

The Shadow of Death

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In the second half of 2013 I experienced a serious surgical mistake in a procedure that was supposed to have been routine. By the time I returned to the hospital emergency room several days after the initial procedure, infection had made its way to my blood stream, seriously compromising my hold on life. This led to two major surgical repairs four months apart that put parentheses around complicated infection control, pulmonary therapy, and a series of ancillary medical complications. Extended hospitalization and even more extended periods of convalescence that totaled almost nine months gave me ample opportunity to be the recipient of care, pastoral and otherwise. What follows are ruminations on the whole experience.

My first response is gratitude to many: family, friends, church members, pastors, and hospital caregivers. Care as it turns out, comes in many guises. The second response is wonder about many things: that I have so little memory about the most severe parts of the hospital experience; and that after nine months I am so much better while other friends and colleagues have experienced so much worse. The third response is a new appreciation of some fundamentals: the place of mortality in the becoming of all things and the way God's care encompasses both living and dying.

All of these establish a fresh awareness of the memberships we all have, in the human family, but also in the wider web of creation. Placing my respite from medical difficulties over against the stark encounter others have with death reminds me that the evolutionary biological miracle God has set in motion with the creation of all things is replete with groaning at every level. In the process of creation's becoming whatever God's dream for it is, there is much hurt, pain, and yes, dying.

I

Having lingered unknowingly in the shadow of death for several days if not weeks, I have gained retrospective awareness that death threatens loss for the one who has died as well as for those living on. The loss experienced by those living on is well known in scripture and common human experience.

In the concluding words of Deuteronomy, the writer evokes the sense of irrevocable absence that follows upon the death of Moses. "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequaled..." (Deut. 34:10-11). There is deep sadness in these brief words which mourn the death of the one who had been cajoled by God into a position of leadership, who had represented the Israelites before Pharaoh and encouraged them in their flight out of Egypt, and who had cajoled God when God seemed tempted to abandon a contentious people in the wilderness—standing boldly in the breach between heaven and earth. "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequaled. ..." Something irreplaceable died with Moses.

Common human experience says something analogous about almost anyone's death: something irreplaceable dies with them. At least it can be said by the living who feel the loss of the one now dead most fully. Nicholas Wolterstorff, professor emeritus of philosophy at Yale Divinity School, has said it more eloquently than most of us

can in his moving reflections published in *Lament for a Son*. He writes not primarily as a philosopher but as a father who would plumb the experience of the death of his 25-year-old son in a mountain climbing accident. He says:

There's a hole in the world now. In the place where he was, there's now just nothing. A center, like no other, of memory and hope and knowledge and affection which once inhabited this earth is gone. Only a gap remains. A perspective on this world, unique in this world, which once moved about within this world, has been rubbed out. Only a void is left. ... The world is emptier. My son is gone. Only a hole remains, a void, a gap, never to be filled.

Philosophers, parents, biblical writers, human beings—all of us know the reality of irrevocable loss which death brings with it. And we are compelled to issue plaintive memorials such as Deuteronomy: “Never since has there arisen a person like ... the one we have lost.”

II

But since I unknowingly languished in the shadow of death, I have come (again, retrospectively) to appreciate more richly the other side of the equation, the loss that belongs to the one who dies. It is not just that the living experience loss, but in some fundamental way, so does the one who dies.

Moses is a paradigm here as well. The pathos of his death is not only in the irrevocable absence it signals, but also in the fundamental frustration it creates. The story tells us: “Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land.” ... “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.’ Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab...” (Deut. 34: 1-5).

Of all the people of Israel who deserved to go into the land of promise, whose name would be before the name of Moses? His death meant that he would never know the fulfillment of the promise that he had safeguarded for Israel at every point at which Israel threatened to squander it. Thus Moses embodies the mystery of death that takes away possibilities arbitrarily and randomly, often from those for whom the promise seems most fitting. “I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.”

Throughout the book of Deuteronomy there is a struggle with this frustrating destiny of Moses. It is discussed several times prior to this concluding chapter. On each of those occasions attempts are made to say why it should be so. Some times it is said that Moses would not enter the Promised Land because of the sin of the people. At other times it is said that Moses would not enter because of his own sin. Yet neither explanation will suffice. Why should the people's sin be taken out on Moses? And exactly what heinous sin Moses is thought to have committed himself is never clearly specified. So just as Job's friends fell silent in explaining to him the reason for his misfortune in life, so the narrator falls silent with explanations of Moses' destiny. No reason is given here at the end. There is just the painful, frustrating mystery of death that stops one short of fulfillment. “I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall

not cross over there.”

Again, it is Nicholas Wolterstorff who helps us see Moses’ fate as reflective of a wider human experience. For in addition to articulating the deep aching loss he feels as a father who has lost a son, Wolterstorff recognizes that his son has lost something too. He writes:

Loss is his as well. How very strange! Yet I feel it acutely. His sudden early death is not just our loss but his: the loss of seeing trees, of hearing music, of reading books, of writing books, of walking through cathedrals, of visiting friends, of being with family, of marrying, of going to church, and—dare I say it—of climbing mountains.²

When I contemplate what I stood to lose as I lingered in death’s shadow, I find myself somewhere between the venerated prophet and the promising young adult. I could not have complained that my life had been incomplete or unfulfilled. And I certainly could not have complained that I deserved to lead anyone into a promised fulfillment. Nonetheless, I stood to lose much that is dear to me: cherishing a young granddaughter as she develops and blossoms; relishing a different season of life with my spouse; vicariously enjoying the lives of our adult children; and taking up new intellectual, social justice, and theological challenges unconstrained by other (paid) responsibilities.

III

Thus the shadow of death has become a tutor who reminds me what is most important to my living. It has reminded me not only of what is dear to me and thus deserving of my best energy and effort, but also that the time for postponing focused attention on these priorities is over. Nicholas Wolterstorff serves as a guide here as well as he reflects on the regrets he felt at the death of his son.

What do I do now with my regrets—over the time I neglected to take him along hiking, over the times I placed work ahead of being with him, over the times I postponed writing letters, over the times I unreasonably got angry with him—over all the times I hurt him, times I noticed the hurt and times I didn’t but should have. Over the times he was sad and I saw, but did little or nothing to console. ... Over all the times he was something wonderful or did something fine and I was oblivious or silent—sometimes because my own projects were my single-minded pursuit, sometimes because my own worries were my single-minded concern. And sometimes because I did not want his excellence to “go to his head.”³

In something of a reversal on Wolterstorff’s experience, the shadow of death that lifted with my recovery provides me a chance for do-overs. For just as losing someone to death leaves us with regrets for what we have done and left undone in relationship to them, when we die our regrets towards our families, friends, and enemies necessarily die with us. So the shadow of death has awakened me to a rare opportunity to lessen the burden of regrets I will one day carry with me to the grave.

Still, I know that I will not come to my end regret free. So Wolterstorff helps me

as he continues his rumination on the theme:

I believe that God forgives me. ...[But] What do I do with my God-forgiven regrets? Maybe some of what I regret doesn't even need forgiving; maybe sometimes I did as well as I could. Full love isn't always possible in this fallen world of ours. Still, I regret.

I shall live with them. I shall accept my regrets as part of my life, to be numbered among my self-inflicted wounds. But I will not endlessly gaze at them. I shall allow the memories to prod me into doing better with those still living. And I shall allow them to sharpen the vision and intensify the hope for that Great Day coming when we can all throw ourselves into each other's arms and say, "I'm sorry."

The God of love will surely grant us such a day. Love needs that.⁴

Of course I am greatly helped by the reminder of what the God of love will surely grant us. Only now I see it also from the other side, the side of those who have already died. They need it too! They have their regrets toward the living that also await that great day a'coming, when the God of love will grant us a day to throw ourselves into each other's arms and say, "I'm sorry."

IV

Of course, a foretaste of that Great Day is always offered whenever we gather at the Lord's Table. And it is offered most particularly when we join in praise and thanksgiving to God, not merely with those gathered in a given sanctuary space, but with all the faithful of every time and place who forever sing to the glory of God's name: "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might; heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest." The choir that sings around the table is the whole people of God, saints on earth and saints in heaven, the living and the dead, brought together in the embrace of God's love. And as we sing—and as we live in the presence of all the saints who from their labors rest—we are gathered in God's arms and thrown together into each other's arms.

That's what the shadow of death has taught me once more. As Barbara Brown Taylor has recently reminded us, things dark and shadow-like are not inherently bad—our psyches, philosophies, and theologies notwithstanding.⁵ While I rather recently was called to account by the shadow of death, I now recognize it as always with us—and finally as our friend.

Notes

1 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament For A Son* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 33.

2 Ibid., 49.

3 Ibid., 64.

4 Ibid., 65.

5 Cf. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 200.