

How Tears Are Healing, How They Are Sacred

by Rayne Johnson

Have you ever considered why we cry? There are other ways of looking at tears than as just embarrassing and/or inconvenient. In fact, our tears act as healing agents, both physically and emotionally.

I have examined the little known history about the ancient practice of tear-collecting. Tears are not only healing but – through the ritual use of their collection in tear cups and bottles – can also provide a sacred element for grieving and mourning. This practice can be so profound that it has become part of my mission, as a grief coach and educator, to revive this profound tradition.

THE BENEFITS OF TEARS

There are three kinds of tears that provide benefits to us:

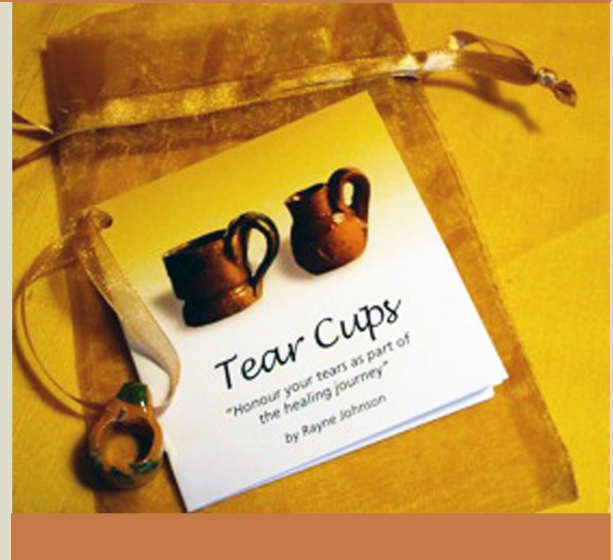
1 BASAL OR CONTINUOUS TEARS:

These keep our eyes lubricated continually and contain an anti-bacterial agent called lysozyme that helps protect our eyes from infection.

2 REFLEX TEARS: These help clear noxious particles from our eyes and noses, such as those from exhaust, smoke, pollutants, or the act of chopping onions.

3 EMOTIONAL TEARS: These are the tears we make in response to emotions, whether joy, grief, loss, compassion, or gratitude. I focus on emotional tears in this article.

When we feel emotional, toxins accumulate in the body. Tears release emotions, along with accumulated stress



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hormones. Crying also stimulates natural painkillers and “feel-good” hormones called endorphins. The heart rate lowers and our biological and emotional states become more peaceful. Have you ever experienced calmer breathing and a sense of release after crying? Whatever situation has led us to cry may not have changed, but our tears have brought more ease. If I have had a good cry, I feel quite fatigued and usually need to sleep.

TEAR-COLLECTING: ITS HISTORY, BENEFITS, AND MODERN USE

I received my first tear cup in 1988 at a dinner party. There was a little cup at each place-setting as a special gift. I did not know what to do with it, other than to place it on my altar.

Mourners would shed tears into the bottles as a sign of honor for the one who had died

There it sat for 22 years, until I began studying as a professional grief coach at the Grief Coach Academy. I was giving a presentation to my class on palliative care work when I suddenly realized I could revive the use of tear-collecting as part of the way clients might mourn and grieve. Encouraged by the positive feedback and many questions I received, my fascination became inspiration. I could see how using tear-cups could support the processes of grieving.

Tear-collecting dates back thousands of years. The first documented reference appears in the Old Testament (Psalm 56:8), dated about 1,000 BC. It reads, "Thou tellest my wanderings, put thou my tears in Thy bottle."

Tear-collecting was also practiced during Mesopotamian and Egyptian times (3,500 BC - 540 BC). Small bottles, believed to be part of mourning rituals, have been found at the burial sites of Egyptian pharaohs and nobility. Mourners would shed tears into the bottles as a sign of honor for the one who had died. Sometimes, professional mourners (called wailers) were hired to attend the funerals of the wealthy and fill the tear bottles.

During a resurgence of tear-collecting during the Victorian Era, mourners collected their tears in bottles that could often be quite ornate, with special stoppers. The eventual evaporation of the tears was taken to signify the end of the mourning period. The special bottle was kept as a token of remembrance and eternal devotion.

There are also stories of wives who, during the Civil War in the United States, would cry as they missed and worried and fretted about their husbands away at war. Many collected the tears they shed in tear-bottles. Sadly, hundreds of thousands of soldiers never returned home. These wives, now widows, sprinkled the tears they had saved on their husbands' graves on the first anniversaries of their deaths in order to signify the ends of those years of mourning. The use of these tear-bottles as part of the ritual of mourning and remembrance provided an element of healing related to their losses.

I began to provide tear-cups in service to others dealing with grief. They are designed to be used as symbolic gestures to encourage tears. As previously mentioned, tears help bring comfort and the release of

Collecting Tears

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Recognize your sorrow,
Acknowledge the grief
Touch thy cup to your cheek
Allow tears to flow
Hold a cup to your friend's cheek,
Catch their tears with love
Perhaps weep with them
In sorrow and in joy
Let bitterness turn sweet
For grief with no sadness may turn inward
and weigh heavy on the heart
Let the fountain of tears flow into thy cup
So you may be guided to faith and love
Grief you feel is food for the Spirit
Bringing softness to the heart and freedom in the mind.
Helping you to surrender to the pain
In times of grief and loss, tears help lift the gloom
and bring comfort and ease.

tension. Those who have obtained these special cups often place them by their computers or on their altars to remind them of how special their tears can be. Others have placed them at the gravesides of loved ones or buried them in special spots as ways of signifying milestones of "letting go" and giving back to the Earth.

Bring in your own creative ceremony to honor your passages through the grief-process, however you feel guided and led.

Remember, tears do not have to be inconvenient and embarrassing. Tears are healing, and they can be sacred. They are a gift to be respected and cherished.

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