

Sacred Presence in the Losses of Our Lives

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One Art

by Elizabeth Bishop

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

--Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

" ... perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us."

Fear of the Inexplicable

Rainer Maria Rilke

Excerpt from *"The Losses of Our Lives, Finding Sacred Gifts"*

Nancy Copeland-Payton (published Sep 2009)

"Then I see it. A mountain maple shrugs and a reddish gold leaf-fall cascades down the mountain. The tree sheds her stunning colors against the green darkness of pine and fir. Whoever knew letting go could be so breathtaking?

Yet there's also loneliness in a brilliant leaf tinged brown, quietly spiraling downward. There's a tugging at my heart of something lost. The bouquet of clustered maple trunks bare themselves, turning towards winter's great night and six months of snowy white. Stunned by such melancholy beauty, I'm overwhelmed by loss.

How many moments of our daily lives are marked by such instances of loss? A child awakens ill and in your concern for the child, you cancel a busy work day of appointments. Your spouse loses a job. A trusted friend moves across country. Achy muscles and splitting head announce you've caught the "put you flat on your back," week-long flu that's going around. You see more and more grey hair in the mirror. A sister begins chemotherapy. Unexpected repairs deplete your saved cash. Your faith seems dry and brittle, no longer a vital source of sustenance. An aging parent is diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

Autumn's sense of loss visits us often, causing once vibrant leaves of our expectations and plans to turn brown and die. Life's constantly changing seasons invite us to shed, or perhaps wrench us from our illusion of control and human-made security.

While mountain maple leaves do indeed die, the tree itself continues to live. Nature teaches us creation's rhythms where the continuing cycle of explosive spring growth births summer abundance, which inexorably turns into fall's letting go and winter's fallow time. Every year, we experience this cycle. Every year we are beckoned to walk its rhythm. And every day, we are invited to experience these same cycles in the changing circumstances of daily living.

My mountain maple is large for its species. The base of its many trunks spreads outward to cover ten feet of forest floor. Each year the trunks grow a little bigger around, a little taller. And each year, tiny new saplings sprout from the base. I welcome the maple's spring and summer leafiness which provides indispensable food for rapid growth. But what about the maple's glorious autumnal shrug which sheds brilliant leaves upon the forest floor? And what about its naked barrenness, stark branches silhouetted against grey sky throughout the apparent dead of winter? Are not these seasons also essential for growth?

We resist seeing the crucial role of autumn loss and winters' seeming death in our growth. The gift of these seasons is not as obvious or as welcome as the spring and summer times of our lives which burst with possibility and fruitfulness. And yet, the wisdom of creation teaches us a longer view that spans seasonal changes to receive not only spring and summers' exuberance, but also fall's letting go and winter's barrenness as indispensable for our growth."

A Few Helpful Books

"All Our Losses, All Our Grievs

Mitchell & Anderson, Westminster, John Knox Press (1983)

"A Year to Love: How to Live This Year as if it Were Your Last"

Stephen Levine (1997)

"Losses in Later Life"

Scott Sullender, The Haworth Pastoral Press (1999)

"Meaning Reconstruction & The Experience of Loss

Robert Neimeyer, Ed., American Psychological Association (2001)

"Necessary Losses"

Judith Viorst, The Free Press (1986)

"The Losses of Our Lives, Finding Sacred Gifts

Nancy Copeland-Payton, Skylight Paths Publishing (Sept 2009)

"Winter Grace"

Kathleen Fischer, Upper Room Books (1998)