

“Ask permission.”

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“Loss”

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“It is the little things you miss,” he said, as he struggled to open a packet of crackers to crumble into his acorn squash soup. We lunched with him in the assisted care facility’s private dining room. Parkinson’s can be ruthless. Wife spooning husband his salmon salad. He who once ran a successful company, played golf, ran marathons, now depends on his walker and shuffle. An expert in city planning, he enjoyed being asked about infrastructure legislation. He replied: “We’re twenty years behind.”

We claim what small victories we may, sitting here in limbo. We claim what control we may. Let him tell you when he’s ready to be pulled from the chair. Losses require considerable patience by both care-giver and care-receiver. Palm pressing the trembling hand. Pausing before replying to the agitated comment sprung from frustration. The mistake of correcting a memory rather than redirecting the thought. Ask permission. Listen. Enter their world. Respect holy silence. “Loss is not as bad as wanting more,” the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu pontificated. I’m betting he said this before he got old.

Illness changes us and our relationships. Illness requires a new understanding of self, for our bodies are our identity. Change isn’t always progress, but change happens regardless. Stand still and see what happens. When did you notice the disappearance of bowls of matches in restaurants? Whatever happened to free newspapers outside your hotel door? Can you remember when rotary phones were charged for dialing long distance? When did we need a smartphone to read a menu? Keyless cars can be particularly annoying, especially when you think you turned the engine off but didn’t. That’s embarrassing when you return an hour later to the parking lot and the car is still running. How many of you resort to using pliers to lever the cork from the bottle of Prosecco? An elderly woman recovering from a stroke grouched how a ten minute visit was as exhausting as unloading a truck. No wonder a seminary professor teaching pastoral care suggested we hold the other person’s hand as tightly as they hold yours. Follow their lead.

There are losses we choose. Mom forfeited her degree to marry and raise five children. A wife gave up her career to move to Danville with her husband. Such losses are sacrifices for something adjudged more important. Resentment may occasionally leak out but can be sponged up by affection.

Then there are losses that we don’t choose but which time and circumstance nonetheless force us to manage. Picture the brother whose hearing was savaged by cancer, who now relies on devices in his ears and a receiver on a lanyard controlled by his smartphone. What does the alchemy of these golden years really produce? I often wish we’d stop talking about getting justice when what we mean is judgment, revenge, retribution, recompense. We need another word. I’ve never seen justice ever doled out in this world. Justice would mean that those innocents never became casualties at a Christmas parade or during school.

A teacher honored at the recent gathering of the Danville Alumni Association quizzed the crowd with a question he often is asked: "What is the most important thing that you want your students to learn?" He concluded his speech by telling us that what he wants his students to know is that they are loved. Knowing they are loved helps our children deal with the pain and loss and injustice they invariably experience. Skinned knees. Electric outlet sizzled fingertips. Discovering friends mocking them behind their backs. Boyfriend-girlfriend rejection. Losing the championship game. Failing to get into the school they wanted. Burying beloved grandmas.

Knowing that you are loved, knowing that your life is woven into a continuing tapestry of something special, much of which has yet to be stitched, speaks just as much to those of us who, long since young, have experienced our seasons of loss and pain. This partly explains why our holidays – Thanksgiving and Christmas, especially – imbue a deeper appreciation. We affect each other. For love seeds hope. When Pandora opened her box and all those calamities, sorrows, and evils escaped to vex the world, the last thing to enter the world was hope. With hope, the man refuses to let time and circumstance define him. With hope, we refuse to let circumstance and time define this world. With hope, he presses on for the next morning. The fortunate among us are those who have lived well enough to have something to lose.