

They that love beyond the World cannot be separated by it.

Death cannot kill what never dies.

Nor can Spirits ever be divided that love and live in the same Divine Principle; the Root and Record of their friendship.

If Absence be not Death, neither is theirs.

Death is but Crossing the World, as Friends do the Seas; They live in one another still.

For they must needs be present, that love and live in that which is Omnipresent.

In this Divine Glass, they see Face to Face; and their Converse is Free, as well as Pure.

This is the Comfort of Friends, that though they may be said to Die, yet their Friendship and Society

are, in the best Sense, ever present, because Immortal

William Penn

English poetry is full of beautiful lines about death as the poet faces it for himself. I pull at random out of my memory Donne's "Death, be not proud," Rupert Brooke's "If I should die, think only this of me," Alan Seeger's "I have a rendez-vous with death," Walt Whitman's "Come, lovely and soothing death," Davenant's "Oh, harmless death"; there are many more, defiant, philosophic, meditative, adventurous, full of courage and beauty.

In comparison, very few poems have been written about death when it strikes those whom we love, a situation that far more urgently calls for the balm and stimulus of beautiful and comforting words. The great elegies impress us more by the skill of their

authors than by their understanding of loss. *Lycidas* does indeed contain two lines that throb with genuine grief:

*For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime
Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer,*

but the poem ends with the bubbling up of the young poet's vitality:

*Anon he rose and twitched his mantle blue;
Tomorrow to fresh woods and pasture new.*

Tennyson's *In Memoriam* is full of attempts to universalize his emotions and thoughts about death, but his expression is facile and a little jingly for the modern taste. Matthew Arnold's *Thyrsis* is too full of elaborate trappings of the pastoral elegy, too confined by the artificial limits of the form.

Here and there we find short and rather fugitive verses in which the impact of the death of a loved friend has been written down with a freshness and simplicity that almost raises them out of the particular into the universal, as, for instance, some stanzas in the ballads, or Wilfred Gibson's lines on Rupert Brooke. Generally, however, they are too full of the personality of the individual to be of much comfort. Emily Brontë's *Remembrance*, which begins, "Cold in the earth and the deep snow piled above thee," is so packed with the hopeless passion and agony of grief that it is torture to read.

That is why these lines of William Penn's, taken from *Some Fruits of Solitude*, are so valuable. Penn knew whereof he spoke. His beloved wife had died, Gulielma Springett Penn, who has been called the "most fragrant spirit in all Quaker biography." His mother, who like so many mothers of brilliant and

sensitive sons, loved and understood him and stood between him and his devoted but impercipient father, had died just on the eve of his great first voyage to Pennsylvania. His son Springett, the only really promising one among his disappointing children, had coughed away his ardent young life at twenty. After a number of years, in which he had come to terms with his sorrow, Penn wrote the lines quoted above. Besides the beauty of their cadence, the preciseness of their words, and the loftiness of their thought, they embody something still more rare and valuable: a calm and utter conviction that what he says is true. He *knows*.

Sorrow cannot be fought and overcome; it cannot be evaded or escaped; it must be lived with. Whether it be sorrow for our own loss or sorrow for the world's pain, we must learn how to shoulder the burden of it, to carry it so that it does not break our stride or sap the strength of those about us through their pity for our woe. Death of the young and vigorous when they still have much to experience and much to give, loss of the rare and precious person in midstream, is comparatively unusual in good times, but in times of war it becomes tragically frequent. Somehow we must learn not only to meet it with courage, which is comparatively easy, but to bear it with serenity, which is more difficult, being not a single act but a way of living.

"Men help each other with their joy," Ruskin said, "not by their sorrow." Sorrow may be the plow and the harrow which dig the soil and crumble it fine, but it is the fresh-springing plant of joy that is directly of benefit to our fellows. True it is that sorrow and joy are bound together and part of the same

whole, but sorrow is for the inward side, joy for the outward. Aubrey de Vere wrote:

*Grief should be
Like joy, majestic, equable, sedate;
Confirming, cleansing, raising, making free;
Strong to consume small troubles; to
command
Great thoughts, grave thoughts, thoughts
lasting to the end.*

That is what we long to find in sorrow, something that makes us stronger and better for the experience; but as so often happens, the poet presents the desirable end without suggesting any way to achieve it. The realization to which William Penn attained, that they who live and love in the Omnipresent are never separated, suggests one way.

About the Author

Elizabeth Gray Vining (1902-2000) became a Quaker in 1934, not long after her husband died. While working for the American Friends Service Committee in 1946, she was chosen to become the tutor of the crown prince of Japan, the now-emperor Akihito. She described her experience in the book Windows for the Crown Prince, (1952). She has written several other books, both for adults and children.

This essay is taken from her book The World in Tune, which was published in 1954 by Pendle Hill Publications. Pendle Hill reprinted the book in 1994 and it is still in print and available from the Pendle Hill Bookstore.

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SECTION OF THE AMERICAS

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SECCIÓN DE LAS AMÉRICAS

William Penn and the Poetry of Sorrow

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