

Towards Understanding Losses in Children

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Infant development, child development, undeniably human development is predicated on loss just as much as it is on love. Our capacities to navigate loss inform our capacity to love, and our capacity to love informs our capacities to bear loss. These capacities begin to emerge early in life—Infants and children are no strangers to loss and pain. The shock of birth, the seemingly arbitrary separations from the important grown-ups, weaning, toilet training, the birth of new siblings, going to day care and kindergarten and babysitters are everyday experiences that steep the infant and child in a dynamic landscape of loss and pain right from the start. Moments of being fed and satisfied, of physical contact, of reunions with caregivers, of feeling held in body and mind by another, the prospect of *giving back* those very things in relation to the surrounding world, fill out the same dynamic landscape with goodness and love from the start.

As adults, we carry decades of the experiences of losses of all kinds, shaping the way we relate to ourselves and the world around us. For example, the adult that has been through a painful divorce is the same adult that once left home for college and that stepped onto the bus for the first day of kindergarten and was once weaned from the nursing breast.

A significant difference for infants and children, though, is that they are in the earliest stages of making meaning out of love and loss. Imagine the vaguest of incoherent and unfocused feelings and sensations a baby and child might have: *Could it be that the very same figure that satisfies my hunger is also the one that goes away and becomes unavailable unexpectedly? Could it be that the very same parents that conjure my confidence in my own goodness and place in this world had the audacity to bring along another baby to take my place—without my consent? If I feel bad or have lost something for now, who's to say I won't always feel this way? If I lose the feeling of love and goodness now, will I ever recover it?* These feelings sound familiar to most adults, too, but children have not yet developed the same inner resources to navigate them.

Adults have the ability to reflect and distinguish inside one's self from outside one's self, self from other, external reality from imagination, bodily pain from psychic pain. Babies are not yet able to make such distinctions, leaving them with a host of powerful and unarticulated experiences. While it's difficult for adults to imagine the depth and intensity of these experiences in such a tiny being, the fear of loss, of losing the source of love and goodness itself for a baby could feel like abandonment or even dying.

It is only sometime after infancy that we can begin to recognize and articulate some of what we've lost in significant ways, with the help of the grown-ups we love and feel loved by. It may be later that we can refer meaningfully to that process as our development, maturation, mourning or our grief.

At this moment in time during a global pandemic and national unrest, the landscape of love and of potential losses for children has dramatically changed, at least on the surface. The current atmosphere for children and for adults contains more external uncertainty, more inherent separations (for instance from extended family and grandparents), less room for independence, at times, while increased need for independence at others. We are all in constant adjustment—just as some families might have begun to settle into virtual school, there is the prospect that many children will return to their schools soon. Returning to their schools with classmates, wearing

masks, keeping a distance from peers and teachers, they will likely find much unfamiliar within the familiar.

In an effort try to bring some life to these ideas, I'd like to present a couple of short vignettes from two young child patient cases, then I'll add some commentary about the two at the end. In an effort to preserve privacy for the patients I know, I'll be drawing from cases presented to us in children's literature. The world of children can often feel distant for us as grown-ups, yet I think we can experience it more closely sometimes in children's stories.

Our first young patient suffered from episodes of crippling anxiety, including the fear of death, momentary and vague suicidal feelings, painful isolation, bullying from his peers, pervasive insecurities and profound loss. It was only through his restorative relationship with a maternal spider that he could begin to envision himself as a sturdier growing up pig that could endure adversity, navigate loss, receive love and give love. Author, E.B. White presides over and describes our young child patient, Wilbur, in his book *Charlotte's Web*, painting the picture of a vibrant landscape of love and loss. It's a story of the struggle between death and growth, frozenness and developmental momentum, isolation and enduring connection.

I will summarize Wilbur's case:

A little girl named Fern, lived on her family farm and found herself in the position of saving the runt piglet of a newly born litter. After pleading with her family and feeling the deep pain and injustice at the prospect of losing the piglet, her father felt compassion and relented. She was allowed to keep the piglet with the understanding that she would be in charge of his care. She quickly formed a bond with him and named him Wilbur.

Her care for him set him on a quick path to growth, leading the father to tell Fern he was too big for the house and would need to be sold. Fern could not tolerate losing Wilbur, so the family arranged a foster situation where Wilbur would go to live in Fern's uncle's barn cellar and she would be allowed to visit anytime.

It's in this barn cellar, during his first significant separation from Fern that he encountered his boredom, loneliness and the sometimes-harsh reality of the outside world. But he also encountered a spider named, Charlotte. He found her beautiful at first sight and was eager to learn about her life as a spider. Her presence and thoughtfulness gave him more confidence in himself. After Wilbur found that he was at risk of being slaughtered in the near future, he fully depended on Charlotte to intervene and save him. She did this by inspiring the farmer's interest in Wilbur beyond just slaughtering him. For a time, it seemed that he had been saved from death and the greatest of losses. Summer came, along with warm feelings between Wilbur, Charlotte and the barn cellar.

Then the author gently turns our attention to the other side of Love:

The crickets sang in the grasses. They sang the song of summer's ending, a sad, monotonous song. "summer is over and gone," they sang. "Over and gone, over and gone. Summer is dying, dying."
The crickets felt it was their duty to warn everybody that summertime cannot last forever. Even on the most beautiful days in the whole year—the days when summer changes into

fall—the crickets spread the rumor of sadness and change...

The young geese heard it and knew that they would never be little goslings again.

Charlotte heard it and knew that she hadn't much time left. Summer is over and gone, repeated the crickets. How many nights till frost? Sang the crickets. Goodbye, summer goodbye.

The sheep heard the crickets, and they felt so uneasy they broke a hole in the pasture fence and wandered up into the field across the road. The gander discovered the hole and led his family through, and they walked to the orchard and ate the apples that were lying on the ground. A little maple tree in the swamp heard the cricket song and turned bright red with anxiety.

The author sets the stage of this story from the beginning with the threat of Wilbur's death in the Spring, followed later by Charlotte's death in the fall, and closes the curtain at the end with the birth of Charlotte's babies the following spring. From Wilbur's presentation in the beginning, it is difficult to imagine he could ever have survived such adversity, much less cared for himself and others. But, what we find in the end is his growing capacity to integrate his loves and his losses. In the final chapter, after most of Charlotte's babies have flown away to a new life, he had an exchange with Charlotte's three remaining daughters that chose to stay with him in the barn:

Wilbur looked up. At the top of the doorway three small webs were being constructed. On each web, working busily was one of Charlotte's three daughters. "Can I take this to mean," asked Wilbur, "that you have definitely decided to live here in the barn cellar, and that I am going to have three friends?"

"You can indeed," said the spiders.

"What are your names, please?" asked Wilbur, trembling with joy.

"I'll tell you my name," replied the first little spider, "If you'll tell me why you're trembling."

"I'm trembling with joy," said Wilbur.

"Then my name is Joy" said the first spider.

"What was my mother's middle initial?" asked the second spider.

"A", said Wilbur.

"Then my name is Aranea," said the spider.

"How about me" asked the third spider. "Will you just pick out a nice sensible name for me—something not too long, not too fancy and not too dumb?"

Wilbur thought hard. "Nellie?" he suggested.

"Fine, I like that very much," said the third spider. "You may call me Nellie." She daintily fastened her orb line to the next spoke of the web. Wilbur's heart brimmed with happiness. He felt that he should make a short speech on this very important occasion.

"Joy! Aranea! Nellie!" he began. "Welcome to the barn cellar. You have chosen a hallowed doorway from which to string your webs. I think it is only fair to tell you that I was devoted to your mother. I owe my very life to her. She was brilliant, beautiful and loyal to the end. I shall always treasure her memory. To you, her daughters, I pledge my friendship forever and ever."

Wilbur never forgot Charlotte. Although he loved her children and grandchildren dearly, none of the new spiders ever quite took her place in his heart. She was in a class by herself. It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both.

In this passage after Charlotte's death and after naming her babies, Wilbur demonstrates an integration of his grief over losing Charlotte and his firm conviction that the future holds potential.

Our second young child patient endured self-doubt, the threat of loss, loneliness and even the impacts of an infectious disease.

In Margery William's *Velveteen Rabbit*, a boy is given the gift of a stuffed animal for Christmas. Like Charlotte and Wilbur, it was love at first sight for the boy and his velveteen rabbit. The rabbit was spotted all over, fat bunchy and soft. The boy took him everywhere at first, until he was forgotten. While feeling forgotten, the rabbit came to imagine something about what he lacked through his encounters with other toys in the nursery—he felt not real, insignificant and disoriented. One day, the rabbit posed a question to the Old Skin Horse, his wise mentor, in this exchange:

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“REAL isn't how you're made,” said the Skin Horse. “It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don't mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn't happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.”

In this exchange we hear that the love is what brings about the loss, and the loss is what makes the love real.

Later, the boy became sick with scarlet fever and the rabbit spent all his time in the boy's bed while he recovered. The rabbit felt needed and connected and more real. But after the boy recovered, the rabbit was purged from the home to disinfect the house. While the rabbit was put outside with the trash, his tears of loss led to making him into a real rabbit, with a respectable place of belonging among his rabbit peers. On the final page of the story, we observe an exchange between the rabbit and the boy, one that shows the capacity to integrate love and loss:

Autumn passed and Winter, and in the Spring, when the days grew warm and sunny, the boy went out to play in the wood behind the house. And while he was playing, two rabbits crept out from the bracken and peeped at him. One of them was brown all over, but the other had strange markings under his fur, as though long ago he had been spotted and the spots still showed

through. And about his little soft nose and his round black eyes, there was something familiar, so that the boy thought to himself: “Why he looks just like my old bunny that was lost when I had scarlet fever!” But he never knew that it really was his own bunny, come back to look at the child who had first helped him to be real.

It’s in this last passage where we can see that the rabbit had not *just* lost the boy, he had also carried his gratitude for the boy into his new life as a real rabbit.

As parent people in the lives of children in our homes and community, we can glean something from the stories of Wilbur and the Rabbit.

Charlotte’s posture towards Wilbur and the skin horse’s posture towards the rabbit was sturdy—sturdy enough to bear their anxieties, stand up to what was true about loss, and to preserve the love and goodness that facilitated growth.

As remarkable as Charlotte was, she did not embody the childhood wish of an all-powerful and limitless parent (a wish and expectation that leaves its vestige even in us as adults and parents). Charlotte got tired and needed space, she couldn’t share with Wilbur the private details of her work to bring her babies into the world, and ultimately, she died. While she gave much to Wilbur and clearly felt pleasure in this giving, she was ultimately equipping him to be his own kind of Charlotte to himself and the world around him. Wilbur seemed to feel that while Charlotte was lost and irreplaceable, the good feelings of love and creativity he found in her and with her endured inside him beyond her death. He could even play a role in the lives of her three children in the barn cellar. Worry, loss and change were not detrimental to Wilbur’s growth—the pain he endured with Charlotte’s help came hand in hand with the enduring love he experienced with her.

The Skin Horse did not suggest to the rabbit how he could *avoid* loss—he gently pointed to the truth that in order to feel real, one must experience both love and loss. And, while the velveteen rabbit was thrown in the trash to disinfect the house, the boy and the rabbit did not trash their recollections or disinfect their memories of each other—neither the boy nor the rabbit felt compelled to avoid the reality of loss by going back to how things were. But, they were also able to simultaneously hold the reality of their love for each other moving forward through the loss they experienced.

Loss is inevitable, it’s even necessary. Experiencing loss while also sustaining love is how we grow—helping our children do this is how we equip *them* to grow, even after they are all on their own. This idea can inform us as we struggle to sustain love and goodness while navigating through losses for ourselves and with our children.

References

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