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LESSONS IN Loss

As I move through my seventies, loss is becoming a dominant theme. I fear I am in danger of becoming emotionally numb. As more and more significant things happen to me, I am reacting less and less. In one year, two of my brothers have died, a twenty-five year old grandnephew committed suicide, and two close friends died—one a childhood friend and the other a mentor and friend since college days. Death accumulates. So does grief.

I do not know where all this grief is going. Sometimes I think I am healthily detached, full even, of peace if not equanimity. But then, without apparent cause, there is a surge of grief that leaves me limp. I am not a psychologist; I have never even taken a psychology course. I do not know how to analyze what is happening. I can only address it in terms that I understand.

Recently I watched the short film *Zen Noir*. The main character, a private investigator based on Garrison Keillor's *Guy Noir*, receives a call that there has been a sudden death at a local Buddhist monastery. He is asked to investigate it. He goes with gun in hand to interview the monks. When he interviews each monk by way of passionate and straightforward questions ("Let's keep this simple," he says, "did you murder him?"), they smile and offer him a cup of tea, or a slice of orange.

At the height of frustration, he complains to the abbot about the unwillingness of the community to cooperate in the murder investigation. The abbot, frustrated with the investigator, quizzes him: was there a wound, or a weapon, or any sign of poison? No. In fact, there is no evidence of foul play. The abbot tells him that the monk was not murdered, he simply died. That happens, he says. It is *Zen Noir* who is complicating this with his assumptions about murder. His frenzy and frustration are a direct result not of the facts, but of his mental constructs around the facts.

In the background of this investigation, the detective, who is haunted by visions of his young and beautiful wife, now deceased, begins a relationship with a woman who is making a long retreat at the monastery. She returns his affection. In and out of memories of his wife, the investigator

learns that the retreatant (Jane) is terminally ill and is at the monastery to deal with the fact of death. The investigator alternately resists and engages until he ultimately surrenders to love.

In the meantime, he seeks the counsel of the abbot, who gently leads him to the still point of acceptance. Death happens. All we have is what we have now, symbolized in the cup of tea and the orange. Relish the tea and the orange. Rejoice in the present. That is all you have.

And that is a lesson for loss. All we have is what we have now. But we do have that.

As I said, I do not know how to analyze what is happening to me because of all this loss, but I have learned over decades in religious life, with steady attention to the spiritual life, that God leads me. But God leads me incrementally. As all I have is what I have now, all I know is what I know now. What I know now as I listen to the quiet escalation of losses in my life is the necessity for three things: attention, simplicity and freedom.

I see the sparrow on my window sill but do not hear his song. I hear the wind in a blizzard but do not see the patterns of snow swirling in the moonlight above the cedar trees. I see the beach but not the fragile bird tracks in the sand, the ocean but not the dolphin rising from it in the sunlight. I smell the coming of rain, but do not hear the soft rhythm of it on the rooftop. I see the maple tree outside my window, but not the subtle nuances of a falling leaf. I am *there* but not wholly there. In all things I am only as present as I am aware, and I am only as aware as I am attentive.

And so it is with loss. Whatever I am experiencing now, I need to experience it, to be in it, and present to it. I need to pay attention to it. Evasion is not an option. At this stage of my life, loss is not a discrete incident, or an accumulation of incidents, measured by mathematical count. Loss is a permeating and permanent reality. Most importantly, it is a reality defined by love. I feel the loss in proportion to how much I have loved. My call as a whole person is to be in the loss *and* to savor the love that makes the feeling of loss possible. Only by being steeped in attentiveness can I move steadily toward equanimity, an end point for a life in God and a life of God in me.

In my attentiveness, I need to be present to what *is*, not to the constructs I am creating around what is. I need to acknowledge the clean and simple lines of loss. Members of my family and my friends have died. As the abbot tells Zen Noir, that happens. While it is true that personal histories have intersected in sometimes complex ways, and that those intersections are not always easy or clear cut, the matter of death is simple and the feeling of loss is real. That is what I need to acknowledge now. Death and thus loss have happened and I feel it. Pay attention to that, and, at the same time, let it be. When deaths accumulate, receive the accumulation of grief that comes with that. Receive it all and let it be. Do not resist it and do not complicate it. Be in it without being ruled by it. Be aware of what is happening around me and in me. Do not dress it up or down. It is what is, regardless of what my mental constructs want it to be. In this context, simplicity, I have learned, requires freedom.

Recently in returning from three days of business in Florida, I arrived at Baltimore-Washington International airport at five in the evening, and was in my car headed home within a half hour. After an icy rain, it was beginning to snow, a heavy and steady snow. At that time of the evening, in a high volume of traffic, the ride is usually forty-five minutes, an hour at the most. That night it took me eight hours to get home.

Most of that time was spent within three beltway exits, a span of approximately seven miles. The fastest we were able to go at any point was fifteen miles an hour. Most of the time we were sitting still, or skidding, or circumventing abandoned cars. I had with me all I needed for survival, a cheese snack I had purchased in the Miami airport, plenty of gas, a cell phone with frequent contact with the sisters with whom I live, and, for the long periods of waiting, an audio book. As often happens to people in critical situations, I was fully in the moment. I was attentive; I was free of fear or anger or projection. It was what it was. I was forced to pay attention, and graced enough to keep it simple.

When I arrived home at 1:30 in the morning, I could not get down the long driveway to our house and so I left my car in the parking lot of a neighboring

nursing home. As I walked from the nursing home to our house in ten inches of snow and without boots, I was aware of a sense of quiet exhilaration. The night was still, the sky and trees were magnificent, the snow was soft and light underfoot, and I was home.

As I reflect on that night, I wish that I could be that fully attentive to every moment, that I could receive what is happening, and most of all, that I could experience that quiet exhilaration and gratitude in the ordinary moments of my life. For in those moments, too, I am home.

All of this requires freedom, a habit of the heart. Freedom, like many habits, comes from practice. And the practice comes from desire and grace, both issuing from a heart disposed to God.

As I speak of freedom here, I mean the interior disposition that first of all (first in the order of occurrence) permits me to accept what is when it is clear that I cannot change it, to accept, for example, the loss in my life. The fact is, that at my age loss is not likely to lessen. Freedom, however, does not preclude sadness or grief. It does, however, preclude resistance or denial. At the farthest reaches of freedom I will not even desire life over death, having over not having. I will desire habitually only to be in the place where God leads me, whether that be the land of loss or the land of love. The distance between acceptance and this absolute purity of desire is probably a lifetime.

And yet I desire to be free, I desire to accept, I desire to let go of my own absolutes and ultimatums. I practice in small ways, not insisting, not *having* to have. Eventually, by dint of discipline and grace, I find that in many everyday things, I am free. Desire and grace, as well as the events of life, especially those events like death which are sources of deep anguish for me, empower me to let go more and more.

And thus I return to my beginning.



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