

**Leaving Without Goodbye, Goodbye Without Leaving:
The Struggle of Ambiguous Loss**

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Nov. 2, 2003

I remember reading a story one evening, a non-fiction story, which I came across casually as I was flipping through a magazine—I think it was the New York Times magazine, around New Years last year. It was the story of four young men who were close buddies, two of them brothers, who were spending New Years Eve quietly partying in each other's company at one of their apartments in Manhattan.

At one point one of them gets up to stretch and decides to step out for cigarettes at the corner store. A half hour passes, then an hour. After a while they begin to wonder why he's been gone so long. They decide to look for him. They're all a little drunk and giddy, and they step out into the crisp gleaming night amidst the revelers, and begin weaving down the street calling for him, laughing and joking, thinking he must have stepped into a bar, or run into someone he knows. But the night wears on; he doesn't show up; they get frustrated, and angry, and worried, and then frantic. As dawn approaches, they call the police. They keep looking, calling, going every place they can think of, combing the neighborhood for days, going down alleys, calling friends to find out if anyone's seen him.

The story was a memorial written years later by one of these companions. His friend disappeared that night as if into thin air, leaving no clues, no signs of fowl play, no nothing. Years have passed and they all try to simply go on with life, but they all live haunted and helpless with the lack of closure, the frozen grief that comes from not knowing.

Here is another story: One afternoon a 10 year old boy finds his father asleep on the living room floor. He thinks it's a little strange, but he doesn't do anything right away. A little later he starts to worry, and when he tries to rouse his dad, he won't awaken, because, it turns out later, he's had a massive stroke. So begins the devastation of a family.

The father is young, a vigorous man in his early fifties, with two young sons and a wife in her 40s. He has been a voracious reader, a community leader and pillar of his church.

The stroke leaves him without speech and paralyzed on one side. After months of exhausting therapy, he is able to walk with a cane, and can get rudimentary sentences out, but is unable to read, to concentrate, to comprehend complex information.

His wife is tireless in her care giving. She exhausts herself attending to him and the boys while maintaining a half-time job. The physical strain would be bearable, but for the truly unbearable part. This man resembles her husband and yet is not. He is helpless, impulsive and emotionally immature, needing to be helped with the most rudimentary tasks, wanting her company yet unable to exchange meaningful conversation. After a few months he begins to desire her again and wants to reengage their sexual relationship, but it is impossible for her, and the guilt is overwhelming.

Her husband, lover, best friend, and companion in parenting, is gone forever. She secretly wants to, needs to, grieve his death, and yet this man with his name and face is still there, needing her love. Day in and day out, she and the boys live with this paradox.

These are among the most disturbing images of ambiguous loss, and yet our lives are filled with less extreme manifestations of it. It creeps in whenever something is lost yet remains without closure.

It emerges under two primary conditions:

One form comes when there is a leaving without a proper goodbye--Someone who is physically gone remains with us as a persistent emotional presence, like the loved one serving in a war zone overseas, like the ghost limb of the amputee, like the estranged member of the family, like the cat that disappears for days, then weeks, then months, yet one windy night you think you hear her crying to come in.

Ambiguous loss also comes when there is a goodbye without a proper leaving--Someone is physically present but emotionally gone or changed, like the aging parent who's is receding into dementia, like the spouse or partner or parent who has all but disappeared into his or her work and is unavailable for real relationship.

Or it's something even more in between...The 19 year old who has goes off to college. The parents are left with the ambivalent pleasure and freedom of an empty nest. Except that this college kid shows up unannounced every other weekend with a duffle bag full of dirty laundry and a voracious appetite. The parents are happy to see him, but how can they get used to him being gone when he keeps doing that?

Pauline Boss charts this strange emotional landscape in her book Ambiguous Loss. She explores the countless ways in which we experience partial endings and confused grief. Sometimes it persists with devastating intensity, but often it's subtler and more commonplace--felt, but not recognized.

Boss explains that, of all the various kinds of losses we experience in personal relationships, ambiguous loss is the most disturbing. She remembers an old English nursery rhyme that captures the distressing feeling of uncertainty:

*As I was walking up the stair,
I met a man who wasn't there,
He was not there again today,
Oh how I wish he'd go away!*

As human beings, we hunger for certainty and clarity, and so to experience prolonged confusion about whether a person is absent or present can be much more debilitating than sure knowledge of a final ending, even when that ending is tragic.

When loss is ambiguous, we can feel immobilized. Certain emotional processes within us are kept frozen, unable to proceed forward. We have trouble problem solving because we can't define what the problem is, or whether it's temporary or permanent.

Ambiguity is confusing not only for those living intimately with it, but also for those in the surrounding community of friends and family. Others don't know how to offer support, because, again, the problem is unclear, held in suspension.

When there is a clear ending, whether by death or some other unambiguous closure, everyone agrees that a permanent loss has occurred, and the grieving person enters into a process of gradually releasing the loved person or object, and slowly becomes capable of forming new attachments. Even when an ending is clear, grief and healing will be a prolonged, emotionally complex, layered experience.

But the greater the ambiguity surrounding the loss, the more difficult it is to master the emotions connected to it. The more ambiguity, the more vulnerable a person or a family may be to anxiety, depression, and conflict.

Ambiguous loss can make one feel incompetent. We don't quite know how to re-organize ourselves and our roles around the new conditions. It erodes the sense of being in control of our life. It can destroy what trust we may have that life is fair, or that the world is an orderly or manageable place.

If any of these experiences sound familiar to you, I would suggest getting hold of Bosses book. It's short and accessible, but is so rich in insight.

For the time being though, I'm not going to lead you into this painful place and leave you there without any sense of how you get back out. So, I'll try to capture the core of what she offers as a way to address the ambiguity.

She offers that the path out of the suffering has to do with finding a balance between surrender, and mastery.

Ambiguity is so painful because it is persistently unclear, a haze of undifferentiated feelings. And so, Boss suggests, the work that we must do is to redefine. We must name what parts have been lost, and name what parts remain. We must distinguish and separate these two things. We name what has been irretrievably lost, and find ways to bring closure around those particular pieces. This is the surrendering, the letting go part.

And we name what we still have, and redefine our relationship to it, hopefully finding some revitalization around the new sense of roles and relationships. That's the mastery part.

She tells the story of a woman whose husband was suffering from Alzheimer's. Their relationship had become profoundly disturbing to her because he was both extremely demanding with her about his needs and wants, and yet he did not know who she was. For a prolonged period she was devastated by confusion.

One day, she simply took off her wedding ring and put it away, and she made arrangements for her husband to be moved out of their bedroom into another room in the house. In doing these things, she distinguished what had been lost—her husband--and what remained--someone she cared for, whose welfare she was committed to, but with whom she had to establish new boundaries.

We can find simple ways to mark changes, small rituals, small disciplines, that enable us to take hold of clarity and reassert a sense of self-determination in the midst of ambiguity.

Those of you who have heard me speak many times may have noticed that I seem to be drawn to paradox. My sermons so frequently end up struggling with some kind of paradoxical dilemma. In the end, it seems that I am trying to hold apparently irreconcilable things together in unity.

I think this is because truth--the universal truths in life, Truth with a capital T, is somehow always about the integration of opposites, about reconciling the irreconcilable, about finding a way to hold opposing forces in relation to one another.

Freedom and connection, loving and releasing, justice and forgiveness, mastery and surrender...

So much of human creativity, resilience, and spiritual transcendence emerge from these tensions. The deepest spiritual work is done in this difficult territory. Peace, spiritual peace, and wisdom, are the gifts that may finally come from fully entering the paradoxes and moving through them to the other side.

We pray for one another and ourselves that we will not face such hardships, and yet inevitably we do, as it is inescapable within the human condition. When we risk loving, some form of loss is inevitable. And because the world is not fair, some of us will experience the most terrible losses.

Yet there will be a path, a way forward. There is a spirit within us which can make a way out of no way. Our work is to hold this fragile and faulty life in endless compassion, and to carve a path for emotion to flow, as it must do, and to companion one another through the canyons of sorrow and awakening.