How Endings Make Room for Beginnings

"...When I recognize the pain I feel because of loss," says SYLVIA BOORSTEIN. "I am respectful of its presence and kind to myself. And in the truth of what has ended, I see displays of what might be beginning."

IT IS SPRING IN CALIFORNIA—

the seed packets and gardening tools are already out in our supermarkets and I notice how my heart picks up when I see the display. I look at the seed packets with photographs of impossibly large tomatoes and I feel inspired about planting my garden again. The packets seem to say, "Begin something new. You'll be happy." I feel hopeful. When this issue is published and spring has come to the rest of North America, cards saying "Congratulations, Graduate!" will be right alongside the seed packet displays. The cards will celebrate the ends of eras and of relationships, as the classes of '04 realize they won't ever be together in quite the same way again. Maybe, when I look at the cards, I'll remember people I was once close to who aren't in my life now. If I do, I'll feel wistful. In advance, I'm imagining the seeds and the cards as signs of beginnings and endings, right next to each other, as they are in life all the time.

The Buddha taught that seeing beginnings and endings—the arising and passing away of all conditioned forms—is a vital step in developing the understanding that nothing exists apart from interdependent, cause-and-effect relationships. To see the beginnings and endings is also, in my experience, a great support in difficult times. Early on, as I began to trust in the fiber of my being that nothing lasts, I became less afraid of pain. The fact that everything has an end comforted me. "One way or another," I would say to myself, "this too will pass." I was glad I saw that. I didn't think much, in those initial moments of insight, about how the pleasant things change as well as the difficult ones.

Then, during a period of intensive retreat practice, I found myself noticing only the vanishing aspect of all experience. I felt dismayed by a sense of continual loss. I'd see the sunset and weep that the day had disappeared. A faded rose along my walking path reminded me of how beautiful the new bloom had been days before. I told my teacher, "Everything dies! It is so sad!" "It's not sad," he said. "It's just true. Sad is the story that you are telling yourself about it."

I thought about how I was, in fact, only telling myself a part of the whole story. I could have seen that the end of the day is the beginning of the night, and that the dead rose becomes compost for new growth. I wondered why the stories I was telling myself were moody ones, rather than ones about the mystery of eternally lawful cycles of creation.

At first, I thought it might be my nature, romantic and more than a little dramatic. I think otherwise now. I think my level of dismay was part of my developing insight that everything is ephemeral—relationships, dreams, plans, health, vigor—and that I and everyone else will lose what we love. The drama of my response to sunsets and flowers protected me from making impermanence personal. I think I got scared. I began to understand the Buddha's teaching, "Everything that is dear to us causes pain." I hold many things dear.

So do we all. The Buddha specifically named "being parted from the pleasant" as a cause of suffering. Parted from the pleasant, we feel pain, and until that pain is eased—with time, with comforting support, with meditations or prayers that soothe the mind—suffer. The elderly mothers of two of my good friends died this past winter, and the mother of a third friend is very ill. My friends are taking the time to feel sad. They tell me that however timely the deaths may have been, they miss their mothers.
a VR get out of control. \Then I see it coming ("Ooh, lim'll that's an attractive person!") I'm careful to notice the potential—where my mind could go—without actually letting it go there in an obsessive fashion. And from time to time I've managed to develop a sustained sense of mindfulness even amidst the desire, so that it really becomes no big deal. That—what a relief—feels like freedom.

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They need the time to get used to their new world. Another friend of mine is ending her psychotherapy career after nearly forty years. Her health is good, and she has plans for the rest of her life, but still, she struggles. She says that when someone new calls to request an appointment, she hesitates, thinking, "Maybe I can still change my mind." She says, "After I hang up, I feel wistful." A cousin of mine calling to say that her daughter had been accepted at Harvard said, "Even though I am thrilled, and even though her leaving is still six months away, I am already lonesome."

Sad and wistful and lonesome are what human beings feel when they are parted from what they love. They are difficult emotions, but they aren't problems. They become suffering when we resent them, or resist them, or pretend that they aren't there. I know that when I struggle with the pain of any loss, the struggle preoccupies my mind and leaves no room for hope. When I recognize the pain I feel as the legitimate result of loss, I am respectful of its presence and kind to myself. My mind always relaxes when it is kind, and around the edges of the truth of whatever has ended, I see displays of what might be beginning.

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