

## THE ART OF LOSING

by Joy Greenberg © 2004

Today I went looking for the spare set of car keys. First, I looked in the drawer where I last remembered seeing them. No luck. I wracked my brain, wondering if I had “secured” them in such an obscure place that even I could not recall where. This has become an all-too-familiar situation for me: not remembering where I’ve secreted various items. Becoming more and more frustrated, I looked into the headboard cabinet behind what was once Chuck’s side of the bed—an area where he kept personal things like his Rolodex and wallet and that has remained pretty much intact since his death eight years ago. No keys surfaced, but I found several books, including his John Berryman collection. I became distracted from my initial key-seeking as I began perusing these books.

Chuck was always a die-hard Berryman fan. In fact, an ideal date for him during our courtship was to hold me captive in bed drinking sparkling wine, often Freixenet—which could be had for three bucks a bottle at Trader Joe’s in those days—reciting, or forcing me to read, passages from *The Dream Songs*. And now, next to the bed a tattered *Dream Songs* resides still, along with *Recovery*. I recognize it as a book I found for Chuck at a Cal Poly sale years ago when I was taking classes there.

Although I know that the “recovery” to which Berryman refers is through the Twelve-Step AA Program, I wonder if there might be something of value in it for me, in what has become a rather lengthy recuperation from injuries sustained in a recent fall down some concrete stairs. And I also wonder if there is anything about grief recovery that relates to alcoholism recovery. I don’t know yet. I keep getting stuck on Step Two: “I came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”

My agnosticism prevents me from acknowledging with any certainty “A Greater Power.” If there is a Power, I do not perceive it to be “greater” than myself. My “Power” is more along the lines of one that is a psychological construct devised by a desperate species longing to give meaning and structure to its transient existence. If I were an alcoholic, would this revelation deem me untreatable? Is that why Berryman killed himself: loss of faith combined with the discovery that he was doomed to an interminable repetition of increasingly damaging binges? Is this lack of conviction in “a greater Power” what is prolonging my grief recovery? After eight years of Chuck’s absence, there are still so many instances of abject misery. Too many instances. Not surprisingly, today is one of them, for it is the anniversary of his death.

You would think by now I'd be so accustomed to death that I'd be an expert at grieving. After all, I lost my parents and a baby sister by the age of 31. The fact is, I have come to feel less—not more—capable with each loss. I believe this is because I, like most, have been taught how to *acquire* things, but not how to *lose* them.

I first became acquainted with death at the age of eight. My baby sister Tracy—born with a malformed heart before infant surgery was possible—passed away following a valiant but futile battle for survival. She was 19 months old. For some reason, I remember going to school the next morning feeling not sadness so much as pride. Pride that this awful thing had happened, but I had managed to get through it and carry on as if death were merely a “badge of courage.”

Now that I have children of my own, I wonder how my parents held up so well when Tracy died. Then again, perhaps they didn't. They both died many years sooner than they were supposed to, according to the national average lifespan. Once again, it was their hearts that gave out. My father was 52 when he succumbed to congestive heart failure; my mother was 62 when she suffered an aortic aneurysm. Who can say how much the stress of losing a child affected their health? This is something I hope to never learn.

As difficult as it was losing my mother and father, nothing—not even my Ivy League education—prepared me for the death of my husband Chuck. Perhaps this is because when I lost my parents, I had the luxury of retreating into total self-indulgence. Rather than seek professional help, I self-therapized. But when Chuck suffered his fatal heart attack, I had my three young sons to worry over. I couldn't run away or lose myself in a haze of drugs and alcohol as I'd done in the past.

I suppose that my grief will not fade until I am willing to release it and accept that Chuck is not wholly, irretrievably lost, even when I cease to remember him and when his image comes no longer unbidden to my mind. But until then—and I cannot yet fathom the possibility of this eventuality—there is no escape from the intolerable sadness, however soothing and healing is nature.

And nature does soothe and heal. In this respect I am one with who believed in the spiritual value of nature and that, as John Burroughs said: “the forms and creeds of religion change, but the sentiment of religion—the wonder and reverence and love we feel in the presence of the inscrutable universe—persist.” If there is a heaven, I believe it is within those boundless spaces within the natural world that remain pristine, where in the seas dwell creatures not known elsewhere on earth and where the desert stretches away on every side.

I distract myself from this reverie by contemplating how Chuck is still broadening my horizons, despite his physical absence. That's why I can't yet bring myself to clean out all his possessions from our bedroom, including the books and junk behind the headboard drawer. I keep thinking I'll want some treasure of his, or our sons will, or that there is solace in the mere physical presence of his things,

even though I know that it is his intangible qualities that will endure long after Chuck and his material possessions are gone. In the meantime, I remain stuck between hanging on and letting go.

Compounding my dilemma is that it has been years now, and Chuck still receives the most mail. It amazes me that merchandisers update their records so slowly. Although, ironically, the life insurance peddlers rank near the top of the most tenacious list, the worst offender is the bank. It has been sending statements to Chuck throughout the years he's been gone, and today I received a new credit card in his name. I have called them and written numerous times, beseeching them to change their records. They keep promising and failing. In fact, the bank rep who called recently asked for Chuck, even though my own name, not his, was very clearly written on the letter I had mailed. I, once again, had requested that they remove Chuck's name from their records *in the same letter*. I practically hung up on this guy because such requests for Chuck usually signal a telemarketer. When I'm in a perverse mood, I get satisfaction out of telling these solicitors, "I'd *love* to let you speak to Chuck; however, it will be a little difficult since I haven't been able to hook a phone line up to his ashes."

And so it astounds me how a dead person can seem more "alive" than a living being. Chuck certainly exists in reality for these Money men. But I, apparently, died with him, as far as they're concerned. The guys in Chuck's band Shadowfax may have lost their careers when their bandmate and leader died, but I lost my *identity*. I had no idea, until he was gone, how much my personal sense of self was tied to Chuck. When he died, it was as if a rug had been pulled out from beneath my feet, sending me catapulting through a gravity-less space—a tetherball gone berserk—launched from its pole.

How long will it take the banks to figure out that I've been managing my finances just fine, thank you very much, without a husband? I am heartened by Mary Austin's tale of a Shoshone woman: "A man," says Seyavi, "must have a woman, but a woman who has a child will do very well. [In widowhood] Seyavi learned the sufficiency of mother wit, and how much more easily one can do without a man than might at first be supposed."

Thus, I am learning the "sufficiency of mother wit" as well, as I embrace my manless parenthood. With my three sons perched to leave the nest, I face further change, being not the person I once was, nor yet the person I am to become. I accept this transiency as another of philosopher Charles Taylor's maxims: "The issue of our condition can never be exhausted for us by what we *are*, because we are always also changing and *becoming*." My losses have rendered me opportunities for personal growth and transcendence. And, so long as I keep growing, I suppose I'm not dying. As Paul Bowles once said, "the journey [of life] must continue—there is no oasis in which one can remain." It is a journey at once terrifying and liberating.