

The art of losing, the joy of finding

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I have no idea what it would mean to be a shepherd, let alone someone who would abandon 99 sheep to go looking for a single stray. But there is another character in this Sunday's sequence of parables, one I recognize fully as myself: the woman who loses one of her ten silver coins and then tears apart her house until she finds it.

In my case, there is no missing silver. Instead--and here I give an itemized account of the last couple of weeks--there are the lost sunglasses, the lost checkbook, the lost cell phone, the lost pair of new shoes, the lost keys. It turns out most of these things are misplaced rather than lost. The glasses have been tucked into the pocket of a suit jacket all along, the glasses hiding in the dust ball underneath the living room couch. (The shoes remain a mystery.)

Like the parable's frantic woman, I go on a mission of reconnaissance armed with a flashlight, a mop handle, and a mental map that retraces where-I-last-saw this or that. The whole time I hold against myself my failure to put things where they belong. I hear the still small voice of reproach, the counsel of perfection: If you always put your keys in the same place, you wouldn't ever lose them.

If there is any comfort to be had in what has become a ritual, it is in recalling Elizabeth Bishop's poem "One Art":

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.

This is my story, this is my song.

And then frequently, but not always, there is the retrieval. It is a moment of pure gratitude before my unearned, outright blessing becomes business as usual. I am filled with joy at the sight of the glasses, the keys, the important piece of paper treated with neglect as if it were nothing. Thank you, God!

I do not go so far as to gather my friends together to report the rediscovery or throw a party. For one thing, this happens too often, and one doesn't want to make too much of a good thing. But just maybe the thrill of finding what was lost gives me some pale sense of the angels' joy over other infinitely more important recoveries.

Sometimes what is lost is not found again, of course, and cannot be replaced. Bishop's poem goes on to tell this truth, offering a list of the irretrievable, a list that grows as one ages and becomes more and more poignant. The speaker maintains that none of these enumerated losses constitutes a disaster, but in her final item-- "even losing you"--she strains credulity. There are losses for which there is no compensation.

Nonetheless, there is the sheep brought home on the shepherd's shoulders, the coin rediscovered where it should never have been, the two sons summoned to a welcoming party that neither deserves to join. Loss is to be expected; it is built into the nature of things. Finding what is lost, however, is always a surprise and never to be taken for granted.

When it happens, it is right to celebrate and rejoice. Why? "I have found the coin!" shouts the woman who has turned her house upside down in her search. That is reason enough.