

Have Alb, Will Travel: Reflection of a Heavy Heart

I was feeling very sorry for myself, since I experienced a series of tragedies in the last six months. My wonderful wife Susan passed away from complications for cancer. My mother went to her eternal reward after a protracted battle with dementia. Finally, my poor dog Molly had to be put down. I had just buried her remains with Susan the week before.

Normally, I am an upbeat person, but today my spirit was heavy. The losses I was sharply feeling was compounded by a feeling that the walls were closing in on me. Too many things were due in too short of a time period. On top of all of this, I had to travel over 200 miles to cover Sunday services at a parish where the priest was on assignment. In short, I was hurting. When I was asked to help out at that parish, I told the pastor, "Have Alb, Will Travel." Some of you might be old enough to recognize this as a pun on the TV show "Have Gun, Will Travel", which was popular in my youth. Today, I wasn't so sure this was a good idea.

I had made hotel reservations near the Church. Obviously, I didn't want to take a chance and be delayed on Sunday morning. The distance was just too great to chance that. I also didn't want to get up at three in the morning, drive that distance, and then look like something the cat dragged in. I wanted to give those parishioners my "A" game. I dreaded the trip, but I packed my alb, stole, and other gear and made my way to the hotel.

This is where the beauty of our faith begins to show. I was leaving late on Saturday afternoon, and I prayed the Midafternoon Prayers of the Liturgy of the Hours before I left. The Psalmody for that hour included Psalm 128, which speaks to the happiness of family life if it is rooted in the Lord. Several verses hit home:

"By the labor of your hands you shall eat. You will be happy and prosper; your wife is like a fruitful vine in the heart of your house; your children like shoots of the olive, around your table.

Indeed thus shall be blessed the man who fears the Lord. May the Lord bless you from Zion all the days of your life! May you see your children's children in a happy Jerusalem."

The heaviness began to lift a little. Susan was a bright light in the world. She was indeed a fruitful vine in our house, our circle of friends, and our church. My children are all on their own, secure with their partners and living independent and complete lives.

And most of all, I did see and enjoy my grandchildren. They are joys in my life. Yet, like the Prophet Elijah I still shook my fist at God and wanted to know why Susan was taken away from me.

On the ride to the hotel, I selected an ebook to listen to. Might as well catch up on my “reading,” I thought. One book I always wanted to read was Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*. Boethius is revered as a saint and a martyr in the Catholic tradition. I had been putting this off and putting it off after I read Marcus Aurelius’, *Meditations*. It is a masterpiece of philosophy I know, but I wasn’t terribly impressed with that book, for whatever reason. I don’t know why, but I just assumed I would feel the same way about Boethius. I was horribly wrong.

The *Consolation of Philosophy* features a discussion between Lady Philosophy and Boethius. He was in prison, awaiting his execution, and bemoaning his fate. Lady Philosophy reminds Boethius that everything external to your own soul—including wealth, power, and even the people you love—is a gift loaned to you by Fortune, and not a permanent possession.

"If they are yours, why do you mourn their loss as if you had lost something of your own? You brought nothing into the world, and you can take nothing out."

When a loved one dies, Lady Philosophy argues that Fortune is simply calling in a loan that was always hers to take back. Grieving as if you have been “robbed” comes from a misunderstanding of ownership: you were given the joy of their presence for a time, but they were never yours to keep forever.

Lady Philosophy’s prescription for the loss of a loved one isn’t to be cold or heartless, but to shift your perspective:

1. **Grieve briefly, then use reason:** Allow the initial shock to clear, but do not let grief turn into wallowing, which she calls a “sickness of the mind.”
2. **Be grateful for the loan:** Focus on the gratitude of having had them rather than the anger of losing them.
3. **Re-anchor your soul:** Remember that the person’s true essence—and yours—belongs to a higher, eternal realm where loss does not exist.

Boethius reminds us that our loved ones are in a better place. We often say that to console loved ones for their loss, but we don’t truly concentrate on how important that is. Lady Philosophy also reminded Boethius of the success of his children, who were

named Consuls in Rome. My children, while not being named Consuls, are certainly worth being proud of.

By the time I arrived at my destination, I was beginning to feel better but wasn't quite "there" yet. On Sunday, the parishioners turned out to see me. Sadly, sometimes visiting clergy are greeted with a lot of empty pews. Attendance drops when the Sheriff is out of town. It wasn't the case, and my spirits continued to lift. At the end of the service, I blessed the parishioners' cars. We laughed as I doused each car and parishioner with holy water. During the social hour afterwards, it dawned on me that I had no reason to be down. I had another family who loved me and wanted to include me, beside my natural family. It was the Church, living the command to love your neighbor as yourself. The dark cloud over me was finally dispelled and the trip home seemed to pass by in an instant. I was once again in good spirits, as I comprehended what my faith was offering me.

As I look back on that weekend, I realized that I had a crisis of faith. Not in the sense of disbelieving my Catholicism, but in the sense I didn't practice it. Our philosophical tradition provides much grist for the intellectual mill. Boethius provided the philosophical underpinning for my reason. More importantly, our Christian faith gives us something to grasp, to hold onto in times of despair. It took me too long to remember that. I finally did reach out and grasp my faith. When you are faced with the same problem, don't wait. Reach out and grasp your faith! Hold it tight! As for me, I look forward to my next trip. I learned a lot during this trip, especially about me. For now though, my lab is dry cleaned and ready to go.

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