

“Call and Response: Voices Beyond the Veil”

October 29, 2017

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“Death is nothing at all.  
I have only slipped away to the next room.  
I am I and you are you.  
Whatever we were to each other,  
That, we still are.

Call me by my old familiar name.  
Speak to me in the easy way  
which you always used.  
Put no difference into your tone.  
Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow.

Laugh as we always laughed  
at the little jokes we enjoyed together.  
Play, smile, think of me. Pray for me.  
Let my name be ever the household word  
that it always was.  
Let it be spoken without effect.  
Without the trace of a shadow on it.

Life means all that it ever meant.  
It is the same that it ever was.  
There is absolute unbroken continuity.  
Why should I be out of mind  
because I am out of sight?

I am but waiting for you.  
For an interval.  
Somewhere. Very near.  
Just around the corner.

All is well.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/death-is-nothing-at-all/>

I have heard this piece by Henry Scott Holland at numerous memorial services. And, as I have met with people to write down their wishes for their own celebration of life, when the time comes, many have requested this passage.

I believe the power and popularity of Scott Holland's words lives in how deeply we who grieve want them to be true. Those who experience the death of someone we love often cannot say this loss is "nothing at all," cannot claim that we and our connection to the deceased have not been changed, cannot affirm that there is "absolute unbroken continuity" between time with our beloved and their disappearance from our present and our future.

And those of us who anticipate our deaths – which, at some point, is all of us – may also hope for this kind of death, the kind that does not lead to our survivors suffering or us being disconnected from those we love after we shed our mortal coil. I recall an important insight from a hospice chaplain; when someone is terminally ill, the community rallies around their loved ones, knowing they must be in pain, anticipating loss. But the person facing death anticipates the loss of everyone in their life, the loss of everything, all at once. What a blessing it would be if there were not such a divide between the living and the dead, if our names could remain "the household word it always was."

I welcome Henry Scott Holland's understanding of death as my experience of death has been one not of on-going connection but absence, not of laughter at "the little jokes we enjoyed together," but silence.

Often, when I drive between northern New Hampshire and home, I take a few moments to turn off Route 3 near the Vermont border. I drive past the boarded-up convenience store and the Christmas tree farm until I find the small cemetery. I park the car and, once I get out, I look for some rocks to put in my pocket.

Walking between the headstones, I stop before the grave of my cousin Sheila, who died in her late thirties from a rare disease. I place the stones on her granite marker, I pause for a moment and, when the time feels right, I return to my car and the journey either north or south.

I have learned that people of the Jewish faith place rocks on grave markers for many reasons. The practice may have pagan roots, a way to anchor the dead in their graves lest they be inclined to haunt the living.

But stones are also symbols of the power of memory. While flowers reflect the cycle of life with their budding, blooming, wilting and decay, stones are eternal. In the words of Rabbi David Wolpe, “in moments when we are faced with the fragility of life, Judaism reminds us that there is permanence amidst the pain. While other things fade, stones and souls endure.”<sup>2</sup>

I have thought about why I place stones on the polished ridge above Sheila’s name and dates of birth and death. It feels important to somehow mark that she is not forgotten. That though her life was too short and too difficult and her body rests far off the beaten path, someone remembers to take some time and a few turns off the main road to bear witness to her existence. The stones proclaim she still has a connection to the living.

But the more I think about it, the more I realize that this practice - that feels primal and important - is more a message to the living, to the other occasional visitors to the cemetery and the fox and deer who walk through, than the dead. My cousin is not conscious and cognizant to receive this gesture and, as I know that the dead cannot talk, I do not hear a message from her. There is not “absolute unbroken continuity.”

Yet, the ancients tell us that this is the time of year when the connection between the dead and the living is the strongest, the veil between the two worlds the thinnest. The ancients tell us that, in this time, the dead have merely “slipped away to the next room, somewhere very near.” They tell us that if we are to live as if “life means all that it ever meant,” this is the season to live out this truth. This is the time when, should we call out to our loved ones long remembered, we may receive a response.

When do you hear the voices of those who have gone before? While my visits to Sheila’s grave are usually in silent solitude, I only have to remember the many summers she and I spent together to hear her nasal voice, the sound of her laugh. Or I recall the sound of her voice when we were older, Sheila always speaking

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/putting-stones-on-jewish-graves/>

loudly as her husband was hard-of-hearing and she stayed in the habit even when he wasn't around.

Her voice is but one of a chorus I carry with me as I know you, too, carry a chorus of your remembered. We hear them when we tell stories from growing up. We hear them when we gather for holidays, for weddings, for the next funeral. We hear them when we face a situation where their wisdom would be of help to us or, at least, we know they would have an opinion. We hear them when we struggle with past hurts, the wounds sometimes as fresh as when they first happened, such is the shadow side of remembering. We hear them when we read the letters they sent us, with their distinctive turns of phrase, or play music they composed – an enduring expression of the soul. When we play home movies or, like Susan Macy Jarvinen, take steps to preserve recordings of their voice, we hear them in a literal way, their words “spoken without effect,” in the midst of their lives, “without the trace of a shadow.”

During this summer's journey to Transylvania, Mary, Cynthia and I visited a unique cemetery with our Partner Church friends. The Merry Cemetery is famous for its wooden grave markers, large crosses with elaborate ornamentation and folk-art depictions of the deceased in life. Along with the person's name and dates of birth and death, the markers include a message from the dead.

Artist Stan Ion Pătraș began this tradition. In time, families sought to have their loved ones buried in this cemetery as a Pătraș marker became a status symbol. Yet, our guide told us that the families had no influence on the message Pătraș would write; he alone carved the testimony of the dead, drawing on his knowledge of the individual from the intimate community of their village.

As our guide translated some of the messages, it is clear that many of the dead have advice for the living, especially related to the dangers of drink. But some of the messages speak of tragedy. With the assistance of Google, some educated guesses to nuance translation and apologies to Pătraș and his subject, we hear this story:

Ileana Holdiș is me  
And I had bad luck  
That I was not very old

And in the grave I came.  
I had five children.  
Without a mother they grew up.  
One came with me.  
And the world left her  
At 48.

And this testimony:

We will rest for ages  
Ștețcă Toader with his wife  
From childhood  
Anori Dori tells me  
In the world I lived  
One girl I had  
They are sad  
That she has no parent  
Death took my sins  
At the stove, eating.

As the power of Pătraș's artistry endured, it was only a matter of time before his own passing and for the next generation of artists to take up the tradition. He, who divined the life and words of so many who died before him, is remembered through this testimony:

Since I was a little boy  
I was known as Stan Ion Pătraș  
Listen to me, fellows  
There are no lies in what I am going to say

All along my life  
I meant no harm to anyone  
But did good as much as I could  
To anyone who asked

Oh, my poor World  
Because It was hard living in it.<sup>3</sup>

The next time I take a moment to visit Sheila's grave, I wonder what it would be like if there were not just her name and dates of birth and death but an account of her life, her message to us, the living. What story, what advice would I hear in her voice? How might there be "absolute unbroken continuity" through these words?

Throughout the year, I am one of many people who regularly walks around Horn Pond. Connecting with the natural world as I greet my neighbors and fellow congregants amid the turning of the year - from the blazing heat of summer to the vibrant chill of autumn to the stark, leafless beauty of winter to the time of spring's furtive renewal – grounds me in body and spirit. There is something about this place that reminds me of the tremendous gift of life.

Yet, if you pay close attention, one will notice that death is ever-present too, reflected in the many memorials that circle the pond. Perhaps the most poignant is the Angel of Hope memorial, dedicated to the memories of children who died young.

Some memorials are benches, marked only with a name – "Patricia A. Brady." Some benches provide more information – "Steven Federico," the dates of his birth and death and a descriptive phrase, "Free Sprit."

And some memorials are more elaborate. There is the elegant plaque erected in memory of John F. Gilgun Jr., former mayor of Woburn who worked to make the Pond and surrounding area available to the community. And there is a memorial with a sense of humor. A bronze plaque is affixed to a large boulder "In loving memory of Norman Stafford and *his rock*, Jean."

It is right and meaningful that we name these names, the names of both those with simple and celebrated lives. It is right that we testify to their gifts – "Kyra Grace Koman, Soulful Singer" – and to the impact of their death on survivors – "In loving memory of Charlie Lentini. You left a mark on our hearts. Love your family, Antonio and Sofia, Love, Grandpa."

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

And, yet, these are messages *to* the living and *for us* the living, lest these names and these lives be lost to oblivion. Through saving our dead from obscurity, we, their loved ones, continue the connection.

However, there is one memorial ostensibly giving voice to the dead, a bench marked with a bronze plaque, emblazoned with “Hello from Heaven, Al and Buddy Coakley.”

As the hospice chaplain who taught me about the experience of the dying also reminds me, “because I never died before,” I can’t really say what happens when we die. I don’t know if there is a Heaven to go home to or if there is ever a time when the dead can speak to us, when there is “absolute unbroken continuity.”

But, if there is, may I – may we – be open to their voices, their messages for the living. May we, in moments of connection through the veil, come to know deep within us that “all is well.”