

# A Tolling of Bells

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I don't think I ever saw my father cry. He had a wonderful sense of humor. He often laughed so hard that tears ran down his cheeks. But I don't think I ever saw him cry from loss or sadness or from his own or another person's pain. It's not that he was callous. Let go of any images of steely masculinity. He clearly felt things deeply but I think when what he felt was pain or fear or shame he was afraid to let it show. It was as though the long years of restraint had dammed the river of his deep emotions for so long he feared a deadly flood should that old strong dam give way. This fact doesn't strike me as unusual among men of his generation or mine for that matter. But though it may not be unusual it is unfortunate and in some ways even dangerous.

I was a terror when I was thirteen. I was volatile and unhappy and I knew who to blame. It was the early sixties, the heyday of pop psychoanalysis. I was completely convinced that my self-doubt and depression was a direct result of my mother's failings as a person and a parent. I began to not so subtly suggest that we would all be happier if they would just divorce. Then Dad and I could live together, mom could go be unhappy somewhere else and everything would be ever so much better. My parents disagreed both with my analysis and with my plan. They loved each other. In the interest of self preservation and of peace they sent me off to boarding school where I began to work through my depression and self-doubt without the luxury of having mom close-by to blame.

One of the great benefits of growing up in a strong religious community is the presence of adults who are not your parents who care enough to be among those tough love mentors most of us need now and again. After three years on and off away at school I was still caught up in blaming all my problems on my mom. One day, having heard enough of my excuses, a fierce young youth advisor grabbed me by the shoulders, put his face uncomfortably close to mine and said "you won't even start to grow up until you begin to see your father's flaws."

He brought me up short. I was hurt. I was shocked. I was confused. My father was a saint, intelligent, funny, kind and long-suffering. I really had no idea what he was talking about. He's probably projecting I thought to myself. He and his father must have had a difficult relationship. At the time I simply wrote it off. But I never forgot what he said. It stayed with me like a snippet of poetry or a line from a song that floated through my consciousness occasionally reminding me of work I might someday have to do.

My father died when I was twenty-five. I left my parents home when I was seventeen and though we stayed in touch he and I never really took the time to know each other as adults. When he died I didn't cry. I loved him dearly but for some strange reason I couldn't grieve his death the way I wanted to, the way I knew I should. I've learned a great deal about grief since then.

One of the most mysterious and challenging aspects of the way grief works is this. When someone important to you you're your relationship with them continues. Our lives are so interwoven that significant relationships continue to grow and to change even after death.

My relationship with my mother, always tumultuous, often challenging in life, became, for me, when she died, an exercise not only in forgiveness but also in coming to recognize and celebrate her many gifts and in becoming deeply grateful for the many ways in which her gifts endow my life. Such work takes time but over years grief can flower into gratitude.

These days I'm so full of feeling I can hardly make it through. I stand up here to sing some hymn I've sung a thousand times before and suddenly I'm overcome (my people say "verklempt"), broken open, crying and I don't know why. My children say it's only that I'm getting old. Janne rolls her eyes and wonders if senility is setting in. Sometimes I'm embarrassed but deep inside I know that for a man like me every tear I shed is victory.

Grief knows no timetable. My father died thirty seven years ago and I'm still sifting through the gifts he left for me. Not every gift is beautiful or kind. Some gifts begin as warnings. My father drank too much. His drinking taught me to be careful. My father conspired with my sister and with me to circumvent my mother's feeling. He enlisted us in helping him to keep her volatility at bay. I know she felt manipulated and deceived. I know that she felt lied-to. Early in our marriage I fell into like patterns with Janne conspiring with the children to keep their mother calm and happy. It didn't work when my father did it. It didn't work for me. Thank God, good friends, a little therapy at the right time and Janne's fierce clarity brought our marriage back to center in good time. And to that list of factors that helped me change my behavior I have to add the lesson of what not to do I finally managed to learn from my father, long gone and still with me.

Among the great artists who died this past year is Nobel Prize winning poet Wislawa Szymborska. I think my father would have loved her poem "Slapstick." Among his many gifts was his ability not to take himself too seriously. Szymborska writes:

*If there are angels,  
I doubt they read  
our novels  
concerning thwarted hopes.*

*I'm afraid, alas,  
they never touch the poems  
that bear our grudges against the world.*

*The rantings and railings  
of our plays  
must drive them, I suspect  
to distraction.*

*Off-duty, between angelic—  
i.e., inhuman—occupations,  
they watch instead  
our slapstick  
from the age of silent film.*

*To our dirge wailers,  
garment renderers,  
and teeth gnashers,  
they prefer, I suppose,  
that poor devil  
who grabs the drowning man by his toupee  
or, starving, devours his own shoelaces  
with gusto.*

*From the waist up, starch and aspirations;  
below, a startled mouse  
runs down his trousers.  
I'm sure  
that's what they call real entertainment.*

*A crazy chase in circles  
ends up pursuing the pursuer.  
The light at the end of the tunnel  
turns out to be a tiger's eye.  
A hundred disasters  
mean a hundred comic somersaults  
turned over a hundred abysses.*

*If there are angels,  
they must, I hope  
find this convincing,  
this merriment dangling from terror,  
not even crying Save me Save me  
since all of this takes place in silence.*

*I can even imagine  
that they clap their wings  
and tears run from their eyes  
From laughter, if from nothing else.*

I said earlier that the inability to express feelings of deep grief though not unusual was unfortunate and in some ways even dangerous. The inability to let grief in, to let the feelings flow, to do the work, however long it takes can make us sick. Study after study has shown a direct relationship between illness, particularly gastro-intestinal illness and unresolved grief. So there are very personal immediate dangers of denial. I also have come to believe that unresolved grief, that old strong dam that holds back the flood of feeling, is one key element in our astounding and tragic ability to ignore the fact as Michelle Alexander writes in the introduction to her magnificent, troubling book, [The New Jim Crow](#): "A human rights nightmare is occurring on our watch."

She's referring to racialized mass incarceration and she's right. It is a nightmare, a nightmare from which all of us need to wake up. This latest manifestation of our Nations original wound is yet another spawn of the sin of slavery how can we not weep for our brothers and sisters in chains?

Why end such a personal sermon with such a harsh indictment? Friends we live where love and justice meet. Love's great lesson is that when we grieve for those we've loved and lost our hearts at best are broken open, the circle of compassion grows until we are no longer able to be numb to the pain and poverty and yes the prisons in which far too many of our neighbors yet languish. This too is grief work friends. We are not angels you and I. We can no longer suffer in silence. We have to learn to cry.

May it be so and amen.