

All Good Things...

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What is the meaning of loss? How can we make sense of it? Reading some of the works connected with “transgender literature” -- *The Gilgamesh Epic*, Paul Monette's AIDS memoir *Borrowed Time*, poems by Shakespeare and Auden -- and looking at others that deal with the subject beyond a strictly gay/lesbian/trans context, I must admit I'm as mystified as ever. What I came away with, however, were two observations, neither of them surprising. One is that losing someone we love, to death or circumstance, is the most devastating experience life can hand us. The other is that if we choose to continue living ourselves we must bear that loss, somehow. This is, of course, a profoundly human endeavor. Dealing with loss can teach us much about who we are and who we can become. Therein, perhaps, lies its meaning.

The first aspect of loss I would like to address is the initial feeling itself. When someone leaves us we're in a state of shock, overwhelmed with grief, numb. That's all we feel; there isn't much room for anything else. Our thoughts are black, our hearts hollowed out with anguish. Indeed, life hardly seems worth living. W.H. Auden, in the ninth of his *Twelve Songs*, evokes this mood with brevity and great power:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good. (229)

The sense of supreme desolation in this poem is palpable; everything is dead and dying and the narrator feels that his life is effectively over. Nothing matters anymore. How can he possibly go on? What's the point in doing so?

The Gilgamesh Epic posits these same questions, but stops short of offering any easy answers. An ancient Sumerian epic, which precedes Homer by fifteen hundred years, it tells the story of a king (Gilgamesh) who finds and then loses the first great love of his life, Enkidu. After his companion's death, Gilgamesh sets out on a quest, refusing to accept his loss and obsessed with finding the magic elixir that will restore Enkidu to life. In his sorrow and naivete the king believes that by breathing life into his friend once more he can recapture the love they shared. He cannot -- *will* not -- let go.

Herbert Mason's elegant translation of the epic illustrates the plight of the title character in simple yet deeply affecting terms: "He entered the Road of the Sun which was so shrouded in darkness that he could see neither what was ahead of him nor behind. Thick was the darkness and there was no light. For days he traveled in this blindness without a light to guide him, ascending or descending, he could not be sure..." (59) Gilgamesh, blinded by his own pain and longing, trudges through his days like a listless zombie; lost, a refugee. Finally, the plant that will revive Enkidu comes into his possession at last. Overjoyed, Gilgamesh turns away for the briefest moment, and when he looks again... it's gone. This too is emblematic of the nature of life and loss. There's simply no way to guarantee anything or insulate yourself from "the fickle hand of fate." Life is a series of losses, someone said. What, then, are we supposed to do? Maybe *The Gilgamesh Epic's* essential piece of wisdom is contained within this lovely, bittersweet passage:

All that is left to one who grieves is convalescence. No change
Of heart or spiritual conversion, for the heart has changed and the soul
Has been converted to a thing that sees
How much it costs to lose a friend it loved.

It has grown past conversion to a world few enter
Without tasting loss
In which one spends a long time waiting
For something to move one to proceed...
Until one learns acceptance of the silence
Amidst the new debris
Or turns again to grief as the only source of privacy,
Alone with someone loved.

For being human holds a special grief
Of privacy within the universe
That yearns and waits to be retouched
By someone who can take away
The memory of death. (53-54)

Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time*, an account of the nearly two years he spent tending to a lover stricken with AIDS, offers some equally trenchant observations regarding loss and how best to deal with it *as it happens* (i.e. before the beloved is actually, physically gone). Monette describes how he decided to treat the situation like a war and cast himself in the role of soldier of love, fighting the disease with everything he had. "We were about to join the community of the stricken who would not lie down and die," he writes. "If the government was going to continue to act as if we didn't exist, if the medical establishment was prone to gridlock over funds, if the drug companies were waiting till the curve got high enough for profit, then we would find our own way. Whistling in the dark is whistling still." (103) In a sense, Monette's chronicle reads very much like *The Gilgamesh Epic*, in that he refused to acquiesce to the inevitable as his partner's condition grew steadily worse. Unable to cope with the prospect of loss, and ignoring his own symptoms, he stubbornly rejected all evidence that death was near until the very end. Rather, he distracted himself with endless details and frenetic, irrational behavior. He was, as they say, "in denial."

However, as Monette begins to accept the fact of his friend's imminent departure, he learns to confront the challenge of what that means with great courage and inner strength. "What good was I going to be to either of us if I couldn't take it? And if I couldn't take it now, how would I ever see it through? *Don't leave me*, Roger had pleaded with me back in '81. At the time an embrace and a promise were half enough to reassure him; time and a little growing had done the rest. Now I was being asked for much more. Falling apart would just not do." (186) Roger Horwitz himself had

issued a personal statement regarding loss, writing, "if later on, as we read this, we might think 'How happy we were then!' at least we'll have that. That as we lived them, these moments, we knew they were important, and that's all there is." (285) Ultimately, Monette finds solace as Roger slips away by keeping a journal of their days together, replete with all the gory details. This is the way he will deal with the loss and work through his grief, immortalizing his friend and the life they shared, "to say that we were here."

This, of course, is exactly what Shakespeare did in a series of sonnets dedicated to a young fellow whose name eludes history but who nonetheless lives on through The Bard's lovesick compositions. "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme / But you shall shine more bright in these contents / Than unswept stone, besmeared by sluttish time... Nor Mars his sword, nor war's quick fire shall burn: / The living record of your memory..." (153) Another portion of one of these sonnets may provide further illustration of Shakespeare's response to loss: "Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks / Within his bending sickle's compass come, Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks / But bears it out even to the edge of doom: / If this be error and upon me proved, / I never writ, nor no man ever loved." (157) Though he was probably speaking here of the timeless quality of authentic love, one might also extract the message that though we may lose someone in a temporal sense, love itself is eternal. If so, then the burden of living without it in the meantime can perhaps be borne with greater ease.

As for myself, I find two books most helpful in coming to terms with the losses I've sustained. One is Rilke's *Letters To A Young Poet*. The other is Antoine de Saint-Exupery's *The Little Prince*. Both speak directly to the heart, both comfort, and both are very wise. I'd like to offer a passage or two from each. As you know, Rilke's letters were written to an aspiring poet over the span of several years, but they might just as well have been addressed to someone struggling with the hurt and the questions that loss can engender. He writes,

"You are so young, so much before all beginning,
and I would like to beg you, dear sir, as well as I can,
to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart
and try to love *the questions themselves* as if they were locked rooms
or books written in a very foreign language.
Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now,
because you would not be able to live them.
And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now.

Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually,
without even noticing it, live your way into the answer..." (34)

Essentially, Rilke counsels forbearance and acceptance of the sadness and loss we feel, that we allow them to "enter into our innermost chamber" and transform us, to *deepen* us, "for they are the moments when something new has entered us, something unknown; our feelings grow mute in shy embarrassment, everything in us withdraws, a silence arises, and the new experience, which no one knows, stands in the midst of it all and says nothing." (83) Rilke preaches the gospel of surrender. There is something almost painfully beautiful about this, something quite sublime.

The story of *The Little Prince* is no less insightful. Upon meeting a fox, the little prince learns what it is to be "tamed":

" '...If you tame me,' said the fox, 'it will be as if the sun came to shine on my life. I shall know the sound of a step that will be different from all others... And then look: you see the grain-fields down yonder? I do not eat bread. Wheat is of no use to me. The wheat fields have nothing to say to me. But you have hair that is the color of gold. Think how wonderful that will be when you have tamed me! The grain, which is also golden, will bring me back the thought of you. And I shall love to listen to the wind in the wheat...' (83)

" So the little prince tamed the fox. And when the hour of his departure drew near --

'Ah,' said the fox, 'I shall cry.'

'It is your own fault,' said the little prince. 'I never wished you any sort of harm; but you wanted me to tame you...'

'Yes, that is so,' said the fox.

'But now you are going to cry!' said the little prince.

'Yes, that is so,' said the fox.

'Then it has done you no good at all!'

'It has done me good,' said the fox, 'because of the color of the wheat fields...' " (86)

Later, when the little prince must take his leave of the narrator who has grown to love him, he says,

"In one of the stars I shall be living. In one of them I shall be laughing. And so it will be as if all the stars were laughing, when you look at the sky at night... You -- only you -- will have stars that can laugh!"

"He laughed again.

"'And when your sorrow is comforted (time soothes all sorrows) you will be content that you have known me. You will always be my friend. You will want to laugh with me. And you will sometimes open your window, so, for that pleasure....'"

"But I was not reassured. I remembered the fox. One runs the risk of weeping a little, if one lets himself be tamed..." (104-105)

If we love, then loss is part of the bargain. Clinging to the ghost of a relationship that belongs to the past and resisting change is futile, amounting to "life that is un-lived, rejected, lost; life that we can die of." (Rilke 82) The same can be said of obsessively holding on to the beloved who has died. As Saint-Exupery suggests, the healing of time and the memory of the love shared must, in the end, suffice.

And this is the most difficult aspect of dealing with loss; the letting go. When we truly love another, we're at our most vulnerable, open to rejection and abandonment, to the passing of things. When we leave or are left, when the love we knew is no more and will never be again, then letting go and moving on are all that remain. But words cannot convey how hard this actually is.

What is left to say? Not much, really. Except that, to paraphrase writer Tobias Woolf, as human beings we are made to persist; persistence is how we find out who we are. It therefore follows that the experience of loss -- how we get through it, reconcile ourselves to it, come to peace with it -- constitutes one of the fundamental blocks upon which we build our character. Loss is the crucible of life, *par excellence*. It's not something we understand, it's something we live with:

In our sleep, pain, which cannot forget,
falls drop by drop upon the heart
until, in our own despair, against our will
comes wisdom
through the awful grace of God.

(Aeschylus)

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