

A Tolling of Bells

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January 6, 2008

“Joy and woe are woven fine,” wrote William Blake. He was pointing toward a kind of emotional interdependence between two essential experiences. One of the key indications of spiritual maturity is the ability to live with ambiguity. A spiritually mature person is able to experience joy and woe without needing to cling to either one.

Yet we do tend to try to stand against the tide. It’s no surprise that we try to hold on to the joy. It would seem unnatural not to. Joy, like love and laughter is among life’s finest gifts. It’s no wonder that we try to make it last. But I can’t help but wonder why anyone wants to hold on to the woe. Life is full of losses and regrets. Most all of us bear wounds which we believe contribute to our failings. And we do cling to the pain as if it provides a standing excuse when we don’t live up to our own aspirations. The pain of grief, the suffering which follows the loss of someone we’ve loved, someone who has loved us, is particularly complex. For in addition to the usual reasons we hold on to pain we also harbor the misguided notion that by holding on to grief we honor the memory of those who have died.

In the 1960’s, in studies conducted at the University of Chicago hospitals, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross found that unresolved grief was a factor in the lives of more than 60% of those hospitalized for gastro-intestinal diseases. The studies indicate that unresolved grief can literally make you sick. You may recall that Kubler-Ross in her book On

Death and Dying presented five stages people commonly experience as part of the grieving process. The five stages; shock, denial, anger, bargaining and acceptance have been set aside in recent years as too simplistic to be helpful but they do provide a framework to help us to reflect on how we grieve.

What's most important is to understand two things. First, that denying grief can make you sick both physically and emotionally and second, that there is no one right way to grieve. Each of us finds his or her way through the tangled thicket and out into the light. In the end though, grief doesn't go away. We don't get over it. In time the acute pain subsides but the truth is grief returns, sweeping over us like tides that ebb and come again. And so we weave each loss into the fabric of our lives and grow in grief and gratitude.

Grieving well can be a form of spiritual practice. Approaching grief as such leads inevitably to gratitude. The two are intricately connected. One of the best ways to grieve I know of is to ask, which of her gifts do I want to cultivate in my life? How did he best bless the world? How can I do likewise? Per Petterson in his jewel-like novel Out Stealing Horses offers us a man well into his sixties who, following the death of wife has moved into a broken-down cabin in the woods outside of Oslo. In one scene he's talking with Olav, the local car mechanic. Olav says,

“I've been up at your place twice myself. Looking round and wondering whether to put in an offer. There's plenty of room for car repairing there, but there was so much to be done on the house I thought better of it. I like working on cars, not houses. But maybe it's the other way round with you?” We both look at my hands. They don't

look like the hands of an artisan. “Not exactly,” I say. “I’m not much good at either, but given time I will put the house in order. I might need a spot of help now and again.”

What I do, which I’ve never let anyone know, is I close my eyes every time I have to do something apart from the daily chores everyone has, and then I picture how my father would have done it or how he actually did do it while I was watching him, and then I copy that until I fall into a proper rhythm, and the task reveals itself and grows visible, and that’s what I’ve done for so long as I can remember, as if the secret lies in how the body behaves toward the task at hand, in a certain balance when you start, like hitting the board in a long jump and the early calculation of how much you need, or how little, and the mechanism that is always there in every kind of job; first one thing and then the other, in a context that is buried in each piece of work, in fact as if what you are going to do already exists in its finished form, and what the body has to do when it starts to move is to draw aside a veil so it can all be read by the person observing. And the person observing is me, and the man I’m watching, his movements and skills, is a man of barely forty, as my father was when I saw him for the last time when I was fifteen, and he vanished from my life forever.

There is no English word for the essential quality Per Petterson is trying to describe. The poet scholar, Robert Graves in his Oxford Lectures on Poetry suggests that the Arabic word “baraka” may well do the job. Literally, the word means “lightning.” But it has a domestic and a spiritual dimension as well. It can refer to the way a wooden spoon or a cast iron pan when well-used by many

generations takes on a quality you can feel when you use it, you can feel it when you hold it in your hand. Musical instruments acquire “baraka” when they’re played and lose it when they’re left in their cases un-played, silent and abandoned. Graves writes that the closest English equivalent to *baraka* is the Elizabethan usage of the word, “virtue.” Plato might have understood it as the ideal form that is always embedded in the particular. For our purposes the baraka or the virtue of a person is the soul-stuff, the essence of our being, the point of intersection, the place in us which cannot die. The evidence is not based on some strained metaphysical belief. We know it is real because those who come after us live in large part by our example.

Look then for the essence. Look for the gifts. Let them take root in your life. Molly Ivins spoke her wry truth to the proud and the powerful. Let truth take root in your life. Kurt Vonnegut made huge dark stories come to life in ways that made us more open to change. Let openness take root in your life. Oscar Peterson found his way by his fierce discipline to a seemingly effortless grace. Let grace take root in your life. Arthur Schlesinger not only studied history he made it. Let that sense of agency take root in your life. Lady Bird Johnson was deeply dedicated to fostering beauty. Let beauty take root in your life. Carol Bly summoned the courage to try to tell the truth unvarnished even when it pointed toward our own unwitting complicity. Let that kind of courage take root in your life.

Take just a moment now. Remember someone you have loved and lost. Recall a particular way he or she blessed and served the world. Imagine how you might make that gift your own. Now let go of your grief. Now let

your woe become your joy. Now let your troubled heart finally find peace by practicing the beautiful brave art of gratitude.

May it be so and amen.