



Tears

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Received: August 13, 2018; **Published:** August 23, 2018

A close acquaintance of mine, who has had a stormy and eventful life, starts weeping over the telephone whenever I call him. I am uncertain as to whether he is weeping for the black clouds that gathered in his past life and are still hanging over him, or whether his tears are expressive of some present torment, and whether he wants to share his sorrows with me. I am not sure what to make of his reactions (over-reactions?), so I decided to try and understand them better.

The Oxford Dictionary defines “weep” as “to shed tears” [1]. Tears are produced by the lachrymal gland which is situated in the depression at the outer angle of the orbit. The fluid produced by the gland is known as tears (not a physiological term). This fluid is conveyed to the surface of the eye by excretory ducts. The fluid is carried away by the lachrymal canal into the lachrymal sac and along the nasal duct into the cavity of the nose. The lachrymal gland derives its nerve supply from lachrymal nerve which is the smallest branch of the ophthalmic nerve which is the first division of V (Trigeminal Nerve). This is the branch from the Gasserian or Semi lunar ganglion which receives filaments from the carotid plexus of Sympathetic nerve [2].

McNaughton [3] explains the “nerve side” by indicating “The view of the function of tears, as a means of returning the body to normal after emotional disturbance fits with the fact that tears are controlled by parasympathetic rather than the sympathetic nervous system. The pattern of occurrence of tears is also consistent with the theory that tears occur during recovery from emotion rather than at peak of arousal”.

Charles Darwin has said “a habit like weeping must have been acquired from the period when man branched off from the common progenitor of genus *Homo* and of non-weeping anthropomorphosis apes” [4]. Weeping arises in human infants as a purposive action

to attract attention with the object of eliciting sympathy”. As age advances, an independence of sympathetic aid becomes establishing. So this means of eliciting it becomes controlled or inhibited. Circumstances of emotional stress from time to time arise such as an overbearing calamity or a sense of failure either to oneself or to some relative or friend, when this power of control or inhibitors over mastered and the old method of eliciting sympathy of childhood again manifests itself. A sense of relief is obtained by ceasing to exert control and allows unrestrained weeping to take place as an outlet for nervous energy, though utterly ineffectual in its primary intent [5].

Structurally the lachrymal gland is similar to the salivary gland. It is worth recalling Pavlov’s experiments which established that dogs salivate on hearing the sound of a bell. Under certain conditions a similar “conditioned reflex may arise” in connection with lachrymal secretion where weeping takes place without from any cause of grief. Certain people also weep disproportionately on the occurrence of any real cause of grief [6]. Some people react to being spoken to kindly as if it were a fanciful or sorrowful notion whereas in other cases an effort of any kind excites weeping independently of any sorrowful or unpleasant idea. So lachrymal secretion is excited by a psychic influence, such as unexpected news or events, which could be either sorrowful or joyous.

I am concerned here only with the emotional weeping of the adult as opposed to that of a child. Nor am I concerned with weeping associated with any eye disease or the systemic effect of any disease. Nor am I dealing with crocodile tears which are shed to manipulate others. Five generic causes of weeping which can conveniently form the basis of a typology of forms of emotional weeping have been identified by Arthur Koestler (ibid): raptness, mourning, relief, sympathy and self-pity. So the weeping of the friend whom I mentioned at the outset could be narrowed to that

of self-pity with a lot of relief and sympathy. Relief in this case is the experience of removal or relaxation of stress. It also expresses the unspoken pleasure that an undesirable outcome has been disconfirmed. Sympathy with another's distress or pleasure is an emotional apprehension of change in recognition of a positive transformation of the social self, whereas self-pity is an emotional apprehension of failure to attain an expected condition or opportunity. Koestler argues that self-pity spawns two emotional types: one concerns sorrow about a pain and the misery associated with this pain, the others are the feeling of hopelessness and self-pity of shame. Self-pity may represent a change in the way one perceives oneself, as suffering from unavoidable pain. Self-pity can also be an aspect of an experience of shame, which relates to a person's standing in the perception of others and can therefore take the form of a negative transformation of one's social self. Thus weeping does indeed register the relevant emotions through the direct physical engagement of one's self in the shedding of tears. This is a process of communication of transformation or change in self through weeping, which is also labelled as a form of self-referential communication [7].

The person who weeps at the start of the phone call seems to carry an enormous amount of psychological baggage which he cannot bear on his own and finds it painful so to do. It is important to understand that weeping cannot be "inner speech" because weeping is a compromise of speech, and in this case weeping appears as a negation of speech, which means that weeping physically prevents speech. So basically weeping is a physical engagement of oneself that is involved in non-symbolic interior communication. The tears serve to direct the way in which the emotions are understood by the person to whom they are communicated. In the case of my acquaintance, the tears shed are invisible. It is the meaninglessness noise and inaudibility of the words that convey the tears of my correspondent. Plessner [8] notes weeping is "not a mere reaction to the actual situation but directs itself to the situation". Thus weeping has a facilitating role in the way in which an emotion associates with it is actually experienced which a normal emotional expression does not provide. The author also argues that weeping involves an act of self-surrender to the forces of evolution and loss of self-control. Weeping involves a discharge of emotional energy in the form of tears and self-surrender.

Barbalet argues that "the physical process of weeping plays a signal role in harmonising or reintegrating a person's self-concept after events that have disrupted a prior self-image and self-feelings. The argument is not that all changes in self require weeping but that when it occurs weeping for oneself is implicated in the changes of self-concept as a facilitating mechanism. It is also believed that

there are tears of joy. Katz argues that the weeping that comes with the experience of joy does not express the joy, rather joy provokes sorrow and weeping expresses that sorrow or sadness. What is discharged in weeping is an image of the self that is not tolerable and for this reason weeping cannot express joy. Joy could only provoke a sense of the obverse of joy, therefore sadness and only sadness is expressed by weeping (ibid). Katz summarises that adult weeping does not exclusively express suffering but rather is an emotional and physical register of changes in one's self which could be either positive or negative [9].

For many, the frequency of weeping is also the coping mechanism for past experiences. Because weeping is supposed to relieve tension and elicit emotional support at the same time, adult weeping can sometimes be issued purposefully to manipulate people turning it into a true problem-focused strategy, as is the case with children. It is universally recognised that women have a high frequency of weeping and are more prone to weep both for negative and positive reasons, whereas men have a significant negative relationship between emotional stability and weeping.

Weeping is a complex act, which involves layers of shifting meanings and dynamic ongoing engagements with the personal and social context of ritual. Weeping can occur in a great variety of situations including fulfillment and happiness as well as failure, loss, sadness, anger and guilt. What underlies all this is mainly perceived helplessness. The basic or critical steps in the process leading to weeping are those situations which directly imply personal frustration and suffering, and surrender to such frustration which could be anticipated, actual or previous. So a wide range of states of mind are expressed by spilling tears which is a symbol of suffering. The common factor in episodes of tearfulness are their relationship with "help" - either by asking for it or offering it.

Weeping is one of the most remarkable behavioural expression. What is conveyed by a teardrop (the smallest secretion of any gland found in the human body) is larger and deeper than an ocean. This requires a day to day understanding of the reaction to ordinary human emotion, which I am trying to understand. As for the person who exhibits his helplessness over the phone line by weeping, I feel as helpless at my end of the phone. My thoughts above are evidence of this.

*"Whilst yet the calm hours creep,
Dream thou - and from thy sleep,
Then wake to weep".
The Flower that Smiles Today
P.B. Shelley*

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Volume 2 Issue 6 September 2018

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