Leadership For Resilience in our Calamitous Times: Some Biblical and Pastoral Insights

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In our calamitous times, every follower of Jesus, every learner in Christ, is called to practice leadership, to exercise imaginative influence, to help sustain the resilience of persons, households, communities, institutions, and ecological-social systems, and to help make such resilience creative and expansive. Leadership is influence, and it can be exercised even without formal authority or a position of power in an organization or institution. According to the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (1948 - 2020), "we are all summoned to the task (of leadership)," and this is one of the principles of leadership in the Hebrew Bible.[1] *He asserted: "Not all of us have power, but we all have influence. That is why we can each be a leader."*[2]

Influence of Jesus

The historical Jesus, a Galilean Jew and manual worker from the small and obscure village of Nazareth, was such a person of influence: he exercised leadership even with no position of power in the society of his time. He was no priest, Levite, or Pharisee, and he did not go through studies under some well-known rabbi. Yet his short life and much shorter public appearance and activity in Galilee and Judea, in which he healed, taught, and exercised pastoral leadership, have made an enduring impact on his followers and peoples of various languages across two millennia.

Through his parables, resonant stories, and healing practices, Jesus exercised influence on mostly Galilean agrarian

[1] Jonathan Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2015) Kindle edition, loc. 4404.

[2] Ibid., loc. 2956.

households and communities so that they would feel a sense of urgency to change from mere sowers of wheat to sowers of the Word and to make a radical break from *business as usual*. After the arrest of his mentor, John the Baptist, Jesus himself felt a sense of urgency to change from woodworker to sower of hope and to continue to change eventually to master of the wood of the cross and guardian of the tree of life.

Although he did not go through formal rabbinical studies, Jesus exercised influence through the informal authority he exhibited and gained as an itinerant teacher and healer whose deeds and words, unlike the deeds and words of "the teachers of the law" (Mk 1:22), resonated among the sick and oppressed people who hungered for good leadership. He set up informal authority relationships when he called fishermen to discipleship, formed the Twelve, and allowed Mary Magdalene, Salome, and many other women to follow him from Galilee to Jerusalem and serve him in his mission (15:41).

Through his resonant words and meaningful deeds, Jesus would sow seeds of hope so that people who were living in denial of the rot or trap, the vices, addictions, or idolatries entangled in their personal and social practices would come to realize their plight, make a break from business as usual, and seek and take up the new way of the *Kindom* of justice, love, and forgiveness.

If every follower of Jesus the Nazarene can exercise leadership in the form of influence through resonant words and meaningful deeds in one's household, workplace, community, and social circles and networks, how can it be done in order to sustain and increase resilience especially in places and times of calamity?

FILIPINO RESILIENCY?

What is the Filipino experience of resiliency to which the exercise of leadership in our households, communities, institutions, and eco-social systems is most relevant? For an award-winning writer, Criselda Yabes, the geography of our country, "this blessed and wretched archipelago, which stubbornly holds on to the ring of fire," and its history of foreign and local colonial masters

have shaped the Filipino experience of resiliency.[3] Many say we are resilient people. Still, "we do not have to stay stuck to the stereotype of resiliency...We can re-invent ourselves from the debris" of recurrent catastrophes.[4]

Some Filipino writers protest the magnification of Filipino resilience. They want us to rise higher than resilience, if to be resilient is to be content with the following description: "The *bayanihan* spirit sustains us through the crisis. Until the next disaster strikes again. We live from disaster to disaster. Somehow we survive."[5]

Beyond inferior resilience is to thrive and not just survive in the midst and the aftermath of adversity. "Thriving means growing," learning, and renewing oneself "in new and challenging environments."[6] Filipino resilience is sometimes compared to that of the bamboo that gracefully can bend without breaking during stormy weather. Without dialogical learning from historic events and the study of history, however, to remain resilient is insufficient. Could this be a meaningful way to interpret the Filipino proverb: "*Lumalaki ka parang kawayan, at wala kang kasaysayan*"?[7] Perhaps to go through life bending to external and internal winds of change most of the time, but initiating change rarely, will make a person a poor learner and agent in history.

SUPERIOR RESILIENCE

Some social researchers use this superior understanding of resilience: "the capacity of an individual, household, community, or system to respond over time to shocks and to proactively reduce

[3] Criselda Yabes, "Seeing," in *Agam: Filipino Narratives on Uncertainty and Climate Change* (Quezon City: Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities, 2014), 95.

[4] Ibid., 97.

[5] Sheila Coronel, "Unnatural Disasters," in *Agam*, 88.

[6] Ronald Heifetz, et al., *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge Leadership Associates, 2009), 295.

[7] "You are growing like a bamboo with no history." See Damiana Eugenio, *Philippine Folk Literature: The Proverbs* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2002), 25.

the risk of future shocks."[8] It is superior, as it entails learning from past shocks to reduce or to prevent the human aggravation of the impact of future shocks. Superior resilience entails learning over time the better management of shocks and risks, whether from health hazards, geological hazards, climate change, economic recession, or political repression. It "may require mobilizing additional outside resources or knowledge."[9]

In their case study of Philippine migrant networks, Bernier and Meinzen-Dick affirm that the migrant networks add significant financial and information resources that contribute to the resilience of households and communities in their home regions, but they also point out that "the social dynamics of relying on daughters [to become overseas Filipino workers] and investing in migrant capital at the expense of local social capital may limit the exposure of households to new ideas at the local level."[10]

Outside support, whether from overseas networks or big institutions like central government or international organizations, is much better when the substance and the process of such support do not destroy local networks of trust and interdependence, but help address the weakness of the local networks, build on their strengths, and make them (more) inclusive and transparent.[11]

Resilience in the Fourth Gospel

Does superior resilience in the social sciences have a theological correlative? In light of the theology of the fourth gospel, the resilience of the disciples and friends of Jesus in the face of inevitable adversity can be understood as "adaptive faithfulness under pressure."[12] It is adaptive abiding in Christ, "the true vine"

[8] Quinn Bernier and Ruth Meinzen-Dick, *Networks for Resilience* (Washington D.C.: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2014), Kindle edition, loc. 57.

[9] Ibid., loc. 98.

[10] Ibid., loc. 360. Social capital refers to "bonding, bridging, and linking capital," which is a real but intangible asset that is available to members of organizations and networks of trust and interdependence. See ibid., loc. 42.

[11] See Ibid., loc. 51-55.

[12] Andrew Byers, "Abide in Me: A Johannine Theology of Resilience," in *Biblical and Theological Visions of Resilience: Pastoral and Clinical Insights*, eds. N. White and C. Cook (London: Routledge, 2020), 110.

(Jn. 15:1). Such abiding is dynamic and expansive and reaches out beyond the disciple's personal relationship with Jesus.

The resilience of the friends of Jesus leads necessarily to mission and fruitfulness: "to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last" (15:16), to practice "missional resilience,"[13] to go and form more friendships and bear better resilience in Christ or fresh fruits of fidelity, love, joy, and peace in his Spirit. Much fruit will come after the martyrdom or faithful witness of those who love, and especially those who lay down their lives for Jesus and his friends. Thus, resilience in Christ refers primarily to the resilience of the holy fellowship and its living legacy despite the death, and because of the fidelity in life and death, of individual members.

Abiding in Christ at various times and places entails adaptive fidelity. Thus, it implies imbibing old and new lessons on how his learners and friends in the midst of troubles can bear true-to-life witness to the nail-marked Messiah, who after his crucifixion and glorification breathed on his learners the Spirit of the new creation "on the evening of the first day" (20:19-22).

A new creation has begun, even though the former creation, in its degeneration and decay, still yields deadly places and times. This "already-but-not-yet-eschatology" is one of the "theological resources for developing Johannine resilience."[14] Through the Spirit of the scarred Christ present within and among his friends, resilience is developed in living and dying in the creative tension of both partial presence and absence, and in the belief that "the hour is coming, and is Now Here [and nowhere], when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live" (5:25).

[13] Ibid., 114-15. Byers identifies "four modes of resilience" in the Johannine writings: "moral, relational, missional, and theological." See ibid., 113.

[14] Other theological resources are the following: "sober honesty that adversity is both real and inevitable...communal support of a divine kinship group...presence of the Holy Spirit...example of Jesus' own resilience...[and] transfiguration of suffering into glory." See ibid., 115-20.

LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE SPIRIT

The true friends of Jesus are his learners, who are called to lifelong learning in the Spirit. In this light appears this ecclesial vision for our complex times: Among the learners and friends of Jesus, everybody follows him, everybody keeps on learning, and everybody leads, as everybody is called and sent to exercise and multiply constructive influence in our households, communities, institutions, and ecological-social systems.

Continuing learning nurtures enduring discipleship, abiding in Christ, which bears fruit in the beneficial influence of evangelical witnessing that is true to life, time, place, and people. A biblical lesson in leadership is the following: "Leaders should never stop learning. That is how they grow and teach others to grow with them."[15] Spiritual leaders for our times should seek and continue learning from the scriptures, the sciences, the humanities, other faith traditions, and indigenous and local bearers of knowledge.[16]

ACTIVE LISTENING

In the matter of leaders as learners, there is an interrelated biblical lesson: leaders should keep their hearing sharp for active listening to the "still small voice" in divine mystery (1 Kings 19:12) and "the silent cry of the lonely, the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, [and] the people in existential pain."[17] Furthermore, attentive leaders strive "to hear the emotion behind the words, to sense what was being left unsaid as well as what was said" when people in

[15] Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership*..., loc. 3810.

[16] Pope Francis writes: "We are in need of greater interdisciplinary communication. Although reality is one, it can be approached from various angles and with different methodologies." Constructive and constant dialogue among various cultures, experts, and bearers of knowledge is necessary to build a world in which all men and women will consider everybody a sister, brother, and friend, and thus a world that will be healthier and more dignified than the world that the covid-19 pandemic brings into focus. See his 2020 encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, 204.

[17] Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership*..., loc. 3644.

physical and mental distress communicate in words and deeds in their contexts.[18]

To lead the children of Israel out of a land of slavery into a land flowing with milk and honey, why would God insist to send somebody "slow of speech and tongue" (Exodus 4:10)? "Perhaps because one who cannot speak learns how to listen."[19] Sacks would have agreed with this Filipino saying: "Malakas ang tinig, mahina ang pandinig" (loud voice, lousy listening). Leaders with loud mouths and weak hearing aggravate or respond poorly to people's pain.

Pope Francis affirms: "We can't serve others unless we let their reality speak to us" especially if they live and struggle at the margins of our world.[20] Leaders for creative resilience try to keep on learning to respond better to evolving or recurrent shared troubles, and thus the exercise of active listening is vital especially to hear the hesitant voices and the silent cries of the poor and struggling people at the peripheries.

Listening is a vital skill for every ministry and church, which is called to be a holy community and a builder of a culture of resilience. Page Brooks says:

> Listening is important in building a culture that supports resilience because people need space to tell their stories. In our hectic, busy world, people have lost the art of slowing down to listen...Oftentimes, listening also will lead us into lament. As we lament, we empathize with a person given their struggles and trauma.[21]

[18] Ibid., loc. 3648. To address the shared problem in the organization or institution which is inadequately understood and whose solution likely will entail new learning in terms of habits, values, or vision among leaders and followers, leaders will need to "listen to the song beneath the words" and consider matters like "body language, eye contact, emotion, and energy" in interactions and conversations with followers and stakeholders. See Heifetz et al., *The Practice*..., 76.

[19] Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership*..., loc. 3656.

[20] Pope Francis in conversation with Austen Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 15.

[21] Page Brooks, "Pastoral Reflections on Resilience," in *Biblical and Theological Visions of Resilience*, Kindle edition, loc. 5962-70.

A listening leader can more easily develop and sustain empathy, which is a genuinely human sense or sensitivity that members of our households, communities, and institutions need in greater supply in our calamitous times. The diminution or disappearance of empathy, which is an "ability to walk for a time in the other's shoes," is likely an effect of creeping indifference as a social malady that worsens and has been unmasked by the covid-19 pandemic.[22] These times call for leaders who are models of empathy.

Pastoral leaders and servants who listen actively and exercise empathy will join and accompany suffering persons and communities in their laments. They exercise humility with nobility by abstaining from proffering explanations, especially conclusive, didactic, or dogmatic explanations, for the occurrence and recurrence of personal trauma and widespread suffering.

MOURNER-LEADERS

Calamitous times call for mourner-leaders who help create open space for personal and communal lamentation that may linger and would not rush toward resolution or closure.[23] This is a biblical way in which they join the Spirit to make "intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Rom. 8:26) in order to turn individual mourners, who can feel abandoned or all alone, into a community of mourners who discover the hidden blessing of God's beloved Son within their experience of weeping and woe.

There are moments when a pastoral leader's well-intentioned but premature words of comfort can have a regrettable or cruel effect, and even the best words will fail miserably. Perhaps this is what the Johannine testimony intimates when it says that, as

[22] Francis, *Let Us Dream*, 18-19.

[23] Among the many psalms of lament in Hebrew Scripture, Psalm 88 is unique in its ending in non-resolution that expresses neither hope in nor praise of God. In the beginning, one reads: "YHWH, you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you...I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death" (vv. 1-3). In the end, one reads: "You have taken from me friend and neighbor – darkness is my closest friend" (v . 18).

he approached his friend's tomb and was troubled and groaned in the spirit as he witnessed the weeping of mourners, God's inner Radiance in flesh and blood, the incarnate Word, wept wordlessly (Jn. 11:33-35).

LAMENTATIONS AND TRAUMA

The Book of Lamentations, which was written probably by a witness to the traumatic destruction of Jerusalem and its temple after an eighteen-month siege in 587-586 BCE, points paradoxically to the failure of words, especially words of explanation. In Jewish tradition, it is called the Scroll or Book of How, as it begins: "How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow is she, who was great among the nations!" (Lam. 1:1).[24] According to Naomi Seidman, a literary writer, and expert on Jewish culture, "behind the declarative *how* lurks an interrogative one, questioning the means, the possibility of telling a catastrophe that evades description or comparison."[25]

For example, a voice admits, "What can I say to you? With what can I compare you, Daughter Jerusalem? To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you. Your wound is as deep as the sea. Who can heal you?" (2:13). If words fail, then there will have to be neither rush nor rashness to teach the afflicted or to proffer an explanation for their afflictions. "Ano ang aking maipapangaral sa iyo?"[26] (What can I teach you as you grieve and lament?)

In the *Book of How*, such questions lurk and haunt: How can you heal? How can you be true to God (who wills or permits catastrophic and traumatic events)? *Natutulog ba ang Diyos? Paano Siya o tayo gigising(in) sa ganitong bangungot?* (How can God sleep through your suffering? How can God or we awaken from his or

[24] Other *hows* in Lamentations are the following: "How the Lord has covered Daughter Zion with the cloud of his anger!" (2:1); "How the gold has become dim! How changed the fine gold!" (4:1).

[25] Naomi Seidman, "Burning the Book of Lamentations," in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, eds. Christina Büchmann and Celina Spiegel (New York: Fawcett Columbine), 283.

[26] Mga Panaghoy (Lamentations) 2:13, in *Ang Bagong Ang Biblia* (Manila: Philippine Bible Society, 2001).

this bad dream?) What if God refuses to wake up? How will the pain end?

The *Book of Lamentations* "provides readers with a picture of survivors giving voice to their trauma and rejecting any coherent explanation for it, not because they do not want to accept such a thing but because they cannot."[27] When the attempt to teach intrudes upon grief, or when leaders or elite groups impose a grand narrative or a cherished religious story to explain the occurrence and recurrence of personal pain and collective trauma, the result can be seeming healing or closure that "cannot prevent (psychological) trauma's uncanny return."[28] Instead of closure or healing of wounds, there is a silencing of the broken laments and disturbing voices of the wounded.

This book (which can aptly carry a subtitle like *How Deep the Wounds! How Will They Heal?*) "Provides readers with some voices trying to advance narrative explanation, and even shows trauma sufferers trying to accept them, only for these narratives to fall away or contradict themselves, replaced by the suffering that readers encounter again and again, (rather) as victims relive the uncanny return of trauma."[29]

The *Book of How* bears witness to the following: the complexity of trauma, the preciousness and precariousness of the fragmented laments of persons and communities in great distress, and the vital importance of reproducing, with authenticity and artistry, echoes of such laments within educational materials, communal rituals, and worship activities from generation to generation.[30]

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[27] David Janzen, "Traumatic Speech and the Rejection of Narrative in Lamentations," in *Biblical and Theological Visions of Resilience*, 102.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., 94. Consolation can be found in these memorable lines in Lamentations (3:21-23): "This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." For Janzen, however, by 3:42-66 the speaker contradicts his hopeful tune, and this can be likened "to the experience of trauma victims who find no explanation or closure for the trauma that uncannily repeats in their lives." See ibid., 99.

[30] The Book of How is the main reading in the mournful synagogue service during Tisha B'Av, the yearly Jewish commemoration of "the destruction of the first and second temples in Jerusalem, as well as numerous other catastrophes in

It is a pity that no portion of the Book of Lamentations is read at all during any Sunday or weekday eucharistic celebration in the three-year liturgical cycle of the Roman Catholic Church. Some correction can be dared by Filipino pastoral leaders who do not want historic tragedies to be neglected or forgotten. In my humble view, the Archdiocese of Manila, for example, can make Lamentations the first reading of a weekday Eucharist that will commemorate and mourn the deaths of more than a hundred thousand civilians, many of whom were massacred, during the (February 3 to March 3) 1945 Battle of Manila in which "the Pearl of the Orient" was turned into one of the most devastated cities in the Second World War.[31]

AUTHENTIC LAMENTS IN OUR LITURGY?

Pastoral leaders can promote resilience by creatively reproducing laments in liturgy and worship such as, for example, turning the prayers of the faithful into laments of the faithful in the eucharistic celebration during traumatic times. I can imagine and I look forward to a liturgical echoing of parts of the poem, "How Do You Read the Clouds? (*Unsaon Pagbasa ang Panganod?*)" by Grace Monte de Ramos, in which she creatively expresses experiences and laments of small Cebuano farmers, who find it harder to anticipate and respond to disastrous weather events in our age of anthropogenic climate change. An excerpt of her poem says:

Jewish history, such as the expulsion from Spain in 1492." See Sara Shendelman and Dr. Avram Davis, *Traditions: The Complete Book of Prayers, Rituals, and Blessings for Every Jewish Home* (New York: Hyperion, 1998), 130-31.

[31] In the Diocese of Borongan, Eastern Samar, Lamentations can be read in the worship service to commemorate "Balangiga Encounter Day" every September 28. During the Philippine-American War (1899-1902), around 2,500 Filipinos above the age of 10 were killed, and Balangiga town and neighboring villages were looted and burned, when US forces pursued a scorched-earth policy in retaliation for the surprise killing of 48 soldiers of the 9th US infantry regiment on 28 September 1901.

The rice for our daily meal has drowned.
The corn has bowed in the cold.
The flowers that would have fruited have fallen.
The *malunggay* trees are flattened.
In the bamboo grove, the waterhen is silent.
The quails have nowhere to run.
The dragonfly is gone.
Our Father/ Is this Your will/ In Heaven and on Earth.[32]

The institutional church has "to provide training to pastors" on how to mobilize "pastoral care in a trauma-filled world," and such training has to develop the skill, among other capabilities, to "conduct a special worship service of lament after a traumatic event in a local community or after a national tragedy."[33] For pastoral care in ordinary times, the meaningful re-telling of descriptive stories of our faith precedes prescriptive preaching or teaching, but in catastrophic times shared grieving and lamenting takes precedence. In ordinary times, the compelling story comes first, and the commandment, demanding doctrine, or didactic definition follows. In calamitous times, shared lamenting takes the lead and may opt to linger.

With sufficient time in shared lamenting, ordained and lay leaders who have skill in the art of the story can continue to contribute to creative resilience among persons, households, and communities by helping them to interweave sacred stories and their current stories to produce a suit of resonant stories that do the following: (a) evoke shared values and common purposes of people at the periphery and the center of our world, (b) make people attentive to personal and shared suffering and appreciative of its

[32] "*Nalumsan ang humay nga pagkaon sa matag adlaw. Niyukbo ang mais nga morag gitugnaw/ Nangatagak ang mga bulak nga mahimo untang bunga/ Nangahapay ang kalamunggay. Nahilom ang kuruwakwak sa kawayanan. Ang mga buntog wala nay kadaganan. Halin na ang alindahaw? Amahan namo/ Mao ba ni ang Imong pagbuot/ Sa Langit ug sa Yuta*." See *Agam*, 35 and 37. The following is another part that is relevant and radiant and which can be echoed liturgically: "*Look at the horizon. Is that a cloudburst or a deluge coming/ Or the thirst that goes with drought? How do you read the clouds/ When ancient wisdom no longer holds,/ Is left behind as time unfolds? Darkness shrouds the world. Star of the morning/ Light our path/ Take us away from calamity*." See ibid., 37.

[33] Brooks, Pastoral..., loc. 5879.

complexity, and (c) nurture the imagination on how, in the Spirit of Christ, *to bear fresh fruit*, or to seek and learn better ways to survive and thrive in the face of sudden or recurrent adversity.[34]

Key Points For this essay, let me recapitulate the following points:

1. Leadership is influence, and even without a position of authority each one of us can exercise influence through one's resonant stories, healing words, and helpful deeds in one's household, workplace, community, and social circles and networks.
2. Superior resilience in social research entails learning from past and present shocks so as to reduce or prevent the human aggravation of the impact of future shocks.
3. In the fourth gospel, the resilience of the friends of Jesus leads necessarily to mission and fruitfulness: to go and form more friendships and bear better resilience in Christ or fresh fruits of adaptive fidelity, love, joy, and peace in his Spirit.
4. Consider this ecclesial vision for our complex times: Among the learners and friends of Jesus, everybody follows him, everybody keeps on learning, everybody leads, as everybody is called and sent to exercise and multiply constructive influence in our households, communities, institutions, and ecological-social systems.
5. Pastoral servants and leaders for creative resilience try to keep on learning from the scriptures, the sciences, the humanities, other faith traditions, and indigenous and local bearers of knowledge to respond better to evolving or recurrent shared troubles.

[34] In the theology of Jurgen Moltmann, the believer's "capacity for resilience results from faith in a non-utopian narrative rooted in Christian assurances of relationality and renewal." This is a "restless resilience [that] comes by seeing oneself alongside one's fellow sufferers – fellow social creatures – on a participatory and ever-changing path towards the coming of the promised kingdom of God." See Adam Powell, "'A Simple and Warm Common Humanity': Self-Transcendence and Restless Resilience in Jurgen Moltmann's Theology," in *Biblical and Theological Visions of Resilience*, loc. 5269-86.

6. It is vital for leaders and learners to practice active listening specially to hear the hesitant voices and the silent cries of the poor and struggling people at the peripheries.
7. Calamitous times call for mourner-leaders who help create open space for personal and communal lamentation that may linger and would not rush toward resolution or closure.[35]

Conclusion

Resilient leaders with attentive hearts sense the time to start to let go of treasured things, persons, positions, or practices, and they help people in their struggles to sense the time to do so. Let me finish with this poetic ending from Mary Oliver:

> To live in this world
> you must be able
> to do three things:
> to love what is mortal;
> to hold it
> against your bones knowing
> your own life depends on it;
> and, when the time comes to let it
> go,
> to let it go.[36]

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[35] In the case of the Nazarene and Messiah in the third gospel, he publicly lamented the calamity that leaders and residents of Jerusalem were bringing upon the holy city in this way: "How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Lk. 13:34)

[36] Mary Oliver, "In Blackwater Woods" (1983), in *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 389-90.