

David B. MacLachlan
January 30 1931 - September 2, 2012

In Memoriam

Presented at his funeral, September 7, 2012, by his son Robert A. MacLachlan.

Parvati the mother goddess and Shiva the destroyer are consorts, the duality of life's bounty and life's loss. Parvati graciously offers us many fruitful opportunities, and we take those opportunities or not. If we do not take the opportunity that she offers in the never-to-be-repeated situation that we find ourselves, then that opportunity is gone, that fruit never will be, and that is all. If we do accept what is offered, then we win something that will be our own for a while. If we choose wisely, then we win something valuable. Perhaps it is something especially sweet, or perhaps it is something that promises even more bountiful opportunities. Then Shiva takes it away, and that is all.

Life gives us only three kinds of decisions, and we make these over and over again: how to worship Parvati, which of her gifts to accept, and how to worship Shiva. Our ordinary concern in life is with which of Parvati's gifts to accept. She is so endlessly bountiful that, however much we might like to honor her in this way, we cannot accept all her gifts. This is a great challenge to our wisdom because these choices give our life its form and its feeling.

How to *worship* Parvati and Shiva is challenging for a very different reason. We have so few choices. The challenge is that our hubris often tempts us to defy them — to worship them improperly. The true way to worship Parvati is with welcoming, with gratitude and with trust. We must welcome her gifts; if we refuse them it is very insulting to her. When she gives us opportunities, and we seize those opportunities to win her gifts, then we must be grateful for the opportunities and for the gifts. We must trust that she will continue to offer us fruitful gifts.

Why must we welcome her gifts, why must we be grateful, and why must we trust her bounty? If we spurn her gifts we insult her because we have impoverished our lives. If we are not grateful and trusting, then we disrespect her, and in turn make our lives miserable. Our gratitude is our gratification in life. If we do not choose gratitude, then we choose to feel some other way that is much less pleasant. If we do not trust her, then we live always in fear that she will cease to sustain us.

Sometimes we spurn her gifts because we cannot bear the thought of having this sweet gift for only a while, and not forever. This is obviously foolish, because if we do not accept her gifts then we never know any sweetness. The opportunity is gone, and that is all.

It is Shiva's choice what to take and when to take it. The only choice that he gives us is how to worship him. In the end even *he* is deprived of choice---because he has taken everything else, the only thing that remains to be taken is our life. Worshiping Shiva properly is the greatest challenge to our wisdom because we cling to our lives and to all of the gifts that Parvati has granted us. But these gifts are ours for only a while, and then Shiva takes them away. Our only choice is in how we respond to this taking away, in how we worship Shiva.

Shiva demands respect. How do we respect Shiva? When he takes something from us, we must acknowledge that it is his to take, and must we give it to him as graciously as Parvati gave it to us. If we respect Shiva, then he rewards us with wistfulness and peace. Yet because we cling to life we are strongly tempted to defy Shiva.

Some may at first imagine that they can command Shiva to pass them by. Shiva is not gracious like Parvati, so he rarely satisfies these rude demands. When their desire is frustrated, and they feel the sweetness slipping away, they may pout and petulantly repeat their demand. This also fails, so they quickly pass to resentment. Now they shake their fists and roar with rage, and vow that they will not forget this injustice. And they do not forget. Every day they worship Shiva falsely by recalling the injustice; every

day he rewards them with anger and resentment.

“Parvati and Shiva” is my own meditation on life, blessings, and loss. It’s relevant because it points out that death is merely the final loss, and that much of our character comes from how, in life, we accommodate ourselves to the inexorable accumulation of losses. David had been slipping away for many years, going back to a marked withdrawal from engagement in life around 1980. The person he became was more pleasant and agreeable, but lacked the fire in the mind so characteristic of his earlier life.

I do not feel that I knew him very well, before or after. He didn’t tell me much about his inner life, so most of what I know is an act of imagination, extrapolating from my own experience of my many similarities to him, such as my shyness, my belief in the value of scientific progress and my passion for discussing ideas. When I wrote the parable of Parvati and Shiva, I attempted to make it universal, talking about how I had seen others confront this existential spiritual challenge. Here, I mention only the forms of hubris I have seen in myself, and by extension, in my father.

It is my feeling that, like me, he was more challenged by the proper worship of Parvati than he was by Shiva’s cold inevitability. When I was perhaps five or six I was paging through a Time-Life book on the solar system which had an illustration of stellar evolution. I asked him about this, and he explained the main point of the two-page spread, which was that in a few billion years the sun would expand to vaporize the earth. This was my first encounter with that idea, and I was appalled. *Isn’t this a big problem? Why isn’t someone doing something about this?* I had assumed that though individuals did die, life would go on more-or-less the same forever. He laughed and said that humans would almost surely be gone long before then, since a few million years was a pretty good run for a species. Later, during the expanding environmental awareness of the 70’s, he remarked (about the risks of pollution) that “It wouldn’t be the first time that a species drove itself to extinction by fouling its environment.” Perhaps he

was thinking of what geochemists call the *Oxygen Catastrophe*, when the waste oxygen excreted by algae completely transformed the chemical environment, leading to the extinction of most forms of life then present. Of course this is the same oxygen that is the breath of life to us.

His acceptance of ultimate loss was not beatific. It had an edge of bitterness and resentment. The 1970's, my mid-childhood and adolescence, were hard on him. In 1972, hurricane Agnes caused severe flooding in Harrisburg, and completely submerged the offices of the Pennsylvania Geologic Survey, where he worked. He recruited the entire family in preserving papers that had been soaked and covered with mud. As well as working on his own field notebooks and maps, one thing that I particularly recall was that he also restored the field notebooks of someone who had formerly worked for the survey. He took this on himself, since no one else at the survey felt that these notebooks were that important.

Even as a ten-year-old, I perceived that he was changed by the flood. I now think it was not so much the loss of some of his own work due to the caprice of nature, but more that it got him to thinking that nobody would care about his own field notebooks once he was gone, and those notebooks were the heart of his work.

In his understanding of what geologists call *Deep Time*, he found himself forced to see all human enterprise as somewhat futile. And yet this coexisted with a sense of idealism about the possibility of human progress through scientific understanding, a heroic view of the malleability of the human condition that fit well with the religious humanism of Unitarian Universalism and also with the liberal political views of the ACLU and the Union of Concerned Scientists (which promoted nuclear disarmament.)

While he confronted loss bravely (if a bit defiantly), he was not so good at embracing opportunity and the social give-and-take that involves. This was partly shyness. If we were going to the hardware store to get a toilet tank float, he would wander up and down the plumbing aisle searching for that item. If anyone from the store asked "Can

I help you?" he would say "No, just looking." That was what he did, and what I did myself for many years after.

The one setting in which he would become expansive, and sometimes scintillating, was in intellectual discussion, such as might take place at a party. As a child, I saw this only occasionally, and was somewhat puzzled by it, but I find myself doing the same thing. My wife Sheila first got to know me as her "favorite party conversationalist". Though I'm an engineer, if you want a demonstration, ask me about evolutionary social psychology.

Like me, he did not do well with welcoming experience or with gratitude. Perhaps a fear that abundance will not be forthcoming, or a resentment about past losses underlies this. My mother is a good cook, but when she would ask him what he thought of a new recipe, he might say: "Well, it isn't awful." From him, that was high praise.

Ray says that he was brilliant. I guess I believe that. I think he had a knack for intuitive synthesis of detailed information, as I do. Ray refers to this as "big picture" thinking, but it is very different from the sort of verbal analytic theory-driven work that is respected in the academic world. Although he nearly completed a PhD in geology, he was unable to get his thesis accepted because his conclusions did not fit with his advisor's view of Nevada geology.

Wherever you go, there you are. I see in him a personality trait that I see in myself and in one of my sons. It is a fierce resistance to being told what to do and what to think. This has some of the toddler's "**Me do it myself!**", with the same aspects of annoying those who think they know better, and yet also being a precondition to actual independence. Whenever I have done creative work, I have done it the "wrong" way. Unless I'm really stumped, I don't read up on the problem. Instead, I want to solve it myself. Then, when it comes time to write it up, I go back and find the other related work, linking it into my own framework.

I don't really understand what happened to David after 1980, when I left home. It is easy to invoke possession by the modern demons of mental illness. The fundamental proof of having a healthy mind is functioning effectively, and the world that we must function in is a *human* world, profoundly social. David increasingly withdrew from engagement with others, both from our family, and from the larger world of social causes and political action.

While Alzheimer's did ultimately destroy his mind, right now I'm playing with the idea of his 40's being a daunting spiritual challenge that he could not overcome. A descent into the underworld, followed a decades-long dark night of the soul. I wonder if the problem was not so much an inability to accept loss, as the failure of hope, the erosion of the heroic vision. And yet, even in the end, he wasn't entirely gone. When, just over a month ago, he could no longer walk, my sister Effie and I came out to visit him. As always, I was at a loss for what to say to him, but Effie got him talking. Effie mentioned Pennsylvania, and David said: "Pennsylvania, that was a long time ago." And so it was—even for a geologist.

Loch Lomond

By yon bonnie banks and by yon bonnie braes,
Where the sun shines bright on Loch Lomond
Where me and my true love were ever wont to gae,
On the bonnie bonnie banks of Loch Lomond.

[Chorus:] Oh ye'll take the high road, and I'll take the low road,
And I'll be in Scotland afore ye,
But me and my true love will never meet again,
On the bonnie, bonnie banks of Loch Lomond.

'Twas there that we parted, In yon shady glen,
On the steep, steep side of Ben Lomond,
Where, in purple hue, the highland hills we view,
And the moon coming out in the gloaming.

(chorus)

The wee birdies sing, and the wild flowers spring,
And the sun shines bright on Loch Lomond,
But the broken heart it kens nae a second spring,
Though the woeful may cease from their weeping.

(chorus)

I sang Loch Lomond at the graveside, and offered this explanation: Loch Lomond sounds like a “love gone wrong” song, but the singer hasn’t lost his love, he’s lost his life. The fast low road he’s taking back to Scotland is through the underworld. He imagines how his love will feel:

But the broken heart it knows no second spring,
though the woeful may cease from their weeping.

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