



THE

TEARS

OF

THINGS



READER'S GUIDE



Center *for* Action
and Contemplation

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Introduction

This short Reader's Guide is designed to deepen your engagement with Richard Rohr's book *The Tears of Things*. In these pages, you'll meet several of the inspired and eccentric prophets of the Hebrew Bible. You'll also meet contemporary examples of people who embody a prophetic path. This path, as Richard Rohr charts it, includes righteous anger against injustice, grief for the world's suffering, and—for those who stay its course—grace-filled love for everyone and everything.

This Reader's Guide is also intended to offer you a glimpse into the new online course inspired by the book from the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC). The course expands on the content of this guide, inviting you into a deeper and more enriching reading experience. Hosted on a new community learning platform, the course fosters meaningful engagement through deep practice, deep reflection, and guided prompts for integrating a prophetic path into your daily life. You'll find space for shared insights and meaningful connections with a community of fellow readers as well as guidance from an experienced facilitator to support and deepen your journey. Learn more at <https://cac.org>.

About the Center for Action and Contemplation

Richard Rohr founded the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC) to support his vision of transformed people working together for a more loving, just, and connected world.

Located in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the CAC serves as a gateway to spiritual development by offering seekers an introduction to the wisdom and practices of the Christian contemplative traditions. Our programs and resources are designed to provide spiritual guidance in support of inner and outer transformation. When we apply this wisdom in practical ways, we discover healing and are empowered to become instruments for love and positive change.

By carrying forward Richard's founding vision, we believe the CAC can become a catalyzing force for change of consciousness inside Christianity and each of our communities. This work invites each of us to play a part—a whole body, a whole community, a whole movement of people grounded in shared vision, values, and an experiential knowing of God's presence in our life showing up in the world together.

Learn more at cac.org and help co-create a world where everything belongs.

Wherever you are on your spiritual journey—that's where God is.



The Path of the Prophet: Isaiah and Martin Luther King Jr.

Isaiah

The Hebrew prophets can be hard to read. Many of them, in anger, deliver news to their people from a God who is likewise angry. But most of the prophets don't end up rage-filled, spewing spit and spite at enemies—and nor does their God.

The prophet Isaiah ben Amoz lived during the Assyrian empire's onslaught, which culminated in the conquering of northern Israel in 722 BCE. He received a dramatic call in a visionary throne room filled by God and angels. Hearing a voice asking, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah could only cry, "Here am I; send me!" (Isaiah 6:8). But these were days of political machination, deals, and alliance-making amid Israel's imminent downfall, and Isaiah's work speaking God's word surely took a toll. Like most prophets, he started angry—"Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people" (Isaiah 5:25)—but ended in a very different place of praise, healing love, and restorative justice.

Isaiah and those who followed in his footsteps wrote and spoke prophecy across many years. In fact, chapter 8 in Richard Rohr's *The Tears of Things* is entitled "Three Isaiahs: The Heart of Prophecy," as most scholars talk about a second and even third "Isaiah" who wrote at different time periods and for different purposes. The prophetic path of anger, grief, and love finds full embodiment in Isaiah, who shares, in Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's words, "prophecy tempered with human tears, mixed with a joy that heals all scars, clearing a way for understanding the future in spite of the present."¹ Forty chapters into the book, Second Isaiah's God says, "Comfort, O comfort my people ... speak tenderly to Jerusalem" (Isaiah 40:1–2). How the prophets navi-

gate anger, grief, and love mirrors our own spiritual growth, as well as our evolving trust in a God who overflows with love, not wrath.

All the prophets started with anger, or even rage, at the right things: injustice, oppression, deceit, misuse of money, power, even religion itself. But with only a couple of exceptions, they did not stop there. They were not just reformers; they were also mystics who were captivated by the wholeness and beauty at the heart of reality at the same time as they were confronting injustice.

—Richard Rohr, *The Tears of Things*²



Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968)

By the end of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life, the alchemy of anger, grief, and love had transformed him into the most stirring example of a prophet that the United States has perhaps ever seen. King began his work for civil rights hopeful for racial progress, and he never stopped holding an unswerving commitment to love and nonviolent action as central to the gospel message of his Christian faith.

A Baptist preacher, King's first pastoral call was to a church in Montgomery, Alabama, where local activists like longtime NAACP Secretary Rosa Parks had initiated plans to break the racist bus desegregation laws. Rosa Parks sat down in the front of a Montgomery bus in 1955, a bus boycott broke out that rippled all the way to the US Supreme Court, and a group of activists named the freshly minted pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Martin Luther King Jr., its president.

King's soaring oratory and leadership in the civil rights movement placed him on the national stage, while, over the years, his pathos and righteous anger about America's injustices of racism and poverty grew. Through King's travels, he experienced the crushing poverty of Black urban life in cities like Los Angeles and Chicago. He began to see the inextricable link between racial inequality and poverty. As the Vietnam War raged, King's commitment to nonviolence expanded to a critique of United States foreign policy: "It is just as evil to kill Vietnamese as it is to kill Americans, because they are all God's children."³ "The time has come for real prophecy,"⁴ he said, as he spoke out about the triple evils of racism, militarism, and poverty.⁵

Assassinated in 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, at the age of thirty-nine, King suffered the same grievous fate as the many prophets whose lives embodied the nonviolent, revolutionary love of Jesus and its accompanying challenge to unjust power.

When God speaks, who can but prophesy? The word of God is upon me like fire shut up in my bones, and when God's word gets upon me, I've got to say it, I've got to tell it all over everywhere.

—Martin Luther King Jr.⁶

The Role of Anger: Jeremiah and Greta Thunberg

Jeremiah

The prophet Jeremiah is known for his tears and his rage. He said, “Whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout ‘Violence and destruction!’” (Jeremiah 20:8) He’s known as a prophet of wrath but, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel remarked, “It is more significant” to say that, like us, “Jeremiah lived in an age of wrath.”⁷

The son of a priest from Anathoth, a small town a few miles from Jerusalem, Jeremiah railed against the religious and political establishments in the seventh century BCE. Jeremiah proclaimed an agonizingly unpopular message of his people’s imminent destruction by the Babylonian empire, a message “like a burning fire shut up in [his] bones” (Jeremiah 20:9). He foretold famine, plunder, exile, and captivity while his friends and family abandoned him and the royal court imprisoned him.

Jeremiah’s prophecy included strange and symbolic acts, like the time God commanded him to buy a pottery jug, lead bigwig religious leaders to an ominous valley outside of Jerusalem and shatter the jug in their presence. Jeremiah’s angry God spoke through him to demonstrate how the people of Israel would be shattered like broken pottery shards by the Babylonians, all because of the people’s worship of other gods and their forsaking of justice and mercy (chapter 19). Jesus quoted Jeremiah’s words when he led his own outburst action at the Jerusalem Temple, flipping over money changing tables and sending animals fleeing away: “Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers?” (Jeremiah 7:11).

Yet somehow, this heartbroken prophet held fast to a vision of collective renewal through relationship with God: “I will give them a heart to know that I

am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they will return to me with their whole heart” (Jeremiah 24:7).

Jeremiah’s was a soul in pain, stern with gloom. To his wistful eye the city’s walls seemed to reel. The days that were to come would be dreadful. He called, he urged his people to repent—and he failed. He screamed, wept, moaned—and was left with a terror in his soul.

—Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*⁸



Greta Thunberg (2003–present)

Greta Thunberg stood in front of the United Nations at the 2019 Climate Action Summit and said, “How dare you!” to global political leaders. She learned the devastating facts about climate change at eight years old and worked with her family to make lifestyle choices like veganism and refraining from air travel to reduce their carbon imprint. At fifteen years old, Thunberg began a school strike every Friday in front of the Swedish Parliament building. Sparking a global movement as similar school strikes of up to a million people burst out across the world, she spoke to government leaders about their inaction on behalf of the planet.

“I shouldn’t be up here. I should be in school on the other side of the ocean,” she told New York City attendees of the 2019 Climate Action Summit. “Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I’m one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth.”⁹ Thunberg’s indignation at global leaders for climate inaction resounds like the prophet Jeremiah. She combines matter-of-fact directness with heartbroken passion for the planet’s wellbeing. Speaking to the EU Parliament, her anger turned to tears as she catalogued our collective crisis: “Erosion of fertile topsoil, deforestation of the rainforest, toxic air pollution, the loss of insects and wildlife, the acidification of our oceans—these are all disastrous trends being accelerated by a way of life that we here in our financially fortunate part of the world see as our right to simply carry on.”¹⁰

Our impulsive anger may feel justified, even righteous, for a while. But then those unconsidered impulses ravage our world like demons.

—Otis Moss III, *Dancing in the Darkness*¹¹

Collective Evil: Micah and Desmond Tutu

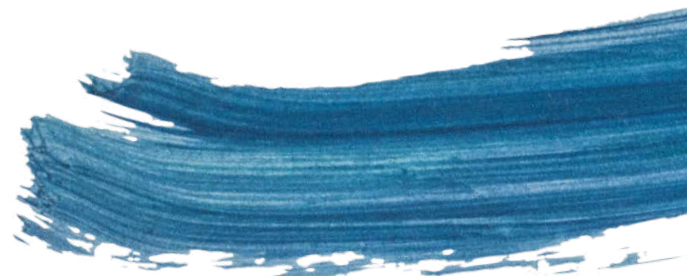
Micah

The Hebrew prophets critiqued collective evil. The country-dwelling Micah railed against rampant economic injustice in the Israelite and Judean cities. Micah envisioned oncoming disaster to the rulers and landowners who “covet fields and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house” (Micah 2:2). He dared to speak the unimaginable, that “Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins” (Micah 3:12). It did, brought about by the Babylonians’ assault on the holy city and temple about one hundred and fifty years after Micah’s day.

Micah continued the long tradition of calling out collective injustice that our prior prophet Amos emphasized. The prophets like Micah and Amos named names, but they were concerned with collectives, the modern equivalents of ExxonMobil and the Pentagon, instead of a few egotistical, money-hungry individuals. From Samaria, Jerusalem, and on through ancient Israel and Judah’s neighboring peoples such as Damascus, Moab, and Egypt, virtually no group was spared from the prophet’s and God’s fearless inventory against oppression. The religious-political leaders in Micah’s day “give judgment for a bribe and teach for a price” (Micah 3:11), while Amos offered woes to those who “lie upon beds of ivory,” ignoring the plight of the poor (Amos 6:4). Micah’s ferocity for fairness eventually soared into a vision of a just and peaceful society in which people turn weapons into farming tools because “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Micah 4:3).

The prophets, far ahead of their time, learned that it is social sin that destroys civilization and humanity: global warming, war, idealization of immense wealth, celebrity worship, the pursuit of fame and fortune, immense and growing income inequality, a denial of common truth, and on and on. They attacked hidden cultural assumptions more than they did the people caught up in them.

—Richard Rohr, *The Tears of Things*¹²



Desmond Tutu (1931–2021)

“The disease in this country is apartheid,” Archbishop Desmond Tutu boldly told fellow South Africans in 1985, as police arrested anti-apartheid activists. He said, “Nobody has gone about hiding the fact that they are opposed to the system. And then what happens? You are charged with high treason.”¹³

Desmond Tutu became an Anglican priest in embattled, apartheid South Africa. The first Black Archbishop of Cape Town, Tutu threw himself into the cause of racial equality with tireless passion, interrupted injustice through nonviolent direct action, and became a priest for his people. When the South African riot police violently arrested protesters, Tutu spoke out about the systemic causes of civil unrest. When the apartheid government banned outdoor mass funerals—often for people who had died in government custody—Tutu led services to mourn. When the apartheid government showed little prospect of changing, Tutu helped lead a campaign for the international community to divest funds from South African businesses until apartheid fell.

Eventually, when Nelson Mandela—the onetime anti-apartheid militant jailed for twenty-seven years—became president and initiated a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) for the country, he called upon Tutu. Tutu became the chair of the TRC, which guided the South African people through a government-led process of public confession of human rights abuses and reconciliation. Demonstrating the pathos of a prophet, he laid his head on the table during TRC events, weeping and overcome with emotion. Tutu summarized the experience this way: “We have been shocked and filled with revulsion to hear of the depths to which we are able to sink in our inhumanity to one another.... But there is another side, a more noble and inspiring one.... We have survived the ordeal and we are realizing that we can indeed transcend the conflicts of the past.”¹⁴

Each person is not just to be respected but to be revered as one created in God's image. To treat one such as if they were less than this is not just evil, which it is, it is not just painful, as it frequently tends to be for the one at the receiving end of whatever discrimination or injustice is involved—no, it is veritably blasphemous, for it is to spit in the face of God.

—Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*¹⁵

Alchemy of Tears: Lamentations and Joanna Macy

Lamentations

There's only one book in the Bible named after an emotion: the book of Lamentations. Tradition tells us that the inconsolable prophet Jeremiah wrote it in the wake of the Babylonian Empire's destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. Scholars tell us the book is anonymous, but Jeremiah and Lamentations sit next to one another in the Bible and share a resonance of catastrophe and heartbreak.

Jeremiah grieved the coming crisis of exile, as well as the burden of his prophetic call: "Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?" (Jeremiah 15:18). Lamentations consists of five lament poems that pour out the people's pain to God in the aftermath of urban devastation, death, hunger, and constant tears: "For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears" (Lamentations 1:16). Biblical commentator Kathleen O'Connor notes that the book opens "upon a universe of sorrow" and draws "us into a world of pain, loss, and abandonment."¹⁶ All of us carry worlds of sadness, and Richard Rohr points to the alchemy that takes place within us when we finally let the tears flow freely: "Felt reality is invariably wept reality, and wept reality is soon compassion and kindness. Decisive and harsh judgments slip away in the tracks of tears."¹⁷

Grief and exile. Weeping that will not stop. Eyes that stream with tears for the people's arrogance, for what human beings do to one another in their selfishness and greed. They are tears for loss, for stupidity, for remorse. But it is also God who weeps—for those who suffer, for the innocent who were the victims of injustice and inhumanity.

—Megan McKenna, *Prophets: Words of Fire*¹⁸



Joanna Macy (1929–present)

When Joanna Macy traveled the world with her husband, a Peace Corps director, she supported Tibetan refugees in India and discovered Buddhism. Macy experienced a revelation that impacted the course of her life: She saw herself as a single brick in a stone bridge connecting the Western mind with Eastern, Buddhist dharma. “I would be a stone in the building of that bridge,”¹⁹ she reflected.

After earning a PhD in Buddhism and systems theory, Macy helped create the field of “deep ecology” by articulating “the Work that Reconnects,” a fourfold process of group transformation that acknowledges ecological grief and encourages people into collective action. In her memoir *Widening Circles*, she tells of grappling with her own despair at the ecological devastation that humans have created. After attending a daylong Harvard symposium about interlocking environmental crises from climate change to garbage accumulation to acid rain, Macy experienced a shift from knowing information about the state of our planet to *feeling* the impact. “Years of stored knowledge about what we were doing to our planet—to ourselves—cascade into my heart and body, bringing a realization I could no longer keep at bay: yes—we can succeed now in destroying our world.”²⁰

Involved in the antinuclear and environmental movements, Macy has empowered countless people in her workshops to face their grief at the world's injustices and act with hope. Macy reminds us that by grieving with others, by engaging in collective grief, we can also “find strength in their strengths, bolstering our own individual supplies of courage, commitment, and endurance.”²¹ She counsels people to begin with gratitude, to honor our pain for the world, to see with fresh eyes, and to go forth with a vocational sense of co-responsibility for our interdependent ecological reality. A turning occurs when we are truthful about our pain, she insists: “When we touch our depths, we find that the pit is not bottomless. When people are able to tell the truth about what they know, see, and feel is happening to their world, a transformation occurs. There is an increased determination to act and a renewed appetite for life.”²²

The Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh was asked what we need to do to save our world. “What we most need to do,” he replied, “is to hear within us the sound of earth crying.”

—Sister Chan Khong, Plum Village²³

Communal lament, as a corporate experience of calling for healing, makes suffering bearable and manageable in the community. When we grieve, when we lament, we acknowledge and live the experience rather than try to hold it away from us out of some misguided notion of being strong. We hurt; something is fractured, if not broken. A foul spirit lives in and among us. We are living in structures of evil and wickedness that make us ill. We must name them as such and seek to repent—not out of form but from the heart. It is only then that we can begin to heal.

—Emilie Townes²⁴

Growing Toward Love with the Prophets and Etty Hillesum

Each of the prophets in this short reader's guide exemplifies a transformational path that leads from initial righteous anger through a larger process involving grief, praise, and love. Similarly, *our understanding of God evolves* through our study of the prophets, from a wrath-filled, destructive deity to a God of universal love.

The prophetess Huldah spoke of the people provoking God's anger but blessed the king of Judah with a peaceful death (2 Kings 22:14–20). The anger of Isaiah's God burned, but later God spoke tenderly to the Israelites, saying, "Comfort, O comfort, my people" (Isaiah 40:1). Amos's God roared like a lion at the Israelites (Amos 3:8) but then pictured justice rolling like a river (Amos 5:24). In Micah, God started by destructively melting mountains and splitting apart valleys (Micah 1:4) but ended with a soaring vision of a peaceful society in which "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (Micah 4:3). Zephaniah's God began with sharing a doom-ridden message echoing the Genesis flood (Zephaniah 1:2), but by the end, God loudly sings to the ancient Israelites as if at a huge and raucous party (Zephaniah 3:17).

Richard Rohr sees the prophets' and God's growth as an invitation for us to allow our own notions of God to grow and evolve: "In the prophetic text, God, like the prophets themselves, evolves from anger to fear to tears to love, and on to a deepening relationship based in trust and truth, not threat and fear."²⁵

Etty Hillesum (1914–1943)

Living under the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, the Dutch Jewish writer Etty Hillesum had more reasons than most to be consumed with hatred. Instead, her diary entries and letters from the period of 1941–1943 show how she chose a devotion to life and a radical love amid the horrors of systemic evil and genocide. Before she died at Auschwitz at the age of twenty-nine, her deepening relationship with God led her into great solidarity with her fellow suffering Jewish people.

Hillesum volunteered as a social worker helping inmates, then was imprisoned herself at the Westerbork transit camp, which deported Jewish prisoners to the Auschwitz and Sobibor concentration camps. She did everything in her power to help others. In the camp, she shared meager food rations and helped smuggle necessary medical supplies to the sick. She had numerous opportunities to escape the Netherlands and avoid deportation to the Nazi concentration camps, yet she decided to remain. Like the Hebrew prophets, Hillesum modeled what it means to transform anger into grief and loving compassion. Somehow, amid horrific evil and her own impending death, she chose love: "I kneel once more on the rough coconut matting, my hands over my eyes, and pray: 'Oh, Lord, let me feel at one with myself. Let me perform a thousand daily tasks with love, but let every one spring from a greater central core of devotion and love.' Then it won't really matter what I do and where I am."²⁶ Etty Hillesum's prayer for a "central core of devotion and love" is the prayer of the prophet.

The transformative journey of the prophets from anger to tears to compassion is the journey of the God of the Bible and those who read the Bible with love.

—Richard Rohr, *The Tears of Things*²⁷

The Tears of Things Online Course

Integrate Prophetic Wisdom Into Your Daily Life

Do you feel drawn to learn more about what it means to be a prophet? Continue the journey from anger, through grief, and into loving action with *The Tears of Things* online course. Like the Reader's Guide, this brand new self-paced study is inspired by Richard Rohr's bestselling book and awakens us with contemplative practices that reflect on:

- Anger at injustice.
- Grief at the suffering of the world.
- Deepening of love and compassion.
- Following the call to act for the common good.

CAC's online courses are flexible in schedule and pricing, with lifelong access to content and ongoing conversations with a diverse contemplative community. Wherever you are on your spiritual journey — that's where God is.

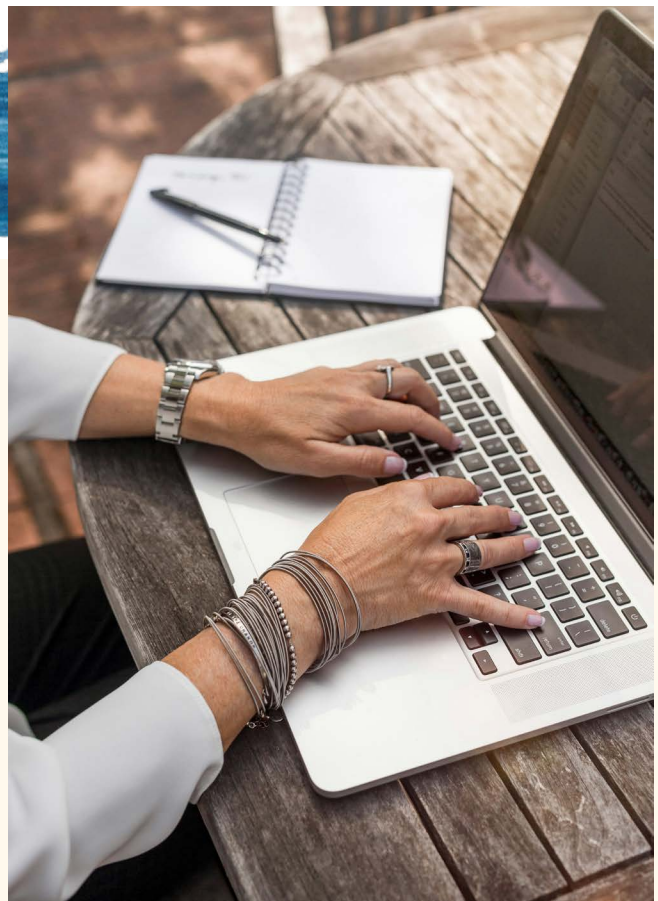
Registration opens in April. Begin the journey toward a more authentic faith.

Visit cac.org/tears-course



“When the tears come, it is the most honest form of prayer. Lamentation is a healing practice where I am certain we are not alone. Thank you for this wisdom.”

—Julie P., CAC Community Member



ENDNOTES

- 1 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, (HarperCollins, 1962), 10.
- 2 Richard Rohr, *The Tears of Things: Prophetic Wisdom for an Age of Outrage* (Convergent, 2025), 9.
- 3 Martin Luther King Jr., as quoted in James Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Orbis, 1991), 239.
- 4 King, as quoted in Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, 242.
- 5 In 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. planned a Poor People's Campaign to bring poor people to Washington, DC for the purposes of showing politicians the faces of poverty and the need for policy changes in the United States. His work has inspired the contemporary "Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival" that seeks to demand an end to the interlocking injustices of racism, poverty, ecological devastation, and militarism.
- 6 Martin Luther King Jr., as quoted in Lewis Baldwin, *The Arc of Truth: The Thinking of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Fortress, 2022), 158.
- 7 Heschel, *The Prophets*, 134.
- 8 Heschel, *The Prophets*, 133–134.
- 9 "Transcript: Greta Thunberg's Speech at the U.N. Climate Action Summit," *National Public Radio*, September 23, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit>.
- 10 "Greta Thunberg's Emotional Speech to EU Leaders," *The Guardian*, April 16, 2019, Accessed December 1, 2024.
- 11 Otis Moss III, *Dancing in the Darkness* (Simon & Schuster, 2023), 37.
- 12 Rohr, *The Tears of Things*, 24.
- 13 Desmond Tutu, in *Children of Light*, directed by Dawn Gifford Engle, 2014, documentary, 90 min., on Tubi, <https://tubitv.com/movies/286039/children-of-the-light>.
- 14 Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (Doubleday, 1999), 119–120.
- 15 Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 197.
- 16 Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Orbis, 2002), 17.
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- 18 Megan McKenna, *Prophets: Words of Fire* (Orbis, 2001), 151.
- 19 Joanna Macy, *Widening Circles: A Memoir* (New Catalyst Books, 2000), 106.
- 20 Macy, *Widening Circles*, 170.
- 21 Joanna Macy, "Working Through Environmental Despair," in Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes, and Allen D. Kanner, eds., *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* (Sierra Club Books, 1995), 257.
- 22 Joanna Macy, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy* (New World Library, 2012), 70.
- 23 As quoted in Sister Chan Khong, "Can You Hear Mother Earth?" *Plum Village*, July 2016, <https://plumvillage.org/articles/can-you-hear-mother-earth>.
- 24 Emilie Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (Wipf & Stock, 2006), 24.
- 25 Rohr, *The Tears of Things*, 149.
- 26 Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941–1943; and Letters from Westerbork*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (Henry Holt and Company: 1996), 70.
- 27 Rohr, *The Tears of Things*, 94.