

GOING BACK TO THE WRITING

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Funny the things that stay with you. A line from the play *Da*, I believe, in which a character remarks that after the death of your parents you move to the head of the queue. Then from another piece of literature someone observes that first your parents' friends die, then your parents, then your own friends, then. . .

"I don't like the feeling I get when I think I am going to die," my nine year old grandson recently told his mother. His words put me in mind of my own son, at age five, during our visit to Yad Vashem, the memorial in Jerusalem to the victims of the holocaust. Earlier in the day we had prepared him a bit for what he was about to see. Finally we stood outside the entrance and he stared at several huge photographs of scenes from the camps. This was his one utterance exactly: "But daddy, they were children."

I guess it is only natural that children should think of their own deaths. Why wouldn't they? I used to shiver in bed when, as a young boy, I thought of being no more, whatever that meant, or still means. I could never escape the feeling of being buried alive, trapped under the ground with everyone believing I was dead. And although I could get myself to imagine something that resembled a death of the body, lifeless limbs and a heart that stopped beating, I couldn't imagine not being able to be conscious. How did one ever get to the point of being conscious of being "not conscious?" So, in mock comfort, I would tell myself, it has to be like sleeping. But this never worked because my self reminded me that you dream while you sleep, and you know you will wake up at some point, either because it is morning or because you have to go to the bathroom. Eventually I must have concluded it was best not to think of any of

this stuff. A person has to train himself to turn off these thoughts otherwise all of life gets contaminated.

Obviously I still have these same thoughts, these same recollections of lines from plays, scenes from novels, and nights buried under the sheets, if not under the ground. I still have some of the same patterns of thinking about death, or frightening events, something neurologists would confirm. Research tell us that early experiences not only invade our memory, but the patterns of the experiences tend to become replicated throughout life as we seek to make sense of new experiences. It is not hard to determine, after all, why a child who was neglected by his parents would grow up perceiving the world to be an unfriendly place.

Obviously too, these recent thoughts have been stimulated by the illness of a close friend, a very close friend, and a very serious illness. Nothing about this is good, nothing is redemptive. I saw him a few months ago and he looked terrific. Slim, fit, good color. I wasn't even troubled by his description of a persistent shortness of breath. That could be a lot of things, I assured him, and myself. More distressing was the fact that his lungs were constantly filling up with fluid and periodically had to be drained. I can barely get myself to imagine how doctors push large draining needles through one's back and into the lungs. "But this draining's not often," I wondered aloud, and not as a question, denying, I am certain, the severity of such a symptom, and such a procedure. Often he said. Every couple of weeks in fact. "They go in through my back." We were having lunch together at a swanky cafe and I thought I might have to vomit.

Predictably we spoke about doctors, medical technology, the need to establish the precise diagnosis, and then proceed with the treatment. I told him if I were in his shoes I would think of alternative medical routes as well; how could they hurt. I offered him the name of a remarkable Chinese physician in my city. He was perfectly open to the idea. I would follow my own advice, but in truth if I were in his shoes I would be so frightened I don't know that I could have lunch with a friend and conduct myself as calmly and kindly as he was able to do. Funny, I suddenly had a memory of being in college and borrowing his shoes because none of mine looked sufficiently stylish.

We parted with a hug, me not making light of his physical distress, but probably saying something in a joking manner to keep him from knowing my concern. He knew my concern. It couldn't touch his own concern. "If this is some call for attention," I might have said, "it really is pathetic." Better this than to admit how terrified I had become as I prepared myself to board an airplane. Maybe I should stay and look out for him. We could tell our wives we had decided to room together again, as we had almost forty five years before. Maybe we could rediscover some of the old furniture, the soiled yellow arm chairs and oak veneer coffee table. Maybe good things would happen to him if we went months at a time never making our beds.

I couldn't stop thinking about him, he on one coast, me on the other. I borrowed his car once at college so I could take a girl out on a significant date. Sometime during that evening I opened the door and got sideswiped by an oncoming car that missed me by inches and bent the door back against the front of the car. I can't remember how that mess got resolved, but I thought about it

when I received a call from him one evening a few weeks after our luncheon. He was driving home with his wife after a lovely dinner; I heard her laughing in the background. A few times he broke away from our conversation to defend the route home he had selected. He apologized for all the giggling and attributed it to some expensive wine they had consumed. I never stopped thinking of him as a young man on a date with a gorgeous blond woman. So what if he was the grandfather of five.

Then, without warning, without any sense, moreover, of a reasonable transition, he told me of his illness and its severity. He was going to explore medical centers in New York and Minnesota, in addition to his own local medical facilities, in order to get a fuller picture of the disease, its causes, and treatment. His heart was compromised, he said, in the same tone, actually, in which he described his dinner and the remarkable wine. This was the reason for his lungs filling with fluid. He mentioned a word, amyloidosis, and said something about proteins and imperiled immune systems, permanent organ failure, and heart transplants. And still the mood in the car was light, airy. He concluded by saying he wanted me to know these things and that we would talk again when he got home. I might have said something utterly incongruous like, "Are you sure you should be driving? You sound a little high?" Often, a part of our running commentary in phone calls was mock parenting of one another: "You mother and I are very worried about you. Are you sure you're getting enough sleep? Are you flossing regularly?"

For an instant after I hung up, I grew selfish. This was hardly the way to pass on such news. You can't tell friends news like this, it's not right. Several

years before, another friend had called to say he had good news and bad. "I'll take the good news first," I said, at which point he told me a raunchy joke with numerous punch lines that had him laughing as hard as I was. "And the bad news?" I asked, still grinning over the joke. "I was just diagnosed with lung cancer. They say from the time you're diagnosed to the time of death is eleven months. That's on average."

Following the phone call from the coast, something shifted, some weight in my mind slid over to another side and it hasn't slid back, and I know it never will. I grew frightened. For him. I grew sad, very sad. For him. I wasn't having thoughts like, first your parents' friends die, then your parents, then your friends. . . . As best as I can make out, my thoughts have consistently been about him. Still, not that I dare blame anyone for the way they handle tragic news, the way he had announced his illness bordered on the bizarre: In a car driving home from a lovely meal? And with my other friend on the heels of a genuinely filthy story? Then again, why wouldn't somebody run for the cover of humor, vulgarity, or wine? Why wouldn't somebody find comfort in the surreal, or outright deny all matters of things for a moment they beg to extend as long as possible? Maybe that's why my one friend's joke seemingly went on forever. And for my other friend, perhaps unconsciously he devised a route home that would take especially long almost as though that one car ride symbolized a desire to prolong the only critical journey any of us ever take.

A few hours later his telephone call woke me out of a deep sleep, my coast being three hours ahead of his coast, which ought to mean, somehow, I am meant to get ill before him. He called to apologize for the manner in which he

had passed on his news. He knew the juxtaposition of the import of his message and the giddy atmosphere was unfair to me. Of course I told him there was no reason for him ever to apologize. I was grateful to him for thinking of me, but this was a moment of sensitivity beyond anyone's rightful expectation. This was the best, I thought, that human beings can be. But it was not because death, in some mystically ironic way, makes us more human, or puts us in touch with our humanity, although this all may be true. It was a deeply sensitive act of a deeply sensitive man who had exhibited just such acts on numerous occasions, some of which I will go to my grave never speaking about, just as he has kept secrets of mine that he will take to his grave. In fact, I just remembered that one of the last things he said from his car phone: "Don't worry, I'll take your secrets with me." It was the only reference that night to the terminal nature of his illness. Promises, secrets and graves, hardly child stuff. But he was the one person safekeeping all my secrets. I think we all have such a person who knows our deeds, and misdeeds. Maybe there is something to be said about confessions. And maybe in hearing and then offering confessions in exchange, we provide genuine absolution to one another.

The journey for him has been anything but easy; he has made several trips to the hospital, each time ending up in intensive care. His body seems to be rushing through its weakening like a self conscious child reading an essay to his class as quickly as possible merely to have the ordeal end soon. I have thought how utterly cruel that a body could retreat from life and viability as quickly as it often does, although one rarely thinks of one's own body as acting cruelly. Perhaps I am only thinking in those old patterns: If parents abandon, then why

not conceive of the body as abandoning its owner. Then again, perhaps the process isn't cruel at all, if it means a person suffers less. But why does it have to occur at all? He's not that old. Neither am I; our birthdays are eleven days apart. Another friend regularly reminds me that much of life is purely random. Why does one woman deliver a beautiful baby, and another miscarry in her seventh month? No philosopher has ever argued beyond the position that some of what occurs in individual souls is pure good fortune, or pure awful fortune, like what is occurring on the other coast.

I fear I am not one of those people who asks questions such as, why would a so-called loving God bring such destruction to a good person? In the same vein, I despise sayings like, God only gives us what He knows we can withstand. I literally turn away from discussions of whether a merciful God would cause tsunamis. Tectonic plates shifting under the ocean cause tsunamis. God doesn't cause cancer either, nor does he heal us from it. And surely God didn't come up with something like amyloidosis. I always smile to myself when I imagine asking God why this or why that? I hear him up there, Jewish to the core in my imagination, answering, "How come you only call me when you have troubles?" I imagine Him turning away from me. Funny that I should think of God as being fed up with me. I have no evidence that God is fed up with me. My mother, however, was often fed up with me. On the other hand, my mother dearly loved my friend. In fact, an interview he conducted with her as she was about to return to the concert stage resolved a momentous issue in my own life.

My mother had a brilliant career as a pianist, but at the top of her form and success, she gave it all up to resume the roles of wife and mother. She lived

desperately unhappy ever after, and in our family I, the youngest, assumed the role of miniature social worker arguing with her that she forever regretted forfeiting the most important element in her life. She denied every charge, insisting that she was doing precisely what she wanted to do, but I never bought it. "You regret it and you know it!" I would shout at her. "You think so?" she would shoot back. "Well, Mr. Know-it-all, you just don't know the whole story. You just don't know the whole story." I never got her to tell the story, but in that one extended interview with my friend who had contemplated making a documentary movie of my mother's return to the concert platform, she confessed to regretting the decision she had made more than forty years earlier. She never told *me*, but she told *him*.

Perhaps my premise in these pages is pure conceit after all. Perhaps it is mere folly to believe that in thinking about my friend I am not thinking of my own demise. But it isn't to death, precisely, that my mind runs. Of course I think about a time when I won't be able to converse with him anymore, or speak with him about matters I can speak to no other person. But I spend more time reflecting on the love and tenderness shown him by his wife and children, his brother, and his friends from all over the country. I see the fruits of his work in the love these people have for him, and in this collective heartbreak, this community of people whose lives are palpably altered by the sadness they now know. Even friends who say they haven't been in touch with him for years feel it. They are surrounding him, literally and metaphorically, a mystical immune system that has to be doing him some good, although the angry part of me mumbles, but just not good enough.

So much of life for me in these last years comes down to sadness. Wars, governmental policies, the manner in which people conduct their business, constantly cause me to say to myself: It all redounds to sadness. This one wants retribution, this one's suing for a billion dollars, this one wants a trillion dollars just to play baseball and dopey owners give in to him, this one believes that war is the only solution, and this one realizes once and for all he simply isn't leading the life he was meant to live. Or is it he lacks the courage to live the life he knows desperately he wishes to live. "I used to be a such a free spirit," I hear people say wistfully. A giddy couple, handsome, full of life, telephone me on their way home, their long way home, from a night on the town with deadly serious news. It just all redounds to sadness.

I read studies indicating that older people tend to become depressed. What's so surprising, the longer you live the more sadness you are bound to encounter. Who can read a newspaper and not feel sad. Rifle through nothing but the headlines and if you don't feel anxious and depressed there has to be something wrong with your central nervous system. And just when you think you have digested every war, hurricane, political uprising, terrorist attack, fire, car crash, mud slide, train wreck, abuse case, murder, robbery, and corporate fraud in every corner of the world, you turn the page and confront the faces of some of the people who have died in the last twenty four hours.

"Jake," the old joke goes, "have you seen the obits this morning?"

"Yeah, sure of course. Like every morning. What's the big deal?"

"Me, Jake. I'm the big deal. I'm in the obits. I'm in the obits."

"Yeah? So nu, Milt, where you calling from?"

Is this why I focus again and again on that call from the car, or my other friend who related that raunchy joke as prelude to his fateful announcement? Where was *he* calling from? Is this the ultimate magic of cell phones I have been trying to discover as I resist buying one? That you can call people literally from everywhere. From everywhere! I often joke that I can live with not ever seeing my father again, but what harm would be caused if I could just call him every so often?

I am waiting for word that it is all right to visit my friend. The members of his mystical immune system will tell me when I may travel across the country. And neurotic that I am, I think, and wouldn't you just know that that was the one plane that crashed in the entire year. Because of a stroke, he has lost his voice, though not his speech, so telephones are out. Thus, I am going through what everyone goes through: I am missing him, trying to put myself in his body and will him to good health, or at least feel what he is feeling. Is he frightened? And I am wondering if I will get a call today from the coast. The solution to all of this, of course, is to get rid myself of all telephones. No calls, no news, no intrusive solicitations, no everything redounding to sadness. "Tuesday, January, 11, you have three new messages. . . " The hell I do. *You* have three new messages. *You* answered the phone, there *your* messages. *You* deal with them!"

And therein the problem, isn't it. I can't find anyone to deal with this one for me. I can't shut it out, I can't compartmentalize it, I can't sneak away from the old patterns, all the redounding, and all the sadness. I can't call my father. Somehow, my friend appears to be dealing with it. But what choice do people have? Isn't that what they always say? What options have I got? Pretend that I

don't feel like I feel? Pretend the doctors are wrong? Pretend there's a cure? And that other expression, "You're only as old as you feel." Let me assure you, I tell the speakers of this phrase, one reaches a point where one feels old.

I suddenly realize I don't want to stop writing. I have come to imagine that if I keep writing, he keeps breathing. I think of that line one hears in a million movies where the woman leans over the man who has been shot. "Stay with me," she begs him. "Just stay with me. Keep breathing. Please don't leave. Please don't leave."

So I shall keep writing. Anything. Not necessarily as a dedication to my friend, but as pure magic, unadulterated juju. I write, you breathe; that's all I ask. It's just like it was during exam times when we put off our studying to the last minute and then suddenly had the sensation when now, this instant, is when we have to begin grinding and not stop until the finish line. Remember that? Finding the absolutely perfect chair in the library, the perfect method for taking notes, the perfect strategy for remembering more materials than any brain could possibly hold for more than half a second. Then at midnight we get to go for something to eat: Elsie's, for roast beef with mayo on a bulky and a shake. Well, it's exam time and we're pulling an all nighter. Without the uppers. The term papers are going to get written, which means we're going to write and write until these typewriter ribbons become threadbare and the letters on the keys begin to blur. You remember that sound of the little warning bell and the carriage returning when you slam it back into position because you're so immersed in what you're writing you can barely take a breath?

I remember what I used to think during those days, and I know he thought the same thing: I just pray this paper's going to make it. I just pray this is going to get in on time. I just pray I studied the right things. Now I am thinking, is it possible that much more than wishfulness is in my thoughts, much more than some desire to keep the sadness from redounding? If in fact I am writing to keep him alive, and bright, if I'm writing so that he will pass the test, and the course, then my writing for him is praying for him. But I'm not writing a prayer; the act of writing is the prayer.

I think, for some reason, of that notion about people needing closure. I have no idea what that word means, and neither does anyone else. It's just some simplified vision created by the media for dealing with the inexplicable. Political preferences and opinions too complicated? Simple: You divide the nation into red states and blue states. Big theological issues where we all know at some level there are never answers, just questions, no big deal: Hunt for closure.

My friend on the other coast is gravely ill, yet there remains something redemptive here, not in my friend's illness, for that is only about sadness. Of course I know I will follow him at some point, but something in my love for him, and admiration of him, and especially the way he has conducted himself through this wretched ordeal, has kept me from thinking all that much about my own demise. How is it, I keep wondering, that he can be so gutsy, even selfless, during such an experience? Surely he once lay under the covers and thought about being no more. Surely he could have spoken the words of my grandson to his own mother: "I don't like the feeling I get when I think I am going to die." When the time comes, will my own family and friends surround me? Will they

too create that mystical immune system? And will they utter words like, "He did the best he could?"

But the writing, okay, the praying has caused me to recognize that I am no longer saying the same things at night under the sheets. I am not so much worrying about death, and seeking to conjure feelings of being no more. I am struggling with something more difficult: namely, the existence of a divinity. And it appears that this matter is far more intriguing, and far more perplexing, and, strangely, far more soluble, than what it might feel like to not feel. Not only that, something tells me that even if these ruminations redound to sadness, it will be a different form of sadness, a reasonable, proper form of sadness. It will be a sadness that I will be able to sustain even when I find myself missing my friend with an especial intensity. Might he be thinking these same things? Would one dare ask him? And finally, would one admit to finding less unacceptable that phrase, God gives you what He knows you can withstand? Does it perhaps mean that prayer makes some of this manageable, or do I deceive myself? Am I deceiving myself in believing that the sadness redounding is somehow lighter?

It is exam week again. I need more time, He needs more time, just a bit more and I think we can be prepared. Just a bit more time and we can make sense of all the notes, the entire course for that matter. We can master the readings and prepare ourselves for the true and false part of the exam, as well as the one long essay. Watch this, we used to joke, the assignment's going to be: "Define the cosmos and give two examples."

The expression is apt: It is a new time, a new generation. Imagine, a website devoted to my friend's illness. In the 21st century we hardly blink at the

instruction: "Google amyloidosis." Everyday I visit the site and view photos of my friend and read updates on his condition. One day the news is promising, the next day the situation seems dire. I read messages from friends along with explanations of his various medical conditions. His son and brother have taken responsibility for uploading the information.

On my first visit to the site I see a beautiful portrait of the man, handsome, sexy. A few days later this photo has been replaced with a shot of him taken from behind as he surveys his beloved California coastline and the lagoon on which his house is located. He wears a ski hat and his shoulders are covered in a colorful blanket. One reads that he is actually sitting in a wheel chair. I can only imagine his dog lying next to him on the deck. I cannot imagine his not being able to speak, nor having the strength to climb the stairs of his home on the bluff above the lagoon.

Several days later another photo. This one has been taken, presumably, from the base of the bluff so that one sees an enormous stretch of beach, then the ocean, and a sky that looks to go on forever. On the shoreline, way in the distance, one barely discerns the figure of a man walking, his dog following by a few steps. It is a beautiful portrait, one that actually uplifts me. This inspiring ocean setting clearly is his home, a long way from the south side of Chicago where he grew up. I find myself nodding as I scroll down to where the writing commences. Yesterday, quietly, and peacefully, with his family around him, my friend has passed away.

The juxtaposition of the message and the photograph take me by surprise; it is precisely what I experienced when he himself had juxtaposed the joyous

frolicking in the car with the news of his serious diagnosis. I scroll back up to the photograph. For an instant, I think I see him move. The dog appears to have moved as well. Website creators could make that happen; it's an easy trick. But there is only stillness. I try pushing the photo as far to the left as possible but quickly reach the border of the screen. Why, I ask myself, did I wish to see more of the shoreline? The photograph, in fact, is magnificent, the placement of the two figures perfect. But I know what I am hunting for. I want to see if the representation is of just the two of them, or whether there might be a queue.

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