

## Every Good-bye Ain't Gone: Reflections on Memory and Leave-Taking

*This is reflection on a number of leave-takings occurring in the author's personal and professional life. The process of departure facilitates remembering and making meaning of the events.*

by  
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It is the season of leave-takings and endings, both personal and professional. At the professional level, several mentors and colleagues are retiring at approximately the same time, so much so that it almost feels like a generational passing of the torch. At the personal level, I am immersed in the "sandwich generation" developmental transition with my young adult son, now on his own, and my very elderly parents, increasingly challenged to maintain their independent lifestyle.

In the midst of all of these comings and goings, I have spent some time experiencing, observing, and reflecting upon the process of leave-taking. The impetus to write this particular narrative is to remember (and celebrate) these people who have had formative personal and professional influences in my life and/or my profession. I have chosen to frame this experience as "leave-taking" rather than using professional jargon such as "termination" because I hope to capture in a more immediate way the process of departure, both for those who are leaving and for those who are left behind. Examining the leave-taking process seems to be one way to examine how we humans weave and unweave the fabric and fibers of our life, how we write—and then perhaps erase and rewrite—the

unfinished chapters of our life journey into a coherent, meaningful life story.

### "What type of good-bye is this?"

When I think back to my own experiences of leave-taking (from previous jobs, relationships, or clinical work with clients), I know well what a difficult process it is. Although I gradually became more skilled in raising the topic of closure with my clients, it was only after a few near-disastrous, trial-and-error experiences. The worst such example was the time I left my job as a child care worker in a residential treatment center to enter graduate school in social work. I avoided telling the kids I had been working with—some for several years—that I was leaving until my very last shift. I rationalized that this was appropriate because the children would not have too much time to become upset. The real truth was, however, that leave-taking then was too painful an experience for me to face and embrace directly.

Eventually, however, I learned the errors of my earlier ways and became more comfortable and confident about the ending process. With later child and adult clients, I would introduce the topic by inquiring about the "different kinds of good-byes" they previously had experienced. Typically, we could list several



kinds of leave-taking: the "see-you-tomorrow" kind of good-bye, said at the end of the day, when you expect the relationship or contact will resume shortly; the "see-you-next-later" good-bye, said at the start of a sustained interruption in the relationship or contact, but one which you expect to resume eventually; and finally, the "we-are-ending-our time-together" good-bye, said when you anticipate ending the relationship or not having further contact.

Framing good-byes in this way helped to normalize and legitimize leave-taking and diffused what for many clients was a highly charged process that they would rather avoid, in part because their previous experiences with endings often had been painful, chaotic, abrupt, and unresolved. Asking clients "What type of good-bye should we plan together?" allowed a clear focus on our ending, making it a mutual process and allowing the opportunity to talk about ways they could continue their growth and progress in the absence of the ongoing therapeutic relationship. It also offered a closure process for me, a way of attending to my own feelings about the ending process. Sometimes happy, or sad, or worried about their future, and occasionally guilty at the outright relief experienced, knowing that the burden of the work was over.

The following reflections about the present set of personal and professional leave-takings draw from this previous experience and address the question, "What kind of good-bye is this?" (Note: To preserve some measure of anonymity for the people being focused on, I have chosen to

use first names or initials, or in some cases, to give no identifying information.)

### Good-bye to Memory

"Honey, tired don't mean lazy and every good-bye ain't gone."

—Maya Angelou (1997) *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*

I wonder why some memories are preserved and others not. My mother—six months shy of 90—is doing a slow cognitive fade, her short-term memory becoming increasingly variable and Swiss-cheese like. The last time I was home, she repeated many times stories about our old (mostly dachshund) dog, "Herman the German"—the time he kept brushing his white coat up against the black pants leg of a visiting priest—the time she learned from a neighbor that he was chasing cars in a department store parking lot, five miles from the house—the time in winter when he was poisoned and died and my sister came home and cried. But what happened yesterday or earlier in the morning, or what was said two minutes ago, often is not available. Yet, I marvel at her valiant effort to compensate, her mind actively searching for and substituting alternative descriptors or memories when the correct words or associations just aren't there or won't come when she needs them.

My father, at age 88, has become the placeholder for her short-term memory, organizing her calendar when the next doctor's visit or hair appointment is scheduled. He also has learned to cook, taking on the running of the household and intuitively keeping their regular daily routine

going, albeit at a slower pace and truncated (though still independent) lifestyle. While both of them are distressed at times about the literal deconstruction of her memory, there also is an amazing quietude, born of faith, that helps them face this challenge. They do not appear to anguish much over what has been lost; rather, they get up each day to pray, to love each other, to care for their friends and neighbors, and to continue.

I do not have the comfort of their faith to help ease my sorrow. Too much contact with the human side of institutional religion and dogma has left me bruised and cynical. Yet, I still can appreciate the healing powers that others find in it. My mother is fond of quoting the old adage "It's a great life, if you don't weaken." However, she has added her own witty rejoinder: "So who wants to be strong!" In their slow surrender to infirmity, I recognize their transparent openness to the Spirit, which allows me to see anew their strengths and to treasure their weaknesses. If ever the time comes when I reach their advanced age, I hope I can remember their lessons—that it is possible to continue to live meaningfully and to love, even as memory fades and abilities diminish.

### Good-bye to Adolescence

"Goodnight stars. Goodnight air. Goodnight noises everywhere"

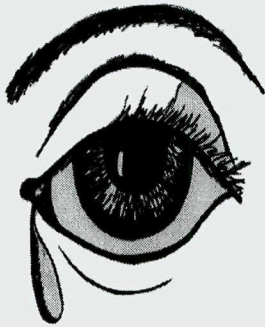
—Margaret Wise Brown (1947) *Good Night Moon*—

The nicest compliment ever said about my wife and myself—and certainly the most unexpected and meaningful—came



last December as our son graduated a semester early from high school. As class valedictorian from a small alternative high school, he used his speech to thank his teachers and family. About us he said, "I would like to thank my parents for all their unconditional love and for always pointing me in the right direction, but never giving me a road map."

It is not often that I cry, but this certainly was one of those times. The tears were not only those of happiness at his accomplishments, but of amazement



that he—and we—had survived his adolescence. Certainly, there were many times during his earlier teen years when I did not feel that my love was unconditional or that he was going in the right direction. I cried a few nights during those years, wondering if all those hours working for tenure was worth it if it came at the expense of being a father who could not help his own son.

A few weeks later after graduation, I gave him his Christmas present—a photo album of his life, from birth to present. I hoped this gift not only would

symbolize his life journey thus far, but also would be something he would take with him on his departure into adulthood. Unexpectedly, our son was moved to tears at the album.

Now living on his own, gainfully employed, and self-supporting, he currently is researching actively his college options and future aspirations—which may take him still farther from home. The midnight anguish about the adequacy of our parenting or the wisdom of supporting his capacity to make meaningful choices about his life has given way to the sunshine of parental pride at his maturity and self-directedness. As always, his development creates the need and opportunity to further our own growth as parents. If we're not quite as prepared for the status of "quasi empty nesters," which has come more quickly than we expected, for the time being we're content as this transitional period still allows frequent contact and trips back home for refueling.

I do not necessarily recommend traveling life's journeys without a road map, for as some sage has said, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there." Nonetheless, I wouldn't change it, because our son was right. Allowing him the freedom to make choices—and to learn the positive and negative outcomes stemming from those choices—has helped him get headed in the right direction.

#### Good-bye to "The Perfect Year"

"'Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door; Only this, and nothing more."

—Edgar Allan Poe (1936) "The Raven"

I have come full circle with Eleanor. One of my initial field instructors during graduate school, she was the first to teach me direct practice skills. In mid-year, I began to pick up cases at the inner city elementary school where she was the school social worker. At the time, I was placed with a unit of students in another agency and we were all quite disgruntled with the lack of cases and poor supervision provided by the primary field instructor. Eleanor's laughter, genuineness, and patient teaching helped turn the year around for me.

After graduation, there was a long hiatus in which we were out of contact with each other. For the past ten years, however, we have worked closely together: she, as educational coordinator of training for the 15 to 20 students placed each year in an urban school district and the direct field instructor for two to four of those students; and I, as faculty field liaison for most of those same students. Through the ups and downs of working with both excellent and difficult students, I have come to know her passion for school social work and her love of teaching, as well as her poetry and playfulness. Who else but she and Connie (described below) would be able to say that upon their retirement they were going to start the "Retired Social Workers' Terrorist Society, dedicated to fighting social injustice—but only in the afternoon!"

The year before retirement, Eleanor began counting down how many months and days were left. I contributed to this



demarking process by grandiosely promising that her final year would be a "perfect year." It only seemed right to have a problem-free ending after years of dealing with challenging or "high maintenance" students. This became our running joke throughout the year. Although we did encounter occasional difficulties (e.g., student-supervisor conflicts, programmatic meltdowns in individual schools), on the whole the year went much better than usual. Problems somehow seemed less intense or intractable and were more amenable to resolution. In addition, at the dean's request, we jointly developed a field training component that attempted to integrate policy, practice, and research into student group field practice experience. We learned some important lessons about what works and what doesn't in the training process, such as "Don't expect students to testify in front of the school board about school social work when they are fearful of and unskilled in policy advocacy." (A painful personal lesson was learned as well. I know now what it is like to be the faculty member on the receiving end of negative feedback and mass resistance from a group of students disgruntled with a part of their field experience!) Finally, with the help of an extremely capable doctoral student, we carried out a well-designed satisfaction survey research study on the quality of school social work student training, as seen by a variety of school personnel. Lo and behold, the data discovered from the survey nicely supported the importance of school social work services and the value of student in-

terns to the schools. Our final act of the year was testifying in front of the school board, along with two brave students and two highly skilled field instructors. So it was a perfect year after all.

Eleanor truly is (and received a national honor for being) the heart of social work. So, with apologies to Edgar Allan Poe, when tempted to forget, I shall

that many people describe first is her amazing grace. No matter what the situation, she always has been welcoming, understanding, patient, and unflappable with students, field instructors, agency heads, faculty members, university administration, lawyers, and academic deans, even in the midst of heated conflict. Knowing nearly everyone in the prac-



remember to tell the raven about this excellent social worker, poet, and masked crusader for justice. Quoth the Kayser: "Not nevermore. But Eleanor! Forevermore."

**Good-bye to the State of Grace**  
"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound."

—religious hymn—

Our field director, Connie, also is retiring. At their separate retirement parties, both Connie and Eleanor were presented with long flowing purple capes and purple masks so that they could go forth as "Super Social Workers" to continue their fight for truth and justice.

The quality about Connie

tice community by name, she has been the best ambassador of social work and the most effective representative of our program for many years. Her gracious manner has made everyone involved feel an important part of the field team.

While sad that Connie is leaving us, equally sad is that many of us are leaving field education. About two-thirds of our faculty have opted out of doing field liaison work, desiring to increase their time devoted to scholarship and research. At first, this was abhorrent, as I felt strongly that having ongoing contact with the field was a core part of what social work faculty should be doing. This feeling gradually



gave way to puzzlement: how did the profession get to such a state that research and practice must be treated by faculty as mutually exclusive options, requiring some type of trade-off? Most recently, I have been confronted by the need to make the same trade-off choice myself.

As I head towards a sabbatical, I ponder the long-term goal of making full professor and the need to re-prioritize my time to do more research. Easy to be critical when the shoe is on someone else's foot. Not so easy when it is on your own. The prospect that I might need to leave field work also seems too much like a fall from grace, a loss of innocence from a less complicated, demanding, or rigorous professional life. In traveling this uncertain future, I will remember Connie's grace, fairness, inclusiveness, and, above all, her deep commitment to the field.

### Good-bye to the Champion of Collegiality

"Many lives they have lived as various Beings.

They could have been a bear, a lion, an eagle or even a rock, a river or a tree."

-Nancy Wood, *Many Winters*-(1974)

Dr. H. is an inconvenient speed-bump on the superhighway of sloppy thinking, an immovable rock on the pathway of shallow ambitions, a surging river blocking the unfettered passage of back-door-dealing travelers. Which is why some students, faculty, and more than one dean have found it uncomfortable to deal with her. One never has to wonder what she is thinking, be-

cause she tells you directly. While known informally as the resident historian or "institutional memory carrier" of our program, I prefer to remember and celebrate her accomplishments in a different fashion. A fierce champion of collegiality, she insists that faculty exercise their individual roles and collective responsibilities in the governance of the school. Should faculty try to avoid doing so, be like the lion, she courageously is willing to remind us.

In her doctoral theory class, Dr. H. also (literally) has been the tree. Using the metaphor of a great tree, she has taught about the conceptual seeds, roots, major trunks, and off-shooting branches of social work theory development. She has planted the seeds of scholarship in numerous students, and with her famous red marking pen, pruned the unproductive branches so that the tree itself could continue to grow and flourish.

I will remember the lessons and crucial contributions Dr. H. has made to my professional development. She has taught me the importance of courage, the meaning of tenure, and the need to take a forceful stand when faculty governance is imperiled. I thank her for making the critical contribution to my earliest narrative research efforts by linking me with Sonia Abels, who was just starting *Reflections*, thereby opening unimagined opportunities. Finally, she has taught me to see past the surface level of academia and learn how to discern and trust the depth of things.

I worry about the next generation of scholars who will

come after people like Dr. H. Will we be concerned only with our own branch of expertise, or will we be able to tend to the needs of the whole tree? I hope that we will be willing to be the tree, the rock, the river, the lion, the eagle, or whatever is necessary when the need arises. That we will know when to become fierce champions of collegiality, and when to dig among the roots in order that the tree might continue to flourish.

### Good-bye to the Story-Teller

"I realized that my sense of place is not a physical entity; it has more to do with my being and doing in context, not where I physically belong. I think we try to fill that empty space, as the patterns that make up reality are missing. *Reflections* and the people connected with it, filled that space for me, with opportunities for learning, creativity, and connections."

—Sonia Leib Abels, [Her Farewell] Letter from the Editor,

*Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*, 5(2), p 3.—

Sonia too is many things: the keymaker who unlocked the helping professions' storehouse of reminiscence; the weaver who designed the journal tapestry of written narratives, connecting practitioners, scholars, and readers; the village story-teller or scribe who gathers and retells experiences and events to inform the community and preserve its traditions.

It is not easy making connections to someone when we work at different schools, in different time zones, with different deadlines and responsibilities. Yet I made such a connection with



Sonia through letters, phone calls, E-mails, and occasional visits, as well as through the exchange of manuscripts, peer reviews, and proposals for narrative and oral history research. The commitment to the narrative form (along with laughter and intuitive sensing) forged connections that broke through times of isolation and discouragement each of us occasionally experienced. Although she is no longer editor, I am pleased that the personal bond remains unbroken.

I will remember and cherish the mentoring and nurturance Sonia and Paul Abels have given to me and other generations of faculty colleagues. Their narrative and connective work has helped to create more humane and humanistic helping in the various human service professions. In knocking down the walls between humanities and social sciences, they have helped us all to embrace narratives as both art and science.

### Conclusion

All of these developmental transitions and retirement departures create empty spaces in the fabric of one's personal and professional life. Empty spaces create opportunities for narratives and poems about the leave-taking experience.

The empty space, filled,  
creates  
connections, meanings, and reflections

The empty space, emptied,  
creates  
room for the Spirit to enter

The empty space, traveled,  
creates  
developmental opportunities and alternative pathways

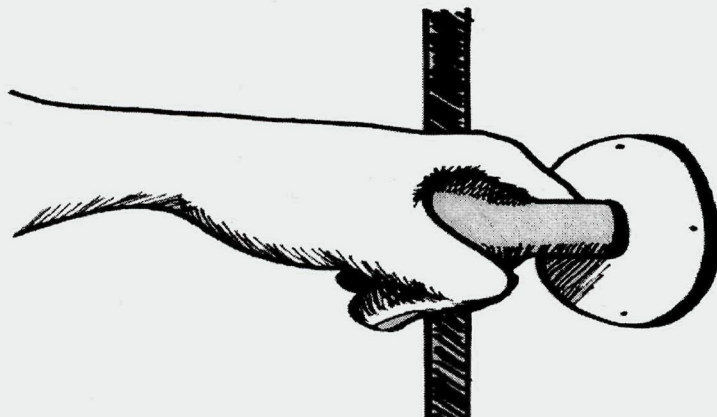
The empty space, re-told,  
creates  
narratives of experience: life history and life story

The empty space, full of grace,  
creates  
a departure and returning place



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