

WHAT THE TREE REMEMBERS

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RESIGNATION I:

*Somewhere in a room I don't well remember
a coffee mug sits on a cluttered desk.
"To teach is to touch a life forever," it claims,
stained with lipstick and the thick brown sludge of neglect.
It rests beside an empty chair
on a surface covered in hastily gathered piles
that at some point became my undoing.
It was my life touched here,
in the bright room with the dying plant
and the paper-strip alphabet still scattered, unfinished.*

For months now, an old, African proverb has been swirling in my head. "What the axe forgets, the tree remembers." At one point, years ago, I knew it as a beautiful metaphor to which I could not directly relate. For most of my life, the bliss of sheltered privilege allowed me to understand, but not fully feel, some pains. There was a time when my greatest sadnesses were those of the people around me. I considered myself an empath, a quality I thought to be an asset as a Special Education teacher. One day, out of the blue and in a quite public way, I began to fall apart. I suppose I am still crumbling, to be honest, and the writing of this is my attempt to piece some of myself back together.

Somewhat obsessively, I began to read about trees, to really think about them—these living, breathing creatures who absorb our waste and give back to us the clean air we breathe. I began to notice the ways in which trees can represent the best about humanity, as their destruction represents the worst. On the day that I resigned from my teaching job after fifteen years, I returned home, hesitant to walk inside my own house. Afraid of what literal and figurative mess awaited me, I sat in my driveway with the car running and looked around. I noticed an axe in a tree stump beside my garage. The axe was latent, immobile, unliving. Its handle was made of wood—it was made from a tree. It sat cleaved deep in the remains of what once had given air, what soon would give heat. It cut to the core the very thing from which it came.

Crying in the car that day, I realized: There is a way to take from our trees without killing them. There is a way to prune a tree that allows it to grow properly and live a healthier, more fruitful life. But, the one who wields the axe must know the tree, even love it, in order to do so. Far too frequently, the axe is simply used to chop. It takes a life, goes on to the next tree, and takes another life. There in my driveway, I finally acknowledged my anger toward the axes in our lives. I mourned for all the people who've been cut so deeply that they are forever scarred, cut down, left with nothing but the memory of an inanimate object's unfeeling work.

There are people who, by nature, attempt to absorb others' pain. I am one of them, and I know many others. This trait is something that attracts us to the teaching field, a field which, in my opinion, has grown increasingly less human and increasingly more bureaucratic. I say this with deference to the millions of men and women who keep students at the heart of their work. But, I have been cut by the system, in all ways.

I have bitterness, and anger, and I have felt most wounded as I have left a job and students that I loved for so long. I remembered a passage from Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), another that would return to haunt me as I moved into new understandings of the world:

If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them.... The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry. (p. 267)

I began to think about these people, these outside-the-box thinkers who consider relationships tantamount to data points and legislation. I sought them out. I spoke to them. I've seen so many wounded trees left in the wake of "progress." And, all of them remember.

RESIGNATION II:

*In my mind I will stare at that desk forever,
drown in the stacks of meaningless words on meaningless documents,
weep for the children those words failed to represent.
Most nights I'll walk a fitful journey into this, my classroom,
and fight again the battles that I'll always lose.*

*I write this, not for those battles,
nor for the empty chested people who mocked my best efforts to love,
not for the boardroom suits mandating hope's creation;
But for the terrified woman who faced that desk alone
year after year after year.
This is for my memory of her:
For the cynic who tried to escape;
for the mother who fought to find balance;
for the drunk who stumbled through unbeatable darkness
and relentless morning lights.*

In Frederick Buechner's (2017) book, *A Crazy Holy Grace: The Healing Power of Pain and Memory*, he refers to the Biblical parable of the talents, one that has always terrified me more than most. Buechner tells of the Master handing out talents to the servants. Upon the Master's return, he requests his servants' profits. The "good servants" have gone out and traded theirs and have gained something more. The "bad servant" has buried his talent, keeping it safe and hidden. This servant was chastised, though his action (as Buechner notes) is based upon fear. He was afraid to keep the talent uncovered, open to the world around him, for fear of losing it. Buechner goes on to say that perhaps our pain is like this servant's talent, something that has been given us and that we are afraid to take out into an unkind world to trade. This word *trade* is the one Buechner (2017) focuses upon.

They took what had been given them and they traded with it....What does it mean to trade? I think it means to give of what you have in return for what you need. You give of yourself, and in return you receive something from other selves to whom you give. (p. 36)

It is in the sharing of my own pain that I have finally begun to find some healing. In the educational world, we are often afraid to admit failure or defeat. We are held to standards that might not match our own personal philosophies, and we are reminded frequently of the repercussions of failure. To make a mistake is human, we all know this intrinsically, but we do not always allow for it in ourselves or others. It is in the admitting of my mistakes that I have now seen myself most clearly. I have struggled for quite some time to simply say the words, "I fucked up." But saying this set me free, as truths allegedly will. At work, I had screwed up on paperwork, but more than that, I'd screwed up in life. Lots went wrong. There was a miscarriage, my body disloyal. There was a failed marriage, the fact that its failure could be my fault. There were deaths and illnesses of people who did not deserve death or illness. There was chronic back pain; there was massive weight gain; there was Donald Trump. I had spent many months there mulling over these things—these major/minor things that eventually built to my breaking point. Acknowledging that I had arrived here by a series of human errors, most of them my own...this was the ironic place where I found hope to begin again.

In my work-failure, I'd had arguments with superiors, and I felt entirely too self-righteous in my criticism of their leadership. I was hot-headed and fueled by exhaustion, this malaise that brought me to notice others' flaws far before I'd evaluate my own. I felt tired of the system. I felt that my own actions had grown irrelevant and futile in the face of a large bureaucracy. I grew disinterested in the paperwork—perhaps I just found it meaningless—but in the end it was the little details that mattered. When I was called out formally, I was crushed but indignant. I was embarrassed but refused to admit that a few errors in my IEP writing could mean much...certainly not more than my heart for all the children I'd taught. Suddenly, things spiraled. Long-time friends and colleagues turned cold around a large table; a well-paid and brutal school board attorney entered the scene. I was not allowed back on school grounds, not even to attend my own children's activities or community events. I was allowed to speak only through union reps. I remember my superintendent holding my hands and saying, "Oh, Mary, we love you here, and I have no intention of losing you!" Yet, within weeks, I was handed resignation papers by a tired and busy union attorney. I was encouraged to comply, as it would save me from further public humiliation. Documents were signed; doors were closed. I was no longer a teacher. It was that simple.

I spent months stewing and crying and blaming. I carried the axe in my back with righteous indignation. And then, one day, I woke up and decided to own it all. I was responsible for certain duties that I did not perform correctly. Maybe there was no more to my story than that. The teaching of children was only a portion of my job, and my personal philosophies, hurts, or hardships did not excuse me from being diligent with details in paperwork. I'd expected an ounce of human kindness from my administration or school board, but this is not part of their contract. I had broken my end of the deal; they had held to theirs. We were bound to some papers, and those papers mattered most. A tree was eliminated.

Some mistakes have greater repercussions than others, to be sure. I have talked with people who have lived through similar work situations as mine, and the conversations are always filled with justifications and accusations. We have formed a sort of club, sharing our boardroom war stories. None of us believe we were given a fair shake; all of us feel we were punished with a heavy hand. Some people seem to skate away with a mere slap on the wrist, and then here we sit, as the few who must have been victimized by some sort of conspiracy. There is truth to our feelings of

unjust treatment, but there is more truth in those moments of silence where the gravity sets in, and we remember what could have been if only we'd *just not done* that thing that brought us here.

RESIGNATION III:

*This is for the kids
who dragged me by my heart
out of bed each morning.
To the parents who didn't show up
because they couldn't;
the ones who begged me to love their child in their absence.
This is my asking forgiveness where I failed.*

*This is for the voice I found and used aloud,
and for the children who believed me.
This is for their graduation days,
for their weddings and their funerals,
for the lives that they will lead;
for the space their dreams carved out in my world.*

Beginning a new life is not unusual or unique. People do it all the time. There are books and movies and inspirational quotes everywhere, and in them, there is typically a triumphant moment when a person looks back and is grateful for the event that caused their path to change. Losing a job is not a life-ending event. Nor is sitting in the seat of public disgrace. These are hurts that pale in the face of other great losses. But, they are hurts nonetheless. Many people find themselves at these proverbial crossroads, and the new road on which they embark is not always a road to recovery, sadly. I have sat with some of these people, interviewed them, drank and cried with them. Not everyone experiences the triumph. Some are broken permanently, and it is these people's stories that finally allowed me to speak freely of failure. We cannot heal until we become honest, even in a world full of liars. Even in a world apathetic to our humanity or pain.

I am often surrounded by people who have suffered true loss, more so now that I have taken a job as bartender and cook in a small-town dive-bar. It feels shallow and embarrassing to claim an understanding of the pain some have known. I think of the incomparable loss of a child, specifically. I speak daily with men and women who have lived through this, and my heart re-breaks each time I hear the stories and see the tears. They are legion and endless. These are inescapable hurts, ones that repeat themselves, intensify, and abate as the liquor flows.

I think of the veterans of our wars who feel forgotten, yet they cannot forget. Theirs is to question what they have become and its juxtaposition to what they once meant to be. As I serve alcohol and food to many Vietnam vets, I am reflective of the minor pains that I've known and how it would feel to daily relive a memory four-decades old—how it must have been to participate, unwillingly at times, in something that shapes the remainder of your life. Those axes that cut forests of young men are long gone now, and here is what still lives. I feel a camaraderie with them to which I have no right. Perhaps, I simply feel the empathy of friendship. And again, *A Farewell to Arms* comes back to me:

“It could not be worse,” Passini said respectfully. “There is nothing worse than war.”

“Defeat is worse.”

“I do not believe it,” Passini said still respectfully. “What is defeat? You go home.” (Hemingway, 1929, p. 53)

Is this selfish of me, I often wonder, to compare my pain to that of a war veteran? My grandfather Apel, a M.A.S.H. surgeon in the Korean War, once said that we all live through our own Korea. It feels like a stretch for me to claim this, like a kind of self-serving story that helps me accept my own reactions to life. But, as I sit and listen to drunk civilians discuss their pasts and their presents and bemoan their futures, I realize that all of them have fought their own war, in some form or fashion. I say this not to minimize the sacrifice of real war, but to acknowledge that life takes all of us to places from which we feel we can't recover. We've all fought battles, and perhaps we've survived, but they've taken a better part of us. We left something there, in a dark muddy place, and the memories feel only pointless and destructive.

RESIGNATION IV:

*I bury this here,
a seed discarded,
and I wait for daylight.
Until then, this rain
renews a depleted heart,
stripped as it was once,
uncovered as it has become.*

*What blooms will
Root like rebellion,
Grow like defiance,
Give back to the earth like Love.*

What has inspired me most are the stories of redemption. They are not in the fictional triumphant moments previously mentioned. They are in the daily attempts to continue living in a world that has dealt us an unfair hand. Going to work; smiling and greeting people with kindness; attending community events; making and sharing meals with people who are hungry; reading a wonderful novel; putting on clothes each day; even just taking a shower—these are the tiny acts of resistance that fight back against the axes in our lives. We have been cut, with or without reason, and not always with feeling. But, we are still living.

It is difficult to recover and more difficult to forgive. Yet, a strength is born in the forgiving of ourselves and of the ones who've done harm. I have felt true forgiveness from others, and few things can bring about such a feeling of revival. It is a gift I have not yet been able to bestow, unfortunately, nor would it matter to those who'd receive it. It will come in time, but until then, I have an unending frustration with a system that treated me as a disposable, replaceable resource. I am blessed in that I have the opportunity to reflect on my wounds, the academic privilege of studying the system, the support of beloved friends and family. My anger comes not only from my own experience, but from the stories of those who do not have such luxuries. To relive a damaging, life-changing moment for forty years or more is, indeed, tragic. To have this damage stem from the educational system, however, is inexcusable, in my opinion. And yet, always, the system rolls on, seemingly oblivious to those left behind.

An old friend of mine was once cut from his teaching job after 29 years. His was

a human error, a forgetful and minor mistake that led to scrutiny of his every move and, eventually, his termination. I taught with him for years. I saw the lives he changed and how he loved his work and how his students revered him. I see the way he has not forgotten his wounds. I've seen his impact on the community and how his former students speak of him with so much respect yet how this same community is blind to the ache of his forced-retirement and the shame he struggles through daily. Another once beloved teacher I know dies slowly in front of me, one double whiskey at a time. He often perseverates on the stories about his teaching victories and his final teaching defeat. I suspect he will not be with us by the time this paper is complete. I write this to commemorate the 26 years he loved the unlovable, fought for the weak, and battled his own demons with such strength. He, and others like him, should not be the proverbial tree falling in a forest with no one to hear. He is making a sound; we all are. We just need to be heard.

As Zora Neale Hurston (1942) once wrote, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you" (p. 116). Telling our stories is a therapy; sharing our vulnerability and weakness and disappointments can be what seals up wounds. And so, we listen to each other. Not necessarily to say, "I understand your pain because I've experienced it," but rather to say, "I grieve with you. I remember the past through you, and I hope for the future with you." We have the choice each day to hear each other, in the classroom, in the bar, in the grocery store, wherever we are. We must not doubt the power and healing that can be exchanged as we branch out to others.

You, my sentry, have nothing guiding you but the discipline which comes from your corporal, who keeps watch over you. And if the corporals have doubts of themselves, they have no discipline save that which comes to them from their sergeants, who keep watch on them. And the sergeants get theirs from the captains, who keep watch on them. And thuswise, stage by stage, up to myself, who have but God to rule my ways; and if I doubt myself, I am out of plumb, a broken reed. (de Saint Exupery, 1952, p. 204)

To the teachers who still fight the good fight and to the ones training to fill their shoes, I remind you that your own heart is all you have left when you end your term as an educator. It will be broken, as it should, perhaps many times. There is nothing redemptive in the hardening of oneself to the realities around us. There are people in leadership who do not get this concept, the ones who flee the classroom when it feels uncomfortable, who can financially afford to pursue further licensure, who have the political savvy to survive within the system. We must never cease to question such authority. The transition to administration should not be a process in which the life is removed and one is whittled into a chopping tool, sharpened and handled by a disconnected force. It simply doesn't have to be so.

Nor should the tiny bit of power we hold in our classrooms, or the models we are made to emulate, or even our own shortcomings, allow us to forget the fledgling trees we tend each day. It is our students whom we should nourish. "One cannot in the nature of things expect a little tree that has been turned into a club to put forth leaves" (Buber, 1992, p. 262). We can help others grow, or we can be a tool that cuts. As educators, this work is what we keep sacred. It is our own personal legacy; it will remain ongoing in the human lives we touch. I will not have former students at my funeral someday recounting my strength in correctly filling out PR-02 documents; of this, I am certain. They will remember instead how we laughed in my classroom, how I was always on their side, how I was often broken, but how I shared what was best in

me. Mostly, they will remember how I loved them.

I write this from a place where I am beginning to regrow. I am renewable, not replaceable, despite what I've been made to feel. I have roots that go deep into nurturing soil. I have a patch of sunlight today, and it streams through an open window. Through it, I can hear the sounds of children on a nearby playground, what was background noise to my teaching for so many years. I cannot say the sounds bring joy quite yet, rather nostalgia and reflection. I miss my students, my classroom. I miss my former life. But, I am not defined by my mistakes, or my job title, or the actions and opinions of an inhuman axe. I will always be a teacher, in many ways. I am also a mother, a daughter, a sister, a student, a friend. And, on Wednesday afternoons and Thursday nights, I am a mediocre bartender. I am able to reach for something higher, to offer rest and fresh air to those around me, to absorb toxicity and offer back something pure. Wherever I stand, I am still living. We all are. We are trees, and trees remember.

References

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