

September 29, 2013
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Relationships - Breakups

Reading: “Coda” from *Love, Death and the Changing of the Seasons* by Marilyn Hacker

Who would divorce her lover with a phone
call? You did. Like that, it’s finished, done—
or is for you. I’m left with closets of
grief (you moved out your things next day). I love
you. I want to make the phone call this
time, say, pack your axe, cab uptown, kiss
me, lots. I’ll run a bubble bath; we’ll sing
in the tub. We worked for love, loved it. Don’t sling
that out with Friday’s beer cans, or file-card it
in a drawer of anecdotes: “My Last
Six Girlfriends: How a Girl Acquires a Past.”
I’ve got “What Becomes of the Broken-Hearted”
run on a loop, unwanted leitmotif.
Lust, light, love, life all tumbled into grief.
You closed us off like a parenthesis
and left me knowing just enough to miss.

Did you love well what very soon you left?
Come home and take me in your arms and take
away this stomach ache, headache, heartache.
Never so full, I never was bereft
so utterly. The winter evenings drift
dark to the window. Not one word will make
you, where you are, turn in your day, or wake
from your night toward me. The only gift
I got to keep or give is what I’ve cried,
floodgates let down to mourning for the dead
chances, for the end of being young,
for everyone I loved who really died.
I drank our year out in brine instead
of honey from the seasons of your tongue.

Sermon: Broken

*You closed us off like a parenthesis
and left me knowing just enough to miss.*

This book by Marilyn Hacker is a novel (or a thinly veiled memoir) in verse about a love story and break-up. The most uncouth, fun, and heart-wrenching sonnets you will ever read. I've read this book probably a dozen times now, and it just keeps getting better. It was published in the 80s; Marilyn Hacker was already a well-respected poet, winner of a National Book Award. The story is that one of her poetry students is a very attractive younger woman named Rachel, or Ray. But Ray is with someone else, and holds Marilyn at arms' length. Then Ray breaks up with her significant other and she and Marilyn start an intense love affair. But the relationship is never an easy road. Ray lets herself be chased but never really gets caught. One year after they first met, the romance is over.

The reader is not surprised—the same way you or I aren't surprised when a friend with lots of relationship drama finally has a break-up. But the writer is devastated.

*Never so full, I never was bereft
so utterly.*

I have been there. Have you?

Unitarian Universalists, when they are looking around for a good word to use instead of the word "God," sometimes say, "God is Love." I believe that, certainly: God is Love with a capital L. "O Love." Giving and receiving love is one of the ways that the holy can be present in our lives.

Yet break-ups shake our belief in Love to the core. We are wounded deep. "Love is patient, love is kind" says First Corinthians. But what if it isn't? What if love does not endure all things, hope all things? If love CAN end...what does that mean for us? What does that mean for our ideas about God?

So even though break-ups may not be something we often talk about in church, I think they have real spiritual implications for us.

Marilyn Hacker says she has the song "What Becomes of the Broken-Hearted" running on a loop in her mind. Music distills our emotions, helps us feel them. It's no wonder pretty much every other song on the radio is either a love song or a break-up song.

"Call and Answer" the song Caitlin sang, is one of my favorite break-up songs. I love both the hopeful chorus:

*If you call, I will answer
And if you fall, I'll pick you up*

And the angry, honest ending:

*I'm warning you, don't ever do
Those crazy, messed-up things that you do*

*If you ever do,
I promise you
I'll be the first to crucify you*

Wow. I don't think that couple is getting back together.

I confess that there was one break-up in college where the two songs I had on repeat were "Tender" by Blur—which is not too embarrassing—and "Believe" by Cher—pretty embarrassing. "Do you believe in life after love?" I couldn't listen to any other songs. Nobody got me but Cher.

When we are going through a break-up it seems like, as Ani DiFranco sang, "everyone's pop song on the radio is suddenly speaking to me." Break-ups are close to a universal experience, yet our own break-ups feel very specific, unique, and intense.

Phil Collins is probably the king of the break-up song: "How can you just turn and walk away...you're the only one who really knew me at all." (Yes, I did just quote Phil Collins in a sermon. Sue me.) One journalist for NPR, Starlee Kine, had a piece on "This American Life" about break-ups.¹ She and her ex-boyfriend had listened to Phil Collins "ironically" together but when they broke up she started to listen to him *very sincerely*. And then she managed to get Phil Collins himself on the phone and ask him how he wrote that iconic break-up song, "Against All Odds."

Phil Collins tells Starlee:

That song ... was written during my first divorce. My first wife and the kids had gone. And I was just left there. So it was written totally out of experience, as opposed to... a "what if" song.

Starlee asks: "Do you think you could have written that song if your wife hadn't left?"

And Phil says:

Probably not. I mean, frankly, if that personal stuff had not happened to me at that time, I probably would never have made an album. And if I was to have made an album, eventually, it would have been more of a jazz/rock thing... Without that stuff, I wouldn't have felt the things I felt that made me sit at a piano night after night... writing stuff. [And I thought,] when she hears this, it's all going to be OK.Foolish, huh? I mean, I did.

Phil goes on to say:

There's various people in your life that you never quite get over.
...[Sometimes]...because of children, you are morally obligated. And ...because of you want to be with the kids as much as possible, you have to be in touch with

¹ <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/339/break-up>

this person that has really hurt you. So it's not like you can just walk away and leave without a trace, because in this instance, there's a couple of little guys that are looking up to you....

Starlee reflects on the interview, telling the listener:

There are so many crazy things about this. First of all, even Phil Collins can't help but quote Phil Collins. Second, if it hadn't been for his wife leaving him in 1979, Phil Collins would never have become Phil Collins. Heartbreak turned a jazz/rock drummer into an international pop icon. But the other crazy thing was how honest and normal he was about it. Once again, Phil Collins put into words what I was feeling.

Celebrities, they're just like us....

But let's bring this back to faith. Back to our understanding of Truth and Love. Musicians and poets have been connecting romantic love to divine love for years. The Bible has the Song of Songs, the sensual description of two lovers, with the overlying metaphor of God and humankind. The troubadours of old sang love songs to their ladies, songs that were both courtly gestures and religious pledges. When humans sing and speak about love, we are often talking about love between humans, *and* our ideas about Love itself—love with a capital L.

When we call God “Love” and when Love is a way we come to experience holiness, when our love gets broken our faith can get broken too.

Sarah Sentilles wrote a memoir called *Breaking Up With God*. I met her in Divinity School; she is an incredibly talented writer, speaker, and artist. When I met her she was in the process to become an Episcopalian priest, but over the next few years, she broke from that life path. She had been struggling against the hypocrisies and sexism still present in institutionalized religion, and her studies in theology had widened her understanding of God to the point where Episcopalianism, or really any religion, felt too narrow, too constricting. Her heart was broken by the church.

She writes:

I broke up with God. The breakup was devastating. It was like a divorce when all the friends you had as a couple are forced to choose sides and end up not choosing yours.

Breaking up with God meant letting go of someone I had believed in, loved, and built my life around. ...

When I knew the God I was with was not the right God for me—that it was over—the voices in my head grew loud and persistent. They seemed to be telling

the truth: You will always be alone. ...Your standards are too high. ...You will never find anyone to love you.

In that moment between knowing the relationship must end and doubting you will ever find someone else, you have to believe you are enough. You have to be willing to stand in that empty house and love yourself. Ending things requires faith.

Faith—not in a deity—but in a way forward, a way through.

When Sarah ends her book, she has left the church, become agnostic, and rediscovered a love of teaching. But she still seems lonely, searching. So I messaged her on Facebook to ask how she is doing now.

She wrote me:

I teach at an art school now, and I see art and religion as meaning-making practices with real effects. ... I understand more the difference between institutional religion and relationship with something bigger than me -- whether that is the earth, stars, food systems, community, g*d, spirit, creativity . . . I am remembering the importance of community, that social change, transformation, and healing are not things I can do on my own. I need other people to work with, to be challenged and held by. ...I stayed away for a long time because I found it so hurtful, but I am finding connections now, and it feels really good and hopeful.

If you call, I will answer.

We have shared the heartbreaks of Marilyn, of Phil, of Sarah. We are not alone.

The very last words that Marilyn has to say about her lost love are:

*I drank our year out in brine instead
of honey from the seasons of your tongue.*

And for the first time, after having read this book a dozen times, I focused on the word “brine.” She doesn’t say bile, or bitterness. Honey is sweet, but brine is salty, savory. Brine turns cucumbers into pickles, transforms turkeys into Thanksgiving. Marilyn’s relationship ended, and it did not end sweetly. But she left a book that I, and many others, have savored for years and years. Phil Collins turned his heartbreak into song. And Sarah turned hers into writing, art, and a new way of life. From the depths of despair rose new creations.

When our heart is broken, when we find ourselves alone and raw, there are people here who will listen. In the faces of our friends and church community, we can find a new definition of love. Our lay ministers will listen. I will listen. We have all had our hearts

broken, by a person we loved or by an idea or institution that failed us. And somehow we are making it through, figuring it out day by day, climbing the hill towards healing.

*If you call, I will answer
And if you fall, I'll pick you up
And if you court this disaster
I'll point you home.*

May we find healing in all our broken places.
And may we love each other well.

Amen.