

*SJ Edelheit*

**Physics and The Metaphor of Loss**

**T**wenty-seven months ago, my wife died. Ovarian cancer. A difficult death, at home. I took care of her as best I could, but it was hard. It was also a gift. She was a great spirit and a beautiful woman, and at times it feels my soul went with her. Twenty-one months ago, my mother died. She was old. She had Alzheimer's and the light had gone out some time ago. A sweet woman faded into a night where she could not see or be found. Fourteen months ago, my father died. He was broken-hearted and lonely and his poor body just gave out. So I know something of loss now. On my wife's last day, while a friend watched over her, I took a shower for the first time in a week. And as my tears mixed with the warm water, I prayed to the Angel of Death to come and wrap her in His dark cloak. And He did. "Tod packt eine Frau."

Since then, I have been trying to reassemble my life. Because it is true what the sages say: When suffering and loss come to you, they break you down. And you either stay broken or you grow back together in unexpected ways. It occurred to me recently that this was a process I shared with the stars. You will laugh at this notion, but I feel it is true. From the small microcosm that is me to the universe of giants, there is, you see, a concurrence. In their collapse, in their journey to supernovae, the very bonds of matter break and in this process of cosmic catastrophe, the simple grows more complex. I could tell you, inexpertly, about the hydrogen that becomes helium and then the other miraculous elements on up to iron. And I could assure you that these complexities are then built into new stars which, in endless time, again reach a catastrophic suffering which in turn is the genesis for all the further heavy elements. But what you need to know, really, is that from this unimaginable death of stars comes all the stuff of life from which you and I and our worlds are made.

And so I share something with the stars, and this is comforting. But I ask myself sometimes now, what is the product of my catastrophe? What complexity and what life have come from my falling in and breaking down and growing back?

Grief is a purifying process, that I know. Nothing else quite helps us shed pretension and decorum and all our worries for position and status and the future. It grounds us as nothing else will in the moment of loss. This morning at breakfast I was reading an article in my wife's college alumnae magazine which still comes quarterly to my house. In it, a guide on some romantic trek to see mountain gorillas in the jungles of Rwanda was explaining on a break the origin of the word "know" emblazoned on the mugs of coffee he was handing out. "Know what?" the guide said he had asked his wife who had packed the lunch and coffee and mugs. "Know that I love you," his wife had replied. When I read that, I found myself crying into my oatmeal. And all the important stuff of my day to come, the meetings, the phone calls, the concern over this or that just dropped away to nothing. Yes, it was something my wife might have done and said, and all that mattered was this connection with a pure and intense feeling.

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I could not save her, my wife. No one could, I know. But, still, I look for reasons that of course are never there. There is no cosmological constant to keep our lives in balance and preserve the normality of our days. There should be a slow winding down and growing old, as with the stars, but sometimes, for no reason, it all accelerates towards incomprehension. And there are no equations, no grand theories to explain it to my satisfaction. So we look elsewhere. On the way to the cemetery for my father's funeral, I looked out the window of the limo and just as we entered the gate a huge black bird rose up and flew over the car, spiraling overhead into the bluest Florida sky. Was it an omen or a metaphor, I asked, and what does it mean?

Now metaphor is a wonderful thing, a means to light the way in the dark. But it only takes you so far, and you are left with...what? Grief and your suffering, still, and your never to be answered questions. The Buddhists say that suffering and loss and death are always with us, the bird on the shoulder, there to remind us of the present moment, which is all we have. And they are right of course and we should be mindful. But we do get attached, how can we not, by the gravity of our love, and we are warped by it. And so being mindful, while a beautiful thought and a right practice, does not take away the pain.

Friends advise me to turn from the stars to other metaphors, spiritual ones. It is in our faiths that we should attempt to find solace or meaning or transcendence. But these metaphors can often seem rote and stale and formulaic. "She is in a better place," a well-meaning colleague told me after my wife's death. "Dust to dust," said the rabbi at my father's memorial service. And others have reminded me of their certainties of, or at least their hopes for, an afterlife of sorts, the particulars differing with tradition and sophistication. I appreciate their concern and have no doubt that community and ritual and prayer can be helpful. But, I'm sorry, it's not enough.

So I turn back to the astrophysicists who say we do not know what causes the universe to accelerate: Perhaps some dark energy creating a negative vacuum that overwhelms gravity and matter seen and unseen. I cannot follow much of this and certainly the math is beyond me. But I am intrigued; I am fascinated. Because I am trying so hard to comprehend my own fate and failing, I find some league with the bafflement of the scientists. Our brains are too small, our lives too brief, they say, to comprehend the universe. And, of course, that is the way I feel about death and suffering and loss.

But then a miracle of sorts. Our small star, the sun, comes back next day; and in my warm skin I uncurl from the dark like an opening seed. And that, for this moment anyway, is enough.