

“Lament Heals”

When I was a kid my family would take Sunday drives into the country to look at the scenery or to visit an historical place. (As a side note, one of those drives was my first visit to horse country and Middleburg.) The drives were taken in my mother’s 1963 Buick LeSabre. It was a big boat of a car. It had a white top and deep blue gray body, four doors and bench seats. It’s only installed entertainment was an AM radio. Given that AM stations cut in and out on long trips the radio was not much good on these Sunday drives. If we were on a major highway we could look for out-of-state license plates, or play “I Spy” with signs and tractor trailers. But on country roads with less traffic those games did not work. So we often sang songs. The songs we sang were mostly hymns and spirituals. They were songs we kids had learned in Sunday School or church. There were so many including “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” “This Little Light of Mine,” “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,” and “Amen” just to name a few.

Sometimes to get us to calm down our mother would sing something slower. I think that is where I first heard the spiritual “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.” [Sonya plays the song one time through.] To three young children in the backseat of a car after a long day of driving it could be a lullaby. Looking at the words we realize it is much more than that. The pain in the lyrics is almost palpable.

The words of the first verse are:

“Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long way from home, a long way from home.”

Imagine the feeling of a child taken away from her mother. It was an actual experience of enslaved children. So many people knew that pain. Others might feel that way because they were ripped away from other family members—spouses, siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. When we have so little in the world, losing our family is profound; without family we are orphans we are completely alone.

While we are not enslaved as the people who composed this song we can relate to it. We can relate when we find ourselves feeling all alone with no one to care for or to care for us. This lament is heartbreaking to listen to as well as experience. The only thing that is more profoundly lonely is what we hear in the next verse.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m almost gone
Sometimes I feel like I’m almost gone
Sometimes I feel like I’m almost gone”

Here the singer is recognizing that not only is she alone in the world, but she is in danger of losing her identity in the loneliness. The feeling of complete emptiness is debilitating. There is no way to continue living when our inner self and our inner reserves are completely wasted away. It brings the observer to the point of tears.

The only consolation is that while

“Sometimes I feel like I’m almost gone
Way up in the heavenly land”

If I am almost gone at least there is the consolation of heaven above as the place where we are headed. The trouble for the singer is that she is not gone, just almost. The pain continues and is only slightly abated even by the promise of heaven.

I sense that this is how many of us feel now. We are not enslaved, but we are in the 25th month of a year that seems like it won't end. We are living a grueling kind of Groundhog Day where we wake up each morning to something that is not quite the same, but not better. Sometimes we are teased with hope that things are getting better only to find the new variant that is sweeping through the population. Unlike Bill Murray in the movie there seems to be nothing we can do to improve things. Songs like "Motherless Child" are the kinds of laments we need to get us through. We need to be able to acknowledge the misery for a bit in order to go on.

Years ago after my father died I found that I could not control my grief. It seemed to come leaking out at the most inappropriate times. I remember sitting in a class and for no reason at all just starting to silently sob. I was distraught that I could not control my grief. I felt it was controlling me. Then a therapist gave me a tool that helped. She said that I could set aside ten minutes an hour for grieving. For those ten minutes I was to let nothing else take my attention. For those ten minutes I could cry, morn, moan, wail, or whatever I needed to do. I was to let it all out. It was like letting off steam from a boiler so that it does not explode.

It took some practice, but it worked. By allowing a set time for grief I did not get overwhelmed. Instead of trying to keep it bottled up so I could get through the day, I gave myself permission to feel it as intensely as I needed to and then I could move on. It did not lessen the grief but it made it manageable.

As we have entered what feels like to me is the third year of 2020 we may need to do something similar. Instead of trying to go on as if everything is just fine, we can sometimes allow ourselves to feel like a motherless child. If we do we can get through the rest of our days with a semblance of peace.

This short song and the arrangement that Sonya is about to play can do that for us. It can allow us to feel the feelings, have a good cleansing cry and find the relief we need to not explode. We may feel far from home, that place that felt safe and normal, but with a little help we can keep moving towards the peace that only God can give. God gave us voices for lamenting, crying, singing, wailing, and letting out the pain that engulfs our anguished hearts. Use that voice, this music or anything else that can allow the grief that is stopped up be released. It is a way to find a little peace, stay sane and to carry on.

Allow yourself to let go now and listen to this beautiful piece by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor based on that heartrending lament played by our music director, Sonya Subbayya Sutton.¹

¹ To listen to this piece online as played by Isata Kanneh-Mason [\[click here to listen\]](#).