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Seasons of Love and Grief

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This article is an account of the author's moving experience of the sudden death of his wife. Through reveries of his experiences of the seasons of the soul in grief, the author invites the reader into the depths of his or her experiences of loss. From being a ghost in those early moments of loss in the season of grief, through the moments of shipwreck in the season of mourning, to the transformation of one's life in the season of melancholy, the author emphasizes how the process of grieving is a matter of surrender to the deep currents and rhythms of the soul. In the soul's winter landscapes of grief and mourning, there are no maps to chart the way into and through the grieving process. But there are stories told by witnesses who have travelled into these depths, and this article is such a record. The core message is that we grieve because we have dared to love, and we can love again because we have taken the time to grieve.

WE GRIEVE because we have dared to love, and we can love again because we have allowed ourselves the time to grieve. Is that all? Is this the only fruit of the harvest of my grief, the only thing I have at the end of a seven-year journey which began with the sudden and unexpected death of my wife? And yet, if so, it seems everything to me, this connection rooted in the soul between grief endured and love regained. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke, one of my companions on the journey, has said that love is the most difficult work of all, beside which, however, all else is but preparation (1962, pp. 53-54).

The difficulty of love lies, of course, in the fact that it is seeded with loss. How easy, I imagine, it is to love if you are, for example, an Angel. Or is it? I have sensed many times, when in the presence of a poet like Rilke, when in a state of reverie while reading his *Duino Elegies*, that it might not be so easy for an Angel, and that in fact we might even be better at love than they are. In his ten magnificent elegies, those songs of lament and praise at our condition of being

neither Animal nor Angel, Rilke does say that it is perhaps the Lover who is best understood by them, who comes closest to them. But he hesitates, and I wonder if his hesitation says more about their condition than it does about the difficulty of loving in the face of loss, which is our fate. It was in this spirit, when I was very deep into the grieving process that I wrote these lines:

Angels wish they had beards
To enjoy the pleasure of the sound
Of scraping the passage of time from faces
Worn with sorrows, lighted with joys.
They wish too to sense the clarity of lemons
And to smell the scent of someone in love.
They want to hear a lover say,
"I will always tease your flesh."
In their airy kingdoms beyond this world,
In their beautiful indifference,
In their silent stillness,
They dream, always, their own betrayals:
To grow old and ill, even to die,
And to hear a lover say,
Even once, if only once,
"I would rather lose you to another lover than to God." (Romanyshyn, 1995, p. 104)

But, in truth, I simply do not know if Angels are less practiced at love than we are, and in the end all that I do know is that Rilke is right about the difficulty for us, who as transient creatures, as mortal beings, love and can love only in the face of loss. And so, when he asks, what monument we should leave for Orpheus, poet and perhaps greatest of lovers, who even persuaded the gods and goddesses of the underworld to release his beloved Eurydice from the embrace of death, it makes sense that he should say, "Set up no stone to his memory" (Rilke, 1970, p. 25). Orpheus, like his songs, is breath, air, wind, subtle, evanescent, transitory, fleeting. For one such as him, for this lover, a monument of stone would be too fixed. Better to remember him with the rose which, like Orpheus, comes and goes, the rose which in its blooming is already beginning to fade.

That Orpheus failed at the last moment is the point of Rilke's, I think, hard won insight. We have nothing on this side of the grave in the face of death. Not even the most persuasive poet, with all the charms of his songs, could conquer death. In its presence and under its sway, language fails, meaning evaporates, and reason disappears. And yet, we are called to love, knowing not only that whom and what we love will, one day, pass away, but also, like the Rose, is passing at this moment, and at every moment.

So, indeed, the harvest of my journeys into and through grief is simple. But it is rich. By following the seasons of the grieving process, I want to explore the depth of this richness. The grieving process is, or at least it was for me, an arc which, beginning with a personal loss, ended with a transpersonal feeling of love. Before I begin, however, I want to offer an image of love's vocation, and two responses to it which, I think, situate the difficulty of loving in the face of loss within a tension of opposites.

First the image: It came to me at the intersection of my own grieving process and Rilke's poetry, an image of Eurydice as Rilke describes her in his poem, "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes." (Rilke, 1995, p. 55-60). The reader will not find this image in the poem, nor does it belong to me. It arose suddenly, like the first ray of morning light which pierces the darkness, and she exists in that space between a reader in search of something, and a text longing to betray its secrets. In this subtle

space of the imaginal realm, where Angels live, the country of the soul, Eurydice lingers, delicate like a mist. Already a shade, she recedes from Orpheus' look, and the appeal of his outstretched arm. He has lost her. She has already outgrown him. She has already become the bride of death. To love in the face of loss is to know that Love is the Bride of Death.

Orpheus, we are told, suffered so grievously that he infuriated the Maenads who tore him to pieces in their frenzy. Could they not stand the solitude of his grieving? Did they sense in the depth of his grief the depth of his love? And if he, archetype of lover and poet, was so unable to bear his loss that it resulted in his death, what can we expect of ourselves?

How low! how fleeting are the joys of Earth
How vain to build on hopes this side the grave
Full soon the Rose that blooms may fade by Death
Beyond the powers of human skill to save.
(Romanynshyn, 1999, p. 84)

This response to loss in the face of love is so human. If not quite despair, these words express the anguish and the sorrow of love's vocation. Who wrote these words, I do not know. I saw them only once, many years ago, while traveling in the west country of England. They were inscribed on a wooden beam near the altar in an old church. I saw them once, but I have not forgotten them. I remember them, I believe, because they strike a chord in the human heart which is a true response to the difficulty to love in the face of loss.

But another response seems possible. As strange as it may seem, I have found it in the study of alchemy, nestled within its powerful images and contained in its language which reaches into the depths of the soul before it ever touches the surface of the mind. In its origins, alchemy is a hope that our knowledge and skill can discover that part of ourselves that survives death. In its origins, it begins, as all knowledge does, with the tension which exists for us between the harsh fact of our mortality and the longing for something more beyond the grave. And in the end, alchemy's response to this tension is, I believe, the awareness that it is love which survives death.

Is it possible that the goal of the alchemical work, the philosopher's stone, is the subtle, imaginal body of love made between two earthly lovers, that third, invisible body which is the

creation of their loving gestures? In one of the classic alchemical texts, "Aurora Consurgens," ascribed to St. Thomas Aquinas, that great scholastic doctor of the Church, we find the confession that love is stronger than death. And we find this beautiful hymn to this love which embraces death:

O, my beloved bride, thy voice has sounded in my ears and is sweet. You are beautiful... Come now, my beloved, let us go out into the field, let us dwell in the villages. We will rise up early, for the night is far spent and the day is at hand. We will see if thy vineyard has blossomed and if it has borne fruit. There thou wilt give me thy love, and for thee I have preserved old and new fruits. We shall enjoy them while we are young. Let us fill ourselves with wine and ointments and there shall be no flower which we will not put into our crown, first lilies and then roses before they fade. (Von Franz, 1980, p. 270)

While we are young and before they fade! True, these words are not precisely a Rilkean embrace of love in the face of death, and yet they are a different response than those anonymous words I saw in that church long ago. Not only do they acknowledge the kinship of love and death, but also they accept this marriage between them, and in this acceptance express a kind of joy for life and an exuberance for living.

Without looking for it, I found in the journey of my own grieving process the seeds of new life and love. Even more than this, I found, again without searching for it, that loving and being loved has radically changed for me. Enduring grief, love has become more free of fear, more expansive in its openness to a kinship with Nature that reaches to the Stars, more aware and present to the sacred in the ordinary, and finally more attuned to the presence of something which is Divine and which seems to draw me towards itself, like a Beloved, as if all creation is a loving act of gathering back into itself the pilgrims that we are, Orphans on the journey home. In what follows, I will try to give a brief account of my experiences of grief as home-work.

Between Two Heartbeats

ON JULY 1, 1992, my wife, to whom I had been married for twenty-five years, died. She said, "Oh, my God," and fell to the floor. Her death was

sudden, and unexpected. It came without warning and with no mercy. It came with a swift, terrible, and utter finality. A brief fifteen minutes before her death, I had approached her as she stood at the kitchen sink. I had placed my hands on her shoulders, and she turned and smiled. In that turning, in the arc of that space opened up by her gesture, I had said these words: "You are so beautiful."

When she died, my life shattered like a pane of fragile glass. In a single moment, in the space between two heartbeats, everything that I ever was, and everything that I wanted to be, was erased. In the interval between the moment just before her death and the moment just after it, a black hole opened in my soul and sucked into it the past that we had made together and the future we were dreaming.

There are, I believe, no maps for the journey into the grieving process, no programs of the mind which can allow one to escape, or even short-circuit, the double death which happens when a lover dies. Shortly after my wife's death, I dreamed I was at a party. My wife was there, clothed in a radiant garment of green, a green which itself pulsed with life. She was alive, mixing with our friends, and it was I who was dead. In the dream, I was sitting in the corner of the room, and I was invisible. I was there, but no one could see or was seeing me.

In this strange place of reversal, I found no concepts to contain my experience and no facts which made sense of it. To be sure, ideas and facts about the grieving process were in great abundance, but they required, or at least assumed, that I was still a rational human being, with a mind which could make sense of death and the grieving process. Our culture of technology, with its addictions to control and power, with its blind belief that there is a twelve-step process for every experience, supports this reasonable assumption, and hurries us through the process of grieving. But loss shatters the mind, which, like an old, empty, fragile house, is blown apart by the winds of grief which blow from the soul.

Below the reasonable mind, grief works its way into the core of the body, into the core of the gestural body, that subtle field which two lovers build between them over the course of a lifetime. In this respect, grief is a "cellular" matter, and the grieving process a matter of a slow dying, a progressive

shrinking of that gestural field. Grief eats away at this body, and it needs the slow time of the soul, its natural rhythms which are like the seasons, to do its work. If we hurry the process, do we risk falling ill? I do not know, and certainly I make no judgment here about the high frequency of illness following the loss of a loved one. I am saying only this: there is no victory over death and the grieving process. There is only surrender to this dying of that third mutual body created between two, a surrender with no guarantee that one will love again, or even come back into life again. No guarantee because this dying, like death, is not subject to the will, because this surrender to the grieving process is not really about a choice, because the voice, for example, which once found its place in the ear of the beloved now, in spite of oneself, empties into a void, or the smile which once found its reflection in the lighted eyes of the other becomes, after her death, a clown's grin.

Reflecting on the death of a woman whom he loved, Rilke asks, "Who talks of victory?" "To endure," he adds, "is all" (in Hendry, 1983, p. 74). So, no maps for the soul's journey into the grieving process. Only images, and dreams, and stories brought back from that far, winter country of loss, told by a witness who, by grace and not by will, has endured.

❧ Seasons of Grief ❧

I *N The Soul in Grief: Love, Death and Transformation* (Romanyshyn, 1999), I offer a poetics of the elements of the grieving process. I call it a poetics to distinguish it from a psychology of grief, and in using this word I mean to declare my indebtedness to the works of Gaston Bachelard, particularly his last major work, *The Poetics of Reverie* (1960/1971). Poetics is a way of knowing and being which is neither that of the rational mind and its concepts nor the empirical eye and its facts, a way of knowing and being which is attuned to the imaginal depths of the moment. It is a kind of presence which elsewhere I (Romanyshyn, in press) have described as that of the witness compared to the critic, a way of being in relationship to otherness which practices hospitality toward and a radical fidelity to experience as it is given. If poetics has a method to it, it is nothing other than phenomenology, and if the practice of this method has a mood, which I believe it does, then it is that of reverie.

Of the many things that can and should be said of reverie, I can offer here only a few morsels from Bachelard (1960/1971): "Reverie puts us in the state of a soul being born" (p. 15); it is that way of being which enlarges our lives "by letting us in on the secrets of the universe" (p. 8); reverie gives to us "a metaphysics of the unforgettable" (p. 21); "Reverie brings to light an aesthetics of psychology" (p. 81).

A poetics of the elements of the grieving process takes us into the landscape of the soul, where its reveries in grief can open the secrets of the universe. Here grief becomes a threshold beyond the personal into transpersonal and transhuman realms, where consciousness is experienced as the vital force within all creation. And so, for example, I write about green as a form of consciousness, about color as perhaps the first form of consciousness, because grief does, or at least for me did, open the small window of my conscious mind to the unforgettable experience of green as the vibrating, pulsating, throbbing, tumescent force of the vegetable body, of a green so green that only the sky could be more blue. No conceptual or factual understandings of the grieving process could have escorted me to this moment, an aesthetic moment of transformative power.

Blaise Pascal, seventeenth-century antidote to the rationalism of Descartes, once said that the heart has its reasons which reason does not know. The soul in grief is a riff on this insight of Pascal. Its reveries of love and loss are a testament to the claim that the soul in grief has its seasons which the mind does not know. In giving a brief account of these seasons of grief, I must emphasize at the outset that as seasons they are not psychological stages which chart a line of progress or development through the grieving process. Would we ever say that fall is progress over spring, or that summer represents a step in development over winter? They are seasons, just that. They are seasons which have their proper moments, seasons which not only come and go, but also linger within each other, like the smell of a summer rose does when the days of winter have grown long.

Being a Ghost: The Season of Grief

ONE MOMENT the one you love is a living, breathing being, a vital presence in your world. And in the next moment she or he is gone, erased, ripped from the fabric of life. The rupture is brutal, a shock so terrible that one is stunned

into disbelief. In a space of time that is less than that between two heartbeats, the life force, or whatever one might call it, which animates each of us, disappears. Even when one has had time to prepare, I have been told that the change from life to death is still shocking. In a sense, death is always unexpected, and one can never be prepared for its first entrance.

When my wife collapsed in front of me, it took me less than a second to reach her side. But she was already gone, had slipped behind a veil I could not penetrate, and her face had already taken on the look of something alien, foreign, strange, a caricature of life, the face of a doll. Dolls have always terrified me, because they mimic life in a cruel way. They are so close in their resemblance to the living person, and yet so drained of the spirit of life. The face of death terrified me in the same way. The doll's face is the face of death; the face of death is the face of the doll. Both of these faces are intolerable images. I wonder: Do we give dolls to our children to prepare them in some unconscious way for the horror of death?

The season of grief is the season of the intolerable image, the moments, when in a state of shock, one is haunted by these images, assaulted by them. One becomes numb in this season of the grieving soul, and there is, I believe, a kind of psychic protection to this benumbed condition. But there is also something more to it, a kind of deep resonance with the body of the one who has died.

In these moments of the grieving process, I was split in two. My body, the visible part of me, was functioning on automatic pilot. Going through the motions of living, I was identified with the dead body of my wife. My actions were without spirit. I was a caricature of life, a robotic doll, a machine. In this state, nothing really touched me or moved me. Indifference was the hallmark of these moments. My spirit, on the other hand, was already elsewhere, behind some veil, living on the other side of the split which had fractured my soul. I was a shade blown here and there in the storms of the soul's grief. I was a ghost haunting the outer edges of the world which seemed far away. I was invisible.

For a ghost haunting the outer margins of the world, the things of the world also die. At first, I noticed how the things which were part of my wife's life, like her clothes and jewelry, or her

manuscripts and the photos that she took, were growing limp and weak. Without her animating presence, they were dying, slowly, and in their presence I could sense their mute appeal. They were looking to me for some sort of explanation, but I had no voice. The ghostly character of my life was mirrored by their own increasingly spectral quality. Gradually, the distance between us became so great that all that remained for me was a feeling of their departure. In the depths of grief, things took on a faraway look, and there were moments in this season of the grieving process when I saw things turn away from me, divest themselves of the yoke of my life and the life shared with my wife amidst them. They were now going elsewhere, recovering, as it were, their own existence, liberated from the burden of our memories. Dust was the evidence of their departure, the breath and soul of things left behind, the dead dreams of things that once belonged to and participated in our life. I was a ghost living in an empty world.

Shipwreck: The Winter of Mourning

MOURNING IS the long, slow, cold winter of the grieving process, the moments when one stops being even a ghost and slips further away from the world. In this winter landscape of the soul, I longed for and welcomed oblivion, a state of nonexistence. I was beyond even any wish to die, beyond any thought of suicide. Every breath was a labor, and I hoped only that this work of breathing would cease of its own accord.

The winter of the grieving process, like the winter of the world, was a season when my soul fell into the rhythms of nature, when I felt myself becoming animal and plant, stone and mineral. Before a beech tree in the half-light of a cold November morning, I could feel the pulsing of my blood resonate with the slow tides of the tree's sap in its languorous pace. And beyond even this hesitant vitality, there were occasions when I slipped into a stony stillness, and felt kinship with the endurance of the stone weathering the lash of the sea. In this state, there was only a kind of unwillful patience, that kind of patience which marks the elemental world of nature and its forces.

Time had no meaning for me in these moments. One hour as noted by the clock could have been a second or an eternity. Wrapped within a cocoon of

grief, I was beyond the human world, in a place that was archaic and prehuman. Does it fit the phenomenology of the experience to describe these moments as transpersonal? I hesitate. They had more of a prepersonal or impersonal feel to them. And yet, there was some dumb sense of prelude in the midst of these moments, not a hope for some emergence of new life from the cocoon of sorrow, but only some vague feeling that all these moments had a horizon to them beyond which something else was waiting to happen. Is this how the feeble tuber is drawn toward the surface of the earth, as it slowly pushes its way through rock and stone before it cracks open the frosted ground of a dying winter? In this total surrender to the grieving process was there a kind of tropism of the soul at work? I do not know. I only know that in addition to this vague sense of prelude, there was in these moments also the felt sense of a kind of guardian keeping watch over this uncontrolled descent into the protohuman layers of the soul.

In the times in which we live, there is not much encouragement to endure the winter times of the soul in grief. We have no public rituals for it, and on a personal level there are so many voices which speak against it. The journey into the dark night of mourning takes time, and there is no guarantee that one will ever return. Better to let the dead bury the dead and to get on with one's life as quickly as possible. And yet, I believe, that when we hurry the soul out of its mourning, loss lingers to poison life. Without a surrender to the soul's ways of grief and mourning, the mind is forced to busy itself with the appearances of life. In addition, I believe that in halting prematurely the soul's process, we retard the dead on their journey. The dead need our grief and mourning so that they can be free of our need of them.

The winter season of mourning was for me the most difficult part of the grieving process, the moments when, whatever part of me remained conscious and aware, I was most afraid. Nothing in these moments was of much use to me, no advice, no well-intentioned injunctions, nothing except those who were able to be with me in the darkness and the silence as witnesses, often without words. It was this simple, raw kind of presence, the kind which sometimes an animal brings to you in your grief, which mattered. It was this presence of the witness, and it was grace. That I am here now writing this article, and that

I have written an account of this journey taken without maps, is, in the last resort, an act of grace. Not by my will, but by the grace of something other which cradled me between those archaic, prepersonal forces of nature and those transpersonal realms of the spirit, particularly evident in the season of melancholy, has the grieving process been endured.

Double Vision: The Season of Melancholy

AT THE end of the "Eighth Elegy," Rilke offers an image and raises a question. The image is of a man who, standing on the last hill which overlooks his valley, stops, and turns, and lingers. The question is who has made us in this fashion, so that no matter what we do, it seems that "we live our lives, forever taking leave" (1939, p. 71).

Forever taking leave, and the look which pauses for a moment, for just a little longer, before it turns away! When the winter of mourning abates, we see with different eyes. The look which lingers is a kind of double vision where each occasion, each moment, is witnessed as if for the last time and as if for the first. Everything is new and old, and in the season of melancholy I am attached to these archaic-new things with a kind of tenderness which acknowledges their presence in the moment, in this moment without any ability on my part to make it last, and with a kind of wonder and joy at their epiphany. In the winter of the soul in grief, I could never have imagined that I could or would love another because we die, that I could or would cherish another because of our mortality.

The season of melancholy is a moment, too, of a kind of natural grace, when the simplest events and occasions seem like a miracle. A spider's web framed in moonlight becomes a silver star, and without any rhyme or reason you know that this is true, that web and star are interconnected, belong together in some great chain of being. In this season of melancholy, there are these moments of quiet surrender when the mysteries and wonders that dwell in the heart of the ordinary show themselves. The morning song of the bird coincides with the dawning light, and in this moment you understand a secret of creation. When the bird sings, light comes into the world; when light comes into the world, the bird sings. You understand that the bird's song is the world's

light, the way in which light speaks. You grasp for a moment that light and song are one.

Something in all these moments betrays the divine character of the world. Something in them convinces you that a god's breath truly does animate the world, that it is spread throughout all creation, and that we are all in-spired by and embraced within its holy aroma. In moments like this the grieving process took on the feel of being a long journey toward home, a journey in which the figures of the Orphan and the Angel became companions along the way. Without knowing how I knew it, I did know in the season of melancholy that melancholy is the aftertaste of our angelic existence, or the foretaste of it, or both. And I knew through the figure of the Orphan that our personal sorrows are always a current in the deeper waters of a shared sorrow over the dim remembrance that we truly do come from elsewhere, and that we are pilgrims in search of home.

In the season of melancholy, then, I realized that grief is home-work, that love and its losses are the pathway home, that our wounds and our sorrows are what humanize us so thoroughly that we begin to see in ourselves and in each other our god-face, the face of god. The irony here is that it is the Orphan, the most homeless of all, who comes in the darkest hours to whisper that there is a way home. A kind of peace and joy settles on you in these moments, and the heart, this organ of courage, and of memory, and of love, expands. How could one ever expect that from grief and loss there can come an increase in our capacity to love, and a recognition that love is, indeed, the force which binds all of creation? Of course, one could never expect it. But it is, or can be, the fruit of grief endured.

❧ The Gift of the Moment ❧

RECENTLY, AFTER a talk which I gave about the soul in grief, I was asked to say one simple thing about the grieving process. In reply, I said that grief brings the gift of being able to stay in the moment. And yet, having been to that far country of grief, I mostly fail to receive this gift. In so many ways, my daily actions still consume me in such a way that I forget, and I miss the moment in its splendors. My heart contracts, and my eyes fail to see the small miracle in the spider's

web. I lose my capacity for that double vision and I no longer stop, and turn, and linger in the moment.

These failures, however, are also part of that journey home, because they deposit in the soul another instance of grief over loss. These small, daily failures linger, just below the threshold of awareness, but still close enough to remind me that once I did feel the slight brush of an Angel's wing on my cheek as the soft wind blew by.

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