1 BEYOND HERE THERE BE DRAGONS

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Illustrated by Ernest Luther

There is a Chinese parable about a farmer who owned a horse that he used to help him plow his fields. One day, the horse ran away. The farmer's neighbors gathered to sympathize with him over his bad luck. The farmer responded to their concerns by saying, "Maybe bad, maybe good, I don't know." The next day, the horse returned bringing with it a herd of wild horses. His neighbors gathered to celebrate his good fortune. His reply to them was, "Maybe good, maybe bad, I don't know." When the farmer's son was attempting to tame one of the wild horses, he fell off and broke his leg. Everyone thought this was very

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bad. The farmer said, "Who's to say? It may be bad, it may be good, I don't know." The next day, the army marched into the village and conscripted every able-bodied young man into service—all except the farmer's son with the broken leg. Now, was that good or bad? Who can say?

I am inclined to agree with the Chinese farmer's perspective. I'm not a silver-lining guy, as in, "Every cloud must have its silver lining." I don't think something good has to come out of every situation. Sometimes a tragedy is simply a tragedy, and the negatives may far outweigh any meaningful or identifiable gain. The people who come to grief support groups relay stories of fumbled attempts at consolation like, "God never gives us more than we can handle," or, "Look on the bright side, she isn't suffering anymore." While well intentioned and possibly even true, these are not the kinds of things you want to say to someone whose loved one has just been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness or has just died from a sudden accident or a long, drawn-out disease.

William Bridges, an author and expert in the field of life transitions, recalled an exchange he had with his wife, Mondi, as she struggled with a diagnosis of breast cancer and the subsequent after-effects of surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy. "'This positive-thinking stuff is crap,' she said to me one evening as I sat on her hospital bed. 'But then, so is negative thinking. They both cover up reality, which is that we just don't know what is going to happen. That's the reality we have to live with. But it is easy to see why people take refuge in optimism or pessimism. They both give you an answer. But the truth is that we just don't know. What a hard truth that is!'"

One of the biggest challenges of any loss or life transition is learning how to deal with this hard truth. Families living with a chronic or life-threatening illness have to live with this reality, and so do those who have experienced the death of a loved one. Across our lifespan, we can also include the uncertainty surrounding moving to a new place, graduating from high school or college, getting married or starting a family, and starting or losing a job. In fact, none of us can say with any certainty what tomorrow will bring.

When I think about life transitions, an anthropologist named Arnold van Gennep comes to my mind. He studied this issue, and in 1909 he published a helpful book entitled *The Rites of Passage*. In it, he used the term "liminal" (a word that suggests crossing over a threshold) to describe when the circumstances of life cast a person into a nebulous, in-between zone, when one phase of life has ended and the next phase has yet to begin. Van Gennep observed that although rites of passage may differ across cultures, most seem to involve three movements.

The first movement is what he calls the pre-liminal stage. It involves *rituals of separation* that mark the end of one of the phases of life. I think the clearest examples of rituals of separation are those that mark the end of childhood. In many tribal societies, at an appointed

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time of the year, the elders physically separate adolescent girls and boys from their families and the community to instruct them in the ways of adulthood. As harsh as it sounds, adolescent boys, in particular, would sometimes be cast out in the wilderness alone in order to demonstrate they are old enough to survive on their own and take on the responsibilities of adulthood.

The second movement—the liminal stage—involves *rituals of transition*. Having crossed the threshold between everything that was familiar and uncharted territory, sometimes called the liminal zone, the person in transition has lost their identity and status within the community; they no longer belong. In transition, they are exposed and vulnerable to all sorts of dangers. They may have been given a blessing or amulet for protection, and possibly a weapon to aid their survival. They may have to accomplish a task, engage in purifying rituals, or acquire secret wisdom before they can return.

The third movement—the post-liminal stage—involves *rituals of reincorporation* that celebrate the successful completion of a challenge or a safe return to the community. These final rituals might include a public sharing of what happened on their epic journey, and the giving of something that signifies their new status in the community.

In contemporary America, funeral rites and memorial services (now often rebranded as "Celebrations of Life") focus primarily on the person who died. Beyond the meal that follows the burial or the scattering of ashes, there is a recognizable absence of mourning rituals designed specifically to support the loved ones left behind. More recently, another anthropologist, Ronald Grimes, suggested, "Our definition of death rites must be large enough to include not only ritualized preparations for death and rites performed near the time of death but also ritual activities that follow long after the occasion of a person's death."

Historically, those "ritual activities that follow long after death," would have been part of a formal mourning period that typically lasted a year or more. However, in Western cultures, attitudes toward death, dying, and bereavement began to shift after World War I, and many mourning customs started to diminish or disappeared entirely.

Today, mourners are advised that "the best thing to do is keep busy," and thereby avoid those distressing and unpredictable waves of emotions. After a three-day bereavement leave, we are all expected to get right back to work. Supervisors and coworkers will offer obligatory expressions of sympathy for the loss, but the bereaved are expected to maintain their composure in public and quickly return to functioning at pre-loss levels.

Most people in our culture simply do not know what to say; either they mumble through a few awkward words of consolation or offer you some tired old cliché. Others are afraid they might say the wrong thing, so they choose to error on the side of saying nothing at all!

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Well-meaning friends and neighbors promise their ongoing support: “If you need anything, just call …” But, they quickly return to their own concerns and forget that grief continues for a protracted period of time.

In the absence of rituals and people to support the bereaved through this difficult life transition, they are (like refugees) set adrift upon the troubled waters of grief.

To complicate matters even more, there is nothing telling us how long grief and the mourning period should last. If it were officially over in six, twelve, or eighteen months, then there might be some sort of ritual of reincorporation at the end, a ceremonial announcement that the mourning period is officially over and the bereaved person has returned to share their insights and stories of survival.

Today, grief educators are reluctant to talk about loss in terms of universal stages or time frames, and instead, they emphasize that the bereaved should be allowed to define their own personal grief journey. The unintended consequence of this means that they are often left with few culturally defined indicators that help to facilitate movement through the life transition that inevitably follows a loss.

The people who come to see me for grief counseling say they feel lost and just don’t know where to turn. The world as they know it has come to an end. Because society offers no clear direction, they come seeking a map of sorts that will guide them through their grief. I know some are hoping that I will give them a shortcut to help them “get through this as quickly as possible!”

The truth is that there aren’t any shortcuts, nor is there one right way to go about it. The truth, even for seasoned travelers, is that these waters of grief are, for each of us, uncharted territory. The hard truth, as Mondi Bridges suggests, is we don’t know what the future looks like or how long the journey is going to take. We all have to chart our own way, and every possible course we might choose will lead to a different future.

I fear that these truths I’ve spoken so far may lead the fainthearted to give up, abandon ship, or worse, refuse to ever leave the safety of the harbor. For the majority, for good or ill, there is no choice; that ship has set sail a long time ago. I’ve heard that mapmakers of old used to write at the edges of maps, “Beyond here there be dragons,” leaving the reluctant mariner with the all-important question, “Dragons, perhaps, but are they friendly?”

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