

A CAT NAMED THOMAS

Thoughts about the loss of (other) sentient beings

The sad fact as I approach the end of my sixth full decade on the planet is that there's an accumulation of losses that can't be passed by without comment. Most of us grew up seeing our parents and even our grandparents as constants of nature; physical death had very little relevance to our worlds. Into late Teenagedom, I recall losing Grandpa —actually a step-grandfather who was the kindest, brightest, internally strongest man I've ever known. And how did I react? I didn't attend the funeral because I couldn't accept death into my psychological universe!

Then after my marriage and in my late 20s, launched well into my professional and ideological career, my dad died. Boom. He was only 54. You know what they say about your parents becoming smarter every one of your years between 20 and 30... We were close. This was not a funeral in which I could take a bye; indeed, I was expected to take a lead role. This had to be the absolute worst I could expect to endure until 300 years from now when I might lose anyone else close to me.

So through the 30s, 40s, and now my 50s, I've become somewhat inured to the natural cycles in which both grandmothers, an aunt, my stepmother, some of my good friends' family, and a handful of contemporary acquaintances have passed on (and a few friends have had close calls). Then in May 2007, I lost my younger brother to cardiomyopathy. Another biggie. And yes, now I'm paying a lot more attention to death... not only because I myself am not bulletproof, but because I want to do whatever I can to keep these special ones of mine with me eternally... at least as long as I'm here.

Plus, the seventh decade is coming on strong.

There's no question that contemporary Western Buddhism, as I've discerned in the writings of Eckhart Tolle in particular, has stepped into the emotional vacuum and the intellectual hole that my brother's demise left behind. When you interpret the essence of life as connecting to this "wholistic existence" that never goes away... and then you start to actually 'grasp'—not in the way of words—that we in our essences are indispensable parts of a vast indestructible 'Beingness,' well it's more than consoling, it can be transforming.

A pertinent passage from *The Power of Now*:

True salvation is fulfillment, peace, life in all its fullness. It is to be who you are, to feel within you the good that has no opposite, the joy of Being that depends on nothing outside itself. It is felt not as a passing experience but as an abiding presence. In theistic language, it is to "know God"—not as something outside you but as your own innermost essence. True salvation is to know yourself as an inseparable part of the timeless and formless One Life from which all that exists derives its being. [*my italics*] — page 122.

Yeah, that's what I'm talkin' 'bout! High five.

Seriously, as purely evocative as the words seem, I'm convinced they point to a fundamental reality. And most cats—at least at a certain stage of life—"get it." And what I miss most about my mom's cat is when he was stretched out in a catsleep on a chair absorbing the energy of the sun, then I'd softly rub my fingers under his chin, the neck would extend, the breath become more even and audible, and the eyes close in slits. I'd say to myself, man, this is inner peace. This is the peace that passeth all understanding. This is "knowing oneself as an inseparable part of the timeless and formless One Life from which all that exists derives its being."

And for Thomas, geez, it was second nature... or first nature. Cats don't have this churning reactive mind that interferes with the channel to the almighty presence. And when I'd be anxious or nervous, simply having him in the room would have a calming effect. My brother had some qualities that were extraordinary: one that I never fully realized until hearing from Mom during the memorial service was his ability to feel the life force of other species. He would sit and communicate silently with various creatures and even plants and flowers. He would certainly have felt that connection with Thomas, except he was allergic to cats. :)

Well, I'm quickly getting over my head in the spiritual enlightenment department, but I have an idea the Buddhists, my brother, and the Cat named Thomas are onto something. It does make it less sad to do the humanitarian thing and put him to sleep, especially when one realizes he did "know God" on a regular basis and now will be "with God" forever. But my mom, for whom the cat was a constant companion for 14 years, feels a void much bigger; and she was with him during the final moments as the vet administered the euthanasia injection.

Mom has a poem from a dogeared old book (*A Child's Garden of Verses* by Robert Louis Stevenson) she's kept from her childhood on a Greenville, Michigan, farm 75 years ago. On the farm she had a Collie who would follow her around, and this is how she felt about him... and now Thomas.

My Shadow

I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me,
And what can be the use of him is more than I can see.
He is very, very like me from the heels up to the head;
And I see him jump before me, when I jump into my bed.

...

One morning, very early, before the sun was up,
I rose and found the shining dew on every buttercup.
But my lazy little shadow, like an arrant sleepy-head,
Had stayed at home behind me and was fast asleep in bed.

These gaps. Holes in the fabric of the universe, empty spaces in our consciousness that were once occupied by sentient beings that we are very, very fond of. Of course, when we lose a person dear to us it's more traumatic than when we lose a cherished pet. But the sadness has the same quality... a feeling of loss of self by virtue of loss of what is such a big part of one's own life.

Sorry, it must seem like I'm rambling. I only wanted to put some words down to commemorate a fine creature and to suggest that we have a lot we can learn spiritually from such beings—while they're with us and in memory.[1] Thomas, I'm sorry I was ever cross with you for not eating your dry food.

[1] More than a year ago I reviewed William Jordan's book, *A Cat Named Darwin*. It taught me quite a bit about cats, also about the differences between cats and dogs. I'm a sloppy sentimentalist by nature. But when it comes to cats, I do temper my admiration—for their ease of connection with the Unmanifested and their incredible athletic prowess—with observation of what would ordinarily be considered gross cruelty in their tortuous treatment of prey. Hey, it's genetic. By the way, during the last six months of his life, Thomas captured and killed seven mice... the eighth got away.

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