

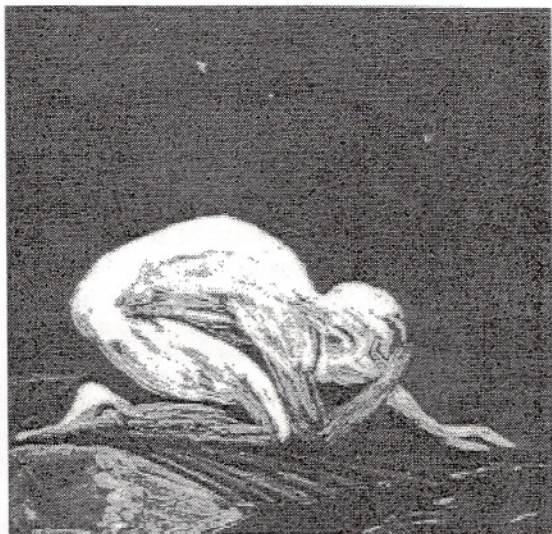
Of Love and Grief

- Sharon Browning

"Set me as a seal on your heart
as a seal on your arm
For stern as death is love
Relentless as the nether world is devotion;
its flames are a blazing fire.
Deep waters cannot quench love,
Nor floods sweep it away."
-Song of Songs

Poring through our wedding photographs taken 25 years ago today, I am struck by the sheer exuberance and joy on our faces as we pledged our souls, hearts, and lives to each other. A deep gratitude wells up in me now, knowing with wisdom won from years of laughter and tears how profound our promises were, how absolutely perfect, how innocent, how graced. I am moved to a celebration of Love, this day, because ours was a blazing fire, not quenched or swept away by the deep waters and floods of our lives. This is love in its most generative form, life giving for us, for our family, for the world.

But then the waves of grief swell up and wash over me: my own grief, the grief of our daughters and son, the grief of a terror-stricken and warring world. How do I celebrate with an aching, joyful, grateful, sorrowful heart? Since Jim died two years ago, the thought of this silver anniversary has drifted across my consciousness from time to time like a slumbering bear... warm and safe



from a distance, but with the potential to rake sharp claws through my tender and vulnerable spirit. Yet here is the day, and I'm struggling and stumbling mightily, but still joyful, still drinking from the well of this Love that has not been ended by death, only changed.

I find it meaningful that this anniversary should fall in the midst of such national and global turmoil. All of our lives are deeply embedded and rooted in our world: I often find the circumstances of my private life reflecting a larger reality. Shortly after Jim died suddenly of an arrhythmia in that heated June of 1999, a friend asked, "Was it Kosovo, then, that broke his heart?" Perhaps. Once we have known love well, it is possible for all griefs to enter and expand our hearts, and Jim carried the weight of his own and other's pain. We are connected to each other by vast webs of joy and sorrow, love and grief. If we let it, our suffering can be the teacher through whom we learn profound lessons about the unity of all that is. "Suffering," C.S. Lewis observed, "is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world." I know from my own experience that suffering and grief are powerful, transformative forces. As the winds of war gather force, I wonder, can we allow ourselves to be swept into this pivotal moment in history by the tides of suffering love, rather than fear?

I've had ample opportunity to ponder the relationship between love and grief, fear and anger, suffering and redemption. It strikes me now that our nation is faced with a similar task. In the opening sentence of *A Grief Observed*, Lewis notes that no one ever told him how much grief feels like fear. He knew he was not afraid, but experienced grief as similar to fright. This has been my experience as well. The sensations are almost identical; grief flutters like a wild bird caged beneath our ribs, making us gasp for air. Fear, too, can literally take our breath away. Perhaps this is why we move so quickly as a nation from grief to fear....the emotions feel the same to us. But grief is about love, and fear is the absence of love. We grieve the loss of what we have known, and loved, and cherished. We fear that which we do not know, and have surely never loved.

Immediately after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, our national mood was one of profound grief; in many ways, it still is. It is worth noting, as many have, that our early responses were loving, not vengeful. We rallied in supportive ways around those who lost loved ones, those helping the nation recover from such loss, and those threatened by the most fearful among us. For it is fear that locks us into thoughts of vengeance and retribution. But "Love has no room for fear; rather, perfect love casts out all fear." (1 John 4:18) I wonder what good might result if, instead of feeding our fears, as a nation we entered more fully into this great grief, born of our love and compassion? Where might such love lead us?

I know where Love has led me. The Love I celebrate today brought Jim and me three extraordinary children, already Light bearers, dispelling the darkness in their own unique and magnificent ways. It led us more deeply into activism in multiple



forms, for multiple causes. It led us to community, and supported us in our work for justice, peace, equality, and the empowerment of those wearied by poverty, abuse, or oppression. It led us, inevitably, to God. We knew, those long 25 years ago, that God is a verb; when we love, we God each other. It doesn't get more concrete and tangible than this: we are the Presence of God to each other. A beautiful Sufi chant captures this reality: *Ishq Allah mabood lililah.....God is Love; The Lover and the Beloved. We live in God's heart.*

And Love has also led me to grief. The familiar section from Isaiah that Jesus used to announce his ministry reads, in part, "to bring good news to the poor ...to proclaim liberty to the captives." Somehow, I never allowed the last lines of this passage to penetrate my consciousness until after Jim died. Isaiah continues:

"to comfort all who mourn;...

To give them oil of gladness in place of mourning

A glorious mantle instead of a listless spirit
They will be called oaks of justice,
planted by the Lord to show his glory."

Oaks of justice... What does mourning have to do with justice? It is this. We mourn what we love, and suffering love opens us to compassion, stretches wide our hearts to embrace others who also suffer. Suffering is a shared human experience; it is our greatest connector. My empty arms join me to all others whose arms ache to be filled: their

sorrow is my own. Can we allow our experience of terror and the sudden deaths of innocent people to fill us with compassion for others in our world who share the experience of terror, loss, and grief? Can we grieve with the innocents of Afghanistan or the Iraqi mother whose child dies of starvation because of economic sanctions? Can we feel the desperation of those made jobless, homeless, or thrust into poverty by globalization policies and practices? Can we become oaks of justice, committed to the transformation of injustice through the power of our love?

I have always believed that Love is eternal. I know it now. It survives the grave, relentless as the netherworld, and continues to grow and generate more of Itself. Love heals. How else can I explain my miraculous recovery from a serious, chronic, painful, sometimes life-threatening illness... after Jim's death? His spiritual director told me recently that one of Jim's greatest sources of distress was that he was powerless to relieve my pain. "All he could do was hold you," she said. He holds me, still.

The bed is still empty at 3 A.M. Sounds, sights, and smells often provide a shocking jolt that catapults me into a searing abyss. Sometimes the tasks of parenting make me weep for the loss of that balancing presence: the tag-teamer, the sounding board, the only other person who knows and loves these entrusted souls as I do. But he holds them, still, too.

I have learned many things that could be not only useful, but downright salvific for all of us in these most challenging times. I have learned that Love requires self scrutiny and the assumption of responsibility for hurting the beloved. I have learned that Love is not possible without forgiveness, that love heals, and that fear debilitates and destabilizes. I have learned that anger transformed by love becomes passion for justice. I have learned that when we fully embrace our grief and suffering, we move into a compassionate stance that enlarges our hearts. As Leon Bloy so aptly observed, "There are places in the heart that do not yet exist, and it is into these that suffering enters, that they may have existence." I have learned that sometimes all we can do is hold each other.

So I celebrate and give thanks for the enduring power of Love that gives us the courage to dance through our pain, to inhale our own and others' sorrows, and breathe healing into lives broken by all forms of loss, loneliness, violence, and oppression. It is my prayer, and therefore my hope, that as individuals and as a nation, we will enter more fully into our grief: explore who and what we love, and how we love, and find new ways of anchoring Love to the planet. It is only Love that can save us. **



Meinrad Craighead