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Elizabeth Gray Vining

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by Elizabeth Gray Vining

I've been asked to talk about death. First of all, I want to say that I'm going to use the word, "death," not some poor substitute for it, or evasion. Death is an honest word, a dignified word, a brave word. Like "love," it is one of the few Anglo-Saxon words for which we have not substituted a more elegant Norman French form.

When I think about death, I have to think about meeting it in two ways: First, sorrow for the death of someone I have loved, and then the facing of my own death which, as one grows old, becomes an actual, foreseeable prospect.

First, sorrow, or grief. Grief, I think, is the first raw, unassimilated anguish of loss. Sorrow is the anguish faced, accepted, endured. Mourning includes both.

When Jesus rose to read the Scriptures in a synagogue at Nazareth, he was given the Book of Isaiah from which he read, according to the account in Luke, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he hath appointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind; to set at liberty them that are bruised; to preach the acceptable year of the Lord." The passage he read was the first verse and half of the second of the 61st Chapter of Isaiah. It continues. ". . . to comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion — to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He might be glorified."

Once many years ago when I was deep into what seemed to me unendurable sorrow I read this passage, underscored the words,

"beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning" and wrote in the margin, "Yes, but how?" Sorrow, in one form or another, comes into every life. We cannot escape it and probably should not wish to. We are all faced sometime with the urgent and searching question, how are we to get beauty from ashes? Can the oil of joy be substituted for mourning and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness? Isaiah evidently took it for granted that they that mourn can be conforted, then joy will follow.

"Men help each other," Ruskin said, "by their joy, not by their sorrow." And yet there is a connection between the two so strong that I wonder if they really can be separated. "The deeper that sorrow carves into your being," wrote Kahlil Gibran in *The Prophet,* "the more joy you can contain." The secret of finding joy after sorrow, or through sorrow, lies, I think, in the way we meet sorrow itself. We cannot fight against it and overcome it though often we try and may seem at first successful. We try to be stoical, to suppress our memories, to refuse to recognize the source of our pain, to kill it with strenuous activity so that we may be too tired to think. But that is just the time when it returns to us in overwhelming power. Or we try to escape from it — to run away through travel, books, entertainment, study. But when the trip is over, the book closed, the curtain lowered, the research accomplished, there is our sorrow waiting for us, disguised perhaps, but determined. We do worse sometimes. We don't try at all but fall into a lethargy and despondency saying it is the will of God and saying it accusingly as if God's will were always the most disagreeable thing possible and to be resigned to it meant a sulky, have-it-your-own-way sort of attitude.

What we must do, and what we can do, with God's help, is to accept sorrow as a friend, if possible. If not, as a companion with whom we will live for an indeterminate period, for whom we have to make room as one makes room for a guest in one's house, a companion of whom we shall always be aware, with whom we can work, from whom we can learn and whose strength will become our strength. Together we can create beauty from ashes and find ourselves blessed in the process.

When I discovered this, I wrote a poem about it.

I shall no longer run from sorrow
nor seek to avoid him
by going down another street of thoughts.
I shall not try to overcome him with my strength.
I shall open the door of my heart
to his knock and let him come in.
Whether he be sorrow for my own loss
or for the world's pain
I will learn to live with him,
steadfast and tender.

And some day the child happiness
will play in the sunshine
on the floor of my house.

E.G.V.

We do not have to foresee the whole course of the way when we start out with sorrow as our companion. All we have to do is to be genuinely willing to accept his company for as long as he shall stay with us, to learn from him all that he has to teach us, to live our life quietly and steadily in these new circumstances. We do not do it alone. We do it with God's help. We do not even have to decide what kind of God we believe in. I need not, as I once thought necessary, define how much or how little of the Bible is to me intellectually respectable. I do not have to reconcile science and religion down to the last equation, or such equations as I know. I do not have to come to a satisfactory conclusion about the miracles in the Gospels. All I have to do is to pray, "Oh, Thou, not as I think Thou art, but as Thou knowest Thyself to be," and I'm lifted up by His spirit as a boat stranded on the beach is lifted by the incoming tide. It has happened to me over and over, in small things and in great ones. And, ridiculously, I'm always surprised when it happens. It is as though my skepticism were so deep that unconsciously I said to myself, "It was only a chance that other time, no more than a coincidence. My own strength was greater than I knew, or my need, less." But it was not chance or coincidence, least of all, my own strength. I know now, or I think I do, that it will happen every time I

turn to God in need in simpleness of heart, in readiness to accept. One of the first and greatest fruits of sorrow is the discovery that we can pray and depend upon the answer.

There are other insistent questions in relation to sorrow besides the sharp one, "How can I bear it?" One, is in the case especially of a young person who has died, "Why? Why should this young, vigorous life who had so much to give to the world be taken while others old and weary and useless live on." This question haunted and hammered at me when my young husband at the height of his mental and physical powers was killed in an automobile accident. People offered what were intended to be comforting suggestions to me. One friend gave me a quotation from the Book of Wisdom that I have cherished. "Being made perfect, in a little while he fulfilled long years, for his soul was pleasing unto the Lord. Therefore, hasted he out of the midst of wickedness."

Another gave me Robert Louis Stevenson's poem.

Yet, oh stricken soul, remember, oh remember,
How of human days he lived the better part.
April came to him and never chill December
Breathed its killing chills upon his head or heart.

Doomed to know not winter, only spring,
A being trod the flowery April for a while,
Took his fill of music, joy of thought and seeing,
Came and stayed and went, nor ever ceased to smile.

Came and stayed and went, and now, when all is finished,
You alone have crossed the melancholy stream.
Yours the pangs, but his, oh his, the undiminished
Undecaying gladness, underparted dream.

All that life contains of torture, toil and treason,
Shame, dishonor, death, to him were but a name.
Here, a boy, he dwelt through all the singing seasons
And ere the day of sorrow, departed as he came.

Robert Louis Stevenson

And in the beautiful war memorial in Edinburgh castle, high above that wonderful old city which has known so much sorrow, I came on Laurence Binyon's poem carved in stone. "They shall not grow old as we who are left grow old. Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them."

They are all beautiful words and they have given me some temporary ease. But they did not answer my question: "Why?" Nor could I accept the old answer, "It is God's will." Again, the cry to that is, "But why?"

In time, I worked out a sort of answer of my own which has come nearer to satisfying me than any other I have found. It seems to me possible that we have, each one of us who come into the world, a hidden, secret contract to fulfill. What it is we do not know in any way that can be spelled out in words or recognized by the mind. It is too deep in our beings. But we live as we can, doing our best. And when it is fulfilled — some do it early, some later — we are released to go on to whatever comes after.

Another way of putting it, more simply, might be the words of King Lear: "Ripeness is all." Some ripen early, some take years for it. This brings me to the other question that haunts me: Is this life all? Is there more? Will we see each other again? There is a prayer written by Bishop Brent in which this sentence occurs: "Death is only a horizon, and a horizon is only the limit of our sight." This is one answer. But how wonderful, how comforting it would be if someone with authority would say, and say it so convincingly that we would believe, "Yes, you will meet your beloved again. There can be no shadow of doubt." But to me, growing up in the modern age, product of modern science and psychology, no one whom I could believe could say these words to me. On the other hand, no one can say with equal authority, "No, this life is all." The most we can say is that we do not know, we cannot know.

Sometimes in moments of inspiration and illumination we have intimations — sometimes, even, and I've had this twice, a vivid sense of presence that has made me indescribably happy.

Once I had an extraordinarily vivid and convincing dream. But it does not last, it cannot be summoned, and I cannot be sure. I

think the most we can do is to accept the fact that we cannot know. This is a solid truth. More than that, I think we are not meant to know. Such knowledge would change the whole conditions of our life — take out what is perhaps a necessary part of the struggle, as the emerging butterfly is damaged if someone takes pity on it and helps it. "I must accept the burden of the mystery," Wordsworth's phrase, and carry it lightly.

I remember vividly an experience that I had when a girl. I saw a locust come up out of the gound, fasten itself to the trunk of a tree and split its shell. There it was, that hard, dry, brown carapace, and out of it came a creature with transparent wings into a world of light and sunshine. How could it have imagined deep in the earth that this world above existed. The time came for it to move into it and to discover incredible beauty.

Our finite, earth-conditioned minds are no better prepared for an afterlife than the locust's.

I have spoken of the strength that we may draw from our companion, sorrow. If we are fighting him, the strength goes into that struggle and we are weakened. But there is a way in which we can use his strength. After John Bright's young wife died and he was prostrated with grief, a friend came to him and said, "There are thousands of houses in England at this moment where wives, mothers and children are dying of hunger. Now, when the first paroxysm of your grief is past, I would advise you to come with me and we will never rest until the Corn Law is repealed." John Bright, using the power of his emotion to strengthen his purpose, labored faithfully in parliament until the reform was accomplished. Countless others like John Bright have taken hold of their tragedy and used it as an instrument for good.

There is a verse about sorrow by Robert Nathan, the author of a number of poems and of some sensitive and poetic novels. It was given to me by a beautiful young woman who had experienced great sorrow and who wrote on the margin of the poem when she gave it to me, "However, I don't agree always." I cannot either, always, but I read it now because it was true for the poet, because it is true for me when I am at my best, and because it may be true for some who hear me say it now.

Love is the first thing,
Love goes past;
Sorrow is the next thing,
Quiet is the last.

Love is a good thing,
Quiet isn't bad,
But sorrow is the best thing
I've ever had.

Robert Nathan

Love in this poem is personal love, young love. Just as there is a greater love which does not go past, so there is another sorrow, greater than one's personal grief, a sorrow not known to many but which brings the highest reward of all. I mean sorrow for the world, the sense of suffering kinship with all agony, all grief, all sins. Little Anne Frank knew something of it, the young Jewish girl who lived hidden away from the Nazis in an attic in Holland, who recorded her fears and love and dreams in an unforgettable diary and who was in the end found by the Gestapo and carried away to the concentration camp where she died. An attempt was made years later to find out what happened to her after the diary ended. And from some who survived, a touching account of her last days has been obtained. In that horrible place of suffering and despair where others became stiff and leaden with their own agony, Anne to the last was tender and vulnerable to the suffering of others. As she saw the lines of people going to the gas chamber she would exclaim with the tears running down her face, "Oh, the look in their eyes!" One who survived her said, "She was the only one of us who could still cry."

Perhaps more than any other person of whom I've known or read, with one exception, John Woolman was sensitive to the sorrow of his fellow men throughout the world. His awareness found its most intense expression in a dream he had in which he saw "human beings in as great misery as they could be and live, and I was mixed with them, and henceforth I might not consider myself as a distinct or separate being. In this state I remained several hours. I then heard a soft, melodious voice. The words were, 'John Woolman is

dead.' I still remembered that I was once John Woolman, and being assured that I was alive in the body, I greatly wondered what that heavenly voice could mean." A little later the realization came to him that the saying, "John Woolman is dead," meant the death of his own will. It was a dream, but it was also a mystical experience and it was perhaps the high point of John Woolman's interior life. We know how he identified himself with suffering everywhere, how he could not enjoy the comfort of his friends in the cabin when sailing to England, but must share the miseries of steerage. And how he would not travel by stagecoach when he went from London to York, but must walk the long way because he could not countenance the suffering of the boys who rode the horses.

We can only faintly imagine the experience of Jesus. But that of the disciples is close enough to us for us to see them more clearly. After the panic flight and the shame, when they crept back they knew fully the bitterness of loss, bewilderment, grief and despair. But the cross is also the sign of triumph over defeat and failure and death. So it was that after the darkness at noon and the long night's vigil, the joy of Easter morning came to them and the renewal of hope and dedication. Their sorrow and the oil of joy into which it was transmuted made them new men; no longer wavering, bickering, faint-hearted, they went forth with new strength to spread the news and to build the Church.

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During and after World War II Elizabeth Vining was a writer for the American Friends Service Committee. In 1946 she was appointed tutor to Crown Prince Akihito of Japan and later wrote *Windows for the Crown Prince* and *Return to Japan.* In addition to several novels and biographies (including that of Rufus Jones), she has written *Quiet Pilgrimage,* an autobiography, and its sequel, *Being Seventy (The Measure of a Year).*

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