

Reflections on a Bereavement

Edward L. Hart

MY WIFE, ELEANOR COLEMAN HART, died on Christmas Eve, 24 December 1990, after an unfailingly resolute two-year struggle with systemic lupus. The forty-sixth anniversary of our wedding passed only a few days before her death. A month later, still in profound agony over her loss, I began writing my thoughts in an attempt to obtain a perspective that would allow me to go on. The pages that follow, dated as I wrote them, came as I felt a need to write. Being alone, I could no longer communicate with the only person with whom I have ever been able to share my innermost thoughts.

Although I know that I am not the only person to experience grief, I feel my own pain is unique—as I suspect everyone's grief is unique, though a generic thread runs through all our losses. As life is a mystery, so is death. I can never understand it, and reconciliation to it as a reality requires more than the human powers I possess.

28 January 1991

The worst thing to think of is the unfinished things: the book I brought to the hospital from which I read to her only the first paragraph; the trip we planned “when she got better”; the gray suit purchased in Pakistan that needed altering to fit the figure that had lost over a hundred pounds during the last year. These activities we left unfinished because we never admitted to each other that she was not going to recover. That posture made it possible to go on and face each day. But beneath that posture, which I never dared confront openly, I

EDWARD L. HART, retired BYU professor of English, has written seven books, including a book of poems called To Utah, and numerous articles, essays, and poems, one of which, “Our Savior’s Love,” is in the new LDS hymn book. He is listed in Who’s Who in America. He married Eleanor Coleman in 1944, and they raised four children. She died 24 December 1990.

think we both knew. And I think that is why her death hit me so hard. Intellectually I knew it was possible, but emotionally I was totally unprepared. But then I think it impossible to know in advance just how deep the emptiness will be, just how inconceivable the knowledge that I will never see her again, never hear her voice again, never touch her again, never do together again any of the things we had done for forty-six years.

There is no way to comprehend the word *never*. I begin to understand it when the vastness of empty space that is *never* hits me with a stunning blow every day. I want to plead, "Come back." By her side just after she died, I did say aloud, "Don't go and leave me here; take me with you." But she went alone and left me to face the world without her—a world from which the focus of meaning had gone. My reason for doing everything had vanished. The lodestone that had drawn me to hearth and home was no longer there. Things we had once shared lost their significance. She had been able to find beauty in things right to the end. She could see the sunsets from our big bedroom window and would call to me to look. On one of her last trips to her doctor before she had to go to the hospital, she looked eastward as we headed home and exclaimed over the beauty of the mountains. So now sunsets and snow-covered mountains are only painful reminders of my lost capacity to share with the one I love. With her loss, "there hath passed away a glory from the earth" (Wordsworth 1892). There can be no consolation for the glory that is irrecoverable. That is one aspect of *never*. It is the black hole into which everything is sucked—and the reason why all the diversions I contrive—exercise, necessary tasks, eating, reading, television—all are drawn into nothingness when I stop diverting myself and confront the fact that she is gone forever.

The last half of Eleanor's last year she was at home—after spending the first six months of 1990 in a hospital and a nursing home. I would not have been deprived of those six months at home for anything. That is why I look frowningly, I'm afraid, at would-be comforters who assure me that now she is out of pain. What I discover is that they are looking at things from her point of view and not from mine. I know that she was often, probably most of the time, in a great deal of pain. Toward the end, nothing I was allowed to give her at home relieved it. The day my son and I took her to see her doctor for her last scheduled appointment, he gave her a shot of morphine on the spot and put her in the hospital immediately—she died exactly ten days later.

If the "now she is out of pain" formula is valid, one would have to reason that she would have been better off dying much earlier. And because I cannot grant that part of the logic, I cannot grant any of it.

I am aware that I am speaking selfishly and because the pain was hers, not mine. Though I tried to empathize with her, I wept silently over her suffering, never letting her see my tears for fear she would think I had given up hope—and hope was all we lived on.

Even in the midst of all the pain, we had good times—intervals when she seemed relatively comfortable, when I would read to her, or we would talk, or visit with our children when they came or phoned. For a time, she was able to get out of bed by herself and walk with a walker to the far end of the house. For a time, she was even able to walk down the steps to the car and go out to dinner (just like old times except for the wheelchair), and then walk back up the steps to the porch and into the house again. Once she even walked down all the stairs to the lower level of the house and back up. She had something of a relapse after that, and at the time, in my own mind, I blamed the therapist for overdoing the exercise. In retrospect, I think it was the deteriorating gall bladder manifesting itself, and that would have happened with or without the exercise. I'm glad that she was able to achieve one goal that she had set. But again, I am probably looking from my own selfish viewpoint. Still, I can't help thinking that she, like me, would not have wanted to miss that six months at home in spite of escalating pain from lupus ulcers on her legs, fractured vertebrae (resulting, probably, from the cortisone she had to take), and a diseased gall bladder. It is as impossible now as it was then to know which pains came from which source.

Toward the end the pains became excruciating. But before that, she had relatively good days when she enjoyed three good meals a day, when she could get out of bed unassisted and take care of her own needs, walk to the car, go out to dinner sitting in a wheelchair. It seemed almost, as I said, like old times, both of us believing she was on the road to a full recovery. We were not able to take into account the diseased gall bladder or the body so weakened by lupus that it could not endure surgery to remove it. It is as well we didn't realize it. Those were sweet times, and on a real-life scale, as in the literary construct of a tragedy, the good times outweigh the bad. Just as the reunion and reconciliation of King Lear and Cordelia, even though they are prisoners, make up for all the bad things that have happened and will happen, so our time together more than compensated for her pain and my heartbreak. I know I am not empowered to speak for her, but I would not have missed those last six months.

All of this is why I cannot take comfort when someone says, "Now she is out of pain." To be out of pain is to be out of life, since there is no stage of life free from pain. She clung to life desperately with the kind of courage and fortitude I hope I can muster for my last days.

29 January 1991

What is the right thing to do about the thoughts that torment me? Should I suppress them as much as possible and hope that with time, enough time, they will disappear or at least be submerged so that I can go through a day (not to mention a night) without being overwhelmed by them? I have thought this and done this up to now. Is it morbid of me to try to write about them now? There seems to be no way to write my thoughts down exactly. As soon as thoughts become words, the words intrude with their own life, a life that has had accretions of meaning unrelated to the purpose for which they were selected. They carry with them overtones that existed in them before they were chosen. These overtones lead off in directions in which the original ideas never thought of going. And so the original thought is muddled—sometimes even completely lost.

I know from the start that this enterprise of writing will fall short of accurate expression of my thoughts, but I proceed anyway because to write nothing—to just wait for time to erase my memories and my pain—would be to hope that she would be expunged from the mind of the one person who knew and loved her best. That, I hope, is thinking of her. For myself, perhaps what I write will help me in some way to come to terms with my experience. Therefore, I have written this, not for posterity, not to be self-serving, but to try to understand why I am alone in a house in which everything reminds me of her and of my total inability to communicate with her ever again; to understand why everything in my life has changed and to realize that nothing will ever be as it was. These thoughts ambush me unexpectedly, not just at home but anywhere and everywhere. My eyes blur, my chest tightens, and the bottom drops out of my life through the pit of my stomach, leaving me inexpressibly lost and lonely.

2 February 1991

I am searching for her essence, especially the part of her that makes up part of me. I know I should not torture myself with this search. It is too painful, and it is impossible. I go through her things in an attempt to get the house in order. What I sort through reminds me that the past two years have not been the same as any other period of our life together. The medicine I have thrown away, the bandages I used when changing the dressings on her lupus sores every day, the paraphernalia of the sick room—all these have quite a different reality from household items we used before, when it seemed we were on a course of gradually growing old together. Of course, even then I was aware that we couldn't do all the things we used to do, but despite the

recognition of the diminished scope of our activities, I never really felt old. And now I do.

No wonder I want to recapture a past that had a wholeness. It's strange. When she was here and all right, I could go through a day similar in all outward appearances to today—just following a routine—and not feel that my life was anything but satisfactory, even though Eleanor might not have been home for some reason. Now I go through the same routine and am overwhelmed by the change. Each familiar object, my solitary meal, even television programs remind me of her, of her likes and dislikes, and I am overwhelmed by sadness. Nothing will ever again be what it was, and it is vain to seek to restore it.

I am reminded of a few words my father taught me to write years ago in a grade school autograph book: "Look not mournfully into the past: it cometh not back again; but boldly improve the future: it is thine." I'm afraid this sage advice is easier to remember than it is to follow. I can neither restore the past nor see the future as anything other than as Andrew Marvell described it: "Deserts of vast eternity" (1974, 308-9). Whatever time I have left—a year, ten years—seems too long.

I went to the cemetery yesterday and just stood by her grave. I know she isn't there, but where is she? I go through her things and look at her pictures. I spent half an hour before dinner going through a scrapbook she kept of our meeting, first date, wedding, honeymoon. There I found the picture of a baby she once put on my pillow. "Propaganda," she labeled it. But those days were a reality we both knew had developed into something richer and deeper as our life together continued. So those early years are not the reality of her any more than an entry in her diary (which I have been using to prop up the other side of this journal). It is the entry for 26 September 1989: "I am in a lot of pain if I move at all. Put more heat on it but didn't help. Poor Ed must do everything besides coping with my screams of pain when trying to get out of bed." Neither the beginning nor the end of our life together—nor yet all the years of growing together in between—have left mementos that revive a lost reality. The sad truth remains that all the artifacts from the past fail to convey anything more than a sense of loss.

The reality that *was* has come to an end. I believe that we will be re-united. But that will be a new reality—one of which I as yet know nothing. While we are mortals, we think and understand as mortals. It is all we know. There is something grand and awesome about mortality that demands—and absorbs—my full attention on its own terms. And as long as I am alive, these are terms that I must learn to deal with.

I have never been touched so closely by death before. Never before has my life been changed to the root by it. Now I have no choice but to experience it, and because I cannot now rationalize it and put it out of my mind, I have to learn to accept it and go step by blind step into the unknown.

I remember feeling as a child that I was missing something—that somehow I did not have all the equipment for sensing what was going on. Perhaps the glasses that I wore after the age of six put an insulation between me and the earth and rendered all things two-dimensionally. When I was a university student, I remember coming out of a classroom one spring day, taking off my glasses, and feeling the depth of the scene beneath the Japanese cherries, sensing that the trees and buildings were three-dimensional and that I was moving through space, not against a flat backdrop. But I think that realization came from more than just taking off my glasses, something I had done countless times before. It was a wakening fully to the realization of what I only sensed vaguely as a child—that reality has a spatial existence we can never fully know, but toward an understanding of which I aspire.

5 February 1991

I have already noted that there is something grand and awesome about mortal life. Knowing that we are mortal, that we are subject to pain and death, that there are finite limits to time and our capacity to enjoy, puts a sharp edge on our earthly experiences. I cannot imagine an immortal beholder standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls getting the same breathless sensation that a mortal gets.

With our limitation of time and space, we know that no moment will ever be repeated and that no scene will ever come again just the same. Subtle changes (in light and color, for instance) always take place, but we also change from one moment to the next. Have you ever tried to recapture a lost experience? An odor, a sound, a rhythm, a color may act upon us strongly, but what comes back in memory is not the same as the original experience. Every moment in mortality is unique. We feel *dejà vu* so strongly because we sense that a *temps perdu* is truly lost forever, no matter how much we may want it back. What we can retrieve is a vague essence at best, tauntingly familiar in some ways, but always beyond grasp.

This is part of the reason why I cannot reconstruct Eleanor's essence. Each moment flees as I reach to grasp it. And yet a sense of her floods over me as I go on living in the house we shared. Her touch, her values, her opinions, her choices are a presence that I am unaware of only temporarily when I become engrossed in a problem, a televi-

sion program, or bills. Always the knowledge that she has gone from me floods back in. I doubt it would be different if I moved to a new house. But why would I want to escape something so much a part of my being? What I want to do is understand it and thus reconcile myself to it; not by running from it but by running into it, by being assimilated into the truth, the reality of her and of her death.

6 February 1991

I saw my friend Dr. Richard Parkinson this morning, and he advised me, "Keep busy. I know the urge is to do nothing, to sit around and think. So many men in your situation just deteriorate and go downhill. You mustn't do that." He is right, of course. It would be so easy to do nothing. That is one reason I walk at the mall every day, steadily increasing my distance. I am looking for something I can respond to with eagerness. And that is a problem. There are tasks I must do—household chores, sorting out and keeping track of the hospital and doctor bills as they still come in. I eat, though nothing tastes good. These are obligations. Today I went out to dinner by myself—for the first time since Eleanor's death. I hesitated to go. Because the restaurant was one of *our* favorites, I thought I might have to explain why I was alone. But the server who waited on me knew and only squeezed my arm.

Reading helps me pass the time, but I haven't the energy to take on anything that requires much of me. I read a number of books to Eleanor while she was in the hospital and the nursing home—several Tony Hillermans and those cat books of Lilian Braun that she had not already read. I read to her almost every day (as problems with cataracts made reading increasingly difficult for her). I can still forget myself for a time in books, but I do not expect, in fact do not want, to be excited by the mystery fiction I read. Books are a good intellectual diversion, and for a time they take my mind off realities that are painful.

I still search for something to respond to with eagerness. Television is little help. A good mystery there serves the same function as a good mystery book, but I shun programs that purport to have a serious purpose, partly because I know from experience that they will be pretentious and that their serious message, if they have one, will not be serious to me. (One exception was the PBS series on the Civil War, which Eleanor and I watched together and thoroughly enjoyed.) Even if I could find an honest depiction of love, I would not be able to handle it right now. All television seems to offer instead is sex. I have nothing against sex as a part (an essential part, I might add) of the whole spectrum of love. It was an essential and satisfying part of my relationship with Eleanor, and I have every reason to believe that she

felt the same. But I cannot respond to it now, nor can it play a part in my life. I watched the dear flesh of her body shrink and waste away. Helping her get into and out of bed, at home or in the nursing home, I saw her poor wasted hips and thighs and went away and cried. During the six months she was home just before the end, before her last visit to the hospital and the operation from which she never recovered, I took care of her every need.

Any portrayal on the screen now of naked female flesh reminds me only of what it can become. I have changed; I cannot see anything without seeing its mortality. Perhaps this is what Holbein was getting at in his "Dance of Death" series. Though my responses may sound morbid, I could not have felt otherwise, banishing from me all thoughts except concern for Eleanor's welfare. But in truth, I did not banish anything. Thoughts not related to immediate needs just fled of their own accord, and I cannot say I am sorry for that. I can only say that now that the center of my focus is gone, now that I have no one to take care of, a great void yawns before me.

10 February 1991

My old teacher, friend, and poetic guide, Brewster Ghiselin, wrote this: "Dear Ed, Your loss of Eleanor is grievous beyond consolation, I know. Yet I hope it will be lightened by the influence of your church and by the poetic spirit that has shaped your life and art. . . ." When I first received this note, I knew the first part was true, that my loss is grievous beyond consolation. My religious beliefs seemed to remain intact but the whole of the rest of my life stretched between me and a future reunion with Eleanor. I reeled from my sense of present loss, and my poetic spirit had no immediate response except to loss.

I wrote the following lines a day or two after all my children had gone after the funeral and I was left alone in the house. It doesn't seem very poetic to me now—just stark, bare, and raw—and certainly offers no consolation.

The word alone
Has an empty tone
Like heavy tread
On hollow bone.
My heart turns stone
By her coffin. Dead.

That sounds like the end of everything; and to me, it was.

I used the past tense deliberately with the word *was*, hoping, perhaps, that saying it would make the feeling of total loss stay in the past—that the little respite I felt today will grow and maybe shape and in time give meaning to my grief. I went to church this morning,

expecting that like the past few Sundays I would feel pain at many points and would have to fight tears in public, something the men in the Hart family have never permitted. I tried to sing along with John Henry Newman's "Lead, Kindly Light" and did fine till the last line's ending: "And with the morn those angel faces smile, / Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile." Even before, I had never been able to sing through those lines, thinking of my mother and father and my older sister, who died in a car accident. Last week, as members of my ward sang, my pain was so intense I don't know how I kept from screaming out loud.

But today was different. The speakers were George and Karen Tate. George lost his wife a few years ago from a gradually debilitating disease, and I'm not sure what happened with Karen's former husband. Between them they have five children, I think. Karen spoke first, about gratitude. As she developed her subject, I had a growing awareness of my own ingratitude. My daily prayers have included thanks for my health and that of my children and their families. And thanks for their accomplishments. But I hadn't really *felt* the thanks until today. How churlish of me to have been so lost in my own grief as to say that all was lost! How selfish! when all along I know that the children Eleanor and I jointly gave life to and nourished are living proof, along with our grandchildren, that our past together has not been wiped out but will continue on earth as long as we have a posterity. And I realized that instead of complaining that our life together as husband and wife had come to an irreversible earthly conclusion, I ought to be thankful for the wonderful forty-six years we had together — rich, fruitful, full of achieved dreams and plans.

How many times had we felt dark despair over some dire event threatening us or our children — only in the end to be delivered, knowing, both of us, that our prayers had been answered and that forces were at work seeing us through life's difficulties. Never did we breathe a word outside the closed circle of our two conjoined souls for fear of sounding boastful and losing the blessing! How ungrateful to forget this, the binding together that will never come asunder, simply because our last, most fervent and sincere prayer of the past two years, that Eleanor would be restored to health, was not answered the way we wanted. I have to acknowledge that the power that worked things out for our best good in the past, in ways beyond our understanding, may well be continuing to do so, though I expect never to understand in this life and must rely on faith that this is so. Job wasn't given an answer when he demanded that God tell him why there is injustice and why the innocent suffer. I suspect the answer is not given because it is beyond human comprehension. In the midst of my pressing sor-

row, I must learn to be grateful for what has been given rather than angry or resentful over what has been taken away—though the weight of the loss is at times greater than I believe myself able to bear.

When George came to the pulpit, he spoke about peace—a good topic with the Gulf War going on at the time. But the peace he spoke of was not the absence of war. It was, rather, peace of the soul, a topic he developed from scriptural and poetic sources. That kind of peace has eluded me lately, and my mind has been in constant turmoil. While George was speaking, a feeling something akin to peace came over me. I no longer looked around at women in the congregation and said to myself, “What right have you to be alive when my wife is dead?” The words of King Lear no longer rang in my ears, the words he spoke over the dead body of his daughter Cordelia: “Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life! / And thou no breath at all?” Especially, I no longer wondered why I should be alive.

I feel a change in myself. Today I looked at the snow on Timp-anogos (insofar as I could see it through the smog—a good metaphor for my state of mind) and felt thankful that I am alive and well. I was able to go home and walk through the door without my heart sinking. At least the seeds of peace have been planted. I am beginning to feel as I would have hoped Eleanor would feel if I had gone first. And I know what she would say to me now if she could: “Put this behind you and get on with your life.” She always was more practical in a crisis.

While I have been acutely aware of so many doors being closed on former joys, I have also, in the overwhelming grief of the moment, lost sight of one important door that remains open. Instead of staying lost in grief and pain, I can lose myself in service to others. I have the example of my two sons and two daughters, who were thoughtfully devoted to their mother while she was alive, spending time and money and traveling long distances to be with her often. They are what she had expended the greatest store of her life upon—they and her husband—and they returned her affection in great and full measure, to her and to me since, comforting me and concerning themselves with my welfare. And I have the examples before me every day of friends, acquaintances, and of people I have never met performing deeds of service to others.

That is part of my belief too, that the best way to show love of God is to show love to his children. So I have a door open if I will walk through it. I do not mean to say that I am out of the woods. The house is still empty when I come home. And my first reaction, when I learn something of interest, is and will continue to be that I want to share it with Eleanor. It happens a hundred times a day, and each time I realize that I cannot will be like a blow to the solar plexus. I can see no

immediate dulling of the sharp edge of sorrow. I hope to keep Eleanor alive, not by sealing off rooms and keeping them just as they were, but by keeping alive in me that most important part of me that she quickened into existence and shaped during the forty-six years of our life together. This, I think, is what it will mean to be at peace.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Wordsworth, William. "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." In *Works*, 403. New York: Thos. Y. Crowell and Co., 1892.
- Marvell, Andrew. "To His Coy Mistress." In *Poets of the Seventeenth Century*, vol. 1, 308-9. New York: Signet, 1974.