

TEMPORARY GOODBYES

By Michael Ventura

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"Goodbye" is such a temporary word. The soul doesn't adhere to it. Memory subverts the resolve of "goodbye," evoking images of the past beyond our power to deny them. When you're young you think you can leave places and people, but later, much later, you know you never can, you never did, you played with time and space but you never left. And as your friends and family die you discover that nobody ever *really* leaves. They reach for you and touch you with a kind of stillness, a strange stoppage of time; and from that stillness a gentleness spreads that you never thought was grief, the genuine grief, but it is: a hopeless and gentle and all-enveloping benediction. You feel the dead receive your blessing, and feel that their reception is a blessing upon you; logically you may think there's no afterlife, but something in you insists the dead can hear and even speak. All that psycho-drivel one hears about "the stages of grief," and that impossible word "closure" -- it all plays into the great American illusion of control, the illusion that we can decide and measure the nature of our hearts, that life is what we want it to be instead of what it is. But the truth is that we are a mystery to ourselves; we are far more than what we know about ourselves; and the dead seem to know this when they appear to us, or when we remember them, or however you want to put it. There is no final "stage," and there is no closure; there is only living every day with the changing, lively presence of the dead, as they come alive unbidden in memories and dreams.

Phrases like "the finality of death" lose meaning when your experience of the death of someone you love is so intensely alive. Death is alive. How can anything that causes so many changes and feelings and thoughts not be alive? People come alive within us after they die with *all* their selves, all their open and hidden aspects, rather than just the selves we tried carefully to select as they lived. For few of us are strong enough to utterly accept another person, even someone we deeply love; we pick and choose among their aspects, their selves; we cherish and abhor some aspects, ignore others, and are utterly ignorant of still others, always editing our experience of the other person to suit what we require. How strange it is to feel them come more fully alive in us after they've gone.

How the dead have the power to intrude from the realm of death -- or not intrude, but to cross boundaries within us -- as they rarely had the power to do while alive! In death they seem privy to all our secrets, while so many of theirs are still opaque to us. While they were alive, we could shut them out of different aspects of our own lives; but dead, they seem to be able to go where they will within us, to enter places in our being that we'd closed to them in life. They even enter places we'd closed to ourselves, and had forgotten or never known about -- the dead open the doors to those places, and bid us enter with them, sometimes holding our hands, sometimes refusing that reassuring grasp. I feel a kind of generosity from the dead, from their presence in me -- because even the worst memories of them are now passageways into parts of me that I hadn't been able to enter before.

(That sentence sounds serene. I don't mean it serenely. I mean it restlessly, sleeplessly, desperately. The serenity comes, when it comes, later -- and sometimes not at all. But, serene or not, one learns to navigate passageways one couldn't even enter before.

The dead are always bringing gifts, however little one might want what they bring. But that's the thing about the dead, and why they seem to have an autonomous power: we can't pick and choose among what they bring, as we sometimes could, or tried to, while they lived.)

"We're losing the father we never had," my brother Aldo said as my father was dying a year ago. He and I, for different reasons, went neither to Pa's deathbed nor to his funeral. My father's other children -- two sons and a daughter -- attended him. So he died as he lived, with a painful mix of absence and presence. As he was dying, and as I was torn between my duty to go and an absolute unwillingness to go, a friend said, "You should know that time and space don't really exist, and you don't have to be there to be close to him." And in that moment I remembered how he abandoned us, so brutally and so cowardly, when I was 10, and my brothers (twins) were five, and my sister was two (my youngest brother was yet to be born); and how during the remainder of our childhoods he never gave a dime of support or a gesture of protection, and the catastrophes his desertion spawned; and I thought of how, when I was 25 and he 55 (almost the age I am now), he and I began to be friends, a friendship that grew intimate and dear, through many letters and rare meetings; I thought of two and a half years before, his dangerous operation when he might have died, when I was the only one at his bedside for two weeks, all day and into the night, and that time when death was closest then and he looked at me with such all-encompassing love, not simply love of me but love of all of life, a love he never expressed in any way at any other time, a look that taught me that redemption is a living possibility.

As he was finally dying I thought of all this, and drove off into the Arizona desert, a drive he and I had taken years ago, to Meteor Crater and the Hopi Mesas and Canyon de Chelly, when we had spoken so honestly, two baffled men who loved each other, trying to make sense of our lives, aided in our communication by the remorseless and generous beauty of the Painted Desert and its vast skies -- I thought of the strange schism my father embodied: the charm and intelligence and humor and grace of the man, which one perceived and experienced as qualities utterly apart from his usual behavior, which was often petty and selfish and worse -- as though the qualities and the behavior of the man were two entirely different people, and you courted the one while being wary of the other -- and for three days in the Painted Desert, I talked with him constantly, prayed for him, walked and drove with him, full of the vividness of memory and the paradox of our lives, far from the madneses and contradictions and beauties of family that were being lived out around his bed as he died an incoherent death -- but there was no incoherence between us on that drive -- I felt that I was accompanying his soul as it left him and embarked on its journey -- I even sang to him, remembering a mysterious drive we took when I was nine, on a cold and snowy night in upstate New York, the only time in my childhood I remember him being unreservedly happy, when he drove his old Hudson fast and sang at the top of his voice, and in a few months he would leave us forever, dying to me when he deserted us as he could never die now -- I sang to him in the desert as he sang then, I sang his soul on its way -- realizing quickly, on that drive, that I could no longer pick and choose among his qualities and behaviors, for all of him was with me now, and so in a strange way I finally came truly to know him, or at least as much as I am capable of knowing him -- and on that drive I realized that I could no longer shut him out from my vulnerabilities as I'd had to and learned to while he lived -- now that he was dead it felt as though he knew all that I'd kept from him, all that I held back; an awful feeling at first, but gradually it relaxed me toward his memory, his presence -- for we

don't know what memory is, do we? Is it only our thought of another, or is it a living presence? I believe now that it is a living presence, and that there is no escape from each other, there is nothing but a constant challenge of how and what to welcome in each other -- my father dead a year, my mother dead 11 years, and both of them now growing wiser in death, in this way: that the words they spoke in life now carry more weight and mean more things, my mother saying for both of them, "We speak with every cell. Sometimes we don't know what it is, but we speak it." In the desert I spoke with them, too, with every cell. And that, for me, was their funeral.

There is a photograph from 1947. I am two, my father is 32. It is snowing, I'm bundled up, he's holding me high, I am waving at the camera, we are inexpressibly happy. I am two and I am waving at -- me. Now. He is smiling not at the camera but at me, now. I smile back knowing that there is no "goodbye" between us, ever. We're still growing and changing in memory and dreams. Still fulfilling and failing each other. Still reaching across vast distances to each other. Still driving and singing.

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