

THE LOSS OF ART, THE ART OF LOSS

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Note: Adapted from an address, delivered at the memorial service of Paul L. Anderson, March 29, 2018.

Sylvia Plath wrote “Dying / Is an art, like everything else.” Perhaps there is an art to grieving as well. People talk about “closure” and “saying goodbye” like discrete events: things you do once—well or poorly—and then move on. But where exactly do we move on to? As Mark Strand points out, “In a field / I am the absence / Of field. / This is / always the case. / Wherever I am / I am what is missing.” Since my father’s death, my missing place keeps converging with his ever-shifting empty place in surprising ways. I miss Paul, miss him the same way I might miss an imagined top stair on an unfamiliar staircase in the dark: the same betrayal of expectation, the same queasy-falling feeling in the stomach, the same jolt against reality.

About thirty-six hours after he said “I think I’m going to faint,” sat down at our kitchen table, and then died between one breath and the next, I walked to the church of my childhood, feeling that empty space beside me. In our family’s unofficial pew, where he wrote hymn lyrics during dull moments in sacrament meeting, one of his favorite Bill Holm poems came to me, modified for the situation:

*Who does Paul think he is?
Walking with us to church,
Not opening the doors,
Not holding up his end of the conversation,
All the way to the chapel,*

*Where he sits beside us in the pew,
Not jotting down new hymn lyrics
Not conducting his choir
Mischievously leaving blank spots on our programs
Where his name was.
And at home:
Leaving himself all over every room, every book, every piece of furniture
Leaving himself all over our memories, our futures, our lives
The dead get by with everything.*

Paul was a difficult man to forget in life, and his death doesn't make it any easier. There are few places where his loss isn't felt. His artist's soul was drawn to beauty everywhere, both places where many saw it, and places where few others saw it. His keen mind, trained at Stanford and Princeton, let him carry far his many enthusiasms in many directions. It seems that in everything he touched, he found something to love. And what he loved, he found ways to share.

Some of this ability to care widely for the world comes through in his sketches. His love of architecture converted the world's cities into his own personal theme park, and he traveled like a kid determined to go on every ride. It genuinely surprised him that the rest of his family didn't feel the same endless delight, that we weren't so jazzed after seeing eight old churches in one day that we just *had* to go see a ninth. I think in his last years, his sketches served as a way to explain himself—the deep joy he felt in beautiful spaces—“faith expressed in brick and stone,” as he put it in one of his unpublished hymns.

His career with the Church Historic Sites and as an exhibit designer at the Church History Museum and BYU Museum of Art was also an extension of this need to find the beauty in painting and sculpture that touched his core of joy and to show others how to find that same feeling. Though capable of writing impressively erudite academic treatments of the works in his galleries, he instead always brought people into the painting itself, reveling in the immediate sensuous experience of color and light. For years, it bothered him that an exhibition in another state showed a highly abstract Picasso next to the painting of a sentimental,

but undeniably masterful, Landseer dog, with a pamphlet on the wall between them begging people to like/appreciate the Picasso more. He understood that appreciating some modern art required additional intellectual machinery, but to him, imposing those sorts of hierarchies on aesthetic response wasn't just a mistake. It was incomprehensible.

This penchant to measure worth in individual-human-sized units extended also to Paul's enthusiasm for history. He served as president of the Mormon History Association (1997–1998), but what he most often talked about from his time in the LDS Historical Department was his friends. What he loved was the ability to gossip about founding Church members like personal friends.

In each of these fields of Paul's life, I feel the blows of Paul's loss. I see both him and the loss of him in art, architecture, travel, museums, and history. Because his infectious love and knowledge in these domains will always provide the lens through which I see them, I ask again: how do you say goodbye and move on from someone so embedded in the substrate of your identity?

The answer is simple: you don't.

Not just because it isn't possible, but because it isn't right to let someone like that slip away. My relationship with dead Paul is going to be different than with living Paul. That's fine. Relationships change, but you work to keep the good ones, and this one is one of the best. My relationship with Paul once meant knocking over enormous towers of paper towels and toilet paper following semi-monthly bulk store shopping. Later it meant late night DinoGrahams and milk, then endless puns during weekly phone calls, then trips together. As I look into this next stage of my relationship with Paul, I think it will mean more awareness of the extent to which I'm following his example.

His loss will help remind me to be more patient, to look harder to see the soul-touching joy around us, to be quicker to see the comical. People who only know Paul through his art and writing will have trouble understanding the difficult blend of humor and sincerity he brought to everything. Friends will remember his laughter, not just for

its warmth and genuine delight, but because he was so often the first to see the humor in a situation. You can see it in *Return to Jackson County*, which is full of visual jokes but also illustrates a personal religious belief. The painting is done in the American Primitive style of early Church painters like C. C. A. Christensen (whom Paul famously impersonated at BYU and Mormon History Association events), but it is the modernized primitivism of Grandma Moses, showing his dialogue between Mormon heritage and contemporary sensibilities. In the foreground, a family's car has broken down, and they are continuing onward hauling their trailer by hand: a twentieth-century handcart. In the bottom left corner, a yellow dog wags his tail in a nod to a widely-quoted prophecy attributed (third-hand) to Brigham Young.¹ As the homes of the Saints and sinners burn around it, Paul's beloved Salt Lake City house remains untouched in the middle distance. Like so much of Paul's faith, this painting seems to say, "I believe this, but I don't think it's going to happen that way."

But I think the ideal I'll work hardest for, one where the space he left keeps interfacing with our family, is that Paul was a man who embodied unpretentious kindness in the way he treated friends, colleagues, enemies, strangers, and not least his wife, son, and daughter-in-law. People—some dear friends and some Lavina and I barely know—keep telling us in tears about a small tenderness or generosity that he had never even mentioned to us. The space left by Paul's absence is in a funny way still full, filled by these recollections of the sort of kindness that only comes from a heart built around Christ-like love.

One characteristic of Paul I will *not* be striving to emulate was his "horizontal filing system," which resulted in knee-deep snow-drifts of papers in his bedroom and office, and over 300 files cluttering almost every available pixel of his desktop computer. It is perfectly fitting that

1. Amanda H. Wilcox reported Heber C. Kimball as saying in 1868: "The western boundaries of the State of Missouri will be swept so clean of its inhabitants that, as President Young tells us, when we return to that place, 'There will not be left so much as a yellow dog to wag his tail.'"

when Marina began organizing his computer, the first file she opened contained just two short quotes.

From Mother Teresa: "I see Jesus in every human being. I say to myself, this is hungry Jesus, I must feed him. This is sick Jesus, I must heal him. . . . It is not how much we do, but how much love we put in the doing; it is not how much we give, but how much love we put in the giving. Let us do something beautiful for God. The dying, the cripple, the mental, the unwanted, the unloved—they are Jesus in disguise."

And from Etienne de Grellet: "I shall pass this way but once; any good that I can do or any kindness I can show to any human being; let me do it now. Let me not defer nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

So let's not say good-bye to Paul. Instead, let's invite him to stay with us awhile, even if he's less talkative than he's been. That way, when the end comes for each of us, our minds may be full of such generous thoughts as those I read, and our friends will think they apply aptly to each of us, the way we think they apply to Paul.



Return to Jackson County
Paul L. Anderson

Perhaps the World Ends Here
by Joy Harjo

The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink cocoa with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table.

This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.

Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.



Paul Lawrence Anderson 1946–2018