

EXCERPT

When You Lose What You Can't Live Without:
Identity Death and Renewal in the Wake of Calamity
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FOREWORD

Everybody loses — no exceptions. To suffer a loss involving that which, to us, is indistinguishable from who we are is to suffer an egregious wound to soul and psyche — life-threatening to be sure. Indeed, *any* threat to personal identity is perceived as a threat of death, as a dynamic of dying. It makes no difference whether calamitous loss occurs through natural disaster or unnatural catastrophe, or involves the removal, from our lives, of another person through bodily death or emotional estrangement, or the loss of community, or career, or physical or mental capacities due to accident, illness, or advancing age, or the loss of material possessions, employment or financial standing brought on by economic hard times, or even the loss of cherished ideals — articles of faith once felt to be grounded in granite. Loss is loss.

Calamity and its attendant losses can be sudden or sequential, by leaps or increments, personal or collective, anticipated or through ambush. *No one is exempt from suffering them.* There is no immunity.

Perhaps more subtle are the attachments we make to those structural elements of our lives — those people, pursuits, stations-in-life, domiciles — which undergird and truss up the sheet-rock of our edifice of self. These are the “givens” of our lives — the “who we are” — and we rarely question our presumption of their constancy. Whatever, or whoever, these perceived givens of our existence may be, these are what, and whom, we assume, as a

direct function of their constancy and our reliance on them, we can't (and will never have to) live without. They are psychologically and metaphorically our air, food and sunshine, our clothing and shelter; they comprise our very pulse.

Yet within the crisis of loss and the trauma of ensuing identity death brought on by calamitous events there awaits, for those who can withstand the process of material and psychological dismemberment long enough, an encounter with the ground of being itself—experienced as *both* the architect of calamity, and the soul-saver—the wringer of rearrangement, redemption, rebirth and restoration out of grinding and excruciating events. This encounter with the ground of being—the Self—is not—indeed *cannot*—be arrived at cheaply. The encounter awaits us, yet we know not where or when. Neither do we know the ultimate meaning behind such encounters, nor, at the outset, whether the ground of being be friend or foe—or both at once.

Any such concurrence—the encounter itself—is an experiential event that often defies pure logic and reason. It is a naturalistic phenomenon grounded in instinct and embracing the immediacy, “language” and trappings of instinct.

What this encounter with the ground of being, amidst the dying of one's former sense of self, seems to yield is a conscious rendezvous with a dynamic of rearrangement that is so fundamental and basic to soul and spirit life as to constitute some form of psycho-spiritual law, a law not rooted in abstruse concept, but planted stolidly in the viscera of instinctual ferment. This law, this intrinsic tendency, this principle of our being, *is* what both destroys us *and* redeems us.

It upends us and rips us away from “what we can't live without,” and “we” die to our former lives. It strips and strains us,

rendering to us, as a residue, our own indestructible essence, and then, after a purgatorial time “in the wilderness” (or the underworld, or the chrysalis), it, against a backdrop of what may feel like frightfully long odds, ordains the loosing of our essence on out into the world once again to attract to it that which is to become our new outer-world arrangement—the apparent resumption of our lives. Only from going through a rending-of-self, sufficient to lead us into a state of irreducibility in which we encounter, on the one hand, our utter impoverishment and, on the other, our meager, yet indestructible, sand-blasted, desiccated, rust-freed condition—only through such an ordeal can pregnancy, new moistness and flow arise, leading to a new emergence.

While such a process is not easily endured, if we strive to stay conscious of it, and of our place within it, at any given moment, great riches may await us. Cognitive, intellectual and emotional, material and spiritual life can finally catch up with, and even off, one another. We can come back into the world with a rich lode of reclaimed underworld veins and ores. To have died, gone into the wilderness, the underworld, and returned—not so much to tell the tale (for it is a tale beyond words, a tale before which words pale) as to incorporate it and exude it through our mere presence—is a redemptive passage for ourselves, and a kind of gift to the humanity which is us all. This gift is self-validating, highly visible to those who have already been obliged to undergo the torments, quite discernible to others who may be starting, under duress, in extremis and with protest, to open themselves to this process (or would, God forbid, aspire to it!), and helpful, overall, to the uninitiated, regardless of their level of awareness.