Holding onto my Better Half: In Memoriam Bernard Bennington, 1931-1991

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When we become attached to other people we begin to see the world through their eyes. This expansion of our internal model of the world does not cease to exist when they die even though, in the early stages of bereavement, it may feel as if we had lost everything that came with them.

In this perceptive essay Margaret Freegard analyses the contrasting viewpoints which came to complement her own and which remain a challenge in her bereavement.

Editor

There was a beautiful red sunrise at 7.30 a.m. on 8th February, 1991, and my husband called me to look at it. He rarely saw the sunrise because he was a late riser, but he hadn't slept very well, said he had indigestion and had got up early. I suggested calling the doctor, but he refused and asked me to make him some breakfast.

Then he decided to go back to bed and try to get to sleep again. I helped him into his pyjamas, and we laughed because he said my hands were cold. I saw him into bed and went off shopping.

On my return at 10 a.m., I looked in on him and he was fast asleep. He hated being disturbed so I went downstairs again and got on with my jobs. At midday I went up again to call him ready for lunch but he was still asleep, so I touched his shoulder to rouse him, and couldn't. And couldn't. And couldn't believe I couldn't. I noticed the top of his head had a yellowish tinge and that his lips were purple blue.

I rang the doctor and told the receptionist, 'I think my husband has died.' I rang my priest and said, 'Bernard has died,' and he came at once. Then the doctor came and sent for a funeral director and they took Bernard away, and I was left all alone feeling cold and detached, especially cold. It was months before I felt at all warm and I'm not sure I do even yet.

Early reactions

In the days and weeks that followed, I tried to remember what I'd heard about bereavement and couldn't. Arranging the funeral was a great help: the readings* were all ones I had read that very morning before he died, and all three could not have been more apt to describe the person he was, his state of mind at that time and his status in and attitude to life, the depression he often felt, his feeling of being an outsider, the qualities he had, so often masked but there underneath. He thought I was hard-hearted because I didn't cry at my mother's funeral, and he'd wondered whether, if he died first, I'd cry at his. He needn't have worried, I couldn't have stopped myself and wouldn't have wanted to.

I carried on my life as before—what else was there to do? I went back to work, and stayed on alone in the house because I didn't want to dilute the memory of him. I wanted to hold on to all he used to say to me, some of which I had rejected quite strongly when he was alive: insights are often not very welcome gifts. I was full of guilt at all the negative feelings which had at times marred recent months of our life together—at my anger and resentment over some of the rows, whose origin I didn't understand and which I found very destructive, and so did he. If I had a consolation, it was that we had had four or five particularly good days preceding his death, and that we had parted with a joke and a smile; and that he, who had often said he was afraid of dying, had died in the attitude of peaceful sleep.

After the initial shock, the tears came quite soon. I found myself avoiding spoken sympathy in case I lost control at inappropriate times and places, and embarrassed myself and others. Written sympathy was a great help because I could read and weep and respond in solitude. My brother and his family were in touch with me daily by telephone, and welcomed me when I visited them. They kept the feelings very low key so I didn't have to feel guilty about burdening them with my despair, only grateful to them for being at hand and showing their sensitivity by their fidelity.

I remembered some of the things Bernard used to say to me and the way he admonished me when he thought I didn't measure up to the standard he expected of me; I remembered my own reluctance to listen to what had happened in cricket or football or at the races—all things he wanted to share with me when I came home from work but which I was too busy and too selfish to attend to. I found a little notebook with the entry:

> **'Thoughts of a probation officer's husband**
> Material things: I have everything I wish for, car, house, money in the bank, video tapes, wireless, cassettes, books, gun for shooting, all these things you would think would make me happy? I think I am being taken for granted, have had that all my life, thought that would stop when I got married. Am probably looking for security, in love, maybe looking for myself.
> I think I am depressed about something . . .'

I remember him telling me he had noted down some observations, but I was too busy to ask him if he'd like to tell me what they were.

Survival strategies

I felt I needed to talk about this overwhelming feeling of guilt with someone who wouldn't belittle it or reproach me with self-indulgence, so I went to a counsellor who let me talk and cry, and cherished what I needed to say about Bernard. She suggested that I write down my memories of him so that I didn't lose them.

The other part of my survival strategy was to buy a book: Colin Murray Parkes' *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life*[1]. It felt strange to see the pain and desolation analysed and to recognise parts of it. I was particularly struck by a passage in Chapter Seven 'Gaining a New Identity':

> '. . . the phenomenon of identification with a lost person . . . remains as mystifying to us today as it was to John Donne . . .
> 'Equally mystifying is the experience of self which is reported by many widows. "I feel as if half of myself was missing," said one widow, and another spoke of "a great emptiness".'

This exactly described how I felt, and I thought I knew why.

Our life together

When I was getting some training in marital work I recall being told that we often choose as our spouse someone who carried split-off or unacknowledged parts of our own personality. During the nearly 16 years of our life together, we had often reflected how true this was of us.

We brought very contrasting experiences to our life together. He was a Durham miner's son, orphaned at about 10, separated from his brothers and sisters and brought up in Barnardo's at the latter end of the war. He had to fend for himself and often did it violently. He left school at 14 and was placed on a farm, one of a series until he escaped by enlisting in the Army, from which he ultimately escaped by disobeying every possible order and proving so refractory as to get himself discharged. He settled down for a while in civilian life, working in a nursery, using his aptitude for figures to become an accomplished darts player; then rebelling again and finding himself on the sorts of scrap heaps to which those who are down-and-out with nothing to lose are accustomed. He survived appalling physical hardships; on the outside tough, aggressive, violent, anarchic; emotional, generous, vulnerable underneath.

This was a far cry from my own sheltered upbringing in a strict but loving home, where great store was set on my education. I was sent to a boarding school where 'deportment' was highly prized, where discipline and self-control were *de rigueur* and good examination results won approval. It was a safe, ordered existence in which forethought was necessary and conventions important. I am grateful for all the advantages I enjoyed, but since I brought to these advantages an over-conscientious, guilt-ridden, somewhat obsessional nature, the result was rather monochrome.

Bernard and I met in middle life: he felt like a breath of fresh air to me, a whiff of the Third World specially for me, fed up as I was becoming with the hollow rewards of prosperity. I had everything except what I really wanted, only I didn't know what that was until I met Bernard: we had at last found someone to 'love me best of all'.

I loved his uninhibited behaviour, even if I was sometimes embarrassed by it; his uncomplicated attitude, pretty unequivocally black and white, no airs and graces to mask his negative feelings. He showed his emotions so easily, would often weep, and equally often speak with the utmost vehemence or fly into uncontrollable rages which often frightened me. Impetuous, wildly generous, fiercely critical, his was a chaotic personality with which neither of us was always comfortable; and underneath it all was a sometimes crippling sense of his own unworthiness and worthlessness, which the commitment and security of marriage could only sometimes mitigate.

What he loved about me was what he called 'refinement', by which I think he meant the antithesis of down-and-outness. He used to say, 'What a lovely smile you've got'—perhaps the first eye contact since his early childhood that was wholly loving and not authoritarian or, worse, overtly hostile.



I introduced him to Mozart and P. G. Wodehouse (he went overboard about both of them, especially Mozart); he introduced me to life and freedom. Both liberated by love, security and commitment, we entered on the most creative period of our lives, jointly working at a project to help people who were unemployed and down-and-out, he using his personal experience, I using my administrative know-how.

Of course we didn't stay at that high point, but settled down to our life together after a few years: sometimes good, often stressful, rarely peaceful but alive and creative. We were both able to acknowledge—sometimes admiring, sometimes appalled—the bits that the other carried for each of us: his emotional bit, his generosity, his vulnerability; my strength and perseverance and competence. We were able to take back into ourselves some of the bits we had previously split off: he became calmer, less aggressive, more tender, more rational, more able to make jokes, loving himself a bit more. I became more assertive if not aggressive, was better able to show feelings and to weep, less self-satisfied, more vulnerable, more anti-authority and a lot less genteel.

Making him part of me

Now my life is quiet, unstressful, bland and I am feeling empty of all those bits he did and carried for me, and which made our life together so rich and varied and, intermittently, uncomfortable. I'm struggling to define more clearly and to hold on to the things he said and did which were important parts of that wholeness, and without which I'm only half a person. I'm frightened I'm going to regress to that twilit, controlled, obsessional person I was before I met him and whom he never failed to challenge. That sounds like the grave, and if I am to go on living then I'd like it to be recognisable as the sort of living we learned together.

He often reproached me with taking him for granted and of course I did, not thinking we should be parted so soon and so unexpectedly; and so each of us was content to leave the other to carry some aspects of our personalities. But unless I can incorporate some of those facets of him which he showed me really belonged to me, I shall not have raised any memorial to him. Nor shall I have demonstrated my astonishment and gratitude that this marital relationship could hold and carry so much anger and hate as well as love and devotion, and still survive.

One of my most moving memories of him is of his infinite patience —that was certainly something he did for both of us. He would sit for hours peeling apples or shelling peas, or topping-and-tailing beans or gooseberries, without ever complaining. It would be easy for me just to feel guilty about all those aspects of him which I took for granted. It is going to be much harder to incorporate them into my emptiness. If I can do that, I will have listened to him in death if not in life; and perhaps his patience is as good a place to start as any.

Reference

1. Parkes CM. Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life. (2nd edn). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986.

**From the Jerusalem Bible, Psalm 13; St. John's Gospel, Ch. 4, vv 5-15 and 21-26; 1 Corinthians, vv 21-30.*

DISASTERS: PLANNING FOR A CARING RESPONSE
HMSO: 1991.

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