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Praying THE Psalms AS A NURSING RESILIENCE INTERVENTION

ABSTRACT: *Nurses face a range of unhealthy organizational, physical, psychological, and spiritual issues that can lead to burnout, turnover, and leaving the profession. Nurses who use prayer for support may find their faith to be another source of tension when stressors endlessly continue without change despite prayer. Walter Brueggemann's states of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation in his classic work on praying the Old Testament book of Psalms offer a means for managing spiritual tension. Praying using the psalms can become a self-care tool for building resilience.*

KEY WORDS: *Brueggemann, incivility, nurse burnout, nursing, nursing shortage, prayer, resilience, self-care, spiritual care, stress*

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Over the past 3 decades, Lydia* has witnessed bullying behaviors and experienced incivility in her various nursing positions. As a new nurse on a medical unit, she was mistreated by the charge nurse and sometimes coerced to work all three shifts by the manager. Later, as a supervising nurse leader, Lydia experienced being devalued, shamed, and unfairly blamed. She suffered betrayal at the hands of coworkers even as necessary information to ameliorate the situation was withheld for no apparent reason.

The COVID pandemic exacerbated Lydia's situation. Despite her love for nursing and her desire to offer the best care to her patients, she finds she is no longer bringing her best self to the job. Lydia is often tired and irritable. She feels depressed, has frequent headaches, and cannot get the sleep she needs. Lydia has called in sick to avoid feelings of oppression, but this made her feel guilty.

As a Christian, Lydia views her situation through the lens of her faith. However, tension is growing between her expectations about the peace of Christ, which she believes she ought to feel, and the anxiety she is experiencing. Lydia has even begun to question her faith; no matter how hard she prays, her situation continues to worsen. She has come to the point where she lacks the energy to do basic nursing tasks, care for her family, and go to church and Bible study. Lydia wonders if there is a true purpose for her life and if she has it within her to continue in nursing.

What Lydia is experiencing has become the story for too many nurses. Nurses are confronting a range of unhealthy organizational, physical, psychological, and spiritual issues. Growing numbers of nurses are facing increased burnout despite their settings or work environments (Kelly et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2023; Shah et al., 2021). To be sure, nurse turnover, burnout, and discontent are caused by multifaceted, complex issues. However, the critical concern is the ongoing rise

in nurses exiting the profession. One study of recent graduates found 42.5% had given serious thought to leaving the profession entirely, with 50.9% having plans to find a position at a different facility (Ulupinar & Aydogan, 2021). The stresses of the pandemic highlighted gaps within the profession as marked by the exit of 100,000 nurses, leading some researchers to predict a gap of 200,000 to 450,000 nurses by 2025 (Martin et al., 2023).

In addition, horizontal violence in the workplace and peer incivility among nursing students plague the profession (Bloom, 2019; Sauer et al., 2017; Tedone, 2020). Although extensive research focuses on the organizational, physical, and psychological issues impacting nurse burnout rates, the spiritual aspect of this phenomenon has not been adequately addressed (Clark et al., 2021; Hodgins & McNamara, 2017). Lydia's nursing practice, as well

to offer a biblical framework for building resilience in the face of adversity, especially helpful for nurses grounded in a Christian identity. The article draws upon Walter Brueggemann's classic work in biblical studies on praying the Psalms from the postures of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation (Brueggemann, 1980, 2007). These postures and their constructive applications will be applied to Lydia's situation.

FRAMEWORK OF ORIENTATION/DISORIENTATION

Numerous practical theologians have noted Walter Brueggemann's writings on the book of Psalms as providing a helpful framework for people experiencing trauma and, consequently, spiritual tension. Brueggemann asserted that the prayers in the Old Testament book of Psalms reveal that the everyday life of faith consists

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as our own, cannot be disconnected from our spiritual identities in Christ.

Spirituality is inextricably connected to one's life experience, whether physical, mental, psychological, or relational. For example, as a committed Christian, Lydia views every area of her private and professional life as a part of her faith walk with Christ. Thus, her holistic nursing experience cannot be disconnected from her understanding of who she is in Christ and her expectation of Christian nursing. However, as her understanding and expectations increasingly diverge from her lived experience, she finds her faith to be another source of tension rather than a place of empowerment.

All the above concerns have made resilience building in nursing a crucial undertaking (Abdul Salam et al., 2023; Henshaw et al., 2020; Rajamohan et al., 2023). The purpose of this article is

of a dialectical movement between *orientation* and *disorientation* (Brueggemann, 2007). A person's orientation refers to his or her basic understanding of how the world, the person, and God relate to one another. As long as those understandings go unchallenged by life experiences, the person does not feel the tension in his or her faith, even during dark and painful circumstances. As such, Brueggemann (2007) observed that prayers in the Psalms written from a posture of *orientation* exude peace and joy. The psalmist makes sense of the world through faith and finds confidence through that faith to face the troubles of life with peace, hope, and stability (e.g., Psalm 8, Psalm 23, Psalm 93, and Psalm 104). For example, the psalmist in Psalm 23:4 (NIV) says, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod

and your staff, they comfort me.” This verse exemplifies the prayerful words of a person who is in the “darkest valley” yet without spiritual tension. His or her faith and confidence in God’s abiding presence soothe the psalmist, acting as a balm to anxiety and other feelings of helplessness.

Lydia expects to experience her faith in this way. She is walking through a difficult situation, believing that as a faithful Christian she ought to be able to navigate such a time with enduring spiritual confidence, finding peace through her relationship with God. However, this is not what is happening inside of her. She is anxious and doubtful about her faith rather than realizing joy and trust in God’s promises. As she pours her energy into fighting these antagonistic feelings, her faith is becoming a source of tension rather than a place of relief.

Lydia might be surprised to learn that a posture of *disorientation* is far more common within the Bible’s prayer book of Psalms. Disorientation refers to a sense that one’s spiritual worldview does not work in a given situation (Brueggemann, 2007). Thus, psalms of disorientation express a profound tension between the psalmist’s understanding of God and the experience of grief or pain, leading to raw and even dark, sometimes shocking, prayers (e.g., Psalm 13, Psalm 88, and Psalm 137). For example, Psalm 88:16b bleakly declares to God, “Your terrors have destroyed me” (NIV). Psalm 137:9 celebrates the idea of beating the babies of one’s enemies against a rock. Obviously, these state-

ments are not in the Psalms because God wants his people to harm any child. But the statements do demonstrate how our darkest feelings and thoughts can be brought to God in prayer unfiltered.


Disorientation psalms reveal that even Lydia’s most angry feelings about the world and her dissatisfied feelings about God’s seeming silence in her trauma are normal. In other words, the anxiety and doubt Lydia is experiencing are not antithetical to her life as a Christian; God anticipates this. The psalms do not tell her that the way through her situation is to deny or fight those feelings or to feel strength or peace via her own power. The psalms tell Lydia and us that the path out of those feelings is to be who we are in the moment before God, to embrace the reality of our thoughts and feelings, and to express ourselves openly and honestly to God who does the work of transformation.

Bidwell (2002) notes that spiritual disorientation, though uncomfortable, is not inherently bad, because it has great potential for being spiritually transformative. Disorientation breaks a person out of his or her comfort zone of faith. When a person presses the limits of his or her understanding, the person’s understanding matures by necessity. Lydia’s preconceived notions about who God is and what God ought to be doing will never be big enough to truly encompass the reality of the God who created the universe. Having preconceived notions shattered by her current circumstance requires her understanding to grow.

The wisdom of the disorientation psalms is that the path toward growth occurs through praying to God with consistent, honest expressions of our disappointment, anger, and frustration. This honest perspective is needed rather than the shame and blame we place on ourselves when changes are slow to occur, or we falsely believe that suffering and difficulty should not be part of life. Most disorientation psalms end on a note of hope that the season of lament will not last forever. God is trustworthy. Eventually, God will make all things well (e.g., Psalm 22:22–31), moving the prayerful person through a forthright expression of his or her despair to a place of hope and toward a posture of reorientation.

Reorientation is not a return to one’s original posture of orientation. Sometimes that previous orientation is shattered forever. Sometimes the orientation involves change that occurs in degrees. However, reorientation is never less innocent and less trusting. For example, Lydia cannot move past her current situation, still believing that God would never let painful things happen to her or that she can maintain her sense of joy and peace through anything. Her disorientation will shatter such thoughts. Lydia can eventually be led by the Holy Spirit through prayer to a place where she can still trust that God loves her, and she can trust him even through hard times.

A person cannot fabricate reorientation; this is something God does, and no one can anticipate when it will take place. Reorientation psalms resound with thanksgiving to God for bringing



Praying the psalms can provide an outlet of release for the spiritual struggle Lydia is experiencing.

the person out of despair rather than celebrating a victory that a person accomplished him or herself (e.g., Psalm 18, Psalm 40). One day God will enable Lydia to make it to the other side of her disorientation, and she will be able to pray with raw honesty, “God drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure” (Psalm 40:2, NIV). At that time, her life will bear testimony like the psalmists’ to God’s power and authority to accomplish such things (Psalm 40:9).

We can say, then, that the book of Psalms demonstrates the normalcy of both orientation and disorientation. Disorientation is a precursor to a new, more developed reorientation on the “other side.” In this way, spiritual disorientation can issue forth renewal and increased resilience.

THE TENSION OF PSALMS OF DISORIENTATION

Although some Christians tend to appreciate the psalms of orientation, disorientation psalms include statements that can feel almost antithetical to the Christian faith. When a person who is in a state of orientation encounters a person who is in a state of disorientation, the temptation is to try to encourage the disoriented person to just trust God, rest in God’s peace, and do the very things that the disoriented person simply cannot do. This can create a situation in which a person who is in a state of disorientation may begin to believe he or she has truly lost faith or that the church does not speak truthfully or relevantly to his or her situation. Unfortunately, many churches today do not include psalms of lament within teaching or worship; people in a place of disorientation may not always experience worship at church as something they can do authentically.

Although uncomfortable, especially for a person who is in a state of orientation, the troubling biblical statements that accuse God of being absent in suffering are important and offer guidance for persons who are undergoing disorientation. These disorientation psalms provide a raw, honest voice for

those who are suffering (Brueggemann, 1986; Jones, 2007; Suderman, 2012). Indeed, even Jesus prayed one of these psalms on the cross (Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). It can also be comforting to know that the Bible is not a book that discourages or disapproves of the honest prayers of the broken and weary. Indeed, the record of Job’s treatment by Job’s friends precludes any idea that God prefers calculated theological correctness to honest expression of grief (Job 42:7).

Rather than dismissing psalms of disorientation as unhelpful for faithful Christians, Brueggemann suggests that it is dangerous to lose such psalms because disorientation at some point in life is inevitable (Brueggemann, 1986, 2007). Because no human mind can ever grasp the fullness of all aspects of life, surprises arise when a person experiences something that cannot be understood, something that shakes basic core beliefs about oneself, others, and God. For a nurse like Lydia, the injustice she has borne and the apparent lack of response from God to her prayers have pushed her to a breaking point. In similar situations, a person’s default reaction may be to try to find a way to make sense of the experience from within their existing spiritual orientation and to use that as a source of strength. When that is not possible, disorientation is simply inevitable. Lydia needs to understand that her anxiety and feelings of helplessness are an indication of her disorientation, which can be and have been addressed in the book of Psalms.

Logan Jones writes, “There is no value in silence, isolation, and denial. And if everything—and every feeling—must be voiced, then it must also be addressed to God, who is, as Brueggemann says, ‘the final reference for all of life’” (Jones, 2007, p. 52). Praying the psalms can provide an outlet of release for the spiritual struggle Lydia is experiencing. Her wrestling may provide an avenue for renewing an honest and deepening connection with God. The book of Psalms gives Lydia permission and even encourages her to cry out for justice



Web Resources

- **How to Write Your Own Psalm of Lament**
<https://annarborvineyard.org/participate/spiritual-formation/writing-a-psalm-of-lament/>
- **Nurses Christian Fellowship Prayer Resources**
<https://ncf-jcn.org/resources/prayer-calendarrequests>
- **Tabletop Discussions (Available to NCF members)**
<https://ncf-jcn.org/membership/tabletop-discussions>

and vindication while simultaneously demonstrating that God cares deeply about the injustices done to her, as God himself provides her with these words in Scripture.

Moreover, praying psalms of disorientation can place Lydia in the position of one who is suffering innocently. The bullying and incivility that have been directed at her are the results of structures, forces, and, perhaps, the people surrounding her; these behaviors are not her fault. She need not carry a sense of shame or blame. As she compares her disorientation with psalms of disorientation, which habitually move toward reorientation, her despair is given a voice. She can move spiritually in a constructive direction. Even as she wrestles through this dark place, praying the psalms can empower her with the reminder of God’s ultimate victory as she wrestles with her questions and pain. The disorientation psalms can provide a healthy avenue for re-grounding oneself within one’s identity as a faithful follower of Christ even while experiencing disquieting spiritual tension.

THE SPIRITUAL EFFICACY OF PRAYING THE PSALMS

The spiritual efficacy of praying the psalms can be found throughout Scripture. For example, when Jesus was experiencing the grief and pain of the world on the cross, he prayed Psalm 22:1 (NIV), “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus himself

Table 1. Psalms of Orientation and Disorientation

Psalms of Orientation	Psalms of Disorientation
Psalm 1	Psalm 3
Psalm 8	Psalm 5
Psalm 16	Psalm 7
Psalm 19	Psalm 10
Psalm 24	Psalm 13
Psalm 29	Psalm 22
Psalm 33	Psalm 32
Psalm 37	Psalm 39
Psalm 46	Psalm 42
Psalm 52	Psalm 55
Psalm 66	Psalm 64
Psalm 76	Psalm 70
Psalm 84	Psalm 71
Psalm 91	Psalm 86
Psalm 103	Psalm 88
Psalm 116	Psalm 102
Psalm 121	Psalm 120
Psalm 133	Psalm 139
Psalm 145	Psalm 141
Psalm 150	Psalm 142

found refuge in a prayer of disorientation as he carried the sins of the world to the point of death and beyond.

When Job, a wealthy God-follower in the Old Testament lost everything (Job 1-2), he spoke to his friends and to God with words that strongly echo the book of Psalms, even inverting the message of orientation psalms into prayers of disorientation (e.g., compare Psalm 8:4-9 and 139:1-12 with Job 7:17-19). Yet, Job's words do not push God away but rather keep Job in connection with God. By the end of the book, Job is fully restored and in a posture of a deeper understanding of God and can also fully forgive the friends who misunderstood him (Job 42:1-17).

What if a Christian nurse today, such as Lydia, were to follow Jesus' example and pray the disorientation psalms as she carries her own figurative cross, allowing those prayers to lead her along God's path for peace and grace toward others? What if she were to imitate Job, and using the words of the psalms, offer up her truest feelings to God, and during the process, be transformed into a person who prays graciously for those who have hurt her?

RECOGNIZING PRAYER AS SELF-CARE

The biggest obstacle to developing this spiritual practice is that nurses often struggle to put time and energy into caring for themselves. However, if we want to remain in the profession of nursing and be of benefit to others, we must make self-care a priority. We cannot love others *as we love ourselves* if we have ceased to be self-compassionate and do not take seriously the responsibility of caring for ourselves (Mark 12:31).

To become more resilient and overcome disorientation, we need to live intentionally and fully in intimate daily connection with our Creator. We need to be intentional about the practice of prayer and let Christ help us make decisions that move us forward. We can be encouraged by praying, reading, and/or listening to the Bible; seeking out other Christian nurses; and collaborating to cultivate a supportive community.

EMBRACING THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYING THE PSALMS

How can we develop a disciplined prayer life? One simple yet powerful step is to embrace the spiritual discipline of daily praying the biblical prayers of the psalms. Although all prayers have value, praying the book of Psalms provides a holistic approach that gives a powerful voice to the multidimensional aspects of the Christian life.

A busy nurse may also find it helpful when reading the psalms to choose one image or phrase that resonates and hold that image or words in mind for the rest of the day. Writing down the phrase or image can further reinforce the Scripture. Practices such as these allow a person who only has 5 to 10 minutes for focused prayer to stay grounded in what he or she has read for the entire day. In whatever way one chooses to select and interact with the psalms, the most important thing is to set aside time for this vital book of prayer and allow it to form our prayer practices in bringing expression to everything that is inside of us.

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Disorientation psalms reveal that ... dissatisfied feelings about God's seeming silence in the face of trauma are normal.

Prayer needs to be arranged for a set time each day. This could be anytime that fits: the first thing in the morning, during breakfast, or even during a bathroom break. Pray at least one psalm per day. Allow the words and imagery of the prayers to include a full range of thoughts and feelings.

Choosing which psalms to read can be done in several ways. One method is to begin with Psalm 1 and go through the psalms in order. The advantage of this approach is that the entire breadth of the prayers written is experienced without missing any components. A disadvantage to this approach is that inevitably some psalms will not match our situation and express our needs to God on a given day. When in a state of disorientation, trying to pray orientation psalms will feel disingenuous, and vice versa.


An alternative approach would be to have a list of different types of psalms available that are characterized as psalms of orientation or disorientation (see Table 1). This method allows for more deliberate choices on which psalms to pray on a given day. Another approach would be to use an app such as *Laudate* (CatholicApps, 2023), which follows the liturgy utilized in monastic communities that pray through the psalms on a rotating basis. Whichever method is chosen, it is important to set aside time to use this book of prayer and allow it to form our prayer lives and bring expression to all that is inside of us.

CONCLUSION

Praying the psalms as a resilience-building intervention can help nurses facing adversity and disappointment in God to grow (or rebuild) their personal spiritual strength. God himself has provided ample prayers in his Word to encourage his people to

come to him honestly. The prayers of the psalms provide a means through which a healthy relationship with God can be maintained as our struggles are addressed authentically. With that in mind, it is important for nurses to encounter biblical scholarship that highlights the different types of psalms, such as the psalms of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation, and to understand that no one type of psalm is presented in Scripture as being more important, holy, or pious than another type.

Christians may feel guilty using psalms of disorientation because the focus is not on a kind and just God. However, we can be honest with our true feelings when praying. As nurses of faith, commit to praying and studying the psalms. Let us also become intentional about encouraging students, faculty, nurses, and coworkers. But mostly, let us remember that disorientation need not be the last word. That final word belongs to God!

LORD, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief. Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life. Psalm 143:1, 8 (NIV) 

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