

Writing for the Dead

Workshop Session with Maureen Tolman Flannery

The Swan

by Rainer Maria Rilke

(translated by Robert Bly)

This clumsy living the moves lumbering
as if in ropes through what is not done
reminds us of the awkward way the swan walks.

And to die, which is the letting go
of the ground we stand on and cling to every day,
is like the swan, when he nervously lets himself down
into the water, which receives him gaily
and which flows joyfully under
and around him, wave after wave,
while the swan, unmoving and marvelously calm,
is pleased to be carried, each moment more fully grown,
more like a king, further and further on.

Christopher Bamford, paraphrasing Rudolf Steiner from *Staying Connected*

It is important to direct our thoughts to the realm between death and a new birth because this will help us to live our earthly lives more fully. Therefore we must always hold the mystery of death before us a key to many of life's mysteries. A human being dies and passes through the gate of death. That human being enjoyed relationships while on earth and those who remain on earth retain memories of the departed loved one. Such memories differ from all others, because the being who is remembered is still present, but in the spiritual world. Nevertheless, the fact remains that a human soul becomes a memory. In other words, we carry an image of a being in the spiritual world. And that being in the spiritual world may perceive these images as well as the thoughts and feelings that surround them. ... Our memories rise to them. How do they experience these?...The answer is that the dead experience our thoughts and feelings as "art" or "creation"; they experience our memories and loving thoughts analogously to the way we experience art in this world. Not only do we then become "living books" for the dead, we also become their "art." This is the deeper meaning of remembering the dead. Something in our memories transcends the ordinary level of existence. For the dead, this functions just as beauty does in our world. Thus, the two worlds—the earthly and the supra-earthly—are intimately interconnected. Our "inner" world is their "outer" world. How much richer our lives would be if we were conscious of this.

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Envoi

by John Neihardt

Oh, seek me not within a tomb--
Thou shalt not find me in the clay!
I pierce a little wall of gloom
To mingle with the day!

I brothered with the things that pass,
Poor giddy joy and puckered grief:
I go to brother with the grass
And with the sunning leaf.

Not death can sheathe me in a shroud;
A joy-sword whetted keen with pain,
I join the armies of the cloud,
The lightning and the rain.

Oh subtle in the sap athrill,
Athletic in the glad uplift,
A portion of the cosmic will,
I pierce the planet-drift.

My God and I shall interknit
As rain and ocean, breath and air;
And oh, the luring thought of it
Is prayer!

World Religions and thoughts on life after death

Islam

To Him will be your return—of all of you. The promise of Allah is true and sure
Qur'an, 10:4

Hinduism

The Spirit that is in all beings is immortal in them all: for the death of what cannot die, cease thou to sorrow.

Bhagavad-Gita 2:30

Judaism

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

Ecclesiastes 12:7

Buddhism

So, just as a traveler who sets out of the road when the time has come to go, I will not remain in this world any longer, but will go to dwell in the stronghold of the great bliss of deathlessness.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead

Baha'i

The soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God, in a state and condition which neither the revolution of ages and centuries, nor the changes and chances of this world, can alter

Reflections on the Life of the Spirit by Baha'u'llah

Taoism

Birth is not a beginning; death is not an end. There is existence without limitation; there is continuity without a starting point.

Chuang Tzu

Christianity

...he that heareth my word and believeth in Him that sent me, have everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death into life.

John 5:24

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

John 3:16

Catching His Death

Maureen Tolman Flannery

The aging angler has seen a primordial form
shape-shifting in the wake of human hunger,
the way it swims, sleek and unhindered,
brilliant gills, fins glistening in the white path
of moonlight on the placid lake.

He chooses his favorite lure—
one that quivers blue-gold
as it moves through depths like an old memory.

This fish, his death, leaps free of the lake,
gleams in slanted rays of late sun,
calls his boat to the spot
where circles ripple over a calm surface.

His last catch will be a worthy prize, old and cunning,
with dappled striations of blue-gray,
silver scales healed around several rusted hooks,
and the snapped lines of lesser fishermen
trailing from its wide mouth like desire.

This one's a fighter, not easy to land.
Say he sets the hook
some early pre-dawn
when it's feeding on minnows in deep pocket of cold.

He will need to play it out till they are both exhausted,
reel, time after winding time, into the lowered pole,
slowly pull back,
give it just enough slack when it leaps above the surface
in magnificent final fury of the captured.

Fragments of poems that deal with how the concerns of a life can be reflected in the biography of a person's death

From Three Elegiac Poems

for Harry Erdman Perry, 1881-1965

II

I stand at the cistern in front of the old barn
in the darkness, in the dead of winter
the night strangely warm, the wind blowing,
rattling an unlatched door.
I draw the cold water up out of the ground, and drink.

At the house a light is still waiting.
An old man I have loved all my life is dying
in his bed there. He is going
slowly down from himself.
In final obedience to his life, he follows
his body out of our knowing.
Only his hands, quiet on the sheet, keep
a painful resemblance of what they no longer are.

III

...he goes dark
into the life of the hill
that holds his peace.

He is hidden among all that is
and cannot be lost.

Wendell Berry

from The Handing Down
by Wendell Berry

...
the old man sitting beside me knows
the tools and vision of a builder
of houses, and the uses of those.
...
His life has been a monument to the place.
...
He has gone in the world, visioning
a house worthy of the child
newborn in it.

Litany for a Rancher
by Maureen Tolman Flannery

Bless this man who lies abed
with so much riding on the way he dies,

Bless his riding the range, his bronc riding,
his riding it out, letting it ride,
riding herd on, riding rough-shod over,
and his sometimes riding the fence.

Bless his fence building, fence fixing,
his offense, defense, nonsense and his sensitivity.

Bless his camp tending, crop tending, pretending,
his tenderness tending sick lambs at night,
his tending to park at the Ten Sleep bar,
his being wrong and his being right.

Bless his bull breeding, bull-shitting, bull-dogging,
his shooting the bull and his humble going home.

Bless his fishing, hunting, dogging the timber,
sheep dog training, curses blaring, pups birthing,
nursing into dog days of his doggedly caring for sheep.
Bless his lambing, docking, shearing,

his mouthing out, his dressing out,
and his being out of time.

Bless all that husbanding
and the wife a lifetime at his side.
Bless his siring five to carry on the line.

Bless their dancing at the Wagon Wheel,
his sheep wagon, covered wagon leading the train,

his being on the wagon
and the wagging tails of his well trained dogs.
Bless his logging and cabin building,
the muddy cab of his pickup truck,

his wethers, ewes, his bucks, his cussing and his cussedness,
his luck and his being down on it.

After tending his land and tending to land on his feet,
bless his recent forgetting, falling, recalling,
calling out in the night,
his victories, feats, defeats.

Bless his wink for the nurse's assistant,
his cursed insistency on peeing in the sink

Bless his branding cattle, branding sheep,
rounding and rounding up,
rough riding, rodeo riding,
riding high, riding west into the sunset.

Bless him.

Parents

by Ted Kooser

My dead parents try to keep out of my way.
When I enter a room they have already left it,
gone off to find something that ought to be done
elsewhere in the house, my dad rolling the Hoover,
my mother with dust rag and Pledge. At times
I've heard their old slippers, pattering away
down the hall, or seen for only an instant
what might be the hem of her skirt as it swept
through a door. I leave all the cleaning supplies
where they're easy to find, and they seem to last
forever. "You don't need to go" I call out
through the echoing rooms, but they've never
turned back. They leave the floors shining
behind the, and remember to turn off the lights.

Peace my heart..

by Rabindranath Tagore

Peace, my heart, let the time for the parting be sweet.
Let it not be a death, but completeness.
Let love melt into memory and pain into songs.
Let the flight through the sky end in the folding
of wings over the nest. Let the last touch
of your hands be gentle like the flowers of night.
Stand still, O Beautiful End, for a moment,
and say your last words in silence. I bow
to you and hold up my lamp to light you
on your way.

Christopher Bamford

[In the writings of Rudolf Steiner] specific indications are given about how we can learn to work together with those we love who have passed through the gates of death into the invisible world.... Gradually we come to realize that the so-called dead and indeed the whole spiritual world are involved in and care deeply about every aspect of earthly life. we come to understand the supreme importance of earthly life as the only sphere in the universe where death can be experienced—not only death, but love, connection, relationship begin only on earth...Our experience feeds the universe. We are the books the dead read. Our thoughts and feelings are the works of art that brighten and instruct their lives.

The following passages from Staying Connected are taken from lectures of Rudolf Steiner, loosely quoted and in no particular order:

Souls of the dead long for the sight of those left behind. But living persons filled with thoughts, concepts, ideas and sensations taken only from the material world, cannot be perceived at all from the other world. But a soul filled with spiritual ideas such as those provided by spiritual science is perceptible from the other world...The departed human being has connections with people on earth and in the afterlife those people can bring the soul the food it is starving for—spiritual wisdom by reading to the dead, thereby bringing about immensely valuable effects...It can help to hold a distinct picture of the person or a distinct picture of the person's handwriting may be held in memory and kept before the mind's eye.

[If animosity existed between two people] the departed soul looks back to the earth and very clearly perceives a definite feeling of hatred in the soul of the one who is living. That hatred represents and impediment to the soul who died—an obstacle to that soul's intensions for spiritual development. It becomes an obstacle to the good endeavors of those who have died. Love takes those hindrances away. It is not a violation of karma when the dead feel put at ease by the love flowing toward them from earth.

When we go to sleep at night, the ideas and thoughts that have passed through our consciousness during our waking hours come alive. The souls of the dead approach and share those ideas, feeling nourished as they perceive them. The souls of the dead are nourished by the souls of sleeping human beings. The thoughts of the living, offered over in sleep, are food for the souls of the dead. But materialistic thoughts cannot be perceived; only thoughts relating to spiritual matters are perceptible by the dead. When human beings are living in the spiritual world between death and a new birth they direct their longing to our physical world. They expect people on earth to show and radiate up to them knowledge that can be acquired only on earth. Knowledge of the spiritual worlds can arise only on earth. We ourselves are living books for the dead.

After death, a human being once connected to us in life has become a memory. When we remember someone who has died, we carry in our soul thoughts of a being who is now in the spiritual world. The souls, who live discarnate lives in the spiritual world, receive into their consciousness from the physical world whatever their spiritual gaze and their spiritual vision directed down to earth enables them to perceive. Our thoughts of love, our memories, and all that passes through our soul in connection with those no longer with us in the physical world create for the dead in their world something analogous to artistic creations of ours. The dead experience our thoughts and feelings as art.

We encounter our dead at the moment of going to sleep and again at the moment of waking.

The unfulfilled thought of the dead pass through our souls into the world, and in this way we can allow those stronger thoughts—which are possible for the dead because they are free from the body—to work in our souls.

If we then form thoughts and connect them with a dead person, aiming not merely at a union of thoughts, but at a union of feeling and interest; if we carry our thoughts further into life situations we shared with that person, so that a tone of feeling plays between us; if we relate our thought to occasions when we were concerned with how the person thought, lived, and acted, and with the interest we aroused in him or her—then we can use such occasions to carry the conversation further. But the right way of thinking about the dead can be developed only by those who are in some way connected with them by karma....If we cultivate communication with the dead in this way—the dead are really present, and their thought, not completed in their own life-time, will work into this life. Our social, ethical and religious lives would be endlessly enriched if the living allowed themselves to be advised by the dead.

We must acquire a feeling of community with everything in existence. There really is a connection, though invisible, between all things—a connection like that between the member of a single organism. Every one of us lives at the expense of others. Individual welfare is really impossible apart from the welfare of the community. We are ready to reach the discarnate individual only when we are able to think back fruitfully to what we had in common with the one to whom we are karmically united. This can happen only when we are able to re-experience what we experienced in common with that other soul, even the slightest detail, and to think of it as one feels when one has this feeling of community.

Anything in life that approaches the deeper aspect of our being, including unpleasant experiences, enriches our life. If we cannot deepen our soul by often realizing that our entire life is a gift, then the dead will not find a common air with us, for they can speak with us only through this feeling of gratitude for all the experiences of life. The feeling of having lost our dead weighs them down. When we lose people we love, we must be able to raise ourselves to a feeling of thankfulness that we have had them; we must be able to think selflessly of what they were to us until their death, and not of what we feel now that we have them no more. The better we can feel what they were to us during their life, the sooner will it be possible for them to speak to us—to speak to us through the common air of gratitude.

We find the dead when we can meet in a common spiritual place with a common thought that they also perceive—when we can meet in this shared thought with a feeling of full companionship. The feeling of gratitude is the medium that makes this possible, for the dead speak to the living out of the space woven by the feeling of community, through the air that is created from the feeling of universal gratitude toward the world.

Wherever our being has been united with another in action, something remains behind. This remainder establishes a permanent relationship between our being and everything we have ever been connected with. This feeling of kinship is the foundation for the subconscious feeling of community or solidarity with the surrounding world.

The enrichment, enhancement and ennobling of life depend on raising into consciousness this feeling of universal trust or confidence in the life that flows through and past us—trust in life. It consists in an unshakable mood in the soul that life, however it may approach us, has under all circumstances something to give us. [this leads to observing] the wise guidance and ordering of life. When we develop this attitude of trust, we

make it possible for the dead to find their way to us with their thoughts, for the thoughts of the dead can sail to us on this mood of trust. We need to call forth freshly renewed trust and confidence in one who can no longer inspire that trust through physical presence.

When we experience something,[we can] form a kind of perception that can call up in the soul the impulse to ask ourselves, how would my dead friend experience what I am experiencing at this moment. By creating the imagination that the dead friend is experiencing the event side by side with us and making this a really living feeling, we can form some impression of how communication arises. We find our way into a language that is not at all formed according to earthly conditions, but is rather a language arising from feelings, from the heart, a kind of language of the heart—a language of vowels and verbs.

After death, our life-force or Etheric body, as it frees itself, carries forth our living thoughts to the angels, archangels and archai, who in the Divine Grace receive these thoughts.

“Angels, Archangels, and Archai weaving in the Ether receive the human being’s Web of Destiny.”

After a few days discarnate souls enter a backward course of life. They experience their deeds, impulses of will, tendencies of thought as they worked on other people to whom they did good or evil. They enter right into the minds and feelings of those others. They undergo all that took place in the depths of the souls of the other human beings with whom they entered into any kind of karmic relationship—to whom they did anything whatever, good or ill. All the human being experienced is being received into the essence the reality of Kyriotetes, Dynamis and Exusiai. The consequences of human actions are taken up and transformed into righteousness by the beings of the second hierarchy. The actions fade or die or pass from existence. We say they are forgiven or given away in devotion.

“In Exusiai, Dynamis, and Kyriotetes, in the astral feel of the Cosmos, the righteous consequences of human earthly life die into the realm of Being”

The discarnate soul, entering Devachan. There earthly deeds—transformed into divine righteousness—are received into the activity of the first hierarchy. The soul feels:

All that took place through me on Earth is now being received by Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones, into their own active Being.’

In Thrones and Cherubim and Seraphim, as their Deeds of Being, the justly transmuted human ‘fruits of the earthly life are resurrected.’

How would you personify Death

The Cowboy's Final Ride

-by Maureen Tolman Flannery

This cowhand was ready for the last trail,
had his nap-sack and grub stowed,
his bedroll tucked behind the saddle.
So much waiting
and Death late with the wagon—
probably out East
recruiting a crew of tenderfeet,
getting them up to speed.
I suppose Death figured this seasoned cowpoke,
already signed on, wouldn't mind.
Greenhorns would need to be trained
about where the trail was headed
and what would have to be left behind.

*Here Death is the trail boss, taking for granted
the experience of the good cowhand, in no hurry
to pick him up, but busy recruiting new saddle tramps
for the final ride.*

from **Necromancer**

by Maureen Tolman Flannery

...
A dark gypsy beauty admired from afar,
her darting gem-eyes almost flirt
and lure with implied promises.
This *curandera*-midwife gyrates around me,
her bell-ribboned ankles tapping exotic rhythms
as she clanks castanets absent-mindedly at her side.
Harboring intimate secrets of every passenger,
she keeps herself aloof...

*Here Death is a nurturing but seductive gypsy
desirable, yet somehow inscrutable*

Upended Again

Maureen Tolman Flannery

I am redirected again by Death,
that upender of agendas who sends us, reeling,
into whirlpools of unknowing just when we were confident
about what we intended to do with a day, a year, a lifetime.

Here Death is an annoying intruder into our intended activities

Beloved Quietus, poems of death by Maureen Tolman Flannery

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