



“Can you remember the last time you cried?”

My pastor posed that question to the congregation in his sermon Sunday morning. From my perch in the choir loft, I looked out at the sea of polite, inscrutable faces before me – they don’t call us Presbyterians the “frozen chosen” for nothin’ – and wondered (doubtfully) if anybody else was thinking what I was thinking:

“That’s easy! It was about 20 minutes ago, during the first hymn. I LOVE that one... it’s got all those great Alleluias...”

The reverend – who actually had a serious point to make – continued, “When was the last time you were so overcome by grief or compassion, that you actually wept?”

“Oh,” I thought. “*That* kind of crying. Okay, then. That was earlier this morning, while I was drinking my coffee and reading *Thirteen Moons* on the back deck. The light was so poignant, and the birds were singing this descant, and there was this gorgeous, *sad* passage in my book... and... oh no... here I go again...”

Though I usually hang on every word of divine wisdom I can scrounge, a sizable patch of that sermon was lost on me as I pondered my Crying Problem.

Some people get nosebleeds. Others sweat profusely. Still others struggle with issues like stuttering or snoring.

Me? I suffer from Overactive Tear Duct Syndrome Related to Hypersensitivity.

Apparently, it's a somewhat rare condition, and I've had it since birth. There's not much science out there, but my mom and I have decided it must be genetic. She, too, suffers from OTDSRH.

But "suffer" is probably the wrong word. The condition, though chronic and untreatable, is painless. As with many longstanding afflictions, it's not so much the patient who suffers as the family. My husband is increasingly irritated by my symptoms (i.e. frequent, unexpected crying jags), and my daughter is downright embarrassed. They don't seem to understand that I have no control over my condition. The tears just come, unbidden – often out of the blue – and when they do, I have to go with the flow.

Victor Hugo wrote: *He does not weep who does not see.* I like that. It makes me feel good about myself. It suggests that we weepy types have a particularly keen eye... an exquisitely refined sensibility... a deeper well of compassion than your average dry-eyed Joe. Yes, I like that quote very much.

Unfortunately, in my case, it's rubbish. I'm just a crybaby, plain and simple. A sucker for sentiment. An easy mark. A sap.

My tears come frequently, they come easily, and they come cheap. I am neither discerning nor discriminating. In just this past week, I've cried over the following: two children's productions of "Mulan" (and dress rehearsal!), the trailer for the new "Harry Potter" movie, a Veteran's Day assembly at my daughter's school, an article in Time magazine, a couple of TV commercials, a sunrise, two sunsets, four trees, a benediction, several photographs, an anthem from Saint-Saens' "Christmas Oratorio," and Billy Joel singing "Piano Man" on the radio.

I got teary when Keith Olbermann was restored to his anchor seat. (He was semi-humble and even said something nice about the conservative pundits who'd defended him during his

suspension). I cried over Gwyneth Paltrow's performance at the Country Music Awards. (It was mediocre, sure, but what guts that took, and how warmly Nashville received her!) I shed tears over an episode of "Parenthood" – which I always do – and over a YouTube video of Bruce Springsteen singing "Thunder Road" and over the sight of Luke Russert doing the news on NBC. (He looks so much like his dad.)

I seldom make it through a church service with dry eyes, or a play, or a concert, or a movie. I can't get through a Charlie Brown special or the Hallelujah Chorus or the Pledge of Allegiance without welling up. I don't think I've ever sung the Star Spangled Banner in its entirety. I always lose it right around the time the bombs start bursting in air...

I'm an emotional sieve. A basket case. With leaks.

And here's my dirty little secret: I kind of enjoy it.

No, I don't enjoy irritating my husband, nor do I enjoy embarrassing my child. Not at all. For their sake, I would gladly "take the cure" if one existed. But as it seems I'm stuck with this condition for life, I might as well be honest and 'fess up: I find crying very satisfying. When I'm full of sorrow, my tears are a comforting balm. When I'm joyful, they're an impromptu celebration! When I'm struck by beauty, they're a silent, spontaneous hallelujah.

My tears come so freely – and feel like such a natural response – I'm continually surprised to find it's not that way for most people. I sat beside the mother of the male lead in "Mulan" last weekend, and while she seemed perfectly delighted by her son's performance, she held it together while I boo-hooed over her boy and the other kids. Everywhere I go, whatever the occasion, I'm surrounded by stoic, stiff upper lips. I envy their dignity and self-control, but I just don't get it. And I certainly don't have it.

Recently, a friend asked me if I liked a particular movie – I can't even remember which one – and I told him yes, that it had made me cry. "Well, that's just you," he said. "*Everything* makes you cry. Your tears don't mean much."

I've been meditating on that statement. It hurt my feelings at the time, but I think my friend was right. In the grand scheme of things, my tears *don't* mean much. They certainly don't signify that whatever inspired them is terribly tragic, or of high artistic merit, or possessed of perfect, timeless beauty. (Though I certainly cry over those things, too. And how.) All they mean is that I've been moved. Again.

But for me, that's no small thing. My tears remind me that I'm *alive* – fully engaged in this world of wonder and horror and mysterious beauty – and that my heart beats in time with yours... and yours... and yours. My tears are inconvenient, and annoying, and sometimes even humiliating, but they never cease to feel like a gift.

So, do I cry too easily? Perhaps. Does that make me mawkish? Overly sentimental? Of questionable taste? Probably. Am I proud of those qualities? No. But I might as well own them, because sooner or later, you'll see them written all over my face. In mascara.

And when you do... don't cry for me. Chances are, I'm having a ball.

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