

A Balm for Our Pain: The Power of Words

Some time ago, my life collapsed like a building under a wrecking ball, a device of my own creation. As I sifted through the debris of those ruins, my sustenance came from the love of some family members, the comfort of two loyal friends, and the remnants of a battered faith.

And from the solace of words.

Sometimes when we are at rock bottom, dead to the joys of the world, filled with agonizing regrets for the past and fearful of the future, we forget the strength and hope we can take from words. We hear that “actions speak louder than words,” that “a picture is worth a thousand words,” or that “words are cheap.” *Facta, non verba*, goes the old Latin tag, “deeds not words,” and so we fail to consider the restorative powers of language.

But what if words are all we have? What if they are one of the only shields left to absorb the hammer blows of our circumstances and failures?

In Mark Helprin’s [*A Soldier of the Great War*](#), the novel’s hero, Alessandro, remembers a letter left him by his dying wife, Ariane. In this final message, Ariane writes:

As long as you have life and breath, believe. Believe for those who cannot. Believe even if you have stopped believing. Believe for the sake of the dead, for love, to keep your heart beating, believe. Never give up, never despair, let no mystery confound you into the conclusion that mystery cannot be yours.

As long as you have life and breath, believe.

In my suffering, Ariane's exhortation was an outstretched hand helping me to keep my feet and leading me forward.

In the same scene, Alessandro shares with Nicolo, a young factory worker, some of his thoughts about God. Alessandro says, "His existence is not a question of argument but of apprehension. Either you apprehend God, or you do not."

The conversation continues:

'Do you?'

'Yes, very strongly, but at times, not. The older I get, and the more I see how life is arranged, and with what certainty and predictability we move from stage to stage, the more I believe in God, the more I feel His presence, the more I am stunned by the power of His works. And yet, the older I become and the more I see of suffering and death, the less approachable is God, and the more it appears that He does not exist. Being very clever, He has beaten life into a great question that breaks the living and is answered only in death. I am so much less sure than when I was young. Sometimes I believe, and sometimes not.'

'What accounts for the difference?'

'My strength, the clarity of my vision, the brokenness of my heart—only these.'

The brokenness of my heart.

How well I knew that brokenness.

In his essay "[The Crack-Up](#)," F. Scott Fitzgerald opens with lines that truly hit home in my time of despair:

Of course all life is a process of breaking down, but the

blows that do the dramatic side of the work—the big sudden blows that come, or seem to come, from outside—the ones you remember and blame things on and, in moments of weakness, tell your friends about, don't show their effects all at once. There is another sort of blow that comes from within—that you don't feel until it's too late to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again. The first sort of breakage seems to happen quick—the second kind happens almost without your knowing it but is realized suddenly indeed.

The second happens almost without your knowing it but is realized suddenly indeed.

I can think of no better description of what happened to me.

Fitzgerald's "[The Great Gatsby](#)" ends with these familiar lines:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther...And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

Borne back ceaselessly into the past.

For years, I taught "Gatsby" to my high school students, and frequently revisit what I regard as the finest of American novels. But despite my familiarity with the book, that phrase hit me like a punch at the time I was undergoing what Fitzgerald elsewhere calls the "real dark night of the soul." It reminded me that that I had to face up to my past, that to shove it aside or cover it over meant living like a man half-dead.

The words of these writers, and many others, acted as candles in my darkness.

When you are enduring a truly terrible slog, when you are staggering along a rutted path in the middle of the night burdened by troubles, guilt, and circumstance, remember to take along some words for your companions. Whatever words you choose. Whatever words keep you going.

And then take the next step.

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