

# On Mourning

Beth Taylor

It happens every time. Listening to the weeping notes of Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, I am sucked back into memory—that face, that love, now gone. Those strings—swelling, haunting, fill one's heart with melancholy. First performed to honor the deaths of presidents and soldiers, then as the soundtrack for movies like *Platoon*, those strings became America's anthem of mourning. Or, as my grown son once said, "great therapy after a break-up."

I am well-versed in mourning. Our training began with my father and his love of history. He reserved his most awed tones of mourning for tales of the Civil War. "As a Quaker," he'd say, "I'm somewhat embarrassed about this. But that war gripped me even as a little boy—something about brother sometimes fighting against brother, and the overwhelming carnage—I'll have to take you to Gettysburg..." and he would trail off, watching sad images in his head from somewhere in his past.

He took us to stand on those battlefields, to look out over the now quiet meadows rising gently to summer-green trees—Little Round Top, Big Round Top. We stood in the sun and studied the park maps of battle positions while tape recordings barked at us the realistic sounds of surprise and hand-to-hand killing, of pain and exhaustion and defeat, burning into us a sensual appreciation for the heroic, the BIG picture around the stoic soldier and the overwhelming fight—moral and physical, upholding the sacredness of belief, evoking in us the sweet-sadness of mourning.

At home I studied Matthew Brady's photographs, the black and white shadings of blurred faces, beards, trousers, boots, bandages, guns, body positions, eyes staring—trying to

find clues to a life once lived three-dimensionally, so I could crawl in to that life and feel its fear, its thwarted love, its sense of duty. During our afternoon quiet time, my brother preferred the poignant stories of the wild west and his picture books about Indians. When he was younger, he collected plastic soldiers and Indians and would set up battles in his room, constructing forts by gluing sticks together, carefully building lookout towers and gun sights, letting my sister and me come in afterwards to admire the panorama of life and death laid out on his wood floor.

All history seemed to be forged by war and death, and the sadness it evoked, which was to be honored with reverence. My father's Quaker family had practiced pacifism and offered alternative service in each war. Indeed, my father would lecture, the greatness of our country is in its freedom of religion and speech. And that freedom was won at great cost in the Revolutionary War. Each summer my mother took us to wade in the Delaware River at Washington's Crossing Park, and then to a dark, cool visitors' center where we watched a blurry film showing the well-dressed general as he stood gallantly at the bow of a boat overburdened with ragged patriots, shoving away boulders of ice on the river, and then trudging through snow, to surprise the British at Trenton the day after Christmas of 1776. My father believed in the power of rituals and wanted us to learn how honoring the dead could be both somber and dramatic. On each 4<sup>th</sup> of July, before the heat of the day, he would hang the flag from our porch and later, after our jaunt to the community pool to cool off in the steaming afternoon and a picnic on the terrace above our sloping lawn, we'd watch him shoot off the miniature cannon—ramming in the gunpowder, pressing in the packing, lighting the string wick, and waiting, hopefully, for the BOOM!—a thrill handed down from his father as a salute to America's revolution and so many lost.

Such patriotic mourning turned personal the night my teenaged brother died, by his own hand, for reasons we will never really know. Many believed he had been bullied for being a pacifist as the Vietnam War was turning classrooms and dinner tables into heated debates about patriotism. The shock of his death aged us overnight, of course. And thinking about him took control of our minds. My parents left his room intact—each drawing, model sailboat, collection of soldiers, soccer trophy, kept right where it had been the day he died. In high school, I imagined him everywhere, felt his memory in places we'd been, with people who knew him, as I performed chores he'd done—mowing, building the winter fire on the hearth; I'd fill journals furiously; cry in the car to songs about lost love—"leader of the pack"; "Billy Joe up on Choctaw Ridge." Mourning was memory—not conscious, not an intellectual project, just a keen memory for detail, a way to hold on to what had been and what would never be again.

Then, my 4-H Club leader, an early crush of mine, died in a meadow of Vietnam from a bullet through his head. And, soon after, a beloved cousin died in a plane crash near Quang Ngai, while working for the Quaker hospital there. In his wallet, soldiers found a childhood photo of my brother. The war, for me, was now personal; I could not turn away from the flickering TV images of soldiers wounded, Vietnamese burned, because each one felt as close as my brother, cousin, or crush. Indeed, mourning felt like love, so intense and consuming it was, and for years I would confuse the two, my sadness drawing young men to me, wanting to help, wanting to care, and when they left, as they always did—because we were so young and searching, the loss seemed only as it should be. The man I eventually married was the one who said, frankly, "I need you to get these ghosts off of our pillow." That was when I knew I had become a professional mourner, that I came from a family of mourners, and it was time to move on.

But, it was hard. Over time, it helped to read the poetry, stories, and memoirs of soldiers, nurses, and refugees—men and women who did not complain, but reported the details of pain, irrevocable loss, and sometimes recovery, with sober dignity. In the college where I taught, I turned these readings into a workshop called “Writing the Southeast Asian War,” where students studied how writers of the war used different forms to tell varied stories of loss. Some students came because they wanted to know more about the war their parents spoke of with such intensity. Some were children of soldiers who limped, or who still flew helicopters, if only to get away from it all. Some were children of Vietnamese mothers and soldier dads, aware that their faces spoke a particular tale of war. Some were children of Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese refugees and each knew how to speak their grandmother’s language as she sat, preparing dinner, in their kitchen. They wanted to understand how others told the stories like the ones their parents barely mentioned; they wanted to give their parents’ grief a voice.

One year, a group of writers gathered to discuss how they wrote about the war—their own ways of mourning. Tim O’Brien, who had written *The Things They Carried* as his own kind of lament, told the students they each had a war story to tell, even though they were young. And he told them truth is not always in happening-fact but in the way things felt. The poet Yusef Komunyakaa said his poems about the war came after years of not letting himself remember; it was being up on a ladder and the physical exhaustion of rebuilding a house that somehow let the first memory of war float up and become the release of mournful, angry, jazz-like words. Marilyn McMahon said, like many combat nurses, she drank away her traumatic memories of helping so many young men die—until one day, she knew she too was dying, and she started writing poems instead. The journalist Laura Palmer said she stumbled on the stories behind the names on the Wall in Washington, stories she tracked down and reported in her book, *Shrapnel*

*in the Heart*, so those names could have faces and voices, again. Jade Ngoc Quang Huynh said, after escaping a re-education camp in Vietnam, he, like many refugees fleeing by boat, survived storms, pirates, and thefts several times before making it to America, so he could work at McDonalds, find lost family, raise younger siblings alone, even as he learned English, graduated from college and graduate school, and wrote his memoir, *South Wind Changing*. Vietnamese, he said, did not cling to their sadness the way Americans did because they had always been at war; life had always been only horror and loss. We listened, rapt; each of these stories haunted, took fierce hold of the heart, like Barber's *Adagio for Strings*.

One day, in my writing workshop, I asked my students to critique an essay I had written about the young men I had lost to the Vietnam War—not only to Quaker service and combat, but to prison and Canada. At first, my students asked writerly questions—how to deal with a fact that can't be proven, or how to use an image to say something better, or when to be personal and when not, how to know what's essential, what's not. Then a student asked, "What do you do with the emotion here? Isn't it hard to write?"

"It's history now," I said. "I could not have written this in my 20s when it hurt too much. I was too busy in my 30s with children and graduate school. And by the time I came to my 40s, the fact of my children's lives had pushed my childhood and youth clearly into the past. These young men's fates had become stories in my head that still moved me—history that I came to see was instructive, important to tell publicly."

But, as I said "this is just history" to my student and I kept talking, my mind saw me sitting alone at home while my kids were in summer camp; typing away at my laptop and suddenly exploding into sobs. I felt that emotion well up now, warm my face as I spoke. My students watched me intently. I was so unused to sharing this side of myself in my role as

teacher. I heard myself say to my student, "But there are times—I'll be driving along in the car, and a certain song will come on, and I'll—I'm just back there again...." Suddenly, no more words came out of me. I looked away from my student, my face flushed. Later I would decide it is OK for my students to see that, yes, I was once young and yes, I do cry about these losses sometimes, even if they are history.

Indeed, every soldier, refugee, and loved one knows there is a moment, the anniversary moment, when mourning is most keen. For me it always happens in the same way. In early November, as the days begin to chill, there comes a weirdly warm, foggy night, and suddenly it's that night again, when I would hear my brother get home from Boy Scouts and go down to the basement to work on his bike. My parents were out learning to play Bridge; they would be late getting home as the fog slowed their old white Pontiac, and soon I would be wakened by that unhuman bellow from deep in the basement below me. The fogged night reminds me that the 16<sup>th</sup> is coming and no matter how much I dismiss it, chastise my mind and heart to move on, get over it, the dread can still rise up, swirl around me like insidious, mocking wisps of grey, damp warning. On the 16<sup>th</sup>, I sometimes get through half the day before the wisps find me again, whisper it's tonight. And sometimes on the 16<sup>th</sup> I get lost in my reading without watching the clock move past 10:05 pm, when my brother dropped his weight into that noose, or 10:35, when my father found him.

Then, within a week or so, I'll be walking on the beach, or raking leaves, and I will hear honking high above me. I'll look up and calmly wait, lost in my own private ritual, until finally, far above the tree limbs, against a blue or cloudy sky, I will see the V of Canada geese heading south. I will think of my brother, his poem -- "There's something about fall that stirs within me/

A feeling, a wild feeling of wanting to be free”—and I will look for the missing dot in that V of geese, knowing that space is always there—that’s just the way it is.

One autumn, a student came to my office as the semester began, closed the door, and said, if it was OK, she needed to talk a bit. Over the summer, her boyfriend from a few years ago had jumped from a bridge to his death. She was having a rough time now. He had not wanted to let her go. But he was unhealthy for her, she knew, so she moved on. He didn’t. And now she felt guilty, as well as sad. And hurt. And pissed—in death he had crashed back into her life, forced himself back into her emotions all over again. She felt very alone. Like the death had taken over her life and pushed everybody else away, including her boyfriend now.

I listened, felt my heart plunge on the first, startling news, then recognized every nuance of confusion she was feeling. She was smart enough to have already talked through some of this with a professional. But she had also read the essay I had written about my brother and the young men I had lost to Vietnam. That was why she came.

But what exactly did I know—know clearly enough to say out loud, as help to someone besides myself?

“I am so sorry,” I said. “The problem is, no one else can heal you, not really, or make it go away.”

I could feel her sadness, the unsettling energy that had taken over her body. “Your heart has been truly ripped,” I said. “Over time, you’ll have to just accept that—that the rip is part of you now. Over time it won’t be so in front of everything else; it will just become like a part of your body.”

I stopped, remembered how I had hated anyone who had said, "Time will heal...." How could I have forgotten? What would I have wanted to hear back then? What words could help any of us in such a time of grief?

"You're right," I said, "right now it just fills you with hurt. And it has to. That's what's hard on your boyfriend. Mourning can be like another lover."

I told her how I had lost my first great love to the sadness of finally figuring out all the layers implied by the deaths of my brother, crush, and cousin.

"I couldn't see it at the time," I said. "But my intensity, my sadness, my seriousness, just weighed us down in earnestness and constant evaluation. I sometimes wish I had met him five years later, after I had worked through whatever I needed to work through."

"That's what I feel," she said.

I nodded. "These things just come at us. Wars. Accidents. Suicide. We can't plan for them. It's never fair. And there's nothing we can do to change it."

My student sighed. "Sometimes I feel so pushed into all this.... But I'm hoping, in the end, you grow."

"Or, you deepen," I said. "The word 'grow' feels green and full of life. But such a death—it's bleak and so dark. It slices down into you, opens up depths of feeling and understanding you never knew."

"Yes," she said. "It's disorienting. I feel like I'm not quite here, like I'm in a different place than everyone else."

I nodded, remembering. "Like you're in another country—gray and silent, you can't speak in normal words about it."

"Does it still feel like that for you?" she said.

"I feel more calm about it," I said. "And I don't feel it so often anymore."

What I didn't tell her was, occasionally, I'll still have a bad day—I'll feel like I'm sliding into that pit of sadness, like I can't get out. It won't be so much about the young men I lost, as about frustrations or worries in my life now—sometimes they just pile up and sink me, usually in the middle of the night. Fresh regret triggers memories of regret. And, I'll feel lost again, groping in the darkness of mourning and "what if." It can suck the air out of you. But I've been through such nights enough times to be patient. I know that, usually within hours, or at least by the end of the next day, something will happen—with one of my sons, or in a class, or with my husband or a friend—a surprising comment, or a silly circumstance, or a kindness I wasn't expecting. And, suddenly I'll burst up through the grayness—into the sunlight, acutely aware I am here, now, in this moment, breathing, once again.

**Beth Taylor** is the author of *The Plain Language of Love and Loss: A Quaker Memoir*, and she has published feature articles, columns, flash nonfiction, historical narratives, book reviews, and essays—about the teaching of nonfiction and about the Vietnam War era. She teaches creative nonfiction in the Nonfiction Writing Program of Brown University's Department of English, where she is a Distinguished Senior Lecturer.