

Deaths and (Re)births

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Descent

2004 is mostly a blur. My memory is shrouded in a merciful haze. Odd or trivial details emerge vividly sometimes. I can recall returning home from work one day, trudging slowly up the steps to the small two-bedroom apartment in which my wife and I lived, newly graced with the presence of our twin son and daughter, born a few months before. I winced as I climbed, consciously slowing my ascent, wanting the short journey to the door—like Zeno’s speeding arrow that never arrives at its target—to never end. I was physically and emotionally exhausted and had been since the day of the twins’ birth, but the wince derived from anticipation of what would inevitably greet me behind that door. Taking a deep, resigned breath (and feeling guilty—again—for not wanting to come home) I turned the door handle and stepped inside.

It was, by now, an all-too-familiar scene: baby clothes, diapers (some used, some not), bouncy seats, and a hundred other little items related to child care scattered all over the floor and the furniture. Bits of sepia-colored carpet showed here and there, islands in a sea of infant detritus. As I looked across the room and into the small kitchen, my gaze rested on my wife, Amanda. Her overall appearance was but one symptom of the devastation that had taken its toll on even the most mundane of our repetitive daily routines. “Disheveled” would hardly describe it. She was in her usual half-dressed state. Bedraggled tresses of her unkempt brownish-blond hair shot out in a dozen directions. If I recall accurately, she had essentially stopped doing her hair at all except for on Sundays when we would attend church services. Makeup and other self-grooming habits had suffered a similar fate. One of the twins (I forget if it was Ethan or Mylyn) was perched expertly

on her hip while she finished cooking dinner. Two surprises, then, contradicting my prophetic expectations during the long climb up the stairs. One—she was not in that suffocating prison of a rocking chair holding both babies, as was normally the case. I surveyed the room and could see that the other baby was in one of the bouncy seats, distracted (no doubt briefly) by some children’s show on television. Two—she was making dinner. Dinner was an enterprise we had long since mostly given up in favor of fast food that we consumed robotically, without tasting.

I gingerly stepped across islands of carpet to the kitchen, calling out my usual greeting. She replied without turning around, “Hi.” Even before I reached her the baby in the living room began to cry. Amanda turned to me, her face emotionless: “Here.” I took the baby in my arms, raising her (or him; I can’t remember) up in the air and cooing, hoping for a smile. Amanda made her way into the living room, picked up the crying baby, and waded through the Sea of Infant Flotsam and Jetsam to the rocking chair, where she began nursing. Not more than a minute passed, however, and the baby I was holding also began to cry. “Bring (him/her) over here,” Amanda called to me, in a flat, indifferent voice. The voice did not match her facial expression—she smiled lovingly at the two babies now positioned on the custom nursing pillow made for twins that we had found online prior to their birth. I still marveled that she could nurse two babies at the same time.

My heart sank (again) as I looked around at the hurricane-like devastation in the apartment. It was a discouraging sight, as always. The kitchen looked much like the living room, with dirty dishes, pots, pans, and food stains filling every available surface. As on so many days before this one, I was at the moment of impossible decision; my entire life, in fact, had been reduced to the daily repetition of this one choice: Should I help my wife in some sort of significantly constructive way? Or should I dig into the nearly untouched mountain of homework and studying that had piled up during the course of the semester? It didn’t matter which horn of the dilemma I immolated myself on. Either way, it would be an all-nighter. We had not, in fact, really slept in months. I felt like Sisyphus, who was condemned to manhandle a boulder up the side of a mountain and then watch it roll back down again for eternity. In Albert Camus’ interpretation, Sisyphus’ challenge was to

discover any sort of purpose or meaning in that one everlastingly repetitive act. Of course, Sisyphus had no choice in his task but to physically repeat it over and over again, against his will. His descent to the bottom was eternal. By contrast, I theoretically had a choice, but—surveying the damage one more time, seeing my wife slumped in her rocking chair, drifting out to sea—there was really nothing substantive about that choice. Our descent into discouragement and despair scraped against the same texture of eternity. I began clearing the table, burying my shoulder and my neck into the side of my now familiar boulder, bracing myself to once again begin pushing.

Fall

“Well, I have good news for the two of you. First, it’s a boy. Second—he has a sister.”

All it took was one perfectly timed and perfectly worded sentence from our ultrasound technician to cause my appetite to disappear completely for forty-eight hours. Twins. It was unimaginable. During that period I experienced varying waves of total euphoria and mind-numbing fear. Admittedly, it was mostly euphoria. The bragging rights were, after all, unparalleled. Not only naturally-conceived twins on our first excursion into replenishing the earth, but opposite-sex twins as well. Apollo and Artemis, just like that.

Surely, we were gods.

I’ll never forget calling my parents, for whom these would be their first grandchildren.

“Dad, we just got back from the ultrasound.”

“*And?*” Dad’s voice sounded anxiously through the phone receiver.

“Guess.”

“It’s a boy, like you thought.”

“Yes. It’s a boy.”

“That’s fantastic, son! We’re so excited for you!”

This was so delicious. “And he has a sister.”

Long pause. Then, “What? What do you mean? It’s a girl?”

Wait for it. . . .

“*Oh my gosh!* Are you saying what I think you’re saying?! *Twins?!* I can’t believe it!” Now he was sobbing like a child, overcome with

joy. I was surprised to realize that my father's rapture was even more thrilling than the news itself. His joy was confirmation of a gift—that kind of gift all sons try to give their fathers in order to prove their worth to them as men, by excelling in sports or succeeding in a lucrative profession. I had been trying to give him such a gift my entire life, and had only succeeded in this event. It was a supremely unforgettable moment.

Amanda's pregnancy was difficult. She had severe versions of typical pregnancy nausea and migraines. But she also experienced dreadful cramping on one side of her abdomen, cramping that could only be assuaged by long walks. Dark three o'clock strolls around our sleeping neighborhood became commonplace for us. Many days she could barely move because of the pain, and doctors were at a loss to explain the origins or offer options for alleviation. It was almost a relief when Amanda's water broke at thirty-one weeks. Almost. Unfortunately, one of the babies was breech, so Amanda had to have an emergency cesarean section. She was frightened. We both were. Our obstetrician was called to the hospital and arrived fairly quickly. We frankly didn't like him—he was pushy, uncaring, and never listened to Amanda and her questions and concerns. But, since this was Provo, Utah, he also happened to be a stake president and he asked me if I wanted to give her a blessing before she went into surgery. I was grateful for that; in all the fear and commotion I hadn't thought about it. He anointed her head and I gave a short blessing. A moment later Amanda was on the operating table.

The surgery went well and both the babies were whisked off to the NICU before I could really catch a good glimpse of them. Later I would see and hold them, of course, and they were beautiful, though so tiny: about four pounds each, a pretty good size, really, for arriving nine weeks prematurely. But my immediate concern was Amanda. She was barely out of the operating room, but her medication seemed to be wearing off far ahead of schedule. She was in severe pain from the surgery, from the yanking and tearing that was necessary to extract the babies through the small incision in her lower abdomen. Nurses came in, followed by doctors. She was gasping, crying, screaming. The consensus was that they had not successfully "gotten on top of the pain," meaning, apparently, that the amount of morphine administered after the

surgery had not been enough. (She would have this same problem in subsequent deliveries). Now it would take some time for the newly administered medication to take effect. It was like being strapped to a chair and forced to watch your spouse be senselessly tortured. There was nothing I could do, and it went on for hours. I vaguely remember screaming at a nurse that if she couldn't do anything then no one could. How was no one able to do anything to relieve her suffering? How could this have happened? It went on and on. I was a sweaty mess just from watching it, just from trying to be with her to the extent I could. But I knew my own exhaustion was nothing in comparison to hers. Over the next several days, in fact, she would be in indescribable agony from her surgery. I do not know to this day whether the hospital's pain-management policy was too conservative or the medication simply didn't work, but she experienced little relief until she was released from the hospital.

In the midst of all the pandemonium, I remember a cousin of mine, a woman I hadn't seen in years, knocking on the hospital room door with a bouquet of flowers in her hand. By this time I was weeping over my utter inability to help my wife as she thrashed about and pleaded for relief. "Thank you," I whispered as I took the flowers, my voice trembling. She could see that we were all in distress and that she would not be able to help. She squeezed my hand, smiling as her concerned eyes clearly conveyed, "I'm so sorry," and she quickly left.

I was numb. This couldn't be real. I had never had to be a helpless witness to such suffering. Something was not right, something bigger than the material suffering in front of me. Something cosmological and universal and foundational was quivering and trembling to the point of breaking—but I didn't ask the Question, the question that so often comes to the believer in the midst of intense suffering. Well. *Other* believers. Not me. I refused the Question. I thought that if I had it set before me, comfortably but persistently gazing into my soul, awaiting my response, I would crumble into nothing. No, it would not be allowed anywhere near me.

My father-in-law arrived soon after. He asked if Amanda needed a blessing. I mumbled between tears that I had already

given her a blessing, much good that had done, but affirmed that one could be given again. Barely able to speak, I indicated that I was in no condition to pronounce the blessing and asked him to do it instead. This time I anointed her head and her father was voice. Nevertheless, neither priesthood nor medicine could assuage her torment, and it would be several more hours before sheer exhaustion from the strain of endurance overtook her and she fell mercifully asleep.

But it was only the beginning.

Landing

I was not going to graduate.

I was nearing the end of my final semester at BYU, approximately fourteen or fifteen months after the twins' births. Predicate Logic. It was predicate logic that was finally going to close the lid on my academic coffin. I had been able to skate by in my other classes: a B in a relatively easy Marriage and Family course, a C in a more difficult philosophy class, even a D+ in Personal Finance, which I almost never attended—I probably should have failed that course outright. But Predicate Logic was a required course for my chosen major, philosophy, and you couldn't get anything lower than a C for a major class. Once you dropped below a C you would have to retake the class. I was well below a C, and scheduled to graduate the following month. If I didn't produce that C, I would not graduate.

That I even had a 3.0 GPA by the time of my final semester was nothing short of miraculous. I had a full load of classes at BYU, but I also worked a full-time job in Midvale, about forty-five minutes away. I would attend my classes in the morning (scheduling the first for the earliest time slot available) and by late morning be on the road to my job. I would arrive home every day around 7:00 or 7:30 P.M. I could either do homework at that time or arise extra early in the morning. Either of these options proved to be essentially impossible from the moment we brought the twins home, dragging along a host of medical complications with them.

The problem (and all other problems associated with their entrance into the world—of which there were many—paled in comparison) was the babies' sleep patterns. Or rather, their complete

lack of any kind of sleep pattern. One of them was almost always awake. Neither slept for more than forty minutes at a time. Try as we did (and oh how we tried!) we could not harmonize one with the other. We attempted everything in the book, read other books, sought advice from doctors, and then wrote our own book to replace the old, clearly flawed books, and that book was a failure as well. We would eventually discover some wheat and dairy allergies; Amanda spent some weeks tinkering with her diet until she at last found one compatible with nursing (she was determined—driven by an unseen force, she would later say—to exclusively breastfeed them at all costs) but this only slightly improved the situation.

I recall that one day/night, Ethan stayed awake (with intermittent short, fitful naps) for almost twenty hours straight. I barely remember placing him in his bouncy seat to play with some toys. It was around three A.M. I sat down on a kitchen chair and immediately nodded off. Amanda had gone to bed thirty minutes before with Mylyn, who had finally fallen asleep. I was awakened minutes later by Ethan's sudden screaming; the poor little guy had also nodded off and hit his mouth on a plastic protrusion on his seat. Amanda came running out from the bedroom, anxiously asking what had happened. My explanation angered her and we were now hysterically screaming at each other. Our nerves were shot, every physical and emotional reserve totally depleted.

The first six months we got at most an hour of sleep every night. Survival only came because it was so consistent: the body will eventually adapt to extreme situations, given enough repetition. By their first birthday, that had gradually improved to ninety minutes. By their second birthday we could plan on about four to five hours every night. I would try to spell Amanda on weekends when I was around so she could get a nap, but it wouldn't last long. When both babies cried and I couldn't console them, she would inevitably get up to help.

Amanda's mother had come to help for a couple of days at the very beginning. But she and her family had recently moved to Idaho, and she still had young children to care for herself (Amanda was the second-oldest of several). Besides, things were . . . complicated with her. She would not be available to assist us. My own

mother offered to fly out from Indiana to help. But there were issues on that front as well and Amanda felt at the time that it would be better if she didn't come. My parents' feelings were naturally hurt, and communication between us dried to a trickle. Neither of us had any other family nearby. As for our ward—we lived in one of those “newlywed or nearly dead” wards. The “nearly dead” Relief Society president had sisters in the ward deliver two meals, and that was that. Looking back, I see that I should have been more assertive in asking for help and pleading our cause. But as it was, no one wanted to hear about the hardships; they only wanted the stories that made having twins as romantic and adorable as they imagined it should be. And besides, do you know Sister Jones? She had *two* sets of twins, and then two more children besides. Now *that's* tough.

Our home had become a prison cell, one whose walls closed in around us a little more each day. We rarely went anywhere with the babies. Even after the danger of contracting RSV (respiratory syncytial virus, particularly prevalent in winter) had dissipated with the coming of spring, it was mind-numbingly exhausting to go anywhere with them because they would never stop crying. I dimly recall walking the paths of campus one day, feeling as though I were surrounded by ghosts, pale, wispy imitations of immaterial beings who could not help me, could not even hear my cries. They weren't real. But that's why I liked them, why I craved their spectral, wraithlike presence. Because the only thing that was real—devastatingly real—was the hellish nightmare living inside my apartment, a nightmare that I sentenced my wife to every day while I feverishly escaped every morning out the front door. Sure, I would dive in when I returned home and we staggered through the nights side by side. But I knew that the vast majority of the burden of their care fell on her. And the guilt would eat me alive that I was leaving her behind each morning, guilt at the relief that would wash over me as the howling of the babies and her piercing silence faded into the distance. I sometimes sobbed to myself in the car as I drove away, “I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.” But I never turned around.

Oh, so many things to have done differently in hindsight! Take a semester off. Insist at gunpoint that a parent or two take up residence in our apartment, relational issues be damned. Switch to

bottles. Tell my professors I was suicidal and take incompletes in my classes. There's a funny thing about hindsight, though. By definition it only appears after—usually long after—the events it claims to be able to see so clearly. And it is not 20/20; far from it. Hindsight is completely reconstructive, more a way of protecting oneself from the horrors of the past than a way of seeing it truly. I remember my brain turning to mush, not being able to type a coherent sentence for the first time in my life, forgetting co-workers' names, nearly driving into bridge pylons on the highway multiple times. No, those commonsense things simply would never have happened, not in this universe or any other one. We were kids having kids, unaided and scared, groping for the light, making it up as we went along.

I realized, distantly, at one point, that I had landed. I had reached some kind of bottom, some kind of ground floor, though in the hazy back of my mind, there was a voice telling me that all lowest points are only deceptively temporary; there is always further to fall, another low to collapse into. I marveled that my initial fall, so brutal and sudden, had become a gradual, seemingly never-ending descent, a descent so deep that I could no longer see the top, and one so gradual it hadn't occurred to me that I was still falling. And then the landing, with this realization, a realization I had had long before but had not allowed full access to my mind: There would be no one to rescue us, to even give us a brief reprieve, no one even to say that things would get better.

We were utterly alone.

Reckoning

At some point, stumbling around in the darkness, I had stopped even attempting to do homework. Some of my classes didn't make attendance part of the final grade; I stopped attending these classes altogether. I initially told some of my professors about our plight but received no quarter. My logic professor responded curtly, "Huh. My son and his wife had triplets." Despite the round-the-clock assistance his son's family was receiving from his extended family and his ward, having triplets was apparently much harder under any circumstances, so I had nothing to complain about.

I didn't care about anything. On some days I would come

home half hoping to hear Amanda had had an affair so I could exit from the misery that was our marriage. I might have considered one myself if I even had the energy to desire one. As if any woman could have even slightly desired my company! I knew that the abhorrence of life I had begun to carry around with me showed perfectly on my face. I couldn't have been less attractive or appealing and I'm sure, now, that no one wanted to be around me. Amanda and I spoke to each other but rarely conversed (I discovered there was a big difference between speaking and conversing). We fought over everything. Both of us had become precision experts in tactically locating the other's weak spots and mercilessly hacking one another to bits. We hated each other. I despised other people, who I was sure had never experienced anything close to what we were going through. I hated life. When I wasn't hoping something or someone besides myself would end my marriage, I was hoping the babies would just die. They were the source of all this horrendous suffering. If they weren't going to improve it would be better for them to just pass on to their celestial state. To make matters worse for me, Amanda didn't appear to feel that way about them. She would occasionally become frustrated with them but only rarely directed her negative thoughts and feelings toward them. Despite her suffering, she found that motherhood was genuinely fulfilling. Ironically, what was killing her was also providing her with the will to go on. I detested her for this. That she could love them—not that she loved them more than she loved me as much as the fact that she could love the very source of her suffering *when I could not*—drove the wedge deeper between us.

I would find out later that most days she would cry all day until about an hour before I returned home. We didn't know it at the time, but her postpartum depression was truly severe. It was winter, and with the additional threat of RSV striking the twins, she almost never left the house. Later she told me that on some days she would stand, wearing nothing but her garments, in the frame of the open front door, a baby in each arm, staring off into nothing. Sometimes people would pass by but she wouldn't notice until they had moved past her. She would spend hours doing this.

Her pain was surely greater than mine. At least I would get an almost daily break from the hell residing in our home and have ac-

tual conversations with adults. Amanda was trapped, both in the physical confines of our small apartment and in the prison of her own mind. She was often completely unresponsive to me, making our fights sometimes strangely welcome. I knew she was suffering more than I. But I was such a small, pathetic man that knowing this made things worse for me, and embittered me toward her. I never felt like I could say I had a hard day; her day was inevitably harder. I never felt like I could complain and rant and rave; she rarely complained. I wanted to suffer the most, to be the one that should be most pitied. I didn't have any reserves left to help her, to go to work, to be a student; didn't that count for something on the suffering scale?

My job was barely providing for the necessities of life and it wasn't enough. I was probably going to fail my logic class, so I wouldn't graduate this year, my primary responsibility unfulfilled. And what would I be graduating in? Philosophy. *Philosophy*. Of all the worthless majors to concentrate on, I had chosen that one. Sure, I had had a "plan." I was going to *graduate school*. I wanted to *teach*. What a joke. Even if I miraculously passed this class, my middling GPA virtually guaranteed that no graduate school would ever accept me. Two months previously, I had written a trial letter of intent, seeing if I could adequately explain to a graduate program why my GPA was so low and how that shouldn't be an obstacle in considering me for their program. Strangely, I just couldn't find the right phrasing for explaining how I chose to help my wife with our twins instead of doing homework and concentrating on the studies that would prepare me for graduate school. That dream had died.

And I didn't feel like a father at all. Many days I felt like (what I imagined would be) a partial and failed mother. At work and school all day, not making enough money, studying for exams to get a degree that was almost totally resistant to employment, and one I was not certain I would even be able to obtain anyway. Up all night caring for children that didn't seem to ever respond to my care. Was I a human being anymore? Was I even a man? Whatever I was, it was a shell of what I had once been. I was in limbo, suspended painfully in midair between the unattainable religious and cultural ideals of fatherhood and manhood and the brute ne-

cessity of physical need that was slowly killing me. My world had become utterly meaningless.

On one particular evening, as I rounded the point of the mountain on I-15 on my way home from work, I dozed off. I came to violently seconds later, realizing I had drifted into the lane next to mine, on my right. Fortunately, that lane was momentarily empty of vehicles and I quickly turned back to the left to reenter my lane, greeted by not a few honking cars. That was it. This was probably the seventh or eighth time I had dozed off on I-15 and I was going to get myself killed. I pulled over at the Thanksgiving Point exit and parked my truck on the side of the road, determined to grab a fifteen-minute catnap. But adrenaline was still coursing through my veins and I couldn't sleep. I gazed out at the cars whizzing by on the freeway in the fading light and shook my head, smiling a mirthless smile. It was hopeless. No really, it was, I thought. I was not being melodramatic. The lack of sleep was making me catatonic. I was in constant pain from head to toe and almost always wanted to cry. I had never experienced depression before and now wondered if this was what it felt like.

In the midst of all this, the Question finally overwhelmed me. I had resisted it in the Gethsemane of that birthing room, the day the twins were born and the day it seemed no divine or earthly mercy would be extended to my wife in her agony. The Question had appeared on my doorstep each day since then, and each day I ignored it and went resolutely about my suffering. With the slow passage of time, it grew larger in my field of vision, until it was everywhere I looked, constantly on the periphery of my gaze, always unflaggingly present. And now, with no strength left, I could not resist anymore, and one day it came in and calmly and silently sat down and took up residence in my heart. In the silence of my commute between Provo and Salt Lake, I began to seriously question my religious beliefs.

However, I fairly quickly (and surprisingly) came to realize that any sort of genuine acceptance of atheism was out of the question for me, not because it was ridiculous or misguided, but because I was ensnared and held captive by my religious world. Atheism wasn't an option because, as a concept, it was too easy—easy to the point of impossibility. I could happily conceptually assent to it, but only superficially. It wasn't that belief was

more rationally defensible and non-belief was weak and faulty. Far from it. In fact, the seductive lure of a verificationist logic that demanded empirically obvious evidence for every meaningful belief (and therefore did not admit belief in God) was incredibly enticing. You see, converting from a religious worldview to an atheistic one is, in the long view, a fairly judicious and reasonable move, one that potentially solves a lot of cognitive dissonance, if it's even possible for you at all. Though I could not do it myself, I discovered that for those who could, such a conversion could be quite freeing. Such a conversion will usually require one to alter and re-align one's entire view of cosmology—of the place of the world and human beings within existence. Everything changes, yes—but everything changes *together*, simultaneously, in a kind of godless harmony. The fragments of a broken world realign (perhaps over time) to form a different, yet even more logically feasible world, one that appears to be newly cohesive and coherent, and one that everyone, religious and non-religious alike, can see the sensibleness of, even if they cannot embrace it themselves. As religious people, we don't normally give the atheist worldview a whole lot of credence. But that's not because the religious worldview is so overwhelmingly rationally superior, and atheism is irrational and pathetic. It is because our religion has seized us, called to us in such a way that we cannot ignore it. It has captured our minds and our hearts with little effort on our part. There's a little free will wiggling around in there; but not much. And it only exerts itself within that specific context. You are religious (and, more specifically, Christian, or Hindu, or Mormon) more because of the pious threads of religious life that created you, or the religious event or events that interrupted and broke open your previous world, and now give new meaning to the world it has created in its place. It's shocking to the community of the former believer, of course, that think that is worse than murder—to turn your back on religion and God. But the move itself is perfectly rational, if rationality is ultimately non-contradiction, and non-contradiction is all the pieces of the observable world fitting together somehow. How could that not be liberating?

Instead, I found that ten-thousand threads bound me to an existence that I never primordially chose for myself, and thus was a

way of being that on a fundamental level I could not merely discard. I discovered this when I willfully and consciously began telling myself that God (at least the God of my understanding) did not exist. This is a classic response to the problem of evil: when the suffering gets intense and prolonged enough you'll eventually see that God (who is supposedly the God of intervention and deliverance) will not deliver you, just as he has not delivered millions upon millions from slow agonizing death, lives that endured far more than you, and then were snuffed out of existence. Once you realize this, you'll stop believing. Unrelenting suffering is the funeral dirge of any so-called god.

Good. Bring it on. What a welcome relief that will be.

But no.

I could not make myself disbelieve. I could not do it, no matter how I willed it. Which wasn't to say that many preconceptions and particularized beliefs were not ground into dust. I was more confused than ever about the nature of God, His presence in my life, and how to reconcile my unrelentingly painful experience with what I had been taught about Him. But I could not make myself believe He didn't exist, or that His presence had not been more obvious and tangible during prior moments of my life. Now, there was an error in the program, a tear in the painting, but the painting was not replaced by a different painting, one that could be equally beautiful and understood, one with no major flaws. It just sat there in front of me, unmoving and glaringly, even gaudily (godily?), ragged and imperfect. Over and over again I wished there weren't a God. My desire for God to not exist was ironically intense and earnest enough to amount to being a prayer, a prayer that my prayers would be received by nothingness. Better to know that I was on my own than to know He was there and supposedly loved me, but that I was nevertheless alone in His presence. The loneliness of solitude under the gaze of an omni-benevolent and omnipotent God, a God who was everywhere at all times, was infinitely worse than the loneliness shared with an equally lonely universe. That kind of realization, to my broken mind, was truly, even absurdly, tragic. The seemingly easy way out would not be an option. I would have no choice but to somberly reckon with the religious world and the religious peoples who had made me what I

was. There was nowhere else to look but up—to an invisible, silent, ever-present God, gazing wordlessly down upon me.

Ascent

In the end, time—which had colluded with the physical world to slowly march us toward death—also eventually served as an invaluable ally, and we gradually emerged from the grave. There was no dramatic rescue, no earth-shattering event on an epic scale. A series of small, grace-filled events helped keep us afloat. We were blessed to eventually move into a much larger and newer apartment. My logic professor unexpectedly, and at the last moment, changed the format of the class final to a written essay (which I easily produced) instead of a series of symbolic logic proofs (which I would have failed). After many months, the twins eventually graduated from their heart monitors and oxygen lines and we began to take them out of the apartment, first on walks, then to restaurants and malls. Gradually, we began to sleep again. Though it seemed an eternity at the time, the agonizingly slow but steady return to semi-functionality (of which I've related only the hundredth part) had lasted about two years.

But we weren't the same. Physically and emotionally, parts of us had died; indeed, had died many deaths, as new selves grappled with our world, selves created from bodies and minds that could no longer endure except in remnants, or bits and pieces of our former selves, the ethereal, barely-there remains of the corpses we had become. Those remnants would become new bodies and new minds, with new thoughts and new ways of struggling to live. And they would eventually deteriorate into remnants themselves, and the painful birthing process would begin anew. We died and were re-born multiple times, in that we lived processes that made us different, processes that forced on us new ways of thinking and being. As we gradually ascended out of the grave, our new selves could no longer know the selves that had died, in the prophet Jacob's words, "pierced with deep wounds." I look back at prior versions of myself with the eyes of a foreigner, an alien, barely recognizing those incarnations.

And yet it was difficult to tell where death had ravaged us and where rebirth into what we became replaced it. They seemed one and the same process, one and the same event. Our new selves felt

stronger but aged. We felt old beyond our years. For a long time we could only look at the people and the world around us with grave solemnity. We had arisen out of a private holocaust. Everything was new, without a history, because we, in the new remnants of our old selves, preceded everything around us. We saw the world with new eyes, eyes not fettered to old ways of seeing and understanding. Resurrected, we could live again in new ways.

It was some time before I could talk about God again, or really anything related to religion. Doctrine and Covenants 122 had once been my favorite scriptural narrative—a dialogue between Christ and Joseph Smith, leader of God’s chosen people, suffering unremittingly in the bare existence of Liberty Jail, crying out to God—where was He hiding while His people suffered and died? And God’s response: if even Hell itself threatens to swallow you whole in its rage and pain, “all these things shall give thee experience and shall be for thy good” (v. 7). I would quote this scripture frequently (often, I’m sure, quite insufferably) to members of the church I encountered on my mission, who were struggling with various trials. Now, I no longer knew what to think of it. Perhaps God was not all-powerful. Or maybe God’s power, His omnipotence, was of a different sort than physical, interventionist power. I thought I could accept that power within a religious context might be qualitatively different than power in the contexts with which I was more familiar. But a God who would not speak to me in the midst of my worst moments? How was that possible? In this way, the Question remained with me even after I had accepted that I could not (and, in fact, ultimately did not want to) rid myself of the core elements of my religious self. God had become a stranger to me, and yet, because I now had to reckon and wrestle with God as I never had to before, in a way He had become more real than at any prior time in my life. He was much more present to me than at those times that I recalled being in some kind of prayerful communication with Him and so certain of his existence that his omnipresence ironically showed Him to be nowhere at all. But this realization was of no immediate help. I could not see how to reconcile myself to this kind of God. Everything had been stripped away and the bare fact of God’s presence (silent and immovable) was all that was left. What was I to do with this?

The answer did not come for some time. In the meantime, I

continued to attend church—by force of will and reluctance to accept the social and marital consequences of inactivity—eventually holding callings and even bearing a testimony once or twice. But it was not because I felt some kind of prompting or yearning; I was curious about the possibility of my new self being able to carry on the practices of my old, dead self. A testimony was to be had in the bearing of it, right? But I did not feel anything—no spiritual confirmation, no witness of truth, no gift of comfort. I supposed, then, I had failed my test of faith, and this was the natural consequence.

More time passed. The twins grew older and a second daughter was added to our family. Another series of miracles and improbabilities (sure, why not? God existed—He just didn't think enough of me to talk to me, and therefore all miracles and horrible tragedies were both totally mysterious and seemingly arbitrary and capricious), and I was in graduate school to study (of course!) religion. Tormented by my experiences, frustrated with unsatisfactory conclusions, haunted by the silent God who incongruously would not leave me alone, I ironically sought refuge in a place where I would have to talk about, write about, and constantly think about God in some way or other. On Sundays I could then be extra-unsatisfied with the way my fellow Saints spoke about and lived their religion. Uneasily, I would note that many of my professors were the same as I. Most of them were atheists, but they were "Christ-haunted"; they had (also with deep irony) devoted their godless lives to thinking about God all the time. In a way God was as much a presence in their lives as He was in mine, and in much the same way. Perhaps, then, I was an atheist after all. Of course, there were many other factors that also constituted my desire to become a teacher, but I was also going to figure this out, however long it took. I was under no illusion that simply "thinking" my way into a solution was possible or would even be sufficient if I could, but I had to find some way of explaining a phenomenon to myself that no other human being could apparently account for to my satisfaction.

For years I thought about, wrote about, took classes on, and talked about the problem of evil and suffering. But everything I brought to bear on the subject felt inadequate, even a betrayal of

those who suffered greatly, because it offered reasons instead of comfort and mercy.

Then one day, in a moment of astounding simplicity, I reread Matthew 27:46, traditionally known in Christian history as the “Word of Abandonment”:

Around the ninth hour, Jesus shouted in a loud voice, saying “Eli Eli lama sabachthani?” which is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

This was the Psalmist’s cry in Psalm 22. This was Joseph Smith’s cry in Liberty Jail. Only Joseph had received an answer. Jesus, here on the cross, in the midst of ultimate suffering, in answer to his cry, received—silence.

I had no immediate response to this. Christ himself was greeted by silence in his most desperate hour. Did this complicate things even more? Perhaps. But I realized that this howl of lamentation, this crying out for the hidden God, was not the question of an atheist. It was the question of a believer, one who cannot help but believe, but whose belief offers no comfort, no revelation, no answers of solid certainty.

This experience remained with me for a while. Again, no easy answers here, but that was actually a sign of hope. I was sick of easy answers that avoided hard questions by appealing to happy endings. We do not live the ending. We are always living the middle. I needed something that would wrench me right down the middle. I had been through something hard, something soul-destroying. Surely any kind of light shed on my experience would not merely reveal that I simply hadn’t prayed hard enough, or had enough faith, or misunderstood prophetic teachings, or didn’t do enough to serve others, as if God were looking for any excuse He could to cut himself off from me. If there were answers, they would need to penetrate my bones and tear open my soul in order to reach me.

Gradually, without fanfare, I also began to realize that communication with me might not be what God was after, if God was after anything. And perhaps, in any case, it wasn’t what I really had needed. The more I thought about it, the more I began to suspect that revelation as word—as words—would never have reached me. Was God (or anyone else for that matter) going to say something to me that I couldn’t already find in scripture, something

that would surpass Liberty Jail and Job and Isaiah? I would never have listened, in any case. Instead, perhaps what was really happening was, on some level, not communication but communion.¹

I could not rid myself of God's presence but perhaps his constant presence was reducible to essentially this: that there could be no words God could have given me, no explanations for my suffering, no reasons why He could or could not intervene, *even if there were in reality such reasons*. I cannot know with certainty that there were not reasons on some level, though I strongly believed that nothing could explain it all away. But to provide me with them, even if they existed, would have been to betray my suffering by justifying it. There is unspeakable suffering that simply *cannot* be justified with reasons—it is unspeakable. I do not want to compare my suffering with the suffering of so many others, but for me it could not be spoken. It could be neither painted nor sung. It could not be brought down on engraved tablets from a mountain. Nevertheless, perhaps it could be communed with. What, I asked myself, was God actually *doing* as I was suffering? What was God doing while so many of His children moaned and wept under the weight of their burdens? What was He doing while his beloved son cried out for confirmation that He had not been abandoned? Communion comes from the Greek, *koinonia*, and it means “fellowship” or “intimate participation.” For the first time I felt that whatever else was happening, whatever reasons existed, whatever laws were being followed of which I was ignorant, God was in communion with me in my suffering, my fellow-sufferer, the one whom Enoch saw would weep over His children, but did not, could not, hide His eyes from them. At last, something of what I can only say was the Holy Spirit finally penetrated me—I had come to know that God was there, silently and immovably there. But now I felt He was also weeping.

Years later I would publish a paper² concerning that most problematic of Mormon scriptures regarding the problem of evil and suffering, Alma 14. In that paper I wrote the following, an incomplete, certainly revisable, culmination of what I had learned in my own experiences:

The religious life cannot be a comfort to us. We think that spiritual comfort or strength is the primary benefit of lived religion but that's

because we continue to bind belief in God to the causes and origins of our sufferings. The call from scripture to repent, to constantly revise yourself in your perpetual brokenness, to reconsider your world, and to reach outward to others as they also call to us is better defined as exhausting, disorienting, and sometimes disheartening. No, religion is anything but comforting and our genuine encounters with God are often painfully transformative. It is radical indeed to consider a relationship to God that is not comforting and reassuring. But there is still comfort to be had. In Mormonism *comfort is a divine mandate* (Mosiah 18) but not as comfort derived from God: we are to mourn with those that mourn, comfort those who stand in need of comfort. And others can and do comfort us, most often in silence, and in ways that have nothing to do with explanations. In the Mormon theological perspective we participate in mourning that did not originate in ourselves, the suffering of which did not originate in ourselves. . . .

The very fact of presence is comforting, even, and maybe especially, in silence. That Alma had a constant companion in his suffering, and in the witnessing of ultimate suffering, is perhaps symbolic of the significance of this truth. Together we suffer, though there are no explanations, nothing that can satisfy our intellect. Even on the cross, even after God Himself withdrew His presence and Christ cries out that he had been forsaken by God, we usually say that he was lonelier than he had ever been. But is that true? At the foot of the cross stood the women he had been closest to in life. On either side of him, fellow mortals, also nailed to trees, sharing the form of his death. None of these could provide explanations to him, and of course perhaps he needed none. In any case, there were none to provide comforting explanations to the women at the cross nor to his fellow sufferers. That they were together, that they would not leave him, was all there was. God withdraws from the scene altogether, and what is left? The mourners and the comforters, to whatever extent possible. Not that God is simply unable to provide reasons. But if He truly suffers with us, what value can these reasons possibly have? Can they turn genuine suffering into non-suffering? No, this seems putatively impossible. If God suffers with us, not just physically but emotionally or psychologically, including the suffering of the absurd and the meaningless, then reasons will not save us. The only thing that will save us, perhaps, is first—to discern that there are always those, worlds without end, who need us to mourn for them—the

task to which we devote ourselves in the presence of the suffering of others. Second, to have available to us at least the possibility to realize that at least one remains with us, noticeable even in absence, the only one whose presence or absence, for all of us, believer and non-believer alike, is always manifest, always unmistakably apparent for each one of us, the one who eternally remains, even if in silence.

Indeed, Simone Weil likewise asserts, “We must only wait and call out. Not call upon someone, while we still do not know if there is anyone; but cry out that we are hungry and want some bread.”³ Job’s friends initially heard his cry of lamentation, and knew that mourning was the only appropriate response:

And when they lifted up their eyes afar off, and knew him not, they lifted up their voice, and wept; and they rent every one his mantle, and sprinkled dust upon their heads toward heaven.

So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great (Job 2:12–13).

We learn, each of us, as if we are an Adam or an Eve, for the first time, what God is. No philosophy or theology can explain it. Scripture only vaguely alludes to it, as the records of people who themselves were revealed as if for the first time. There are no answers that apply to every situation. More broadly speaking, however, suffering presents a task to be accomplished. That task is the task of lifting and mourning. If my experiences gave me anything, they really only gave me this: a well of empathy and love on which to draw and offer others in their own brokenness and weary despair, a willing (if still imperfect) haven for the downtrodden. As Henry James so eloquently put it, “We help each other—even unconsciously, each in our own effort, we lighten the effort of others, we contribute to the sum of success, make it possible for others to live.”⁴

My religion is no longer a religion of scripture-quoting or prayer-offering on others’ behalf, though I will do both if they wish me to. My personal religion is no longer a religion of preaching a testimony of propositional certainty about particular doctrines. Instead, my religion is to be a person who can be approached by those in tears, near total collapse. It is to be someone

who is ready and able to lift up hands that hang down, and weep and mourn in silent communion over that which cannot be spoken. I believe that this, in the end, for those of us who live in the interminable, everlasting presence of God, is the glorious task for which we are born and re-born.

Notes

1. See Michael Rea, "Divine Hiddenness, Divine Silence," in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology, 6th Edition*, edited by Louis Pokman and Michael Rea (Wadsworth/Cengage, 2011), 266–75.
2. "Theologizing in the Presence of Burning Children: From Theodicy to Lament," *Sunstone* (September 2012, no. 168): 44–49.
3. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, translated by Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), 102.
4. Henry James, *Selected Letters of Henry James*, edited by Leon Adel (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 201.