

Excerpts from: *The Story of Ruth: Twelve Moments in Every Woman's Life*

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LOSS:

It is a crossover moment in time – to God's new time.

Moments of great loss throw a woman back on her own assets. ... It is her faith in the ultimate logic of God in her life that is her only real resource. ... What happens to them now rests entirely on them and their trust in the fullness of their own creation. It is a moment of deep spiritual revelation.

Like everyone ever born who goes through sudden, defining loss of any kind, these women find themselves faced with the question. Who am I when I am no longer who and what I was?

Loss, any kind of loss – rejection, abandonment, divorce, death – is a shocking, numbing, gray thing that at the outset, at least, freezes the heart and slows the mind. Loss changes life at the root. Irrevocable. What was once the center of life – the person, the position, the plan, the lifestyle – is no more.

With the loss, time stands still; thought stops in mid-configuration. Life is never the same again. What we have known, almost unconsciously, often for years, to be good – to be at least familiar, sure, certain – is gone...

For no acceptable reason, loss destabilizes even the most sophisticated of us...

It is the habitual that dies with every death, the comfortable that dissolves with every ebb and loss of the familiar. What we took for granted, what has been the unquestioned gravity of our existence, shifts and tilts and weakens. Emptiness becomes our new companion, God more a rumor than a fact. Even our spiritual certainties can fade a little: Where is God now when our world is tilting and tipping and we are left in a sea of disorientation.

To be left without the mainstay of a life is to be plunged into questioning the rest of it. ... Where is the will of God for us in loss?

And yet loss, once reckoned, once absorbed, is a precious gift. No, I cannot be what I was before but I can be – I must be – something new. There is more of God in me, I discover in emptiness, than I have ever known in what I once took to be fullness.

There are spiritual lessons to be learned from loss that can be barely divined by any other means and often despite ourselves. We learn, just when we think we have nothing, just when it feels that we have not one good thing left in the world, that what we do still have is ourselves. We have, deep down inside us what no one can take away, what can never be lost either to time or to chance: We have the self that brought us to this point – and more. We have gifts of God in abundance, never noticed, never touched, perhaps, but a breath in us nevertheless and waiting to be tapped. And more, whatever we have developed over the years in the center of ourselves – the grit; the hope; the calm; the bottomless, pulsating, irrepressible trust in the providence of God despite the turns of fortune – is here now to be mined like gold, scratched out and melted down, shaped and shined into a whole new life. We have *within* us the raw material of life. And we have it for the taking.

Sometimes only loss releases the wealth of the accumulated self. Sometimes only loss requires the concentration of spirit that brings us to our best. Often it is only loss that reduces us to our most meaningful resource, ourselves.

We learn that loss is simply the invitation to begin another life, to take on the rest of life, to develop the fullness of the godlike within us. In fact, loss propels us into another life whether we want to begin again or not. It's when we allow ourselves to get stuck in the quicksand of loss that we can't function, that the godly gift of loss escapes us.

Loss, ironically enough, is the catalyst of newness, a doorway to other parts of the soul, where what lies dormant in us comes alive because come alive it must. Without a capacity for the unexplored, life dies. Ironically enough, when all is said and done, we discover that what loss really leaves us with is beginnings.

To lose one phase of life is an end only to the degree that it forces us to muster our energies and turn our directions. Life is not one path; it is many paths, most of them unexplored in favor of closer, clearer ones. But when loss comes, our creating God comes to us in new and demanding ways so that we can finish the creation that has been begun in us.

Grief alone can paralyze, true, but too soon a rush to reassessment can abort the process of readiness for the future. Only grieving can release us from grief. There is no moving on to new life until we have faced the loss of the past one. And that takes time. It takes time to deal with the anger that comes from loss and which no amount of false consolations or irritating solutions – the gifts of the glib – can relieve. It takes time to absorb the shock of losing. It takes time to regain perspective. It takes time to see ourselves as separate from what we've lost. ... It takes time to see the end of something precious as the beginning of some other kind of good. It takes time to see the hand of God in the depths of darkness.

It is only when we have celebrated the gift of what we've lost that we are really ready to move on with life, to move beyond what has been to what can be, to let go.

Grief has a place in life. It consecrates the past to its place in memory. What we do no grieve was surely not worth having to begin with. The measure of the pain grief gives us is the measure of the love we've had.

But grief does more than memorialize what was. It also frees us for the future by giving closure to the past. ... We can ask what it is in us that lies unfinished and begging to be done if the will of God is ever to be completed in us.

We must find what is missing in us and pursue it. We must reassess the essential elements of who and what we are. We must remember how it is that we first defined ourselves – independently of anything or anyone else that has defined us since. We must ask ourselves what is left in us, with these things gone, to become.

... if Creation goes on creating in us all our lives, then the function of loss is to bring us all back to the completion of ourselves just when it seems that there is nothing left in us to develop. No one is one thing only. We are all a medley of possible beginnings, all of them straining toward fulfillment. The pain of loss lies in the fact that we so seldom realize the fullness of ourselves until the rest of life lies open in the ashes of the past. When loss finally happens, as loss inevitable will, then we get the opportunity to say either yes or no to the other parts of creation in ourselves.

The truth of loss is a freeing one: It is the grave of something we loved – this person, this path, this place – that calls forth the resurrection of the self. Then the past has done its doing. Then the Word of God becomes new life to us. Then life becomes a series of possibilities which, when taken seriously, make us whole. ... we take another road, not because we know what will happen at the end of it but because we cannot be whole without walking it.

CHANGE

They can do everything possible to minimize them [changes], to deny them, to ignore them, or they can see them for what they are: God's invitations to development.

Change and loss, it must be realized, are two different things. Loss takes something away from life. Change adds something to it. ... Loss is not an option; it is a necessary and inevitable part of life. Change, on the other hand, is only a possibility. It can be resisted or embraced.

She is certainly still "Naomi," but she is also certainly not. She is not the Naomi who went to Moab. She is a Naomi in process.

Real change is change that is out of my control.

The change process may be a normal one but it is a painful one regardless.

The spiritual offshoot of discontinuity, however, is evolution. It grows us. It cracks us open to God in whole new ways. Creation goes on creating in us. Given new horizons, we become new people. We do things we've never done before. We begin to see things we've never seen before. We think new thoughts and dream new dreams. All the old barriers, all the old absolutes fall. We begin, if we do not cling to the past, to do what could never be done in other circumstances because those circumstances no longer bind us to the past. We begin to walk away from one life toward another, from one self to another, from one way of being in the world to another. We bloom again.

All change is not progress. What people do at times of change becomes the mark of their mettle. All change is not negotiated easily. Faced with a life that is unrefined and strange, anything can happen to the soul of a person. Some people, in fact, faced with the demands of change, change for the worst. ... The thought of living differently is beyond them. But other people, ... know in the center of their souls that however painful the process, the only response to the God of life is life. They know that every new day in every new place is a new glimpse of the face of God. They come to understand that we live in the womb of the God who is changeless, whatever the maelstrom in which we find ourselves.

... change is a quality of growth. ... Real risk is a gamble on the unfinished self, then, on what God gave us to begin with but has only now required of us in full. ... It is the opportunity to become what we have always been but have never done.

Change points are those moments in life at which we get inside ourselves to find that we are not, at the end, really one person at all. We are many – each of them lying in wait to come to life. We are each a composite of experiences and abilities, of possibilities and hopes, of memories and wonder, of gifts and wishes. Every stage of life calls on a different dimension of the self. Every stage of life is another grace of being that teaches us something new about ourselves, that demands something sterner of ourselves, that enables us to learn something deeper about our God. At one stage of life, we rely on personality; at another on our skill; at a third on a latent love of adventure; at others on imagination; at others on faith. ... as each stage spells itself out, we go back into the home of the heart to find the untapped part of the self whose life depends on the choices and changes we make now.

Change may frighten us, of course, but it may just as surely free us from our old selves and freshen us for life newborn. Change dusts off our possibilities and explodes us into new beginnings. ... it points us up the road of reflection, where face-to-face with ourselves, our roots, our hopes, the unanswered questions of our lives as well as the inscrutable, immovable circumstances that surround us, we begin the walk to nowhere with somewhere primal in mind. And the mosaic called life shifts again as we pilgrim it, awake to

possibility as we have not been for ages and attuned to the God who beckons, who companions us, on the way.

TRANSFORMATION

A moment of transformation comes when something inside us shifts and, despite ourselves, we find that we are no longer the person we used to be. ... find not only that life has changed but that we have changed. Then we know with certainty that God is working in our soul.

The problem with the way we go about life is that we are too often deluded into believing that it should be one long straight road from birth to death.

We're surprised, then, shocked perhaps, when after a series of satisfied yesterdays we find that we are no longer who we used to be. We find, suddenly or subtly, that yesterday is no longer the measure of our meaning, the height of our contentment, the standard of the self. ... The person we knew ourselves to be when we began the journey has turned into someone else.

They are not comfortable moments, these glimpses beyond the now. They feel like infidelity. But they taste like life.

Transformation is not happenstance; it is a revolution of the soul. ... We stop being whoever it was who began this journey. We are not now who we were. We don't want any longer to be who everyone thinks we're supposed to be. Our souls stretch to the bursting point and home becomes foreign soil. Somehow, without ever knowing that it happened, we awake to find ourselves transformed. ... It is a solemn and sober moment. It is Passover time. Something is dying and something is coming to life.

The question, of course, is what to do with these new questions, these old dissatisfactions, these upstart doubts. ... If I say where I am and all my past life learnings lie at waste, I die before my time. If I leave where I am, but new questions are bogus, my call to new life nothing but a sham, I die in disgrace. It is indeed the crossroads of the soul. God stands in the dark of it, waiting for me to become the rest of me.

Now she sees herself becoming something, someone new. ... It is the point at which we feel the anchor behind us dislodge and the ocean in front of us draw us in. Those we leave behind us shake their heads. Those who see us coming shake theirs, too.

Life is not a mystery for those who choose well-worn paths. But life is a reeling, spinning whirligig for those who do not, for those who seek God beyond the boundaries of the past. All the absolutes come into question. All the certainties fade. All the relationships on which they once had based their hopes shudder and strain under the weight of this new woman's newness of thought and behavior.

It is a great spiritual moment to come to know that God works in us above and beyond the templates of our lives.

Transformation is the process of coming to wholeness, of growing into the skin of creation in such a way that we become more than we ever thought we could be before we realized that God was our God, too.