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**Kohelet**[**\***](http://yjhm.yale.edu/essays/ekanter.htm#A)**Moments**

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As human beings, we have experiences that challenge us to the core, that test us so deeply that we question the very essence of who we are. The nature of our response to the experience often teaches us about ourselves, and forces us to grow in ways that we never would have otherwise. I do not mean to say that ‘tests’ in life are welcome, nor should they be. An illness or a tragedy is something we would never choose as a learning path. But when the illness hits or the tragedy happens, the critical issue is how we respond to the trial, how and what we can learn from it.

In *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway wrote: “The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.” If a test doesn’t kill us, then we can grow strong in the broken places, we can learn from it. And if we *can* learn from it, if we *can* draw some meaning, insight or understanding that we did not have before, then, although we would not have chosen to learn in that way, the experience has not vanquished us. Like Jacob in his struggle with that angel, we may walk away limping, but we have seized a blessing.

A little less than ten years ago, I had surgery and radiation for the treatment of thyroid cancer. Questions that I had explored in my work as a hospital chaplain became real in a dramatically different way because I was the subject. The aftermath of my illness was the most difficult part of the process, my ‘Kohelet phase.’ During this period, Kohelet’s declaration of life’s futility gave voice to my deepest feelings.

I had spent my career as a rabbi teaching that life has meaning, that if we work hard each day and try to appreciate each moment and each person as a gift, that we will feel our lives as full, overflowing with blessing. But after being ill, though the idea still made sense to me intellectually, none of it *felt* true. Rather, what I knew to be true was an overwhelming anger at my fragility, particularly my vulnerability to pain, and a cynical sense of the futility of everything.

I remember thinking, before I was sick, that I was so grateful to God for all the bad things that hadn’t happened to me, grateful to God for having “been spared.” After my illness, I no longer felt that I had been spared. After my illness, I remember thinking to myself, “I played by all the rules, and look where it got me.”

And my own answers came back to haunt me: the answers that tell us that the reason we are religious people is not to make some deal with God whereby we are spared human pain. The religious life is precisely about our ability to affirm despite it all, and the tradition offers us help with all aspects of our humanness, the joy and the pain. But again, there was a disconnect between what I knew intellectually and what I felt. I knew there was no reason why I should *not* experience pain. But I *felt* that it was just fundamentally not fair.

Before my illness, Kohelet had been an uncomfortable acquaintance: part of my spiritual heritage as a Jew, and yet with a message that seemed to fly in the face of everything else the tradition stands for. Kohelet was the one who celebrated life for all the wrong reasons: eat, drink and be merry because there *is* nothing else, says Kohelet. After my illness, however, Kohelet was my best friend, because he was the voice of honesty, speaking a real, hard truth; that there are experiences in our lives that can make us feel in the depths of our being that we don’t matter, that our lives don’t matter, that all is for naught.

Utter futility!- said Kohelet, Utter futility, All is futile. What real value is there for a person in all the gains he makes under the sun?…
Wisdom is superior to folly, as light is superior to darkness… Alas, the wise man dies just like the fool.

The starkness of his cynicism, the sharp edge of his honesty rang truer for me, at that moment, than a hundred sermons affirming life.

When I lost my health, I felt my finiteness in a way that I couldn’t have imagined before. I knew, in a profoundly real way, that my life would end, and my encounter with that fact seemed to make everything else feel trivial. It brought everything I had thought to be true into question. How do any efforts, accomplishments, or relationships really matter, when sooner or later death will remove us from this world?

With my illness seeming to give the lie to truths that had given my life meaning, I found myself in a spiritual no-man’s land. I wondered about my faith, about what might make anything other than the approach of death feel real or true again.

For months after my illness, I lived my life *as if* I had faith that the world that God had created was good, *as if* I believed that what we do, who we love, what we build, matter. I didn’t feel it, but I said it, I read it, I recited it. And I returned to my routine. And time passed.

The ancient rabbis have a helpful teaching concerning religious action and experience: mi-tokh she lo lishma, ba lishma. What is done at first with the wrong intention or for the wrong reason, can, in the process, take on the right intention, and eventually be done for the right reason. This idea teaches us that worthy action, regardless of the nature of our intentions at the moment, can transform us, and has merit.

At the time that I was living in the limbo I have described above, this teaching relieved me of the burden of worrying whether or not I was a hypocrite. It made me think that living as if I had faith, in the hope that the feeling would return, could in itself be an act of faith. It gave me hope that while what I was saying and doing didn’t feel true to me at that moment, eventually it could, or it would.
And, eventually, it did. No illuminating insight revealed itself; no dramatic experience occurred; slowly, with great subtlety, a sense of meaning returned.
There is a story told about the great late 1st century teacher, Rabbi Akiva, who was watching drops of water, and saw how water had softened and reshaped a rock. He marveled that something as soft and unimpressive as drops of water could, over a long period of time, make an impression.

When I think of how I found meaning in life again, I am reminded of Rabbi Akiva and his drops of water. The mundane details of life were my water drops. The small wonders of daily living drew forth a sense of gratitude within me; they slowly re-opened my heart, and I began to see a larger picture.

In Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism), there is a concept called hamtakat ha-dinim, which literally means the sweetening of the judgments. Hamtakat ha-dinim is the process of going from the state of being so immersed in suffering that we can’t see beyond it, to the state of seeing suffering in the larger context of our lives. When we regain the ability to see the larger picture, a picture that includes suffering but also has within it the blessings, the gifts and the beauty of life, the harshness of the ‘judgment’ softens, the bitterness is sweetened, just a little bit. And when that larger picture came into focus again for me, what I *thought* was true, began to *feel* true again as well. I began to feel a sense of meaning and purpose once again.

So ten years have passed, ten healthy years, filled with more blessings than I can count. The anniversary of my diagnosis has returned this experience to the forefront of my consciousness. And I thought if someone found themselves in a situation similar to mine, it might be comforting to hear of how a heart hurt by illness, can heal. The questions are difficult, and it is hard to live with deep doubts and emerging uncertainties. But if we can live with the doubt, and wait, our ability to sense blessings can return, and with it, a way back to renewed faith, meaning and purpose.

**\***Ecclesiastes, a book from the Writings section of the Hebrew Bible.

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