

Empty Chairs and Empty Tables

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Introduction

Without a doubt, most of us can remember the best day and the worst day of our lives. The best day may well have been the day when a particular person appeared on the threshold of our hearts and walked into our yesterdays with the promise of love, with the intimacy of a lover or a spouse, a partner or a friend, or the familial intimacy of a parent or sister, brother, or son or daughter.

By the same token, the worst day may have been the day when death crossed that same threshold of our hearts and snatched away that person and the intimacy of that particular relationship that had once sustained us.

All Saints' Day. This is the season each year when we ceremonially remember the people who once touched our lives profoundly but then died and went on before us from a *dusty death*ⁱ to the *undiscovered country from whose bourne / No Traveler returns*.ⁱⁱ

The Empty Chair

This is the time—perhaps the *unbearable* time—when Marius' lament from *Les Misérables* runs grievously through our ponderous silent thoughts:

*There's a grief that can't be spoken;
There's a pain goes on and on.
Empty chairs at empty tables,
Now my friends are dead and gone.*

*Oh, my friends, my friends, forgive me
That I live and you are gone;
There's a grief that can't be spoken;
There's a pain goes on and on..*

*And some faces at the window,
And some shadows on the floor,
Empty chairs at empty tables
Where my friends will meet no more.ⁱⁱⁱ*

With your mind's eye, look around you at the empty chairs and empty tables. There sat our sister, and there our mother, and there—at the other end of the table—sat our father; and there our son that died before his time, and there our daughter who never reached maturity; there sat our wife who shared the essence of our life, or there our husband who was the kindest of men. How indelibly we recall the worst day of our life when time stopped, when the hands of the clock remained fixed in position, when the world halted in its orbit, when the cold stars became frozen in space, and the blood-red sun scorched our life. As we fixedly gaze around the empty room, at the empty chair, at the empty table, at the empty bed, *now o'er the one half-world nature seems dead; and wicked dreams abuse the curtained sleep*.^{iv} And at last we are forced to acknowledge vast, empty caverns in our hearts, where deep within us—far beyond our reach—reverberates echoes of past laughter and there loom before us remembrances of things past. *Death is (was) the sound of distant thunder at a picnic*.^v The thunder crashed and the lightning struck, and the picnic of life, of a vibrant relationship was over.

*There's a grief that can't be spoken, there's a pain goes on and on.
Now my friends (my dearest loved ones) are dead and gone.*

Remember the Dance

Madame Hortense told Zorba the Greek: “On my sixteenth birthday, my mother said to me, ‘You will dance through life. You will dance *all* through life.’”^{vi} The same could have been said about anyone of us, for I’m convinced that the

*The only music is time,
the only dance is love,^{vii}*

and each of us experiences in our lifetime a series of dances with other people, a *pas de deux*, if you will, a dance of two, an intricate dance of intimacy with lovers, spouses, parents, siblings, children, and friends—all of those relationships possessing a greater or lesser degree of intimacy, but intimacy all the same. Then when the dance is over and the relationship is severed by death, we wonder: *how shall the heart be reconciled to its feast of losses?*^{viii}

How? O gracious heaven, how shall we ever go on living with this loss?

*In my darkest night, when the moon was covered and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice directed me:
"live in the layers, not on the litter."^{ix}*

Live in the layers of faith, not on the litter of losses. Remember the dance!

On the matter of death and loss, Paul has a relevant word to the Thessalonians: *but we would not have you ignorant, beloved, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.*^x

For Paul there is a superior reality: those who have gone before us are alive. So, remember your dance of intimacy with them.

I know you know the name: Eli Wiesel, the Jewish writer who suffered in Nazi concentration camps. Henri Nouwen speaks of him in one of his books: *In The Town Beyond the Wall and A Beggar in Jerusalem, Eli Wiesel evokes in a masterful way the sustaining power of friendship (relationship). In both books it is not simply from a friend but from the memory of a friend that the sustaining power flows. In The Town Beyond the Wall it is Michael who lives through torture but avoids madness because Pedro, his absent friend, lives in his memory and so sustains him in the midst of his agony. And in A Beggar in Jerusalem it is David who is sustained in his struggles by the memory of his friend Katriel, killed during Israel's Six-Day War. This is a crucial theme in Wiesel's writings. He wants us to remember not only the wounds but also the great affectionate bonds of our life stories. Just as the memory of past wounds can prevent us from repeating the evil that wounded us, so also the memory of love can nurture us in our day-to-day struggles. . . Memory not only connects us with our past but also keeps us alive in*

the present. To remember is not simply to look back at past events; more importantly, it is to bring these events into the present and celebrate them here and now.

It is central to Paul's belief that God's love for his people should not be forgotten. It should remain with us in the present. When everything is dark, when we are surrounded by despairing voices, when we do not see any exits, then we can find salvation in a remembered love, a love which is not simply a wistful recollection of a bygone past but a living force which sustains us for the present. Through memory, love transcends the limits of time and offers hope at any moment of our love. ^{xi}

A personal note here: In 1995, at the age of 73, Jane—the oldest of the seven sister and brothers in our family—died in upstate New York. She was a classics scholar, a great joy to her students, a cosmopolitan spirit in the world, and a rich blessing to the other six of us. It was an indisputable source of devastation, and for a period of time I refused to be comforted. Ultimately a friend passed on Hamlet's words to me:

A ministering angel shall my sister be. ^{xii}

It was the turning point for me, for I finally grasped the reality that my recurring remembrance of her dance of intimacy with us transcended the limits of time and offered both hope and comfort:

*For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my states with kings. ^{xiii}*

Remember the dance.

Remember As Well: The Dance Goes On

The only music is time, the only dance is love. When time runs out, the music fades; but the dance goes on, for the only dance is love, and love never ends. ^{xiv}

Paul to the Thessalonians: *And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. (Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse as: we shall be walking on air, we shall be dancing on air, and there will be one great family reunion with the Master.)*

Kahlil Gibran confirms it:

*For what is it to die but to stand naked
in the wind and to melt into the sun?
And what is it to cease breathing, but to free the breath
from its restless tides, that it may rise and expand and seek
God unencumbered?*

*Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you
indeed sing.
And when you have reached the mountain top, then you
shall begin to climb.*

*And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you
truly dance.^{xv}*

How apropos then to exclaim and exalt with the Psalmist:

*Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing;
thou hast loosed my sackcloth
and girded me with gladness,
that my soul may praise thee and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to thee forever.^{xvi}*

For the dance goes on.

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ⁱ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V, v

ⁱⁱ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, i

ⁱⁱⁱ *Les Misérables*, Act II, "Empty Chairs at Empty Tables"

^{iv} Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, II, I, 49

^v W. H. Auden

^{vi} From *Zorba*, the Broadway Musical starring Anthony Quinn and Lila Kedrova; book by Joseph Stein, lyrics by Fred Ebb, music by John Kander, 1983

^{vii} Stanley Kunitz, *King of the River*, from *Passing Through: The Later Poems, New and Selected*, W.W. Norton Company, New York/London, 1995, p. 56.

^{viii} Stanley Kunitz, *The Layers*, from *Passing Through: The Later Poems, New and Selected*, W.W. Norton Company, New York/London, 1995, p. 107

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 108

^x I Thessalonians 4:13-14

^{xi} Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Living Reminder*, pp. 37-38

^{xii} Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, V, I, 263

^{xiii} Shakespeare, *Sonnet 30*, lines 13 and 14

^{xiv} I Corinthians 13:8

^{xv} Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet: On Death*

^{xvi} Psalm 30:11-12