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## **NINE PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SPONTANEOUS AND INVOLUNTARY WEeping**

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Transformative and sacred weeping is defined by the author as the “spilling over of tears” which is intense, spontaneous and seemingly involuntary, that is not caused by obvious immediate stimuli or set of conditions known to the weeper. In contrast to tears caused by the common human passions and their accompanying stimuli, transformative weeping evidences little reddening of the eyes or contortions of the facial muscles and is accompanied by feelings of physical and psychological well-being. To the weeper, it seems a gift. According to a twentieth-century writer, “... ‘the gift of tears’—the very expression shows that the tears in question are supernatural, associated not with human passions but with the experiences of God. Even their physiological aspects manifest this fact. They flow without strain or effort, without violent sobbing or contraction of the face” (Gillet, 1937, p. 7)

Laughing so hard that one begins to cry is a form of weeping familiar to most people and quite similar to transformative weeping. Like episodes of transformative weeping, “Tears of laughter cannot be forced. The tears simply appear. You are laughing and suddenly you are aware that the tears are flowing down your cheeks. Additionally, you cannot artificially create a situation in which the elements will guarantee that people will laugh until they weep” (Ross, 1987, p. 163).

Episodes of transformative weeping vary widely in duration, lasting a few seconds or continuing off and on for a period of years. While transformative weeping has its own unique properties, as indicated above, it may be accompanied by a wide variety of emotions—ranging from profound grief and lament to rapture and joy—yet always the experience is intense, usually vividly remembered, and difficult to capture easily in words. Other examples include weeping in profound grief which reaches into the very core of Self, weeping at the sight of astonishing beauty, at the apprehension of one’s essential nature and that of others, and as a gift, i.e., receiving spontaneous acts of grace.

### **Methods**

This report presents a phenomenological content analysis of historical and contemporary writings on “mystical tears” in English, often in translation, *and* a phenomenological analysis of three contemporary in-depth interviews. The historical literature searched was limited to Christianity and included original sources whenever possible. Since “tears” and “weeping” are not conventional theological categories, locating writings on mystical

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tears in the major religious indexes was time-consuming and difficult, even within the Christian literature. Most of the literature search, therefore, involved following the trail of references backwards in time. This “networking” procedure is unlikely to include every article written on mystical tears.<sup>1</sup> The historical writings include pertinent writing samples from fourteen authors, including major religious figures of the Eastern church such as Ephrem the Syrian (4th c), Evagrius Ponticus (4th c), John Climacus of Mt. Sinai (6-7th c), Isaac the Syrian (7th c), and Symeon the New Theologian of Constantinople (10-11th c), as well as Catherine of Siena (14th c.), and contemporary authors (mostly women). The three female volunteer participants were recruited through newsletters in spiritual organizations to participate in a study of the “phenomenology of intense and spontaneous weeping.” The project-in-process has spanned four years. Interviews are on-going, presently including both phenomenological content analysis of interviews and heuristic methodological procedures.

Using phenomenological content analysis of writing samples from the historical and contemporary writings and interview transcripts, an original list of forty-two characteristics describing transformative tears was reduced to nine commonly shared and non-overlapping characteristics. Phenomenological analysis followed the modifications of procedures outlined by Valle & Halling (1989) and Moustakas (1994) and heuristic methods in Moustakas (1990). The characteristics selected were either explicitly stated or implied in both the historical and contemporary writings and interviews.

## Results

*Due to the pervasive nature of negative emotional experiences often associated with religions in our society, it may be difficult for the reader to identify and/or appreciate the discrete behaviors depicted in religious writing, especially in the historical writings infused with ancient religious terminology. In the case of the following examples, a “psychological reading” is recommended, looking for the concrete behaviors and the contingencies and attributions which frame meaning.*

Accompanied by illustrative examples, the nine commonly shared and non-overlapping characteristics describing spontaneous and involuntary weeping are:

1. Relinquishing of superficial concerns and aspects of self, of “breaking through the facade.”

*“Pray first for the gift of tears so that by means of sorrow you may soften your native rudeness.”* (Evagrius Ponticus, 1972, p. 56)

*“Tears signify losing one’s life—or what thinks is one’s life; one’s pseudo-life—in order to gain true life. . . . the light of God that illuminates and burns away all that is not pure . . . the painful shock that shows us the illusory nature of our perceptions about our selves, the sham image we desire to project . . . .”* (Ross, 1987b, pp. 14, 16)

*“. . . that which flows sensibly from the eyes washes the soul spiritually from the mud of its faults: that that which falls to the ground burns and crushes the demons and renders the soul free from the invisible stains of sin.”* (Symeon the New Theologian, quoted in Sylvia Mary, 1976, p. 111)

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<sup>1</sup> The author would appreciate receiving articles on mystical tears, especially articles from sources outside of Christianity.

2. A sense of the “re-integration of lost aspects of self.”

*“Tears falling on a corpse cannot restore it, but if they fall on a soul they will bring it back to life. It is not for the body that tears, sorrow, and affliction were made. It is for the soul that God made them, so that you may raise it up again. Give God weeping, and increase the tears in your eyes: through your tears and his goodness the soul which had been dead will be restored. Behold, Mercy waits for your eyes to shed tears, to purify and renew the image of the disfigured soul.”* (Hausherr, 1982, p. 29)

*“. . . the trust towards God continues and becomes more powerful, the process of being organically transformed, the process of divinisation, also continues. More and more illusion is lost.* (Ross, 1987b, p. 18)

*“. . . he who does not weep each day... puts to death hunger and loses his soul.”* Symeon the New Theologian, quoted in Ross, 1987a, p. 40)

3. Being in relationship with the impulse of life throughout the universe or of “touching reality” beyond one’s ordinary awareness.

*“This longing has grown out of the most profound human experience, earthly experiences, and is an ineffable glimpse, conscious or not, of what the created order might be when fully reflecting the image of the Creator. . . Tears are a mark of having touched reality, or having been touched by the reality of integration and regeneration.”* (Ross, 1987a, pp. 164-5, 227)

*“. . . unaccustomed experience of inner sweetness and for a moment he is, in some way, a new man, set afire by the breath of the spirit. And the more he tastes the object of his love, the stronger grows his desire for it.”* (Gregory the Great, quoted in Casey, 1981, p. 309)

*“And when the time of birth is come, then the mind will perceive something of what belongs to that world. Like a faint perfume which an infant receives inside the body in which it has grown.”* (Isaac the Syrian, quoted in Ross 1987a, p. 227)

*“When she feels the presence of my eternal Godhead, she begins to shed sweet tears that are truly a milk that nourishes the soul in true patience. These tears are a fragrant ointment that sends forth a most delicious perfume.”* (Catherine of Siena, 1980, p. 163)

4. Holding together the seeming (sometimes bittersweet) polarities of human existence, e.g., life and death, joy and despair.

*“. . . here is sweet and flaming compunction; mixed sorrow and joy like honey in the comb to use a image of John Climacus.”* (Isaac the Syrian, quoted in Ross, 1987b, p. 21)

*“But soon there is a decided shift... As the emptying process imperceptibly takes place, compassion grows. This compassion grows because of the revelation of one’s own wounds. These in turn are recognized to be the wounds of all humanity, and of all creation.”* (Ross, 1987b, p. 19)

*“The strangest paradox proved itself in experience as these early monks wept before God and God comforted them. Their interior joy, as their interior sorrow, had to manifest itself in the exterior countenance. . . Filled with great tenderness and longing for greater union with God, the Christian finds his strength in his weakness.”* (Maloney, 1969, pp. 156, 158.)

5. An apprehension of the “tragic dimension of human existence” seen as universal rather than uniquely personal.

*“Later I realised that my so-called great sadness was but the tears . . . for the tragic dimension of nature, for the unfilled possibilities, the broken egg, the lost innocence, for the child dying with the diseased brain, for the victim of Huntington’s Chorea . . . .”* (Clark, 1986, p. 400)

*“Again, we should distinguish between depression and state of sorrow. Sorrow is a state of union with God in the pain of men. It is a state of deep and profound understanding. It is as if God put his hand out and the panorama of the whole world and its pain is opened before you.”* (Doherty, 1975, p. 118)

*“The burning of the heart on behalf of the entire creation, human beings, birds, animals -- even all that exists, so that by the recollection and at the sign of them the eyes well up with tears as a result of the vehemence of the compassion which constrains the heart in abundant pity.”* (Isaac the Syrian, quoted in Ross, 1987b, p. 19)

6. Changes in body awareness to include a felt sense of the integration of body, mind, and spirit.

*“Tears are to the mind the border, as it were, between the bodily and the spiritual state, between the state of being subject to passions [emotions] and that of purity . . . .”* (Isaac the Syrian, quoted in Ross, 1987a, p. 4.)

*“The goal of ascetic practice is the integration of the whole man and his ‘deification’, that is, his introduction, by grace, into the life of God. The gift of tears has long been taken as an indication that this process is underway . . . . The matter of tears has a profound bearing on the unity of these levels [spiritual, cardinal (all-embracing, emotive, and sensory), and somatic] as it affects man’s nature, and also on the interaction of the various levels within the human person. Indeed tears—empirical no more than reflexively secreted response to a variety of stimuli—are seen as a divine gift, revealing the intrinsic link and kinship between the intellect and the body.”* (Chryssavgis, 1985, p. 37-8)

7. Changes in visual perception, e.g. a sense of seeing things in their essence or seeing with more than the physical eyes themselves.

*“The luminous eye is the eye of the heart, the eye of those who see with more than their eyes. . . .”* (Ross, 1987a, p. 235)

*“Here is sign that you are approaching the borders of that mysterious country, when grace begins to open your eyes so that they see things in their essence; it is then that your eyes begin to flow with tears, which run in streams down your cheeks, and the conflict of the sense is subdued within.”* (Sylvia Mary, 1976, p. 110)

8. A sense of being startled, awakened, and triggered into an expanded awareness of reality.

*“Sadness [sorrow], like the tears which express it, may be accumulated and stored within, in the deep recesses of the self. It requires a ‘trigger’ to release it.”* (Clark, 1986, p. 398)

*“. . . the light of God that illuminates and burns away all that is not pure, and it is the piercing light that is katanyxis, the painful shock that shows us the illusory nature of our perceptions about our selves . . . . It is the shock that begins to turn us toward repentance, the penthos which is the matrix of holy tears.”* (Ross, 1987b, p. 16)

*“When we are thus pierced (compuncti) we seek to distance ourselves from what we have made of ourselves so that we may be awakened according to what we were originally.”* (Casey, 1981, p. 309)

9. Inward sense of freedom, vastness, or pure consciousness from which all activities begin.

*“Virtually all ... agree that what is most required to find the realm of tears are solitude and poverty. Though much has been made of external solitude and poverty, these writers are referring primarily to inward solitude and poverty . . . .”* (Ross, 1987a, p. 190)

*“Our soul, washed by tears, can see clearly that we really are free, that we can say yes or no to God... this struggle between yes and no, this struggle with God, is intensified a hundredfold. At some point, your yes to God will make you nonexistent. It’s only a second. Something will happen in your purified soul through these tears and struggles. You will seem to be like one dead. But it won’t last long. You will return, and on that day you will know a miracle. You made your choice for God. The true liberation that God reserves for those who love him will be yours.”* (Doherty, 1975, p. 120)

*“Once you have reached the place of tears . . . it begins to shed tears. For now the birth pangs of the spiritual infant grow strong, since grace, the common mother of all, makes haste to give birth mystically to the soul, the image of God, into the light of the world to come.”* (Isaac the Syrian, quoted in Ross, 1987b, p. 20)

### Discussion

The procedures employed identified nine characteristics of transformative weeping which were explicitly stated or implied by all of the fourteen writers and the three contemporary interviewees. Each commonly shared characteristic is discrete from the others, that is, uniquely described and easily identifiable. Yet, on the other hand, there was an unexpected congruence -- an easy behavioral and phenomenological confluence or movement from one characteristic to another. For example, the holding together of the bittersweet polarities of human existence (# 4), e.g. birth and death or joy and despair, seem easily to extend to a perhaps more philosophic apprehension and compassion for the tragic dimension of human existence shared by all humanity (#5). This universality of compassion for the human experience seems naturally aligned with an expanded sense of freedom and vastness (#9).

One of the most unique aspects of the characteristics of transformative weeping is the explicit descriptions of physical/mental/spiritual integration taking place in the context of sacred tears. Integration, re-integration, unification, reclaiming and healing of the Self, are phrases commonly used by both historical writers and interviewees. This commonality suggests questions for further research, such as, 1) How do tears configure in the integration process as described? 2) Are tears an external manifestation of a integration already taking place? 3) Do tears facilitate integration? 4) Or deepen the process? 5) In the far-ranging integration processes of the human psyche, does the somatic expression of tears compel a deeper or more thorough integration of the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of the Self? 6) Are any of these described changes in perception -- ranging from changes in visual perception (# 7) to an experienced sense of inner freedom, silence, and vastness (# 9) -- permanent?

At a fundamental level, the nine characteristics of transformative weeping challenge some of our basic assumptions about the body-mind-spirit connection. While there are notable exceptions among spiritual practices such as *yoga*, *Tai Chi*, and *Aikido*, a popular assumption of many transpersonal psychologists and mystical writers is that spiritual processes initiate mental, emotional, and physical changes--but not the other way around. The descriptions reported here, especially among the Syrian historical writers and contemporary female interviewees, suggest the possibility that the somatic expression of sacred tears is “... to the mind the border, as it were, between the bodily and the spiritual state, between the state of being subject to passions

[emotions] and that of purity...” If sacred tears initiate or facilitate integration of body-mind-spirit, physical practices and somatic changes may be starting points rather than end points in the integrating processes per se.

In closing, it is important to point out that there is no reason to suspect that the historical writers were usually pathological from a modern clinical point of view. From what we know about them, they functioned within their communities (at least as well as any one else) and often were responsible for large communities of monks or other on-going administrative or leadership responsibilities. The three women interviewed were functioning extremely well. All of them are full or part-time doctoral students and have demanding personal and professional lives. The purposes of this investigation was *not* to look at depressive, indulgent, or pathological tears. The transformative weeping described here show signs—not of disintegration—but of integration of the psyche and expanded awareness of the deeper and universal realities of human existence.

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