

The Last Word on Sorrow, by A C Grayling

'Sorrow makes us all children again.'

Ralph Waldo Emerson

When people die in an accident, suddenly and unexpectedly, with a terrible arbitrariness that seems unjust and cruel beyond description, there seem to be very few consolations for those left behind. That is how it must seem to those bereaved by the Paddington rail disaster last week. In such cases there is no preparation, as with someone long ill; no sense of the quiet inevitability of great age; there is no closure, no proper leave-taking. Too much is left unfinished and unsaid. Even when soldiers go to war, the possibility of their never returning gives a significance to the farewells on the day they left, and that fact brings comfort later. What intensifies the tragedy of sudden accidental death is that none of these helps is available.

But there are sources of consolation nevertheless. One is that the dead do not wish the living to linger in sorrow. Rather, they wish them to grasp the truth expressed in Jean Giraudoux's lines telling us that comfort and an eventual return to happiness are always promised in grief: 'Sadness flies on the wings of the morning; out of the heart of darkness comes the light.' To demonstrate this, consider the following. Think of those you care about; imagine them mourning when you die; and ask yourself how much sorrow you would wish them to bear. The answer would surely be: neither too much, nor for too long. You would wish them to come to terms with loss, and thereafter to remember the best of the past with joy; and you would wish them to continue life hopefully, which is the natural sentiment of the human condition. If that is what we wish for those we will leave behind us when we die, then that is what we must believe would be desired by those who have already died. In that way we do justice to a conception of what their best and kindest wishes for us would be, and thereby begin to restore the balance that is upset by this most poignant of life's sorrows.

Another consolation is to be found in the fact that a tragedy like Paddington is shared. Sorrow is always easier to bear, even if only a little bit so, in fellowship; in his *Agamemnon*, Seneca wrote, 'Grief wounds more deeply in solitude; tears are less bitter when mingled with others' tears.' Even if sharing sorrow does not lessen it, after a time it becomes a help in the process of recovery.

For someone in the midst of sorrow hope seems far away; as Petrarch says, 'Hope is incredible to the prisoner of grief'. But ordinary human nature is full of surprisingly deep courage, not least that which makes hope and a return to happiness possible. Sorrow is said to be one of the profoundest teachers of wisdom – 'Grief should be the instructor of the wise,' said Byron, 'sorrow is knowledge' – and one thing it teaches is its own role in the texture of things. No personal history is free from sorrow; that is a fact intrinsic to the social nature of our kind. To be related to others, whether through family ties, or in love or friendship, is to invite the probability of loss, and therefore the likelihood of sorrow. Some find consolation in the thought of a transcendent order which requites sorrow by bringing together, in a final and permanent reconciliation, those who have mourned each other. Others find consolation in secular terms; the Stoic philosophers of antiquity were wisest in saying, as Epictetus did, that although sorrows come from without, our reception of them is to some degree under our own command, enough to make it possible for us first to bear and then to master them, acquiring from them more insight into the human condition, and more sympathy for others, than we had before that mastery was complete.

But it remains true that we never quite get over the sorrow caused by losing those most loved; we only learn to live with it, and to live despite it, which – and there is no paradox here – makes living a richer thing. That, perhaps, is the most valuable legacy sorrow leaves.

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