may be great, but they serve the greater good of soul-making and community building. In the words of St. James, then, when trials come upon us, we can count it as all good for the testing of our faith because the result of trials is steadfastness (James 1:2–4). While I myself do not think this way, I believe that I have fairly accurately stated the "default civic theodicy" in Western culture. It is particularly evident in the public rhetoric operating in American society when rituals and memorials are devised to address community disaster.

A second theological option is to recognize that when disaster comes upon us, it instantly changes our history. In the very instant it stomps into time and space, disaster inaugurates a new history, requiring a new story. If God is affirmed as the power of life in opposition to all

⁸ I realize that this discussion does not distinguish between so-called natural disasters and human-caused acts of terror and violence. While there are important differences in assessing responsibility, as will become apparent, all forms of intrusive catastrophe raise central important questions about life's goodness and divine purpose, protection, favor, or neglect.

the powers of sin, evil, and death, then the very instant of cataclysm is also the very instant of divine participation in creating a new story in human history. The power of life-sustaining human bonding at the onset of tragedy is the power of God woven into human events. The interweaving of human and divine compassion, service, and protection is made possible by God's strategic response to the destructive elements in the universe. The deep bonding and compassion that humans feel with one another and with the divine is not a new form of divine compassion and power, but another of the countless encounters with God's sustaining and transforming goodness within the messy unfolding of the universe and the vulnerability of human life. In this view, the catastrophe is not God's plan or intention, but it immediately initiates novel forms of compassion, renewal, and transformation.

I find the second theological option more promising. It lets God off the hook for the onset of destructiveness and evil. It avoids the tortured conundrum of trying to wrest a positive divine purpose out of despicably evil and undeserved circumstances. Rather, it finds in God the basis for the upsurge of grace, power, and caring human community in response to the tragedies that inevitably throw us into the abyss. God is our ally in this point of view. God is our co-creative partner in healing, sustaining, and guiding the shaken, shattered, exploded, bombed, bulleted, blowing, and drowning human community.

Being free from interrogating God's responsibility for the onset of catastrophic evil, we are free to join the inquiry into what natural and historical forces have led to these circumstances. We are free to probe into the causes and hold accountable the elemental powers that have come together to create monstrous circumstances. We can protest, complain, contend, and wrest power from those forces that damage us and diminish the world. God can be construed as an enlivening ally in this process rather than an ambivalent or ambiguous murky force obscured by cataclysmic events. Public lamentation and the memorializing process give the structure for us to contend with one another about the meanings of and responsibility for evil and to fashion new approaches to living from what we discover. They are sites where we can express our anguish, voice our complaints, and protest the injustice of what has come upon us. In memorials and corporate rituals, the macro, meso, and micro levels of political and religious discourse come to the fore.

The convergence of political and religious themes at the macro, meso, and micro levels can be seen in the experience of one of the families I interviewed in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This interview poignantly describes how a memorial event that takes place each year provides a basis for them to name their anguish before God and one another, to protest the injustice of what happened, and to yearn for moral and political accountability.⁹

The interview was with Mrs. B and her 25-year-old daughter Amina. On the evening of May 25, 1995, Mrs. B's 17-year-old niece, Lejla, went to the town square in Tuzla with her best friend Sonia to gather and be with other young people. Rockets were fired into the square a little after 8:00 PM in the evening. Seventy-one people were killed and 200 injured. Since Tuzla was populated by Serbs and Croats as well as Muslims, persons from all three groups were affected.

Mrs. B and her family were very worried about Lejla. Mrs. B and her husband joined Lejla's parents to look for her. They finally discovered that Lejla and Sonia had been killed. The shock and grief were overwhelming. Mrs. B agonizingly asked, "Why should someone do this to other

⁹ A fuller account of this event can be found in Graham (2011, 2013), used by permission. I am required to inform readers that my research was reapproved on August 17, 2012, by the Institutional Review Board for Research on Human Subjects at the University of Denver. The family I introduce in this presentation has given consent to use their stories and has reviewed the text included in this presentation. However, in accordance with the terms of participation I do not use their real names or provide other identifying information.

humans? Only God can take life! Why is this happening to us?” Her piercing lament was echoed by others in her family. Amina said that she saw her uncle’s face at a televised funeral service. “I will never forget how he looked! When I saw his face I realized that this is not a nightmare that I will wake up from, but that my cousin is really gone. Try to imagine somebody who has always been a happy person suddenly with a crushed, pale face, and I could see that he lost his heart, soul, and his life. My uncle and aunt started to smile again just a few years ago, but never like before they lost their daughter. But at that moment when I saw him on TV I knew that Lejla was gone and that our lives would never be the same.”

Mrs. B and Amina told how this affected their family. They are still in great pain about it. It was very difficult for me and the translator to feel the anguish they demonstrated in telling the story. Mrs. B carries in her purse a poem that was written on the first anniversary to lament and protest these deaths. She finds great comfort in it. She read the poem in our interview. Her daughter later sent me a translation.

The poem of lament by Nijaz Alispahic is read in Tuzla at an annual memorial service. It is called “Overcoming Pain” and was translated for me by Amina. It is a lament that links the community’s ongoing pain of loss with the longing for vindication and accountability. (The phrases “Mother raised Sulejman” and “Golden sun, say hello to my old mother” are titles of old Bosnian folk songs and poetry.)

That night they did not shoot at the city
 They shot at “Mother raised Sulejman”
 At “Golden sun, say hello to my old mother”
 They shot at our soul,
 At the poem,
 At silver moon light,
 They shot at the narrow eyebrow of a girl,
 At the iris of our eyes they shot,
 They shot at our prayers,
 Killed those who were sleepy and in love,
 Killed the desire of two coasts to come together,
 That night Tuzla’s Kapija [Center City] was the birth place of:
 Sorrow among sorrows,
 Grudge among grudges,
 Poem among poems.
 They extinguished the light in pearl lakes.
 Dear God!
 Let them be punished,
 those who brought us this pain,
 which we will never overcome!

This lament takes place at a memorial site.¹⁰ The community draws together in solidarity and compassion. The ritual of lament at this site enables the community to feel and to bear together the pervasive sense of loss and the anguish that remains from the tragedy of violent aggression at the hands of former countrymen. It is a vehicle for naming those who are responsible, protesting the injustice, and calling for accountability. Rather than leaving persons and communities broken and isolated, public lamentation in the memorial context allows new questions to be asked, new answers formulated, and new histories to be imagined and named. Of course,

¹⁰ 14th Anniversary Tuzla Massacre, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pC0dZVezaDk>, accessed 15 November 2012.

there is a danger that such events may perpetuate rage and hatred toward enemies, which may generate future hostility as well as efforts toward accountability and justice.¹¹

Reinvesting in hope

Catastrophic disaster spawns despair and hopelessness. Memorials are intrinsic to the lamentation process. Memorials provide sites to share anguish, to protest and question, to honor the virtues of the dead, to reclaim life, and to reinvest in the future. The structure of lament in the context of memorial practice usually reaffirms the core virtues of the community and commits to bringing them to bear on changing the world.¹²

The 9/11 Memorial and Museum, for example, names the anguish, assigns responsibility for the catastrophe, and recommits to a hopeful future. From the website:

The Museum honors the nearly 3,000 victims of these attacks and all those who risked their lives to save others. It further recognizes the thousands who survived and all who demonstrated extraordinary compassion in the aftermath. Demonstrating the consequences of terrorism on individual lives and its impact on communities at the local, national, and international levels, the Museum attests to the triumph of human dignity over human depravity and affirms an unwavering commitment to the fundamental value of human life.¹³

Lamentation is not a process of wallowing in pain, loss, and victimhood. It is a way of carrying the past with strength and funding the future with hope. By naming the costs of disaster, sharing its pain in public venues, and interrogating its causes, the human community is drawn together to work for its highest values. Memorials inscribe these in history and give them a place to stand as enduring beacons lighting the way for justice and meaning.

To summarize, politically grounded and politically responsive pastoral care as I am presenting it in this article arises in the communal response to catastrophic disaster. Catastrophic disaster threatens the survival of the whole community, with few exceptions, and requires a comprehensive response both inside and outside the community. It is characterized by the sudden onset of violent disruption. There is usually a moment when the fabric of existence is permanently severed. At that moment a process of response to save and protect life comes into being. There is solidarity across human differences and a mobilization of coping resources. When guided by memorials and lamentation, positive coping and thriving involves sharing anguish, interrogating causes, and reinvesting in hope.

¹¹ I later learned that the commander who ordered the shelling was tried for crimes against humanity in The Hague and given a 25-year prison sentence. In some respects the prayer for the offenders to be punished was realized, at least in part. It is important to underscore that the cry for punishment in this lament should be regarded as a cry for justice and vindication, not revenge. Mrs. B expressly forbade her husband, an artilleryman in the Bosnian army, to shoot civilians. Further, the war crimes tribunals, both internationally in The Hague and locally in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are widely regarded by Bosnians as appropriate political and legal responses to the call for accountability and restitution. In this respect, care and healing for survivors of violent atrocities require political and legal action.

¹² One of the dangers of public lament at the macro level of religion and politics is that the pressures of community solidarity during disaster will obscure the conflict or battleground elements and force the community to legitimize the current political order that has come under threat. Finding room for protest, dissonance, and prophetic challenge within the memorializing context may be very difficult, if not impossible. Religious leaders and pastoral caregivers may influence the initial public rhetoric, but intense political engagement is more viable during later phases of the disaster-response matrix.

¹³ <http://www.911memorial.org/mission>, accessed 1 September 2011.

The disaster-response matrix

More concretely, what are some ways that public pastoral theology and the life of religious communities may become available to communities in crisis, noting especially some of the political dynamics that can be expected to emerge? How do we conceive and how do we map the range of possibilities in which public, politically responsive pastoral care might be lived out? I want to suggest some concrete strategies available to religious communities and their leaders for responding to corporate trauma and disaster.

Religious communities and their leaders play a critical role in responding to disaster. The process of lamentation is a longstanding practice in religious traditions that helps communities respond with compassion and strength to the destructive forces by which they are gripped. Public memorials, both spontaneous shrines of memory and hope as well as permanent monuments to honor and celebrate the lives lost and to reclaim the animating virtues of the community, are the means by which lamentation becomes inscribed in history as a sustaining, healing, and transforming practice.

Strategies of response are determined by where we are located in the disaster-response matrix and the nature of the circumstances on the ground.¹⁴ I think it would be helpful to visualize a matrix in which lamentation and memorialization come to bear at various points in responding to and recovering from disaster.

Table 1, the disaster-response matrix, summarizes the functions of the three main phases of disaster, listed across the top row.¹⁵ First is the onset phase in which everything is disrupted and survival is most threatened. This is followed by a stage of stabilization and relative security. The third phase is the reconstruction phase. Pastoral leaders and religious groups, therefore, have various roles pertinent to Accessing, Stabilizing, and Reconstructing in response to disaster.

Within each of these three phases, the roles of religious leaders and community are organized around five overlapping functions, listed in the left-hand column. These are (a) to provide refuge; (b) to promote resiliency; (c) to offer rituals; (d) to guide public rhetoric, or offer religious interpretation of events; and (e) to empower reconciliation. All of these involve functions requiring sensitive and often astute political strategies. Finally, within each phase and each function are the elements of memorializing lamentation through sharing anguish, interrogating causes, and reinvesting in hope. These elements are listed in the top horizontal row.

The table I have presented is a static picture of a dynamic, overlapping, and messy process, but providing an overview sometimes affords a base from which to improvise and reorient our efforts. I wish to highlight the three phases for pastoral intervention and the strategic political responses in each, briefly linking them to a few examples of real situations in which many of these dimensions play out.

Phase 1

Accessing the disaster scene means stepping into danger, terror, suffering and death. People are in states of shock and disbelief or are emotionally distraught and inconsolable. It is quite helpful if religious leaders and congregations have had some disaster preparation training so that they are able to self-regulate and be emotionally engaged when things are falling apart.

¹⁴ I first developed the disaster-response matrix for the Schmiechen Lectures on “Memorializing Lamentation” at Eden Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, in October 2012. It was revised for use in a Spiritual-Care Praxis on Religious Leadership in Community Disaster co-taught with Jonathan Wallace and Carrie Doehring at Iliff School of Theology in November 2012. This material is published here for the first time.

¹⁵ See Zunin and Myers (2000) for an overview of this process.

Table 1 Disaster-response matrix

Phases	Accessing	Stabilizing	Reconstructing
Memorializing Lamentation	Sharing anguish Interrogating causes Investing in hope	Sharing anguish Interrogating causes Investing in hope	Sharing anguish Interrogating causes Investing in hope
Functions			
Refuge	Rescue, safety, account for missing, food, shelter, medical care, transportation; open buildings	Housing, food, financial assistance	Job search, relocating, rebuilding property, restoring land, changing churches, leaving the faith
Resiliency	Calming, comforting, Psychological First Aid (PFA), coping style; conversation partners	Short-term counseling; support groups; psychoeducation; literature and online resources	PTSD healing; pastoral counseling; long-term therapy; family counseling; grief counseling; study groups
Ritual	Spontaneous shrines; prayer and meditation; scripture reading	Funerals and ceremonies, local and regional; interfaith services	Public memorial services; monuments and permanent memorial planning and commissioning
Rhetoric	Interpreting crisis: identifying faith resources: love, trust, compassion, hope, memory, a comforting God, community care; mobilizing outside religious leaders to speak and support	Speak comfort at funerals: “Blessed are those who mourn”; affirm anguish and guide ways to share it; address meanings of tragic loss, God’s goodness, and the nature of finitude and human brokenness; affirm God’s ongoing grace, power, and care	Promote community forums to understand various points of view; normalize different viewpoints; find cross-cultural resources to build interpretations together; guide rhetoric to be used in ceremonies and memorials
Reconciliation	Affirm the strong natural communal bonds that come into place as a foundation for handling inevitable conflicts and painful disagreements later	Be prepared to deal with contention and diversity; intensity of feelings around religious themes: accountability, punishment, forgiveness, reconciliation; help establish healthy boundaries to contain hostility and revenge between social groups	Normalize differences, without seeking false unity or superficial harmony; help offenders be accountable; work toward friendship and compassion; establish rituals of reconciliation; resolution of losses, affirmation of values, reinvestment of hope in reconstructing life

The main task in the Accessing phase is to get people to safety, to find refuge and protection. The symbolic role of a pastoral presence engenders a sense of safety and protection, so taking immediate steps to engage and access the unfolding crisis is critical. To help empower endurance, psychological first aid is available at this stage. According to recent research on effective disaster response, several factors come into play. These involve “(a) promoting a sense of safety, (b) promoting calming, (c) promoting a sense of self-efficacy and community efficacy, (d) promoting connectedness, and (e) instilling hope” (Watson et al. 2011, p. 484).

Providing refuge means that the church or religious setting should be open to all and rituals of prayer and comfort should be inclusive. The pastoral message, or rhetoric, pulls the community together, sets the framework for understanding, and recognizes the need to cry to God for help. As pastors and communities access the disaster, questions and concerns about what is going on and what brought it about begin to surface. Initially, interrogation begins to determine who or what is responsible and how to stop the damage. The religious leader and spiritual caregiver in this phase works as a community liaison between various agencies and volunteers flooding the scene.

Phase 2

Stabilizing begins early but becomes more relevant in the immediate aftermath of the destructive event. There is still shock, anguish, and distress caused by what has happened. There will be acute grief from the losses. A sense of despair or futility may start to come upon the community. Building support and grief groups for sharing anguish and strengthening resiliency is very helpful. Outside resources may be invited to assist. Relocating to a more secure place may provide more permanent refuge. Worship and prayer sustain and orient persons and keep the community together. This is the time when there will be many funerals and public ceremonies in the church and community. The rituals and sermons during this time can emphasize teachings about death, community memory, honoring life, and celebrating the sacrificial efforts of those who helped others through the crisis. Pastors may inspire renewed efforts for care through their public presentations. This is when pastors should be prepared to address God’s relation to the suffering—not the cause but a comfort and a sustaining presence. Pastors need to consider how they will interpret spiritual, ethical, and theological matters to the press and avoid being drawn into conflicts fomented or magnified by the press. The religious leaders serve as gatekeepers between the community and outsiders. Pastors may need to minister to contending parties in safe places (refuge and reconciliation), providing separate and safe venues in order to contain hostility and to keep the crisis from escalating. Political negotiations and the education of elected public officials may be required of pastoral caregivers and religious leaders.¹⁶

¹⁶ Immediately after the Aurora Theater shootings in July 2012, my colleague Carrie Doehring (2012) gave a spiritual care response on Colorado Public Radio. She emphasized the importance of recognizing the needs of diverse families and of honoring diverse modes of coping. She also emphasized that Christian religious leaders conducting public memorials should use inter-religious prayers and not assume a Christian standpoint if they wanted their prayers to nurture the entire community. She was contacted shortly afterwards by an irate public official who argued that the wishes of the families of the predominantly Christian victims should determine the content of the memorial. Professor Doehring attempted to add a different perspective and to normalize religious diversity in Aurora’s political culture, even though she indicated in private conversation that it was not clear at the time what difference it made to this particular official. This vignette illustrates that pastoral political engagement is important but not always easy during high-stress times in the immediate aftermath of tragedy.

Phase 3

Reconstructing addresses the longer-term consequences brought into life by the disaster. Reconstructing life may take years, decades, and even several generations, as in the case of war, terrorist acts, and cataclysmic natural events such as the earthquake in Haiti or the earthquake and tsunami in Sendai, Japan. It is a mistake to think that anguish does not continue over the long haul. We saw in the interview and lamentation from Mrs. B from Tuzla that the pain at the 1995 shelling of the Kapija in Tuzla is still palpable many years later. Memorializing lamentation validates this pain and provides a context for normalizing it, much like the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem allows visitors to mourn and to remember the horrendous losses that still structure their lives. As O'Connor (2002) states, we become more human and more real when our pain is accepted and mirrored by a witnessing community. But in the reconstructing phase, the anguish is joined with other resources of resiliency and healing through counseling, education, and a variety of self-regulating techniques. This is where resources for healing PTSD, learning to live with acute grief, and longer-term pastoral counseling and psychotherapy come into play.

Reconstructing life after disaster will involve study, education, and theological inquiry to resolve some of the questions that have crashed into our minds because of the tragedy. Prayer, meditation, spiritual guidance, and sermons addressing the hard issues of life become a means of interrogating the world and understanding our faith and social and cultural situation in more complex terms.

Rituals of remembrance and public monuments, such as we have recently experienced on the tenth anniversary of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, are examples of ceremonies that offer resources by which we might restructure our lives in the aftermath of catastrophic events that now defines us. For example, the Vietnam Memorial continues to be a memorial and ritual space that allows persons to become reconciled to the traumatic history of that war and to recover from the anguish it has brought upon our nation, families, veterans and protestors. By participating in such memorial events, pastors normalize the rhetoric and set the tone for how conflict and contested values and identities may be renegotiated and reconciled. As witnesses to forgiveness, healing, and hope, religious communities can help our communities do the hard work of restructuring our lives around our highest values rather than holding wounded and wounding grudges from past injuries. These memorials constitute a refuge where we can bring our torment and anger and have them received and responded to with ritual and spiritual resources. New forms of engagement may be developed at these sites so that we may become energized by the goodness we find in one another rather than being held by the evil mediated by past events.

Conclusion

The pastoral caregiver and our religious communities are compelled by tragic disasters to become immersed in public and politically fraught efforts toward rescue, relief, recovery, and meaning-making. Disaster immediately leads us and the larger community into God-inspired efforts toward human survival and renewal. In addition to the spontaneous upsurge of grace, power, and caring within the human community that comes into being the instant disaster strikes, there has arisen over the centuries a variety of cultural products that enable human communities to endure and transform the evils befalling us. Religious thought and ritual practice are central elements in the repertoire of human coping and healing. Religious sites become safe refuges for the displaced, injured, and dead when the storms of life are

carrying everything away. Religious rituals organize meaning, give voice to anguish, and call forth the values that sustain a community and focus its response. They provide a setting for continuing the struggle to harmonize contending values and interpretations and to contain the destructive potential of outrage and social differences. Religious authorities provide order and comforting authority in the midst of disorder and chaos brought on by catastrophe. Religious symbols and religious teachings anchor the heart and mind within the enduring values of courage, sacrifice, and collective efforts for the greater good. All of this comes together in the processes of lamentation, mediated by a range of memorial options, where anguish is named, comfort shared, questions asked, and communities begin to write the story of a future worth having. Participating in these promising yet often contentious dynamics is made possible by a public pastoral theology that is realistic about macro-, meso-, and micro-level political dynamics. Pastoral and spiritual caregivers are uniquely positioned to make available within the burgeoning public square the rich traditions of healing, sustaining, and guiding that have sustained their communities over the centuries.

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