

On Wading To The Other Side, March 7, 2021

Today five years ago, Bob Carlson, my husband of 57 years, my best friend since I was thirteen and my only love, died at Central Dupage Hospital. Early on in my grief journey, I received the following poem from my friend, Paul — *Grief*, by Barbara Crooker.

Grief

*Is a river you wade in until you get to the other side.
But I am here, stuck in the middle, water parting
around my ankles, moving downstream
over the flat rocks. I'm not able to lift a foot,
move on. Instead I'm going to stay here
in the shallows with my sorrow, nurture it
like a cranky baby, rock it in my arms.
I don't want it to grow up, go to school, get married.
It's mine. Yes, the October sunlight wraps me
in its yellow shawl, and the air is sweet
as a golden Tokay. On the other side
there are apples, grapes, walnuts,
and the rocks are warm from the sun.
But I'm going to stand here,
growing colder, until every ounce
of my skin is numb. I can't cross over,
Then you really will be gone.*

I remember reading the poem and realizing I was indeed “standing in the middle of the stream,” that the fear of “crossing over to the

other side” would mean a further loss I could not bear. Now, five years out from the day I lost him to Earth and he gained Heaven, I am no longer numb. I have faced the nights when sorrow invades so deeply that sleep eludes. I have lived through the never-ness, the silence of laughter stilled, years-long touch (a rich fact of life) no longer mine to experience, gentle words of endearment, errand days, ordinary days which I now know were not ordinary as they were effused with togetherness. I no longer expect him to round a corner and call out “Hey Babe... .” I wear two of his best jackets with my jeans and have been known, still, to breathe in a favorite sweater, hoping for a faint whiff of his scent. I’ve taken over all that was his to do in our partnership. What was daunting at first is now a matter of course. In the first years of grieving, I had no warning when tears would fall. Each season was replete with seasonal memories — summer’s shimmer, autumn’s gold, winter’s stark beauty, spring’s gradual greening. We loved the change of seasons and took advantage of what each offered. Someone told me about a song called *Every Season* by Nicole Nordeman. I played that song over and over in the car, or before sleep, sobbing at what it meant to experience each season without him. And one line — “I will offer thanks for what has been and what’s to come” — nearly killed me.

Visuals of him would come unbidden. They were not chronological. The last heartbreaking moments, yes, but so many more. He’s young, laughing, head thrown back. He’s acting goofy for no reason. He’s sleeping beside me, one lock of silver hair gentle on his forehead. He’s backpacking grandchildren up a mountain trail. He’s driving a jeep down a rugged Colorado mining road. He’s hugging our kids, hugging me. He’s gazing at our new babies in wonder. He’s coming back from a market trip to New York. His tie is loosened; he has what the kids call his “New York look,”

meaning he's pale, spent, but still smiling as he tosses his garment bag to the top of the stairs. He's cooking his "eggemier" scrambled eggs to perfection (not too runny, not too hard) and making a big show of it. He's chopping wood, hauling in logs, tweaking a fire. He's rollerblading the rail trail, striding strong. He's watching intently from bleachers no matter what the sport, the concert, the dance recital. He's chucking an amazing spiral, still in the game, even if it's only on our front lawn. He's leaf raking, he's barbecuing. I see his profile, driving west into the sunset. I loved his profile.

What is grief like now? I have "crossed over" to the other side. I can appreciate the metaphorical feast of apples, grapes, and walnuts described in the poem. I can rest on rocks warmed by the sun. The other side is still rich with purpose and meaning. The gift of support I have experienced from my family is one reason I have been able to take the first tentative steps to reach what felt like a distant shore. Friends, too, have bolstered me with courage and understanding in that step by step process.

What do I miss most? I miss the one person in my life with whom I could share my deepest thoughts, the little colloquialisms, couple secrets, inside humor, silent humor, knowing looks across a crowded room, names of endearment known only to us. I miss the one person I could never wait to tell. I miss the one person I could ride with mile after mile into Big Sky country, sunsets fading into starlight, silent, in communion. I miss the one person whom I knew better than anyone on earth and who knew me better than anyone on earth.

I love the writings of Frederick Buechner. Two quotes of his resonate with me, help me to remain on the "other side" to rest on the sun-warmed rocks.

Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.

And:

Turn around and believe that the good news that we are loved is better than we ever dared hope, that to believe in that good news, to live out of it and toward it, to be in love with that good news, is of all glad things in this world the gladdest thing of all. Amen, and come Lord Jesus.

He is gone from this earth, but not gone from eternity, and until our final crossing, I wait with gratitude. 