

# SOB STORIES

Tears expose us at our happiest and our most vulnerable. But what really makes us cry? And why are some of us better at it than others? Christa D'Souza turns on the waterworks

**a** funeral. If there is any time or place it is appropriate to shed tears, this, surely, would be it. So why, when we all assembled at Mortlake Crematorium last month for my father's, did I not? How, when his youngest grandchild tremulously recited "Do Not Stand At My Grave and Weep"; when the first bars of Chopin's "Ballade in G minor" played on the iPod—one of his favourite pieces of music ever – how could I *possibly* have not? My sister did. My kids' nanny did. My mother, I'm sure she did, too. But not me. Much as I am all too capable of doing, much as the acute shock of him finally having gone and not coming back hit, much as I really, really loved my dad, at the funeral, not one tear did roll.

Crying. The natural behavioural response to events in our lives, both happy and sad and, unless you believe what they say about elephants, a uniquely human one, too. Aristotle had them down as the ultimate manifestation of catharsis; Hippocrates, similarly, the purging of excessive humors from the brain. Tears also contain leucine enkephalin, supposedly a natural painkiller. All of which makes tremendous sense. There's nothing like being able to let it all out. Then again, for all the times you want to but frustratingly can't (such as at a funeral or in an eager new therapist's chair, next to which a box of Kleenex has helpfully been placed), what about the times you don't want to but *do*. Is that not one of the most mortifying things – the adult equivalent, almost, of wetting one's pants?

What intense, alarming, revealing things these little drops are. No wonder they fascinate and repel us in equal measures. No wonder, out of all the photographic images



one sees in magazine supplement round-ups or on coffee tables, it is those of fellow human beings moved to tears that somehow imprint the most. Tears are the bodily function most ceaselessly and effectively hijacked by art. Look at the impact of Picasso's jagged, violent portrait of Dora Maar crying, or his series of weeping women (a metaphor, supposedly, for his own torment about the Spanish Civil War massacres). Look to the other end of the spectrum, at the rows of crying children painted on to black velvet, which will forever decorate the railings of Bayswater Road.

Look, too, how in real life they can evoke

such horror. Particularly when they spring from the eyes of someone you least expect. I remember the first time I ever saw my mother cry – into the curtains of a hotel room in Karachi – having been told that my sister might have contracted typhoid. I recall how it felt that some cardinal rule had been terribly broken and the world would now surely have to end...

Tears serve as such vivid life markers. I have a male friend, for example, who remembers being pinched so hard by his mother when she showed him Leonardo's *The Last Supper* for the first time, that he cried. When he >



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tearfully asked her why, she told him she was worried it might not be around by the time he grew up and wanted a way to make him remember it forever. It worked.

But why do we do it? What is the function or purpose of “psychic” tears (as opposed to the basal tears, or the reflex kind you get from cutting onions or dodgy contact lenses)? Can they, like yawning, be catching? A friend tells how she cannot stop herself from welling up when she sees people issuing tearful goodbyes at the airport gate, yet finds herself boulder-like when it comes to that point at a charity event when the starving-child short rolls and it is a competition between celebrity guests who can publicly emote the most.

According to one evolutionary theory, blurring one’s vision handicaps our aggressive or defensive actions and therefore acts as a protective signal of appeasement or helplessness to the “enemy”; tears as a tool of not so passive aggression, then. Children are especially good at this, but grown ups can be, too. We all know the type; the Professional Crier who, when issued with the slightest reprimand in the workplace, is off, with the result that you are in a constant state of holding back, couching your words, making allowances just to avoid the inevitable scene. It’s a clever ploy in one way – there is nothing more wrong-footing than having a grown-up conversation with someone and then having to helplessly witness them dissolve into tears. On the other hand, is it not true that the more you have someone down as a weeper, the less those tears come to mean?

Fact. Women are much more likely to employ such tactics. Especially with men. Again, we all know the type. The type who when she (well, OK, me sometimes) knows she’s lost the argument, starts brimming with tears. “Women’s tears,” as my mother wisely put it when I emailed her about this, “un-man most men”. All of which tallies with a recent study performed by the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel, which found that women’s tears (collected while female participants watched a sad film) contained a chemical signal which reduced sexual arousal in males. Though rare is the man who, at the vaguest hint of them, will not capitulate, he’d honestly prefer it if you didn’t.

Worse, perhaps, than weeping at the drop of a hat, is not being able to weep at all. There is nothing more demoralising than wanting to cry and being too numb to do so, as I was the day we said goodbye to my dad. Without emotion, after all, are we not mere biological

computers? Perhaps we are all taking too much Prozac, a famous culprit for inhibiting both tears and orgasm. Perhaps, as when it is too cold to snow, sometimes one is just too sad to cry. Perhaps we’re terrified of seeming self-pitying. Or self-indulgent. “The whole point of crying [is] to cut it out while it [is] still honest, while it means something,” as Frank Wheeler, the protagonist in Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road*, grimly counsels. “Because the thing [is] so easily corrupted: let yourself go and you [start] embellishing your sobs...”

Keeping it all together, staying in control, stiff upper lip... It’s such a peculiarly male British tradition, it’s almost a cliché. At the age of 15, my other half was called into the

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headmaster’s office to be told his father had been killed in an aeroplane accident. He never cried once in front of the other boys. Or, indeed, in front of anyone. Now, he cries at almost everything. U2 at Glasto, Remembrance Day and even, much to the kids’ embarrassment, the televised Last Night of the Proms. Like many men I know who were educated at public school, he takes great pride in being able to show his emotions after being socialised for so long into holding them in. “It’s a counterpoint to bottled-up anger and frustration,” he explains. “Collective emotion, preferably in a big crowd and accompanied by big music, does it for me every time.” But isn’t it often the case that the toughest people can turn out to be the most cloyingly sentimental? Isn’t it funny, too, how tears in a man are perceived now as a sign of sensitivity and strength, whereas tears in a woman are still so, well, not?

According to one study recently carried by the German Society of Ophthalmology, females cry on average between 30 to 64 times a year, while males do it on average six to 17 times a year. Of those male tears, only six per

cent mutate into uncontrollable, big-girl’s-blouse sobs. For women, it’s 65 per cent. This is only partly due to the way we are socialised. Up until the age of 12, boys and girls cry at about the same rate (and, in fact, start doing so in the womb). When our prolactin levels (the hormone that allows us to produce milk) surge around puberty, it’s physically more difficult for us to hold back. Meaning that, as capable as you are of “manning up” in the workplace, you will always be, to an extent, a slave to your hormones. Bloody hormones.

Oh, and the ignominy of finding oneself unable to stem the tide when this happens, of observing oneself with horror as those tears pricking one’s eyelids irrevocably mutate into an all-out shoulder-heaving sobfest. A sobfest that seems to have a momentum and will all of its own. Certain things do it for certain people. When my mum looks at me in a particular way and goes, “Darling, what’s wrong?”, it doesn’t matter how cheerful I was before she asked, I start to well up; that hideously mawkish song “The Living Years” by Mike & The Mechanics; the last scene in *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*; the thought of my nine-year-old sister, on a riding holiday in Devon all on her own with a tuck box we’d made up for her that got nicked the very first day. I have a friend who cannot for the life of her watch a man eating alone in a restaurant without wanting to bawl.

The cathartic effect of crying – let it never, ever be underestimated. It is not just normal but healthy, on occasion, to pity oneself to that degree. I enjoyed a “session” I had about two weeks ago. It was after meeting a friend, not a terribly close friend, but one who has known me for about two decades, a friend who knew my father had died. Though we had seen each other twice since, he had made no mention of it, and still, on this third meeting, neglected to do so. OK. Perhaps I was a little hormonal, perhaps I was subconsciously looking for a trigger. Whatever the case, when I got on the Piccadilly Line at Green Park and saw that the entire last carriage was empty... Boy, did I go for it. All the good memories I had of my dad came flooding back: his mad impressions, his impetuous generosity and so on; all the sad bits of those final days, seeing the last rites being administered, watching as he lay there in the spare bedroom like a frail little bird, his life slowly but surely ebbing away. Boy, did I “embellish” those sobs, and boy, in the privacy of that empty carriage, did it feel good. ■