

Stripped bare

Holy Week and the art of losing

by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [March 21, 2012](#) issue



Good Friday at St. Andrew's Church, Whissendine, Rutland, U.K. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Andrew Tatlow](#).

Undressing another person, or another person's body, is a slow and exquisite work. Whether it's a feeble parent who can't manage the buttons, a child for its bath or an expectant lover, undressing can be an act of love. When a Jew dies, a small group known as chevra kadisha prepares the body for burial. First the body is reverently undressed, and any wounds on it are carefully cleansed. Rings, bracelets and all jewelry are removed. The body is bathed and purified by water, then wrapped in a white sheet and perhaps a prayer cloth and tied with a sash secured by a sacred symbol. Now it is ready to meet the living God.

Each Maundy Thursday, the members of our church's altar guild carefully and lovingly remove the candelabra, cross, vessels, fine linens and paraments from the altar. They strip the altar to bare stone. When everything is removed, what is left is nude and vulnerable, not as imposing as one might expect. It seems almost a shame to see the altar that way, and so when the women are finished undressing it someone turns out the lights, and the congregation files out in silence.

Every time I participate in such a service, I think of Jesus, who on the night of his betrayal laid aside his woven tunic and tied a towel around his waist. He stripped for service. Another Gospel tells us that later "they stripped him" for mockery and death. The altar stands for Jesus, who in Holy Week enters the last stages of his ritual purification. The altar also stands for those from whom something or someone is being taken away. It stands for us. A sentence from one of Bonhoeffer's prison letters comes to mind: "I think that even in this place we ought to live as if we had no wishes and no future, and just be our true selves."

As a graduate student I read *Letters and Papers from Prison* for the usual 1970s reasons, as an exhibit in the battle between orthodoxy and what was then called secular theology. But now I read it as an end-of-life narrative. I read it as the story of a brilliant young man in a concentration camp who is preparing for his own death, but not without a Gethsemane-like struggle.

In the spring of 1943 Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge, "I sometimes feel as if my life were more or less over. . . . But you know, when I feel like this, there comes over me a longing (unlike any other that I experience) to have a child and not to vanish without a trace." By January 1945, he had adopted a fully retrospective view of his own life. He made the telltale gesture of instructing his parents to give away all his clothes, including the salt-and-pepper suit and the pair of brown shoes. According to the witness of the prison doctor, before he went to the gallows Bonhoeffer removed his prison clothes and knelt in prayer. On April 9, 1945, the stripping of his altar was completed.

When I was a child, it was the mysterious shadows that attracted me to Holy Week. Nowadays it's something more, or something different. It's what draws me back to Bonhoeffer's *Letters* year after year. In a church that's filled with people who are being reduced in a hundred different ways—by illness, death, grief, betrayal, depression and economic reversal, whose insurance has lapsed and whose dreams have been foreclosed—Holy Week teaches us all a lesson in losing. We are not

losers, but we have been reduced, some of us to what feels like our touchstone. On Maundy Thursday we discover that even when everything has been taken away, something remains.

My South African friend Peter Storey once remarked that "America is the only country where more Christians go to church on Mother's Day than Good Friday." It is a sobering thought. The message of Easter, as Paul Tillich said in a sermon, is that the Messiah was "born in a grave." Those who skip Thursday and Friday but show up on Easter Sunday are missing the essential truth of the Passion. Thus they also bypass the profound grief that attends Jesus' death. But there's more to it than that. They have also missed one of Jesus' most important lessons before dying. During Holy Week Jesus teaches the art of losing.

In the first three stanzas of her poem "One Art," Elizabeth Bishop ruminates on life's reductions:

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

The poem is heavy with irony. That Bishop would label the inevitable slippages of time and memory an "art" is downright funny. And that she would equate our desperate responses to loss with the notion of mastery reeks of self-deception. When you are slammed by tragedy, what is there "to master"? By the last stanza, however, the poet has narrowed her loss to a beloved person and only then arrives at an honest response:

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.*

What Jesus offers this Holy Week is not an escape from loss but a better way of losing. In each Passion account, and especially in the Gospel of John, Jesus suffers humiliation and defeat but does not relinquish his identity as the Son of God. His final cry is addressed to his Father. His divinity is confirmed not by coming down from the cross but by his gestures of love while impaled upon it. From the cross he provides for his mother and forgives his tormentors. From the cross he draws a world of lost souls to himself. As it turns out, what remains in each of us is not the bravado of mastery but the vulnerability of love.

All our losses, however sharp or permanent they may be, deprive us of our ability to think and act beyond ourselves. They rob us of the very quality of love Jesus performed in the Upper Room and on the cross. Take grief, for example. Grief bears witness to no story or solution larger than itself. It shrinks your life to the exact size of your longing. The art of love is lost to you.

By God's power, however, some break through the anguish and, in the midst of their own loss, find someone else to help or love. A boy dies of a drug overdose, and his parents take a new and active role in drug education for teens. A woman survives breast cancer, but instead of nesting with her own anxiety, reaches out to other women with the same disease. Poor people help other poor people. The bereaved understand and comfort the bereaved. This is the true art of losing. And it is an art or, as the apostle would say, a gift of the Spirit, no less a blessing than any of the other, better-known gifts. Jesus teaches the art of losing. It's one of the reasons why some of us still sit in darkened churches on a Thursday and Friday night.

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