

Farther than Our Eyes May Ever See: A Sermon for the Season of All Souls

Jan K. Nielsen

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Reading

"Candles" by Carl Dennis, from *New and Selected Poems 1974-2004*. © Penguin Books, 2007.

If on your grandmother's birthday you burn a candle
To honor her memory, you might think of burning an extra
To honor the memory of someone who never met her,
A man who may have come to the town she lived in
Looking for work and never found it.
Picture him taking a stroll one morning,
After a month of grief with the want ads,
To refresh himself in the park before moving on.
Suppose he notices on the gravel path the shards
Of a green glass bottle that your grandmother,
Then still a girl, will be destined to step on
When she wanders barefoot away from her school picnic
If he doesn't stoop down and scoop the mess up
With the want-ad section and carry it to a trash can.

For you to burn a candle for him
You needn't suppose the cut would be a deep one,
Just deep enough to keep her at home
The night of the hay ride when she meets Helen,
Who is soon to become her dearest friend,
Whose brother George, thirty years later,
Helps your grandfather with a loan so his shoe store
Doesn't go under in the Great Depression
And his son, your father, is able to stay in school
Where his love of learning is fanned into flames,
A love he labors, later, to kindle in you.
How grateful you are for your father's efforts
Is shown by the candles you've burned for him.
But today, for a change, why not a candle
For the man whose name is unknown to you?
Take a moment to wonder whether he died at home
With friends and family or alone on the road,
On the look-out for no one to sit at his bedside
And hold his hand, the very hand
It's time for you to imagine holding.

Sermon

It can happen when I least expect it. Sometimes it happens when the spicy aromas of Mexican food carry me back to that little hole in the wall place in south Texas where my mother and I, decades ago, shared our last supper together. Sometimes it happens when I find an old letter, written by my grandmother's shaky hand in the broken English of one who had to leave behind the land and language she had known since her birth. Sometimes it happens when the music

of my childhood carries me back to another time and place. One day, I was driving when I heard a song I hadn't heard in decades, a song that took me back. With the first words, I was twelve again, riding beside my father in his truck, surprised to look up and see tears rolling down my big, strong father's face, as that old song (it was even old back then) came on the radio, the Gene Autry song, "That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine." (Maybe some of you know it.) There I was, all grown up, in the driver's seat, my Daddy gone for years, tears I didn't know I had left rolling down my face. *"When someone you love dies,"* Mark Twain once said, *"it is like when your house burns down; it isn't for years that you realize the full extent of your loss."* Our tears can come when we least expect them, leaving us surprised by old griefs that linger in our souls. It can take us a lifetime to work through our griefs and to understand what we lost the day someone died.

For generations, people the world over have taken time in the days of lessening light to remember their losses and to honor their dead. We stand mid-way between the beginning of autumn and the winter solstice, a time, according to Celtic tradition, when the veil between this world and the spirit world is at its thinnest. And so, just as our ancestors did, when the early days of November signal the season of All Souls, we sing the old songs, and we light candles. We drop stones into water. We remember the stories, the faces. We say their names. We give thanks for lives that touched ours. We honor all the saints of our lives, some known, others unknown, people both ordinary and not so ordinary who lived, and loved, and died.

On any Sunday of the year, someone here among us is grieving. Sometimes I know your losses. You call. You check in. Or I hear about it, and I call you. Other times you might try to keep it to yourself, and that's okay. But as you walk in on Sunday mornings, I notice your faces, your eyes; I wonder how it's been for you this week. And sometimes your eyes tell me that your heart is hurting. I check in with you and learn that you have lost someone dear.

All of us, at one time or another, have tried to steel ourselves in the face of loss. It's kind of "the American Way." We try to put on a strong face. Right away, we try to stay busy, to get on with "normal life" (whatever *that* is). Well-meaning people may try to talk us out of our grief, or hurry us through it, saying things like, "It was for the best" or, even worse, "It was meant to be," words that can hurt. "You'll feel better soon," they may say, and when we don't, we might feel like we have failed. Easy words and platitudes don't help us to heal, but instead encourage us to stuff our griefs deep inside, where they won't show, make noise, or get in the way. With every grief we try to stuff inside, though, an essential part of us can shut down, and begin to die.

The same part of us that hurts and grieves when we lose someone is the part of us that makes us human: our heart, that part of our brains that allows us to feel, that essential part of our humanity we call "the heart." After losing his father to suicide when he was a boy of ten, Frederick Buechner tells of burying his loss *"so deep"* inside (he says) *"that after a time I scarcely ever took it out to look at it at all, let alone to speak of it. If anybody ever asked how my father died, I would say heart trouble. That seemed at least a version of the truth. The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed (he says) secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from.* When we steel our hearts to loss, Frederick Buechner reminds us with his words, we also steel our hearts to life, and to joy.

"Let mourners mourn," says Jess Decourcy Hinds, who was 25 when she lost her father to cancer. He was 58. Her words come from a piece she wrote for Newsweek, in the magazine's "My Turn" series, where people from all walks of life can speak their truths. She learned her truth when she was grieving and the world around her didn't want to let her mourn. Listen to her words: *"Why don't people say 'I am sorry for your loss' anymore? Why don't people accept that after a parent's death, there will be years of grief? I am still a responsible citizen and a good teacher, despite my grief. My grief is not a handicap. People seem to worry that if they encourage me to grieve openly, I will fall apart. I won't. On the contrary, if you allow me to be sad, (she concludes) I will be a stronger, more effective person."*

The truth is: the heart needs to mourn its losses, for mourning can help the heart to grow stronger. Our mourning can be private, but sometimes when we mourn, we need one another. Even some animals know this. The young woman

who lost her father points to the elephants. *“Elephants,”* she says, *“are known to grieve in groups; they loop trunks to support the bereaved.”* Can you imagine the sight? A circle of majestic elephants, all connected, all looping their trunks in a bond of solidarity as they share their grief. Maybe for all our smarts and sophistication, we humans risk forgetting some of the spiritual wisdom earned by our animal ancestors— wisdom that can help us to be more fully human. As Frederick Buechner says in lines you’ve hear me quote before, lines I will surely quote again for they are words that speak truth, Buechner says: *You can survive on your own. You can grow strong on your own. You can even prevail on your own. But you cannot become human on your own.”*

Today we draw on the wisdom of the ages and the wisdom of our ancestors as we remember our dead and honor all the souls, known and unknown, who have gone before us. When I first found the words of the poet, Carl Dennis, in his poem *“Candles,”* our reading for today, I thought, *“He’s so right.”* And then I thought both of my life, and of yours. None of us here got where we are, nor got what we have, all on our own. We had help. We may have worked hard and sacrificed and studied hard but, still, we had help from saints both known and unknown. As stubborn and hardworking as my father and his immigrant parents had to be just to survive, I know full well that they were helped along the way, sometimes by people whose names I may never know. Today, when I remember my parents and grandparents, at the invitation of the poet, the candle I light will be a candle for the unknown saints whose simple kindnesses and help may have made all the difference in my ancestors’ lives, and in mine.

It is true: we are all connected. Some days when the going gets tough, we may wonder why we do what we do, or what difference any of it makes to anyone. When those times come, remember that what we do can make a difference, not just today, but for generations to come. Remember the poet’s story of the man, out of work and low on hope, who decided to scoop the mess of glass shards up with the want ad section, the man whose small act of good will made a difference in the life of a young girl, and an even bigger difference in other lives yet to be born. Never forget: what you say and what you do today, and in the coming week, has the power to touch lives, both now, and long after you no longer walk this earth.

In this season of all souls, think about honoring someone’s memory and mourning your loss by how you choose to live, today, and in the year to come. Choose kindness. Choose generosity. Choose compassion. Choose love. Help out. Clean up some of the messes before you, both literal and figurative, just because they need cleaning up. When someone needs to mourn, let them mourn, giving them your ear, your hand, your heart. This I know in my heart: We live our lives not just for ourselves alone. Everything we say, everything we do, can touch lives, both now, and farther than our eyes may ever see.