



all our griefs to bear

RESPONDING *with* RESILIENCE
after COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

J O N I S . S A N C K E N

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Introduction

At the outset, author Joni Sancken sets the tone for what is to follow by describing a day that she did not know would end up being so significant: a “normal” Sunday just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit full force in the United States. Looking back, she sees the subsequent two years as full of trauma related to the pandemic, “intense, racial reckoning, increasing impacts of climate change, and global conflict.” She asks, “How many experiences can be called ‘unprecedented’ before the word is drained of meaning?” (pp. 15–16).

As you prepare to read this book about collective trauma and Christian responses to it, take a moment to reflect on how the events of the world around you have affected you in recent days, weeks, years. These may be personal, intimate experiences of loss and grief. These may be more universal experiences that humanity has been plunged into together.

- What traumatic events have touched your life?
- How have you grieved over them?
- If you’ve been able to work through this trauma in positive, healing ways, what practices have helped you do this?

Joni says that her hope for this book is that the practices proposed will “inspire resilience and creativity, eliciting local ideas and responses that become channels for God’s presence and healing” (p. 19).

- Anticipate what’s next. At the beginning of this book, where do you think the author seeks to take you?

On page 20, Joni writes, “The incarnate Christ, wounded and risen, leads the way, drawing us toward each other, creating spaces where we can experience healing, and empowering witness as leaven and salt in a world that has become flattened by pain and bitter on our tongues.”

- How does this statement resonate with you? Take a moment to reflect on all that that is invested in this one sentence.

Collective Trauma: A Wound We Share

BEGIN

- Joni describes her birthday in March 2020 as a moment of calm before the storm of COVID upended her life, and would throw us all into waves of chaos.
- As you begin this chapter, reflect on the day before COVID brought everything to a halt in your part of the world. What was the calm before the storm? If you're reading this long after the impact of COVID has receded, think of another traumatic event that upended your life, and reflect on life before that. How has your life been changed by experiences of trauma?

INTERACT

Collective trauma

In this chapter, Joni asserts that trauma is experienced collectively, and that it shatters our sense of “we.”

- As you think through experiences of trauma in communities that you've been a part of, or have observed, does this idea resonate with you? Have you seen or experienced a dissolution of *we* in the wake of tragic experience? If so, how did that dissolution magnify the initial trauma? What steps, if any, did your community take to move through collective trauma to come back to a sense of *we*? Were they successful?

On page 33, Joni writes, “Naming specific effects, experiences, and feelings are important. Caregivers and leaders can observe the actual effects of traumatic stress on individuals and families in their congregations and communities and help people identify and name what feels broken, hurting, out of sorts.”

- If you are a caregiver—whether a pastor, chaplain, nurse, therapist, family member, friend—and have worked with people in grief, how have you witnessed the effects of helping others *name* what is broken and hurting?
- Have you ever had a caregiver help you name your pain and grief? How did it affect you?

Resilience

Given that we cannot return to how life was before a sustained injury, Joni identifies three types of responses to trauma. Instead of “return to how things were,” the way forward is the building of *resilience*. She presents the metaphor of three different kinds of trees to illustrate three important aspects of resilience: recovery, resistance, and reconfiguration (p. 39).

- Think through each of these ways of building resilience. Can you think of examples of each, either in your own experience, in your own observable experience of others, or in your caregiving of others who experienced trauma?

Life after trauma

On page 45, Joni posits, “Not only are churches positioned to weather and heal collective trauma faced by congregations, but congregations can also be leaders in broader, more systemic solutions of collective trauma.”

While the book will engage with this further in later chapters, at this point, what “identity-forming rituals” do you think position the church to be a leader in systemic solutions to trauma?

The author then offers this sobering observation: “Far too often, groups with a hand in causing cultural trauma refuse to study or recognize their own role in causing the suffering of others. This deepens the suffering of the traumatized group, invalidates their experiences, and devalues their humanity” (p. 48).

- We see this dynamic among many groups of people. However, many of our white brothers and sisters have an especially difficult time examining the history that has brought us to where we are now. Why do you think that is?
- Is it possible that this difficulty examining history could be a way to avoid the trauma of having a supposedly peaceful story of the past, a story constructed in order to insulate ourselves from pain or guilt, be shattered? Why or why not?
- How might we come to a greater awareness of our own roles in inflicting grief on others, whether individually or collectively?

On page 51, Joni writes, “The event of Jesus’ resurrection shows God’s deep investment in life beyond trauma.”

- How can Christ’s resurrection can change our perspective and experience of trauma, pain, and grief?

REFLECT

On page 25, we’re encouraged: “If you’re not feeling like yourself, if you feel frozen or immobilized, if you feel keyed up and anxious, if you lack patience, if your emotions are close to the surface, if you’re feeling disconnected, if you lack creativity and clarity in your thinking, *you’re normal* and your body is, in fact, displaying tremendous wisdom. God created our bodies with tools to keep us safe in a crisis.”

- Reflect on how it feels to be given permission to feel normal about your response to a traumatic experience. Has this been the case for you in the past? How have you felt you “ought” to feel? How can this permission change your experience of trauma moving forward?

CHAPTER 2

Lament

BEGIN

Lament is not terribly popular as far as Christian rituals go. As Joni says, “There are very few spaces where this kind of radical honesty is possible” (p. 57). Often, we approach lament as something to be avoided rather than embraced. This is evident even in our liturgical reading of the Psalms, where prescribed readings routinely redact the parts of otherwise cheerful and beautiful songs that simultaneously deal with one’s enemies or one’s pain or call out for vengeance specifically because of a trauma inflicted by others.

- What do you think of when you hear the word *lament*?
- Why do you think we are less invested in lament in scripture than we are in, say, Jesus’ parables or Paul’s lists of household rules?
- Why does scripture include a significant amount of lament? Why might it be important for us to engage with this practice?
- At the outset of this chapter, how do you think lament provides a path through trauma and grief?

INTERACT

Biblical practices

Joni asserts that “the entire act of lament is relational, beginning with a focus on relationship and a sense of understanding that God cares about creaturely suffering, and moving to a deep sense of trust that God will respond” (p. 61).

- How is this different from the almost caricatured “thoughts and prayers” offered by politicians and civic (and sometimes religious) leaders in the wake of tragedy?
- Think about the three movements of biblical lament in the Psalms sketched on pages 60–61: addressing God; lament, petition, God’s motivations; praise that God has heard and thankfulness for God’s action. How is this counter (or counterintuitive) to how you’ve experienced a response to tragedy or trauma, whether personally or collectively, as a faith community? How might it be similar to your response?

Implicit lament

Four modes of implicit lament are presented here: silence, anguished cries, expressions of fear, rage. Reflect on where you’ve seen these forms of lament expressed in our recent cultural experiences.

- Do you see these practices present in biblical lament? Where in scripture?
- How might “solidarity in corporate prayer with those who have been silenced” (p. 64), or with those shocked into silent response, provide an antiphonal and healing response when coming alongside someone, or a community, experiencing trauma?

Lament as complex social practice

Joni observes that lament is a “complex social and relational act” (p. 68) where a social audience stands on the outskirts of the words spoken and emotions expressed. She asserts that the church “is not merely a passive observer of these cries,” and that the observation of these cries moves us toward response: “In the presence of lament one, cannot remain neutral” (p. 69); “God’s love is transformative, leading us to change racist systems

and practices that generate fear” (p. 66); “the loving power and presence of God among God’s beloved people is the key to being able to proclaim the ‘why’ and move communities from disempowered despair to meaningful action” (p. 72).

- If you are the person (or group) expressing lament, from the perspective of one at the center, how might you want those on the outskirts of your words and the pain animating them to respond? Think about this in specific situations of trauma or oppression.
- From the perspective of the one on the outskirts of lament observing others (individuals or groups) in expression of grief, how might you be moved in God’s love to respond? Again, think about this in relation to specific situations of trauma or oppression.

Resistance to lament

Four broad reasons for why we tend to avoid lament are presented here: our culture’s commitment to self-help and individualism; avoidance as a coping mechanism; traditional theologies; and late modernity and secularism.

- Have you seen these play out among individuals or groups in the wake of trauma? In what ways? To what effect?
- Have you experienced these play out within yourself in the wake of trauma? In what ways? To what effect?

Benefits of lament

On page 79, Joni writes, “Practicing lament . . . offers many benefits that can nurture resilience and renewal in congregations.” She then presents seven benefits of practicing lament: physical, social, faith, healing, celebratory, empowering, hopeful. Think through these potential positive effects of engaging in lament.

- Which benefits are surprising to you?
- Which are not surprising?
- How is the idea of leaning into grief and pain as a means of healing, with several significant benefits, countercultural? Counterintuitive?

Lament as a practice

Joni provides many pathways into the practices of lament. Prayerfully consider these avenues toward deep prayer and expression and think through how you might best be poised to enact lament for yourself and within your community of friends, family, and social networks. Use the following questions as kindling for reflection.

- How can you create space for lament right now? This can be for yourself, within your ministry, or in your broader engagement with the world.
- How might you integrate lament into your regular prayer life? Is lament something that can or should wait until the next “tragedy” strikes? Or is the world troubled regularly enough to weave lament into the fabric of your speech to God? On the other side, is lament something that needs to be a part of *every* prayer that you pray?
- What are ways that you can integrate the psalms into your prayers? Would making a purposeful study of psalms of lament be helpful for your faith or for your ministry?
- If you are involved in worship planning in your church or a similar role, what are practical ways that you might incorporate the suggested elements of lament in your concrete ministry context?
- What might be the significance of lament *with* our children? Could fostering a practice of lament within their faith be a means of helping them nurture resilience?

REFLECT

To reflect on this chapter on lament, it may be beneficial to write your own prayer of lament for this season of your life. It may be a painful practice, but as we've read, there are benefits to leaning in to this. Lament is a gift that God has given God's people. Engage with pain and trauma that you've experienced, or to which you've borne witness. Use the questions on pages 90–91 and prayerfully write a prayer of lament to God. Consider using the biblical formulation presented: address to God, complaint(s), confession of trust, petition, vow of praise.

Storytelling

BEGIN

This chapter explores the role of storytelling in processing collective trauma. As you begin, can you anticipate how storytelling can be healing as it comes into contact with our experiences of trauma or stories that we may hold collectively that are harmful?

The Christian narrative is “the story of salvation, the movement from enslavement to promised land and from cross to resurrection, [and] is the most vital story that shapes Christian identity” (p. 108). How might telling this story provide healing for collective trauma?

INTERACT

Story and human experience

“The way we make sense of or process experiences through time is narrative,” Joni writes on page 108. She then presents several meaning-creating modes of storytelling: a daughter recounting her day at school, a Mennonite tradition that collects and values stories of faith history, parents writing down stories to pass on to their children and grandchildren. “We all have our own backgrounds and traditions that are passed on, in large part, by stories” (p. 109).

- What stories have you received that have made you who you are?
- What stories have you lived that have made you who you are?
- What stories are you telling for those who will continue on after you?

Storytelling in scripture

Joni writes on page 110 that “the stories in the Bible form our identity as God’s people and show us how to live as disciples of Jesus. In the aftermath of trauma, scriptural stories, particularly stories that place a range of human experience within God’s care, and stories that testify to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, can be healing and restorative.”

- What scripture stories have been particularly formative for your faith, and for your person?
- What biblical stories do you think might be particularly healing when brought to intersection with collective trauma?

Trauma and storytelling

Joni asserts that “for many individuals and communities, our sense of identity is implicitly shaped by the stories we have absorbed over the years. These implicit aspects of identity are unexamined until something happens that contradicts what we thought we knew. Trauma creates a sense of rupture in that narrative quality of experience” (p. 113).

This chapter mentions societal experiences of collective trauma: the COVID-19 pandemic, aggressive responses to wearing masks, the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, and the scenes of violence that played out in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021, among others.

- How have these experiences unveiled for you individually, or us collectively, unexamined stories that we hold deeply? How have you reconsidered their validity, accuracy, or value? For instance, how has

seeing aggression toward greeters at Walmart over masking requirements affected the collective story about unity and division in North America? Or what implicit stories might have been revealed with the murder of George Floyd that was almost unavoidably broadcast on social and mass media? How have these traumatic events caused us to reconsider inherited or deeply held stories of our collective identity?

On page 121, Joni writes, “When the worst happens, it becomes integrated into the story of the future, polluting a sense of possibility, change, or redemption.”

- How have you observed or experienced this dynamic?
- How might stories of hope have a similar and opposite effect? What potential for storytelling do you see here?

Storytelling after trauma

We can see here the power of story for reality-making, and for healing: “Stories are so powerful; we need to treat them as a potent drug. . . . They shape our worldview” (p. 124). But it’s not just *any* story that creates a healing and healthy reality. There are unhealthy and untrue stories as well.

- What are some principles for discernment when engaging with the stories the world tells us, and with our embedded and often unexamined stories? How might we be wise in how we interpret stories and in how we tell them?
- “Christians speak of faith and identity in relationship to Jesus’ identity, actions, and behavior. As present-day disciples, we follow him, and we understand our suffering and experiences of trauma and death through his experiences” (p. 126). How can the story of Jesus serve as a guardrail as we interact with all the stories that press in upon us from outside, and with all the stories we tell ourselves from within?

Storytelling as a practice

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to practices intended to facilitate storytelling to heal from trauma: free writing, preaching (and practices within preaching), Bible memorization, sharing stories, six-word memoirs, and the magic box. With these in mind, engage with the following questions.

- Which practices resonate with you—with your identity, your passions, your gifts? Which of these practices would be most readily available to you in processing trauma, and in walking with others in processing trauma?
- Which practices do not resonate with you? Which might you find hardest to engage with or to lead others in doing?
- In terms of storytelling and preaching, have you heard a sermon that has addressed trauma or tragic events in a healthy and engaging way? If so, do you think the sermon was helpful in facilitating healing for the hearer or the community? What was helpful about it?
- Have you heard preaching that did not address trauma or tragic events well? How did these sermons fall short? What is the effect of sermons that either miss the mark, set the wrong tone, or tell unhealthy stories in response to trauma?
- If you are a preacher, how might you adjust your preaching to meet the moment when it comes to helping heal trauma? If you aren’t a preacher, how might you help your pastor or minister do this better?

REFLECT

As in previous chapters, this chapter offers several healthy practices to help us engage with storytelling to “metabolize” trauma. Choose one of the suggestions and put it into practice. For instance, take time to write about an event or cultural reality that you’ve wanted (or needed) to process. Choose a passage of scripture to memorize (really, to internalize and incarnate), and commit to internalize it. Shape your next sermon to tell a story of comfort, healing, or hope. Write a six-word memoir. Make at least one of these practical theologies a practice.

CHAPTER 4

Blessing

BEGIN

This chapter sets out to help us understand, receive, and embody blessing: “Blessings are a manifestation or experience of God’s love and goodness. Blessing is an overflow of God’s very being that pours out on creation both indiscriminately and with specific intention,” writes Joni. “When we bless we name the world as already redeemed—we name the reality God intends for the world” (p. 143). As you approach this final chapter, think through times when (1) you experienced God’s blessing; (2) another person, through a word or act, conferred God’s blessing upon you; and (3) you were an agent of blessing to someone else. What memories and feelings do you associate with these three experiences?

INTERACT

Blessing in the Bible

“Blessings start with God but can be passed from person to person,” Joni writes on page 147. This is a powerful observation.

- How does this influence how you view your own words and agency in the work of bringing blessing to those under the weight of trauma? Is it empowering to think that blessing which has its origin in God can be transmitted through you to others? Why or why not?
- Do you think of this as a privilege? As a responsibility? As both?

Joni points to several functions of blessing in the Bible: blessing bears witness, restores relationships, serves a purpose. Blessing is not transactional, is God’s grace among us, and is release.

- Reading through these qualities of biblical blessing, which are you most familiar with? Is your familiarity thanks to your experience of blessing in this way?
- Which of these qualities were you unaware of, or had not thought of before? What is one thing that surprised you about these aspects of blessing in the Bible?

In experiencing blessing as God’s grace among us, Joni observes that “serving communion and being served is an extremely powerful experience of blessing and grace” (p. 157).

- Have you ever felt it difficult to be served communion? Why is it sometimes hard for us to receive a blessing from someone in an act of service to us?
- How does the act of communion provide such fertile ground for blessing?

Blessing as a practice

In this section, we’re given an assortment of practices designed to help us both experience and extend blessing. We’re encouraged to write a blessing, to invite God’s blessing and intervention, to experience blessing in a physical manner, to experience and be a blessing in giving to others, to be a compassionate witness as we bless, and to help facilitate transition through the act of blessing.

- How have you experienced God’s blessing through another person who has offered one of these acts of blessing to you? What did that feel like?

- Do you regularly engage in any of these acts as you seek to bless others? Tell a story of how you have tangibly blessed someone in this way.
- Is there a practice offered here that you would like to engage in but never have? How might you enact that blessing for someone in the near future?

REFLECT

In more formal blessings that are given in church, such as in benedictions, and in scripture, such as in some versions the Aaronic blessing in Numbers 6:24–26, the word *may* invites entrance into God’s blessing, into God’s presence, and into God’s future. Joni notes, “Using the word *may* in blessing ‘imagines and wills’ divine presence to the particular pains and joys in our lives” (p. 158). The word *may*, used in this way, is inherently in the subjunctive mood, meaning that it expresses a possible, imagined, or promised future. *May* opens God’s future in the present moment, inviting us to step through the pain experienced now into the healing embrace of God’s love. The power invested in *may* is considerable.

Now that you’ve journeyed through this book on trauma and healing, take some time to write a blessing that expresses your hope for God’s action in the lives of those you minister to, those you love, or those you live with (or even yourself) who may be under the weight of trauma, whether individual, collective, or both. Express your hope for a future saturated with hope and God’s healing. As you do, pray that this blessing, which begins with God, will pass from you to another to open hope and healing.