

# Grieving the Death of a Friend

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by  
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## Author's note

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This narrative was designed to give some idea of the quality of our friendship, with the final paragraphs intimating how much John's death had been transformed into a return to the Father. So the emptiness that might easily have accompanied a sudden death or a friendship less enveloped in things of the spirit never attacked me. What has overcome me is an abiding gratitude for a friendship so precious. Can that be grieving? I believe so, for it has left me bereft of a confidant of ruthless honesty, and so made me look to others for something of what we shared over the years. That has made me more humble, driven home the fact that I cannot make it without a daily dose of assistance — something which our friendship had supplied so abundantly that I might have fooled myself into thinking that I was doing it on my own! The friendship, with John's passing on, has also opened up in me capacities that I had not previously accepted; where these will lead one cannot know, but to respect them is to grieve the death of such a friend.

Eskimos are said to have countless words to express what we simply call "snow," for they relate to it as the atmosphere surrounding their very life.

Like Eskimos, we need a plethora of words to describe the intimate and variegated process we call *grieving*, for not only does each of us go through it differently, but the way we undergo it is colored by the relationships involved and by the manner of our friend's dying. Friendships also vary so that one person's account of grieving a friend's death will help another only if that account is given in sharp relief, so others will be able to discern what is similar from what is different in their respective situations. Yet such comparisons help us more than we can say; often the differences are even more illuminating than the similarities. For one telling example, I would be at a loss to understand how to grieve the sudden death of a close friend, to say nothing about a friend's taking his or her own life. My own experience is far less traumatic than either of those, yet describing it in its very particularity may allow others to do the same for their own grieving. My language in this essay will try to respect the fact that grieving, like friendship and

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nearly everything significant in our lives, is not something we do; it is something we undergo. And once we realize that the root for our word "suffering" is the same as "undergoing," we have taken a step towards undermining the modern presumption that suffering is the worst of all evils.

That presumption is connected, of course, with its complement: that the best situation is one in which we are "in control," which leaves us with nothing more than the banal language of "dealing with" or "coping" to confront events like the death of a friend. It is a mark of the wisdom born of suffering when we are able to parry attempts to comfort us cast in those terms with a straightforward: "I'm neither "dealing with it" nor am I "coping," thank you. I'm just letting it sink in; suffering it, you might say!" So the friendship that has been ours is something that neither of us did; it gradually insinuated itself into our lives, shaping them into what they have become. That process entailed our doing a number of things, of course, but the reality itself was none of our doing. Neither is grieving, even though countless persons will suggest things that we ought to do — and some of them extremely useful, yet these are at best aids to a process that we can only suffer, undergo; yet undergoing it is precisely what we are called to do in response to the gift of friendship. And this new grammar — an ancient one, of course, yet news to moderns — suggests the direction our reflections will take: as friendship is a gift we have learned to receive and be immensely grateful for, so we learn through it — and through its ostensible loss — that life itself is a gift, whose loss leaves a space as ample, or as restricted, as our capacity to have received it. Indeed, *capacity* becomes the clue we shall be following: friendship, death, and grieving all effect capacities in us; it is out of those spaces that we learn how to live.

Ours was a friendship between two men; David and Jonathan offer the biblical archetype. John and I were brothers in a brotherhood as old as western monasticism yet as variegated as modern religious communities can be. Ours is one of those, barely 150 years old; the initials after our names, "C.S.C.," signify "Congregatio a Sancta Cruce" or "Congregation of Holy Cross." Normally friendships in religious communities can be traced to the years of formation, beginning with novitiate, when a heterogeneous group of individuals from diverse family backgrounds are taught the rigors of living together. The teaching consists of a life in common: of prayer punctuated by studies and sports, with some excelling in one or the other of the latter, and each learning to counter the inbuilt ethos of the playground with strange gospel injunctions against pressing one's advantage. Prayer is of course at once familiar and strange to all of us, while the common frame masked what would become telling individual differences in this crucial component of our lives. Prayer would become the most in-

dividual feature of each of our lives, with those who became attuned to its personal rhythms growing apace. In retrospect, it can be said that John's and my friendship turned on prayer, on the need each of us felt to discover it afresh in our lives as they unfolded – but that is to get ahead of the story.

We had not known each other during the early, formational period of religious life; he was ordained before me and had completed his studies for ordination in Washington, while I had been sent to Rome. We were thrown together in New Haven, as I began doctoral studies in philosophy and he was to continue work in English, after receiving an M.A. from Cambridge where he had studied under F. R. Leavis. We did not take to each other at first; he seemed to know it all, with Leavis' judgment final on anything of importance, and I doubtless had to flout my "superior" intelligence — typical male posturing, one might say. Yet we grew to respect one another, taking frequent walks after supper and playing squash together. Our friends moved in different circles, defined by different courses of studies, yet slowly a bonding took place that imperceptibly shaped our respective views of graduate studies and our shared religious life. During our first year we shared chaplaincy responsibilities to our Holy Cross brothers teaching in a high school in West Haven, which meant rising early enough to preside at 6:30 Mass each weekday morning, while one of us helped in the local parish on weekends, with a splendid pastor who asked very little but appreciated whatever we did.

John heartily resented the "scholarly" approach to the study of English at Yale; a hefty contrast with the more substantive approach of Leavis at Cambridge, which had appealed to his innate penchant for judgment. He once remarked, as I alighted from my bike with a simple book bag, that "you philosophers only need a pencil while we scholars need a dump truck."

We saw less of each other that year. Turning thirty in the sixties, I was anxious to get on with a real life, so returned with a completed draft of my thesis to teaching at Notre Dame, leaving John to continue the rigors of scholarly life for another two years. We were reunited on his return to Notre Dame in the joint venture of directing a student residence with our mutual friend and confrere, Ernie Bartell, only to be faced imminently with the crisis that Vietnam posed for young men of that generation. Thus began our baptism of fire: undertaking a ministry that put us at odds with University decorum, the convictions of a number of our confreres, and inevitably the local FBI, yet all in response to the demands of the times and the students whom we were teaching. We also managed to help initiate a freshman humanities program, which epitomized education in the classics according to Leavis, and by the fall of 1969 the three of us were

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drawn to concelebrate a campus-wide moratorium Mass called to hasten the end of American involvement in Vietnam.

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All of this activity took its toll, however, and a semester sabbatical gave the time and space for reflection. Its improbable location was Dallas, because Perkins School of Theology (at SMU) had offered me an apartment for my services as “resident Catholic scholar,” and John could join me to try to bring his lingering dissertation to completion. It was the conversations we had in the interstices that marked that year for both of us, conversations about prayer, about love and celibacy, and other inevitable topics of the times. John had begun to work with a wise woman, Helen Luke, who introduced both of us to Jung; so we learned to read the scriptures in a fresh way, informed by his literary background and our growing attunement to a symbolic reading of revelation. John was later to make a point of thanking me for displaying a fidelity to morning meditation during those months together, something which he took up with characteristic tenacity once he had negotiated the life-shaping step of joining AA over Easter of our spring in Dallas. The further blessing of that time apart was his momentous decision *not* to finish the thesis, to resign from the faculty at Notre Dame, and remove himself to Window Rock, Arizona, to teach Navajo children — the result of an American Indian child beckoning in a decisive dream. We managed to spend Holy Week together at the monastery of Christ in the Desert (near Abiquiu, New Mexico), which allowed me to feel how much the Southwest and Navajo culture had penetrated his spiritual grasp of nearly everything.

Before long John was invited by his religious community to serve in ministry to us: first as local superior at Notre Dame, then as assistant provincial, and finally as director of formation for young men studying for priesthood — a total of sixteen years in all. During those years (1974-1990) we took up two practices that would shape our respective lives: weekly overnight getaways to our community house on Lake Michigan, and annual directed retreats over Christmas break. These were supplemented by a reading/hiking interlude in some secluded place just after classes were over in the spring, for even if John was not directly involved in academic life, our lives were inevitably measured out in semesters. We migrated south together in early January, soon discovering two or three retreat places that became dear to us, notably Knobs Haven in Nerinx, Kentucky, and the Desert House of Prayer in Tucson, Arizona. The discipline of centering prayer, learned assiduously on a directed retreat, managed to perdure during the ensuing year for us, and the weekly times together let us take stock of these and other matters so essential to men and women in religious life, but which men, at least, often find quite difficult to broach to one another.

It was in that context of sharing what is most important in our lives, indeed, when I was deep into my own need to share the loss by suicide of a Chinese coworker — that John had to inform me of an imminent biopsy for a curious lump he had discovered in his neck when he inadvertently stroked it while reading. The diagnosis came shortly: untreatable liver cancer of unknown origin, with a six-month prognosis. Yet he was able to complete his teaching of a sophomore humanities seminar that fall before a clotting situation brought on by liver malfunction prompted him to move to our medical facility at Notre Dame.

There began his final journey, one that he consciously undertook and in which he allowed us to accompany him. We had planned to make our retreat that January at Desert House of Prayer, but the clotting restricted John's travel, so we made it at Holy Cross house where John was staying. We also continued our weekly overnights at our lake house well into March. On Ash Wednesday John composed a letter to his numerous friends, indicating that he was at peace, assured that the Lord had nothing more for him to do but this, and asking our prayers that he complete the journey well. He even expressed relief that he did not have to learn the computer after all — a characteristic light touch that had become John over the years.

We did our best to walk with him during those months of Lent, as he undertook one final thing after another, presiding at our Wednesday community Eucharist as well as with the graduate students on Sunday evening, where he served as chaplain. The last was an open AA meeting, where he recapitulated the twenty-six years since that Easter in Dallas, leaving us all with the memorable phrase: "we can live out our lives either in resentment or in gratitude — there is no middle ground — and I have been made immensely grateful."

During Holy Week I was moved to make the weekly journey to our lake house alone, as John's situation precluded his leaving the medical facility. Looking out over Lake Michigan the next morning, I asked myself why I should go on living. He had made it as easy as possible for his friends to walk with him, but what were we to do at the precipice? No answer came, but the question posed assured me that I could not supply an answer myself; it would have to come to me. That very evening I was called to be with him, and his close friends gathered for the vigil which coincided with the church's triduum — Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. He drifted in and out of consciousness, yet remained focused on those around him, responding to his dearest friend when she asked him, "what do you want?" that he wanted to "go home."

And that he did, at noon on Easter Sunday, the deep toll of the requiem intermingled with the carillon of Alleluia's proper to the liturgy of Resurrection.

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