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WHEN LOSS AND GRIEF COME: WHAT WILL SUSTAIN US?

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For many years an Associate Professor at the Peace Studies Institute and the Department of Religion of Manhattan College he has also taught at Antioch College and Bard College.

A Social Psychologist by training he was acting Chairman and Chairman of the Department of Ethics of the three Ethical Culture Schools from 1951 to 1976; taught in the Encampment for Citizenship of the American Ethical Union and lectured in and co-Directed the Leaders Training Institute with Prof. Horace Friess and Dr. Howard Radest. He has been a Lecturer for the New York City Police Department on "Ethics and Violence" and addressed the Nursing Schools of Montefiore Hospital and New York Hospital.

Dr. Spetter studied at the Amsterdam City University in his native country, the Netherlands; was awarded a fellowship at the Leicester University, England, and received his Doctoral Degree from the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York. Founder of the Riverdale Mental Health Clinic in 1960, he serves both on its Board and its Professional Advisory Council.

He is a Clinical Member of the American Association for Family Therapy and serves as a Family Therapist. He is a member of the American Psychological Association and its Social Psychology and Personality Division and of the Academy of Religion and Mental Health.

He was co-author of Bio Ethics and Human Rights (Eds. Bandman, Little Brown, NY) and of *A Lively Connection* (Ed. Neuhaus, Ethica Press NY).

During World War II Dr. Spetter served in sectors of the Dutch and French Resistance. Arrested in 1943, he was condemned to death because of his work on behalf of Allied Intelligence, subsequently he was a prisoner of the Nazis at the Buchenwald and Auschwitz Concentration camps. After his liberation he served in the Dutch Security Branch of the G2 - G3 section of the U.S. Army, Seine HQ and later functioned as a witness for the U.S. Prosecution at the International War Criminal Trials in Nuremberg, Germany. (Gen. Telford Taylor) He was awarded the Resistance Cross by the Government of the Netherlands.

A working member of the War Control Center since its inception he was a participant in the White House Conference on Disarmament. A Member of the Board of the International Humanist and Ethical Union Dr. Spetter has represented the AEU since 1957 and has delivered keynote addresses at the Congresses of the IHEU in Oslo, Amsterdam, and Hanover. He is an Alternate Delegate for the IHEU at the United National Non-Governmental Organizations and a Member of Amnesty International and the World Council on Peace and Religion.

Recent addresses were the Brown Lecture at Manhattan College on: *The Holocaust and the Sanctity of Life* and at the Free University in Amsterdam on: *To Rescue the Human Spirit*.

Among Dr. Spetter's many publications are: *The Courage to Stand Alone* (NY 1960); *Man, the Reluctant Brother* (NY 1967); *Symbolism, Ritual and Man* (Rekenschap, Utrecht,

Holland, 1968); *De Dag Ligt Nog Voor Ons* (Stockum, The Hague, Holland 1969); *Bruder Wider Willen* (Barth Verlag, Munich, Germany 1969): *To Deny The Night* (NY 1970); *Humanists Say "Yes" to Life*. Humetisk Forb. Norge, (Oslo, 1980); *Building a World Community* (Ed. Kurtz Prometheus, Buffalo, NY 1990). *Sounds of the Heart* (Columbia Press, NY, 1992): *Coping With Our Darker Hours* (NYSEC, NY, 1994); *Humanism's Cutting Edge-Our Hidden Oneness* (NYSEC, NY, 1994); *Daring to Live* (At the 50th Anniversary of the end of World War II) (NYSEC, NY 1995).

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Sunday Meeting, January 25, 1998

HOW WE CARE

A man who had recently lost his wife told me that he felt that his grief would never end. It had been a very good second marriage for both of them and then the disaster struck of a rapidly spreading disease with much suffering toward the end. His devastation was without relief.

Loss and grief come to all of us. None of us escapes, but our question is, as this man put it: "*How do I get back into life?*" Traditional religions have created elaborate rituals for mourning which no doubt are helpful to many people.

In Humanist religion we also try to build a bridge from the time of acute suffering to the life that lies ahead. The issue to us is not just the rite of passage, but how to restore ourselves out of the pain and suffering that beset us at time of loss and death. How do we pick up the thread that feels so terribly broken? These are eternal and universal questions.

The man I just mentioned had to grow out of the feeling: "*Look what life has done to me*," of feeling deprived, to regaining an activation of his own ability to heal. A very hard process for many. Can the grief that follows our loss ever become a bridge?

The dignity of living is what I will try to explore with you. In this I am reaching for something almost inexpressible. I do not use the word "*dignity*" lightly.

In his book *Crossing to Safety* the author Wallace Stegner tells us about a man whose wife is struck by totally paralyzing polio. Speaking about their shared sorrow the man says that in the end the affliction and grief "*has at last taught me the alphabet of gratitude*." Here is a guidepost to that bridge of restoring life's hope notwithstanding suffering and grief: gratitude.

The realization of terminal illness can lead to withdrawal, resignation. As when death comes, to finally have to absorb its reality puts us to a grave test. Can we help ourselves and those we care for to reach beyond the loneliness and feeling torn up inside without end? Of course, at time of death, we each mourn in our own way. Some of us can only mourn much later, postponed mourning. In others grief stirs anger and rebellion against fate.

The poet Dylan Thomas wrote this as he helplessly grieved for his father's closeness to death:

> *Do not go gentle into the good night*
> *Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*
>
> *Good men, the last, wave by, crying how bright*
> *Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,*
> *Do not go gentle into that good night.*
> *And you, my father, there on that sad height,*
> *Curse, then bless me now with you fierce tears, I pray*
> *Do not go gentle into that good night,*
> *Rage, rage against the dying of the light . . .* [1]

1In Archibald MacLeish. *Poetry and Experience*. Houghton-Miflin. Boston, MA. 1961.

It is a son's agony "*to face with humility and submission his dying father*" as MacLeish wrote. But what do we know of another's pain? We can only identify so far.

I am thinking of another author, Donald Hall, who facing a carcinoma of the colon wrote "*...I wept for my old mother, for my children and grandchildren and for (his wife) Jane...I started writing again...with manic prolixity...I realized that I had always worked—the real thing—in defiance of death.*"[2]

But whether the rage or the burying in one's work, in the end we know that grave illness, unavoidable separation, grief, confronts us first with inner terrors. Only later, if we can do the labor of grieving when we can "*admit to our wound able*" self, we may save our soul by unconditional love[3] (The *New York Times* recently reported on a support group of parents mourning stillbirth or miscarriage).

It was the French author Victor Hugo, I believe, who said that only those who think they are far away from death, like to discuss dying. Words to that effect.

And so, while end-of-life decision making is a very important issue to consider, we must not forget that the raw realization of impending death can tear at our entire being.

This is why the reinforcement of the private dignity of the person contemplating such decision is of such crucial importance. Family and doctors can play a central role here. Not by holding out false hope but by continuing to approach the suffering man or woman in the fullness of their human dignity. That means in the fullness of their person and not

2In: Donald Hall. *Life Work*. Beacon Press, Boston, MA. 1995.
3In: Gillian Rose. *Love's Work.* Schocken, New York, NY. 1995.

just in terms of their body's decline.

There is a caring possible that includes what the suffering person is yet giving to us, by allowing us to enter into their situation. It is then that our entire attitude needs to reflect: "*You matter to me, not your illness only or your nearness to death*."

We can reflect, without pretense: "*I know you. I knew you well when you were well. I love you no less now—we still share the worth that is in you, my respect for you as yours for me. My love for you is not complicated. I will not wander from you even though we both know your body is breaking down. I will be with you in this terrible helplessness. You are not alone....*"

What matters is how we express our caring for the other, what wordless dialogue we continue, how we address his or her awareness of being close to the threshold of life.

We find in the Bible a chapter of a man who lived in about 200 BC. The Greeks called him Ecclesiastes, the Hebrews called him Koheleth, the teacher. Searching for meaning to life he ended up by saying: "*Vanity of vanities, all is vanity*." He did not want to pretend that God has a purpose for each human being. Therefore he concluded that everything moves in circles:

"*...a generation goes, a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. All streams run into the ocean. But the sea is not full...*"

But is such stoicism enough?

From a Humanist point of view grief and loss are

to be dealt within human terms. Our self-affirmation depends upon what takes place within ourselves. Life's agonies call for our emotional integrity, or what an earlier generation called our "*spiritual nature*". The heavens have no response for us. Even after pain and loss, life can still be lived in the here-and-now, with gratitude.

Life, with all its uncertainties, is an experiment for each one of us. But it also happens within a whole of which we are part and partner. By our caring, by our giving, we can yet affirm a love for life even in the midst of grief. There are contradictions to each of our lives which we probably will never solve. That need not prevent us from becoming as fully human as we can. As the ancient teaching put it: "*I put before you life and death, blessing and curse—and now chose life*." That is the human choice even when beset with pain and loss.

In our time many people have lost that sense of the interdependence of life's events. We have to rediscover that loss and grief are not hostile invaders, but ways in which the essence of existence is bound up. We can fear even to live with the unfulfilled—sad as that can be. Our bodies too react to the pain of loss. Regret, anger, guilt can trigger sleeplessness, loss of appetite. But such is the work of grief. What can make us ill is denial, or repression of grief.

To cry, to go through deeply felt separation are phases of the necessary responses in order to regain that balance of which the biblical teacher Koheleth spoke.

The poet May Sarton expressed that insight so well. The concept namely that are the resources of our inner life, the resources we have gathered over our years, that can help us deal with loss, grief, suffering and the searing pain of suddenly missing a beloved person.

Sarton wrote: *If the one certainty is suffering,*
and if the only absolute is doubt,
from these alone then belief must be wrung,
take anguish for companion and set out.

...if we dare to keep anguish companion,
we feel spring into our throats a living song,
out of the darkness set with clearer eyes,
for to be desperate is to discover strength.

...we die of comfort and by conflict live who
grow in this knowledge, till at length
we find it good, find it belief-enough
to be anguished-alive—and yet creating love...[4]

The poet, suffered a great deal herself. How true, that if we "*dare*" to accept anguish: and when we attempt to comprehend our life out of "*the darkness*" by continuing to "*create*" love, we can deal with the pit of isolation. Then we can use the reality of our suffering to build connections to others and thereby set a healing process in motion beyond our often frightened and fragmented selves.

We can feel as desperately lost as people in a forest, yet more often than not there is a trail out when we do not withhold ourselves from life. We have to find a different way of evaluating ourselves, of orienting ourselves. That is hard. There often is the fear that we cannot "*make it*" alone, there is a tendency to feel more helpless than we really are. But we can grieve without becoming the prisoner of our loss. To be utterly honest with ourselves is a crucial requirement for example it is usually not true that our past leaves only pleasant memories—the reality even of a loving relationship is always shot through with contradictions. Our only hope lies

4From: *Take Anguish for Companion* Ray Sarton. Collected Work. Norton, New York, NY 1974.

in reunion with life, because reunion with the one we loved and lost is impossible.

There is purpose to our grief and that purpose is to rebuild new bonds of affection, so that we can live and rebuild a different inner security for our future. Treasuring our memory of the one we lost can help us restructure our reality by, as it were, allowing empathy with ourselves.

With all our pretensions of mastery over nature, of our possessions or knowledge there is an inner acceptance necessary both for living and dying, because death reigns undisturbed in all of nature. And that is what we are part of. When we understand better the function of grief and its pain, it can change us. We are not the same person after we have absorbed the reality of the death of someone we loved so dearly. It is a very private process; mourning is a solitary labor. But there is much confusion possible.

Let me give an example of such confusion. During a recent hospital visit I saw a wife and her two grown children at the bedside of their very sick husband and father. Suddenly the chatter stopped; all one could hear was the wailing of a radio beside another bed. First the mother and then the children had tears in their eyes, as did the father. They silently shared grief and the anticipation of loss. At that moment someone came in, surveyed the scene and berated the family for "*upsetting*" the patient. They were herded into the waiting room, where a doctor appeared who suggested that the wife take a tranquilizer. The family looked guilty, the staff annoyed. To have shown real feelings had been too upsetting for the routine. There was resentment as if this family had betrayed some decorum, some neat order. Worse, they were left to wonder whether their emotion had in fact set the patient back.

Of course, one should not generalize. There are many devoted caring doctors and nurses. But I have found, again and again, that especially anxious ICU patients find it often impossible to grab hold of one of the doctors floating in and out of the room for a sustained serious discussion of their situation. Many physicians have not been adequately trained to care for the dying patient or his family. A study by the American Medical Association in 1994, found that only 5 of the major 126 medical schools had distinct, required, courses on dying, death, loss, grief, or relief of pain at the end of life.

We are still a death-denying civilization. Death is still far too often seen as a "*failure*." Therefore the stress of family grief is often dealt with less than careful attention. Thus suffering is added to the very impact of loss.

You may have seen an article about two weeks ago in the *New York Times* by a woman (Christina Walker Campi) about this very issue. The article was entitled "When Dying is as Hard as Birth" and it told about the author's experience of having been left alone with the decision how much morphine should be administered to her dying husband. To the immense impact of her loss was added the sense that—I quote her—"*I was left to drive the engine of death.*" Her plea was for an end of life care—team of doctors, social, workers and chaplains. We have far more ability to be healing agents than we assume when loss and grief come.

It requires the recognition of the interconnectedness of life and its unfolding, all of us are at times among those who need healing and among the healers. As our lives progress, we move back and forth in those roles. They can change hour by hour, day by day. The essential question is to be alert in the course of our lives, to be ready to give or to receive what is offered to us or what is required of us. We are each other's keepers.

RELIEF IN TIME

I recently read a very moving autobiography by a psychiatrist, Dr. Kay Redfield-Jamison. It is a very courageous book about her struggle of living with manic depression.[5]

In a chapter entitled "This Medicine, Love" she discusses how the ability to give and receive love gave her the impulse to live. But she had to go through years of bleak anguish. As most of us, she had thought that there is only so much pain one has to face and that then life would be kinder. But she found that this is self-delusion. That the challenges follow one after the other and that any balance has to be struggled for. She discovered, as she writes, that sometimes when one sees a light at the end of the tunnel, it may be the light of a train coming at you, and you'd better get out of the way![6]

Though she had her work, her life was often out of focus especially in the manic periods of her illness. Her marriage suffered greatly and she and her husband agreed to divorce as good friends. Both needed time to grow by themselves.

Kay Redfield felt very frail emotionally, even though treatment with lithium was an immense help. In that period of recuperation she met a man, a British physician, who by and by became a great love of hers. "*It made me believe again in how important a sense of life is to love, and love to life*, she wrote. Before long she felt it ethically necessary to inform her lover of her illness, especially since he wanted to have children and she feared the possibly genetic nature of her affliction. His response was simply: "*that is rotten luck*". But

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5*An Unquiet Mind*. Kay Redfield Jamison. Vintage-Random, New York, NY. 1996

6Quoted from Robert Lowell.

he loved her no less, and gave her further belief in whom she was, by, what the author calls, "*his many intuitive acts of kindnesses*."

She quotes from Robert Louis Stevenson who wrote: "*It is the history of our kindnesses that alone make this world tolerable.*"

Yet her foreboding that so much goodness will not last, alas, comes true. The light she had seen at the end of the tunnel was indeed a train moving inexorably toward her. The man she has so come to love suddenly died of a massive coronary. She suffered to the bottom of her soul. The reality almost too much to be grasped. For the disastrous rupture happened just when it had appeared that at last there had been a way for her out of the stress of her illness; when at last she had felt that life had returned to her.

Mind you, this is an autobiography, not fiction. She writes:

> "*...bit by bit I began to understand that the future I had assumed and the love and support I had come to depend upon, was gone....so many dreams lost. Yet grief, fortunately, is very different from depression: it is sad, it is awful, but it is not without hope.*"

Hope namely, that even an open wound sometimes can heal. There was the support from friends, there was the return to her work as a psychiatrist at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

In that terribly hard process of healing she received two letters of David which had been delayed by the mail and then—she writes—"*inevitably they stopped coming.*" The

shock of David's death may have gradually lessened over time. "*But missing him, never has*." She concludes: "*Time finally did bring some relief. But it took its own, and not so terribly sweet time, in doing so*."

Dr. Jamison is now remarried. Her present husband, also a physician, greatly encouraged her to write this book.

It is a book about loving, about loss and grief. How one person found ways to deal with that grieving, not by miraculous intervention from on high, but by the hard labor of living. A woman drawing upon the utter depths of her soul. A woman who learned to deal with her affliction as-well-as the raw edge of loss which, of course, spares no one.[7]

There are many layered realities to despair. Life usually takes us by surprise, the unexpected always breaks in upon us. But transitions are possibilities if we can see ourselves as complimentary men and woman, who have learned that those we love are "*not given to us for our enjoyment only*."[8]

Very often life forces us to compose our existence out of improvisations of courage. At such times our commitments can yet assist us to rebuild a sense of wholeness. But it is a strenuous process. Sorrow, loss and grief lie in the ground plan of human existence. There is no painless life. But so also lies there the exercise of courage in order to overcome isolation. Our pain must not tempt us to withhold ourselves from life.

It may appear a paradox. But the grief that follows loss can sometimes be a pathway to growth, to maturation of our

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7Kay Redfield Jamison. *An Unquiet Mind.*
8Felix Adler.

person. The reason is that loss and grief force us to come to terms in full truth with our relationships and our values. The very vulnerability can make us more honestly open with ourselves and with others. The make-belief falls away, it serves no purpose and a new opportunity may arise because we no longer deny or pretend real feelings. Sincere grief can be deep, but we do not have to dress up any longer whether a marriage, for example, was all that perfect. We can sincerely grieve and yet disengage ourselves from whatever we felt we had to camouflage. Those who refuse to come to some kind of closure—and to whom grieving becomes a way of life—miss out on that opportunity for such new perspective.

I have seen that many times in my work when trying to be of some help at the time of death. Some men and women who might be able to start a different life chapter, who in a sense could start their lives anew, have a tendency to feel disloyal to the husband or wife who died, if they try to find a new close relationship. They are then in fact stuck in a role they have chosen but which does not help them to rebuild a life on different terms. Their anxieties about the future may be so strong that they find it too hard to come to terms with their honest needs of the present.

Yet, it is that very struggle with the self that is an affirmation of their humanity. We are not gods—we are only people rocked by pain and loss, for such is the human fate. What matters is what we do with the experience whether we will allow ourselves to grow out of the very essence of that entire array of feelings and experiences.

That possibility for growth is exactly what a Humanist way

of life can assist us to discover. It is a way of emotional recuperation and hopefully of healing. At the least it is a faith worth holding on to.

The Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich spoke of this in his book *The Shaking of the Foundations,*[9] when he referred to his own quest for some harmony in his life. He wrote:

> *Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless (time of) life....It strikes us when year after year the longed for perfection of life does not appear....Sometimes at that very moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as if a voice were saying: 'You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you....Simply accept the fact that you are accepted....'*[10]

Loss and grief make us doubt ourselves. It is a time of upheaval and sadness. It is then that we need that very notion of compassion, of "*accepted*." There is in us a potent strength for recovery. That is what Dr. Jamison spoke of in what I quoted to you of her labor to rebuild her life.

Grieving is part of the process of healing. It is obviously true that our loss can be so complete that it feels as if all of our life is arrested. It requires a long process of recovery. Those who loved truly and deeply, will grieve deeply. Profound memories of a smile; a gesture, even of the smell of one's partner, may never entirely fade. But life will be resumed when the best another gave us is stirred in us for our own existence. That is the greatest tribute of a real

9Scribner. New York, NY. 1948.

10As quoted in Roy M. Oswald, in: *Running Through the Thistles*. Alban. Washington, D.C. 1997.

love. As Felix Adler put it, when we remain loyal to that best in the one we lost, "*They will remain silent but real presences in our households.*"[11]

Solid memories, like these, make healing possible. It is what the prophet Isaiah meant of what is required ethically "*to bind up the broken hearted*." That way lies consolation. But the "*binding up*" of the heart often requires us to come to terms with our inner defeats and all those hours when the veils of illusion have been lifted and we are confronted with descending into our hours of fear and darkness.

It is out of these components of grief and loss that we may hope to devise a roadmap for ourselves to rejoin gratitude for life—acceptance.

Allow me to conclude by mentioning the wise insight of a man I had the privilege of exchanging ideas with, the psychologist Abraham Maslow. He was no doubt one of America's most original thinkers. Not withstanding his success in reaching millions with his books he was also a very modest man.

He finished his last book just before he died, and sent a tape cassette to the publishers with his last instructions. It was almost as if he were saying to the world, "*This is what I had to tell you. My work is finished.*" He had had an earlier heart attack and used to speak about the time after that heart attack as "*pure gravy*." This is what he said in that final statement:

My attitude toward life has changed....One very important aspect of postmortem life is that everything gets doubly precious, gets piercingly important. You get

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11Felix Adler.

stabbed by things, by flowers, and by babies and by beautiful things—just the very act of living, of walking and breathing and eating and having friends over and chatting....If you are reconciled with death...then every single moment of every single day is transformed because the pervasive undercurrent, the fear of death is removed....I am living an end life where everything ought to be an end in itself, where I don't have to waste any time any more preparing for the future...so sometimes I get the feeling of my writing being a communication to my great-great-grandchildren who are not yet born. It is all a kind of at least a measure of expression of love for them, I am not leaving them money but affectionate notes, bits of counsel, lessons, that I have learned and that I hope will help them.

In his own, unique way, Maslow states here what the poet May Sarton said as well in the poem I quoted earlier. When we dare to live, knowing that anguish is always a companion, we can still build upon an unspoken hope. Inner liberation from grief is not something to conquer like a trophy of self-congratulation. It is a readiness to accept the gift of life again, by allowing even loss and grief to help us restore our awareness of being intertwined with human possibility for some good, some work, some love.

CLOSING WORDS

THE WAKING

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear by being dance from ear to ear.

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the tree, but who can tell us how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great nature has another thing to do
To you and me, so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.[12]

12Theodore Roethke. *Collected Poems*. Anchor, Long Island, NY. 1975.