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A Communal Lament: A Psalm for the Unemployed

Dodi Dolendi
College of DuPage

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As an aspiring writer, I have big dreams: Dreams of getting published, making The New York Times Best-Seller List, and ultimately being invited on the Oprah Show to promote my book. Considering that Oprah is in her twenty-fifth and final season and I still haven’t written a book to publish, this moment to explain the process of my final project will have to suffice as my Oprah moment…and so I thank you for being my audience.

Earlier in the class, we wrote a Communal Lament Psalm for the unemployed in America; I decided to keep and expand that assignment as my final project. I chose a lament Psalm because its emotional, empathetic qualities suit my temperament; a communal over a private lament because as a caregiver, my focus is typically directed toward others. Although the human experience of unemployment was assigned, I kept it for this project because it tapped into my personal life...
experience. My husband was unemployed for a year and half, so I was well acquainted with the feelings that accompany job loss.

Just like Oprah building her empire, writing a Psalm doesn’t just happen; there is homework to be done. From reading Leland Ryken for class, I learned the five building blocks that organize and form the structure of a lament Psalm. Although the five elements can appear in any order and be repeated, I applied them in the order presented by Ryken because it seemed the most logical, instinctively familiar, and prayerful to me.

![Diagram of the five building blocks of a lament Psalm]

Analyses and Interpretation of Ten Applied Literary Elements

My introductory cry to God is six verses long. What can I say? I am a crier! I address God directly as though God were present and capable of hearing. The apostrophe already gives God the human capacity to hear, so I continue to portray God in human terms in order to embed an image that both the reader and I can understand.
The Invocation

1 Where are you, O God, faithful provider of every need?
2 What diverts your watchful eye as evil and greed rob America blind?
3 Where are you, O Beacon, in the darkness? Where shines your light to show the way home?
4 Do not sleep when the jobless lie restless, while all night they toss like the sea;
5 Do not slumber as the wide-eyed search
6 for your light to guide them toward secure land. Selah

I dedicate twelve verses, more than one third of my work to lament on behalf of the unemployed in America so that readers have sufficient time to experience not only their feelings of inadequacy, fear, and loss, but also to explore their own attitudes toward others in need. The amount of space mimics and highlights the enormity of the problem for my readers.
In poetry, every word and nuance selected holds power to transform something ordinary into something lyrical, concise, vivid, and concrete, so that the poet can bring to the reader meaning beyond the literal. I wanted to convey to my readers a sense of urgency, both about the problem of unemployment and the need for God’s intervention. My initial attempt lacked precision. Many attempts later, I got impatient and cried out loud: “I need an answer NOW! People without jobs need answers now, too!”

Hours of reflection, living in the dictionary, and conversation allowed me to remove the excess baggage and pack all the urgency and emotional, physical, and spiritual needs into a stronger piece that holds more weight. I have highlighted the changes before and after revision.
I then force readers into a meditative state by using comparisons linked with “like” or “as” so that they can discover multiple connections between the comparisons, and transfer meaning to the subject of the poem. In verses 17 & 18, I wanted my audience to experience the effect that passing time has on the human spirit during unemployment.
I treated inanimate objects as if they were humans capable of response and action so that I could show readers how I feel. I had fun exposing the feminist in me by making laziness a man and preparedness a woman. Sorry guys!
I would love to say that I intentionally placed three types of parallelism in verses 21-24 of my petition but that would be far from the truth. I don’t want any James Fry problems here. What I did intend was to include parallelism, because, as Ryken states so eloquently: “The effect of parallelism is comparable to turning a prism in the light, ensuring that we will look at the colors at least twice.”
Half way through the class, pivotal assignment #5 had us sifting through the entire *Book of Job* to identify, analyze, and interpret twelve literary elements. I had a major meltdown over that assignment; however, the literary foundation helped me apply the elements when the time came. Intention? Not exactly. We’ll call it inspiration.
If I had a Dodi’s favorite things list, archetypes and repetition in writing would be on it. I sprinkled many archetypes of ideal and un-ideal experience throughout this work like darkness and light used in the statement of confidence in God because they are familiar in real life and in literature and they evoke an emotional response from readers.

I used repetition as a highlight for readers to recognize what is most important in the piece and specifically in this section the third of a threefold repetition to symbolize and emphasize the triune God who is the central and unifying character of the Bible and my Psalm.
I never know what might inspire my writing; but I know from experience that, always, something does. For this piece, inspiration came from the lighthouses that I photographed in the Outer Banks of North Carolina during Spring Break this year.

28 You will destroy the darkness of unemployment; Your hand will open doors, bringing opportunity to light.
29 Forever, we will look to Yahweh with glad hearts.
30 Long we will gaze in wonder and awe.
31 For you a lone stand strong in the harbor;
Your steadfast wisdom, O Beacon in the darkness, the shining light to show the way home. Selah
My picture appears with my poetry because the lighthouse helped me to embody and convey another meaning and bring a central character to light with concrete imagery. The lighthouse helped me to create unity with symbol and metaphor and commit it the page so that readers might have a visual, as I did, of the Biblical God. The Lighthouse helped me to be poetic in my closing element of praise that says to the reader, in the way that C.S. Lewis says poets do: “look at that” and point to the Guiding Light who shows the way home.
What follows is my Lament Psalm for the Unemployed:

32 I will praise your mighty name, Yahweh;  
among the nations and among the unemployed,  
I will lift Your name high.

33 All glory and praise to you, in the darkness,  
my Light, my strength, my guide.

Symbol
Metaphor
Unity
A Psalm for the Unemployed

1 Where are you, O God, faithful provider of every need? What diverts your watchful eye as evil and greed rob America blind? Where are you, O Beacon, in the darkness? Where shines your light to show the way home?

2 Do not sleep when the jobless lie restless, while all night they toss like the sea; Do not slumber as the wide-eyed search for your light to guide them toward secure land. Selah

3 See the devastating and powerful storms that torment them each day, wave after wave crashing in to erode their labor. Yahweh, keep watch! You are the safe harbor who welcomes all adrift from work. Laziness accuses the unemployed: ‘Surely, you are not looking hard enough,’ says he. Preparedness taunts too: ‘Not good enough’ or ‘overqualified’ claims she.

4 Long are the lines of the lowly, able-bodied, who desire work for a livable wage. To support their families, they wander aimlessly, wait patiently, and lose hope.

5 Will never a door open? Never a new employer see their worth? Will never again they put forth the gifts Yahweh gave? Selah

6 Will days without work become months, or years, or a lifetime? The days pass as quickly as a thought, with the speed of the arrow that Desperation shoots through the heart, and still no job in sight. The nights pass as slowly as a memory, with the tedium of grief that Loss etches on the heart, and still no hope in sight. Selah

7 Cast a bright light over your disheartened; on the heartless a shadow of judgment throw. Your guiding light is needed in the darkness; your confidence they need to employ. Your strength is needed to tether them; Your love the only anchor they know.

8 Fill thy empty vessels with your provisions; pour bounty, more than their hearts can hold. Show yourself, O Beacon, in the darkness; shine your light to show the way home. Selah

9 Remove the doubt from their faces; dress them in strength to interview well. Take their hand and lead them to warm shelter; walk them to the table where abundance flows. Selah

10 You will destroy the darkness of unemployment; Your hand will open doors, bringing opportunity to light. Forever, we will look to Yahweh with glad hearts. Long we will gaze in wonder and awe.

11 For you alone stand strong in the harbor; Your steadfast wisdom, O Beacon, in the darkness, the shining light to show the way home. Selah

12 I will praise your mighty name, Yahweh; among the nations and among the unemployed, I will lift Your name high. All glory and praise to you, in the darkness, my Light, my strength, my guide.
Work Cited