Review


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David Runcorn is a retired Church of England priest with a background that includes working in areas of spiritual accompaniment, retreats, vocational guidance, leadership, and ministry and theological teaching and training. At some level, all of these roles are referenced and evidenced through the book.

The book, which simultaneously delighted and frustrated me, contains 29 chapters and three appendices, all packed into under 150 pages of text. Alongside theology and church history, Runcorn touches on aspects of biology, ecology, economics, physics, sociology and topography, to name just a few. Inevitably, these areas can only be covered fleetingly. A dual frustration was of either wanting to read more about a topic (for example, in Chapter 3, Runcorn outlines how there are three different types of tears – “reflex”, which happen when we get something in our eyes, “continuous”, which keep our eyes lubricated and contain antibacterial chemicals protecting our eyes from infection, and “emotional”, which excrete hormones and other toxins accumulated during stress – each with a distinct make-up, function and role) or of finding, such as in Chapter 4 relating to economics, that hugely complex theories are oversimplified to one-sided statements.

Despite these annoyances, overall the book is very readable. Just once, I felt Runcorn somewhat contradicted himself through the points he was trying to make; in Chapter 4, Runcorn critiques leaving a baby to cry regardless of the reason for its tears, suggesting that all they would learn “was that when it cried out in need no one would come”. However, later in Chapter 23, he states that “not all tears are for comforting immediately, like an indulgent parent who comes running at every cry”.

Received: [tbc]  Accepted after revision: [tbc]
I started reading the book in the hope that it would provide insights which would help me within pastoral encounters. While there was learning to take into my chaplaincy work, the book is much more an invitation to reflect on our own relationship with tears. Runcorn begins by noting that, as babies, tears are our first and only language. Throughout the book, as reflected in the title, rather than tears being seen as little more than an emotional reflex, Runcorn views them as offering expression to that which may be far beyond word or thought. Tears, Runcorn writes, “flow from the most authentic places within us”. In many ways, the theme running through all the chapters is a plea for us to rediscover or to engage with our vulnerability as an essential part of what it means to be human; a phrase repeated several times within the book is that “feelings do not decompose if you bury them”.

Throughout the pandemic, the use of the word “resilience” has become ubiquitous within healthcare settings. Resilience, Runcorn reminds us, is a word that comes from physics and is used in relation to a material’s capacity to absorb energy under mechanical stress and return to its normal form when that stress is released. Those who have felt the call to be more resilient as a demand to “toughen up” will welcome Runcorn’s statement that the appropriateness of this word for speaking about human endurance and well-being is at the very least questionable. Healthy resilience, he argues, is not developed by excluding our emotional vulnerabilities. Instead, it requires the nurture of human warmth and relationships and the support of those who love and know us.

Against a culture of toxic masculinity and related stereotypes – “never let them see you cry” – the book offers an invitation to notice where our tears most readily surface. Instead of tears being seen as a less than helpful part of our emotional make-up, which, at best, is embarrassing or, at worst, is taken to indicate an inability to cope, Runcorn opens up the possibility of viewing tears as a gift. My personal reflection here is that the willingness of major sports stars not to hide their tears is perhaps a small sign of hope that things may be changing. The fact that sports stars have been seen to cry on winning, as well as losing, is a reminder that tears do not just come in sad or serious times. Tears can be, as Runcorn suggests, a language for the whole of life and may accompany every mood and experience.

The book is firmly situated in Runcorn’s Christian faith. While many of the statements Runcorn makes are generalizable beyond the Christian tradition, the biblical reflections on scripture, which permeate the book, would probably make it hard for chaplains from other traditions, particularly those beyond an Abrahamic background, to engage with the points being made. However, the appendices at the end of the book, which offer three practical resources for exploring tears (tracing our relationship with
tears, the names we call our tears and listening to our tears), do not draw on Christian material. As such, those of other faiths or belief traditions would have little trouble working through them – something I would encourage any chaplain to do. Carl Jung wrote that “knowing your own darkness is the best method for dealing with the darknesses of other people”. Maybe, similarly, knowing our own tears will help us deal with the tears of others?

Perhaps strangely, for a review, I finish by turning to the start of the book. Runcorn opens with a description of a counsellor inviting him to “tell me about your tears”. The framing of this as an open invitation he found revelatory and transforming; both literally and metaphorically, the whole book unfolds from that offer. Whether or not chaplains explore their relationship with their own tears, when sitting with someone who starts to cry – and who inevitably proffers apologies for doing so – that invitation to “tell me about your tears” is a gift to remember.