

After a Death...Interpreting the Silence
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Several years ago, after the death of his wife he loved so deeply, a colleague of mine said he felt as though all the lights of the world had gone out. The sense of sudden dark emptiness after the death of someone we love, cherish, and admire is unique among all human experiences. It reduces us to silence. The silence is sacred, a testimony that something of incomparable and unsurpassable importance, that something terribly definitive, has happened to one of our very own, and to us.

In an instinctive, not fully conscious way, we are chary of disturbing that silence, the only fitting response—our failing words seem to say—to an event and a loss we cannot fully fathom or comprehend. We dare break that silence with short, soft words of comfort, signals that we are near to those who grieve and mourn, signals of human presence in a dark absence, signals to others that they are not alone. Dare we do more?

We do. We *sympathize*, and it is not difficult to share the sorrow of others when it is also our own, when we also hear the silence that follows the stilling of a loved one's voice, and song, and laughter. We *grieve*, and there is an uncontrollable spontaneity to the periodic waves of heavy sadness that arise within and roll across the mind and the heart. We *mourn*, and making the low continuous sounds of a dove—one meaning of this word—is akin to the spontaneous, immediate, early tones of human lament.

Our cries in the first moments and days after a loved one's death often carry the thin plaintive notes of deep, organic, biological, even animal, wound. Indeed, philosophies that separate the mind from the body do not arise out of data on the experience of grief. Death tears someone away from us, and the tear, in those first moments, seems to be felt more in the body than in the mind. Later, only somewhat later, after a measure of equilibrium had been restored, are we ready for the slow, ordered rhythms of the dirge and the liturgy of burial.

Then, after the immediacy of the first overwhelming moment of grief, after our bodies and minds have skirled their first bars of lament, we begin to hear the silence more acutely, and we seek its meaning, the meaning of the vast human loss it expresses. Human beings are interpreters, hunters, and gatherers of meaning. But how can we interpret the loss of death and the silence it leaves behind? Can the silence after death have different meaning? Or, perhaps, simply no meaning at all?

The meaning of the life that is lost and gone measures and determines the meaning of the silence it leaves behind. But the meaning of that life took form slowly over time, and across hundreds of relationships and thousand of words and deeds. Of course, most of these were everyday events—routine, repeated, fleeting, easily forgotten, unmarked and lost—because tomorrow is pregnant with promise and wins our allegiance over yesterday. But now, in the silence after a death, we have no tomorrow with the one we have lost. And so we turn to the past and we cull those privileged moments, words, and deeds that are marked, and that will be remembered always.

This is the recollective and reconstructive phase of mourning, for, as the Sanskrit root of this word suggests, to mourn is to be mindful of, to remember. The remembering act of mourning, though, is more than a fleeting recall of past events. We seek to reestablish the *membership*, the network of relationships that were, and we affirm, still are the personal substance of our loved one's unwritten biography. She is gone, but we are still here as her mother, father, brother, sister, husband, lover, son, daughter, uncle, aunt, cousin, friend, or colleague. This recollective and reconstructive interpretation of the silence is an integration of all those specially marker relationships and memories that deliver the meaning of a life lost. Every mourner, surely, has personal and private moments of sorrow, and memories that are unique and cannot be shared. But the reconstructive work of mourning, this eminently human undertaking, cannot be rightly done by an individual of loneliness. We are meant to do this work of mourning together, all of us who are "remembered" to each other because we are "membered" still to the one whom we have lost.

The language we use to interpret the silence created by death is a language of verbs conjugated, not only in the passive voice of memory, but also in the future tense and optative mood of hope. Rarely do we rest content with the present tense that recognizes the brute fact of death. People do die with dreams shapes in acts of hope, dreams that intimate possibilities beyond the planetary routine of organic decline and death. This language is poetry in its deepest sense, the making and creating of visions that surpass what we can simply observe, and that match a reality we glimpse only in hope.

Hope is a primordial, eminently human act, an original way of interpreting the silence following upon the death of someone we know and cherish. That silence, though, is not total. It vibrates, at first faintly, then later more plangently, with both of G. M. Hopkins' echoes: The Leaden Echo – despair, despair – and the Golden Echo – yonder, yonder. It is almost easier to atune one's ear to the Leaden Echo, so in harmony it appears to be with the obvious brute fact of death and its dark empty absence. The Golden Echo disturbs, provokes, demands movement, and goads mourners to stand up and, with heads high, to look far ahead. That echo insistently challenges: Do you dare to hope?

The work of mourning, continuing through acts of remembrance, reaches its completion in an act of hope. This is an audacious act. It exacts the boldness and courage to live with, and to affirm, what seemingly contradicts reality, what seems unbelievable, and what, yet, could be true. Hope needs paradox for its interpretation of the silence after death. Within this vision of the silence after death. Within this vision of things, we start life as a candle, all bound up in the wax of body, time, and opportunity. At death, when the wax has burned down to nothing, the flame, the flame and nothing less, remains. It illuminates the absence, and within that light one can bear to listen to the silence. When our mourning has matured and we listen to that silence, together in the circle of a sunlit absence, we may begin to hear the hymn to joy. It needs no interpretation.