



Noli timere

by Joe Moran



On 13 November 2020, a leaving do was held at 10 Downing Street, in a room so crowded that people were perched on each other's laps. Later that evening, Abba's 'The Winner Takes It All' was heard coming from a party in the Prime Minister's flat. On 11 December, Number 10 took delivery of a new drinks fridge for the regular 'wine-time Fridays'. On 18 December, around fifty people attended a Christmas party, with cheese and wine and the exchange of Secret Santa gifts.

At the same time, my closest friend was dying. In those months, my only contact with her was a series of ever more desultory phone conversations, when she was either worn out and dreamy or high on steroids. At her funeral, in early February 2021, I was one of exactly thirty mourners. Everyone wore masks and no one hugged. At the end we briefly milled around outside, before the next thirty mourners from the next funeral came out. It was so cold that, when I looked down at my hands, I saw that my knuckles were bleeding.

When news of the lockdown parties broke, the most enraged were the bereaved – the ones who had been forced to say their farewells through windows in care homes or on iPads, or watch funerals on live streams on their laptops. Those defending the parties didn't understand, or pretended not to. *People had been working hard, they said, and we needed to maintain morale.*

Ever since our ancestors first sprinkled ochre on bodies 40,000 years ago, and buried them with favoured objects and adornments, we have needed rituals for the dying and the dead. Gathering round the bed to accompany those in their last hours on their voyage into the unknown, then cleansing and purifying the body, holding wakes, keening, eulogising, taking turns to shovel dirt into the grave, sitting shiva, breaking bread. The rituals wash over us and relieve us of the duty to think. They help to fill the void of unmeaning left when someone we love simply, shockingly, ceases to exist.

We share these rituals with other animals. One night in the summer of 1941, while watching a sett, the nature writer Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald saw a badger funeral. A sow and her son improvised a grave from an old rabbit's warren, dragged and heaved an older male into it, then roofed it with earth. The whole ceremony, throughout which they howled and whimpered and touched noses, lasted seven hours. The scientist and conservationist

Cynthia Moss, who has studied elephants in Kenya's Amboseli National Park since 1972, has seen them covering dead members of their herd with leaves and branches and standing vigil, then returning much later to stroke their bones; the Roman author Aelian observed the same elephant rituals in the third century. The animal behaviourist Marc Bekoff once witnessed the funeral of a magpie hit by a car. Four birds stood silently over the body, then flew off and brought back grass, twigs and pine needles to place beside it, like a wreath. After bowing their heads for a few seconds, they flew off.

Some scientists think that calling these things 'funerals' is just mushy anthropomorphism. You can observe animal behaviour, they say, but you can't prove what feelings lie behind it. The biologist E. O. Wilson noticed that when an ant dies, it lies ignored for two days. Then, when its body starts to release oleic acid, another ant carries it to a refuse pile of dead ants, the ant version of a graveyard. When Wilson applied oleic acid to a live ant's body and returned it to an ant trail, that ant was also carried off on another's back to the graveyard, struggling all the while.

I suppose a strict behaviourist would see the grieving rituals not just of ants but of all animals – perhaps even humans – like this, as a matter of chemical triggers and blind instinct. But I have seen a group of horses in a field with heads bowed over their dead comrade, and I know what I saw. Other animals can tell us something about why we have to

say goodbye to those we have lost, even though we know it changes nothing. We need to be with our dying and our dead, and when we can't be, it feels as if a hole has been rent in the fabric of the universe.

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For months after my friend's death, a line from a Paddy McAloon song, 'The Old Magician', kept popping into my head: *Death is a lousy disappearing act*. Things felt oddly dulled and affectless, as if the normal course of grief had stalled in the general surrealism of daily life in lockdown. Life went on, but laboriously. My brain felt like an old computer that more or less works, but takes ages to boot up and keeps freezing because of all the old programs and temporary files running in the background. It occurred to me that at some point the computer would stop working altogether, and those feelings, whirring away uselessly underneath, would have to be faced.

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We owe to Sigmund Freud the now common idea of grief as an arduous road we must walk undeviatingly along. Bereaved people, he writes in his essay 'Mourning and melancholia', cleave so tightly to the memory of their lost beloved that 'a turning away from reality ensues'. Mourning demands *Trauerarbeit* or *grief work*: the hard labour

of severing the ties that bind us to them. It means slowly conceding the truth that they are now, in Freud's unforgiving phrase, a 'non-existent object'.

I could hardly begin to think of my friend as not existing. For the last year of her life, I knew her the same way I knew almost everyone else – as a digital ghost, an incorporeal intelligence spirited through the air. And then, like a switch being tripped, she wasn't even that. How easy it was for me to believe that she had just mislaid her phone, the one with the scuffed Cath Kidston case, or forgotten to charge it. Or that she was somewhere with dodgy reception and was wandering around in the garden holding it up, trying to pick up a single bar of signal, and at any moment her thumbs would start dancing on its little screen, she would press send and her name would pop up again on my phone. *Sorry for the radio silence*, she would say – as people always say.

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Even now, I still think an email might arrive with a friendly ping, and it will be her. Or that one of those little grunts when my phone shudders on silent might be her sending a text. Or that she might chip in to our WhatsApp group in the way that long-time lurkers suddenly and weirdly have something to say, and remind us with a jolt that they exist.

To Dr Freud, all this is just denial. *Must do better with your grief work*, he would say. *See me after class*.

Things carry on existing even when we can no longer see or hear them. We aren't born with this knowledge; we need to learn it. The psychologist Jean Piaget gave the name 'object permanence' to this awareness that a thing might live on even when it is absent to us. Piaget observed the reactions of infants when their favourite toy was covered with a blanket. Babies think the toy has gone for good. They seem briefly puzzled or sad, but then quickly give up on it. From around eight months old, though, they start to realise that the toy is just hidden. This newfound knowledge overlaps with the first wave of separation anxiety. Once a child grasps object permanence, the world becomes a more complicated and scarier place. The child knows when someone isn't there, but doesn't know when, or if, they will return. A parent in the next room might as well be on the moon.

Infants develop ways of coping with separation anxiety. In September 1915, Freud was staying at his daughter Sophie's house in Hamburg and was watching his 18-month-old grandson, Ernst, play a game of his own invention. Ernst would throw a wooden reel with a piece of string coiled around it out of his cot, exclaiming 'Oo!'. When he yanked on the string to bring the reel back into view, he uttered a gleeful 'Ah!'. Freud heard these sounds as infantile approximations of the German *fort*, 'gone', and *da*, 'there'. In the *fort-da* game, Ernst was symbolically commuting an unhappy situation, in

which he had no control over the presence of his mother, into a happy one in which he could call her up at will.

Later on, we learn a harder truth. Human objects are not, in fact, permanent, and sometimes they will leave, never to return.

Our modern faith is the quest for perfect connectivity. These days it is as near as the godless get to the promise of eternal life. When the telegraph and the telephone were invented, the Victorians saw them as the electrical equivalents of that then-voguish pseudo-science, telepathy. These inventions seemed to fulfil the same dream of contact with distant others. Our online world is the culmination of that dream. It offers up an antidote to the depressing laws of physics which say that a human body is time-limited and gravity-bound.

This faith is fuelled by the market's unquenchable hunger for harvestable data. The online world cannot conceive that anything could end. There will always be another update or notification, another drop in the self-replenishing drip feed of gossip and comment. All you need to do is keep scrolling, dragging down to refresh, searching for the dopamine hit, the virtual hug that comes from being liked and shared. The dead live on in their undeleted social media accounts, still flogging their CVs and freelance pitches, their holiday photos, their pictures of long-consumed meals about to be

eaten, their thoughts on Brexit and vaccines and face masks and *Love Island*. Everything online feels ongoing, as if death were a temporary bandwidth problem. Online, we think that things will be solved by saying them, by declaring our feelings and having them validated. *Thank you for sharing*, we say, because saying anything is always preferable to saying nothing.

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In the early days of the first lockdown, a Second World War veteran in a care home was filmed in tears after being given a cushion with his late wife's face on it. Thousands shared the film online. This man had been sleeping with a picture of his wife in a frame, so his carer, worried he might cut himself if the glass broke, had the cushion made. A kind thing to do, of course. But why did it need to be filmed so that the sight of him crying could go viral? A stranger's tears allow us to think that something has been fixed. Click on the link, feel the warm glow of empathy by proxy, have a little cry yourself and then go back to your own life. Online, shedding and witnessing tears is seen as healthy, cathartic and semi-compulsory. But since when were tears ever a guarantor of sincerity or depth of feeling? Often, what provokes them has nothing to do with whatever is really making us sad. The other day, I cried when I couldn't tear the cellophane off a box of tea bags.

In *Wonderworks*, Angus Fletcher explores the neuropsychology of grief. Almost all of us, he writes, feel that it's wrong to stop grieving and move on with the rest of our lives. At the heart of this feeling lies guilt. Guilt's function is to keep a check on our relationships with others and raise the alarm when rifts form. The death of a loved one scrambles this system. Our brains sense their absence and warn us to heal the rift. But how can we, when they are no longer there? This is why our ancestors created funeral rites, which offer gifts to the dead in the shape of words, music and formalised gesture. They help a little, but these rituals can also feel empty and, well, ritualistic. Their stock utterances and choreographed moves can never account for the infinite particularity, the limitless heterogeneity, of the person who has gone. And that person can no longer relieve our guilt by accepting the gift of remembrance anyway, and telling us not to worry.

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In the middle of a pandemic, with death a grim statistic on the nightly news, I worried that the uniqueness of my friend, the stubbornly singular way she took up space in the world, was being lost in the weight of numbers. But I also disliked the idea of sharing her with strangers, of posting some online tribute that followers of ever-diminishing

proximity to her could answer with comments, likes and emojis. Why should she have to fight for space in the jarring juxtapositions of a Twitter timeline, sandwiched between someone saying *I'm so fucking angry* and someone else saying *I've been promoted*? I didn't want her to become part of the noise.

We need time, Fletcher says, to move beyond the necessary bromides and expedient clichés of memorials. We have to acknowledge that the person we have lost has left behind a human-shaped hole moulded to their precise dimensions, one that nothing and no one else will fill. Our brains must slowly absorb this brain-melting paradox of being human – that set against the billions of other selves who have lived and died, a single life doesn't matter much, and yet it matters beyond words.

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Grief today comes with a script, and the script says this: it will obliterate us and then, painfully, remake us. Its trauma will be worth withstanding because it will teach us something important about ourselves. Even grief, in other words, has been co-opted into the progress myths and redemptive arcs of the personal growth industry. But why should the worst pain of all be turned into an opportunity for self-improvement? *Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger*, they say – even though a moment's serious thought reveals this to be nonsense.

In *All the Lives We Ever Lived*, Katharine Smyth writes about the death of her father from bladder

cancer at the age of 59. After this long-anticipated event, her days just felt ‘vague and muffled’ – not the required response in our culture of ‘grief worship’. Smyth wonders if we overinvest in the idea that grief floors us and changes us for ever. Instead, in its tedium and monotony, it ‘recalls to us our impotence, reminds us that our longing counts for nothing’.

The slightly shaming truth is that grief is an anti-climax. If this is grief work, I remember thinking in the weeks after my friend’s death, then it is the dullest desk job imaginable. The schedule isn’t onerous or stressful; I seem to spend most of my time clock-watching and staring out of the window. But the hours are long, there is no annual leave, and I don’t know when I can hand in my notice.

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I look at my text conversations with her, laid out on my phone. A long daisy chain of words, saying *where are you?* and *sorry I had to rush off* and *I’m running behind as usual!* and *are you ok?* and *I hope things are feeling a bit less shit*. One of the designers of the first iPhone conceived this idea of putting all our conversations in a thread, with different-coloured speech bubbles to the right (me) and left (her). Every other phone manufacturer copied it and it became part of the invisible grammar shoring up our remote interactions.

The whole thread unspools like a two-hander, with both characters at first oblivious as to what’s

coming next and then all too aware but desperate to talk about anything else. Here she is, after the diagnosis, sending me a picture of an injured oystercatcher she has rescued, convalescing in a cardboard-box nest in her garden, its long orange beak peeking out sadly from the opening torn out of one side. Or excitedly sharing a picture of her old Brownie Collector's Badge, found in a clear-out. Then come the texts that say she is *feeling a bit rubbish, rallying a bit now*. And *sorry for going on and on, earlier*. *I could blame it on the drugs but you've known me too long*.

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Then my words are parried with a bald *sorry, I can't talk right now* or *can I call you later?* When I got the first of those messages, my stomach dropped. She had never been so curt before; had someone stolen her phone? Then I twigged that it was an automated message, selected from a drop-down menu when she didn't have the energy to pick up. At the end comes a salvo of messages from me, with no reply. The ping-pong pattern on my phone fools me into thinking that a message will appear on the left, with her initial, but it never does.

When online daters cut off contact with someone they have been seeing by simply ignoring their messages, it is called 'ghosting'. What compounds the sense of abandonment, I assume, is that the speech-balloon format already implies a reply. When you are ghosted, it feels like someone

turned away from you in mid-conversation and walked silently out of the room. Our age venerates interactivity. We think that every message deserves an answer, that no conversation need ever end. Back in the real world, though, plotlines peter out, conversations tail off and ends stay loose. Those deathless parting words we write and rewrite in our heads turn, in reality, into something bland and adamantly cheerful. The messages get briefer and more perfunctory and then, without warning, stop. But that's OK, or should be. Life is not a TV police procedural where, if the ending feels like a cop-out or doesn't tie up all the threads, you berate yourself for wasting twelve hours of your life. Our lives were precious anyway; they are not defined by the leaving of them.

Nowadays clinical psychologists don't tend to think like Freud. Grief, they have found, is not some exam we have to resit repeatedly until we learn to accept reality. Nor does it parse itself into neat, self-contained steps, from denial to bargaining to acceptance. Grief has no universal symptoms and no obligatory stages to be got through, like levels of a computer game. Most of us turn out to be fairly resilient in the face of loss. It doesn't tear us asunder. It just makes us feel wiped out and wobbly, and we wonder if this is really grief or if we are doing it wrong. Grief has no script; we are all just making it up as we go along.

Grief is not a long lesson in letting go. Maybe some of us never accept that the person we are grieving for no longer exists, and we learn to live with not accepting it. This is not magical thinking. We know that they are utterly gone, and for ever – but there they still are, brightly and intensely alive in our heads. In many cultures, the living see the dead as vividly present. On the Mexican Day of the Dead, they welcome their departed, always alive in memory and spirit, back to the earth. Maybe these rituals are on to something. Maybe grief, as a universal human dilemma, is something that evolution has hard-wired us to be able to handle, and this is one of the workarounds we have devised.

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Something imagined is still real, because the imagination is real. Most of what matters to us happens in our heads, in that supercomputer made of fat and protein between our ears. The un-lived life is also life. I am forever conducting made-up conversations with others, endless rehearsals without a performance, or rehashing exchanges that went wrong, trying to do it better next time, even when I know there will never be a next time. That doesn't seem so different from the messages I compose to my friend in my head, which one day I might send zipping at the speed of light to that phone with the scuffed Cath Kidston case, which is probably still in a drawer somewhere, powered down but ready to sputter into life and pick up my unread messages. In

our brains, synapses fire, chemicals react, electricity fizzes, new neural pathways form. What happens in our brains happens in the world, because our brains are part of the world.

At the end of August 2013, the poet Seamus Heaney was leaving a restaurant with a friend in Dublin, when he stumbled on the steps and banged his head. He was admitted to hospital, where the doctors found a split aorta, requiring a serious operation. After Heaney left for the operating room, he sent his wife Marie a text. It contained the Latin words *Noli timere*. Do not be afraid.

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Heaney died shortly afterwards, before the operation even took place. His son Michael revealed these last words during his funeral eulogy, inspiring a flurry of tears in the congregation. Heaney had loved Latin ever since, as a small boy, he heard his mother rhyme off the Latin prefixes and suffixes she'd learned at school. He was old enough to have attended, in the days before Vatican II, daily Latin masses at St Columb's, the Catholic grammar school he went to on a scholarship. He learned Latin in its classrooms, where it was taught in imitation of the English public schools, and his lifelong love of Virgil began. He admired

the relentless logic of the language, its economy and precision, its neat conflation of analytical and emotional truth. *Noli timere* says with two words what English needs four to say, or, in the King James Bible, three: *Be not afraid*. Two words are easier to type when you're being wheeled to theatre on a trolley.

Noli timere appears about seventy times in St Jerome's Vulgate Bible. Often God says it, while trying to calm a human understandably freaked out at His presence. The angel says it to the shepherds before bringing them news of the birth of Jesus. Jesus says it to the disciples when he walks on water, and when he meets them after rising from the dead. The force of *Noli timere* derives from its blend of clear instruction and gentle assurance.

Heaney's texted words weren't as lapidary or final as all that. He was expected to recover from the operation, and often used Latin with his family as a private, joking language. His use of the singular form *noli timere* instead of the plural *nolite timere* suggests the message was personal, meant only for his wife. But the family, Michael later wrote, 'seized on his final words as a kind of lifebuoy'. It seemed to them that he had captured 'the swirl of emotion, uncertainty and fear he was facing at the end, and articulated it in a restrained yet inspiring way'. *Noli timere* was a last act of kindness, a spell to help those left behind to grieve.

In the days and weeks after Heaney's death, *Noli timere* appeared in all the obituaries and tributes. They became a shorthand for the power

of language to help us survive our losses. They did what Heaney had been doing for more than half a century: writing sturdy, well-shaped words that cut cleanly through banality and pierced the heart. The graffiti artist Maser painted the words, in English, on a gable end wall in Portobello, Dublin (although an all-caps DON'T BE AFRAID in massive white letters is not perhaps as reassuring as it is trying to be). The phrase now speaks a little more forlornly in our fretful and fractious new world, from which Heaney was spared.

A few months after my friend died, this story about Heaney's last words came into my head. It felt like a little chink of light to walk towards, a source of solace and hope. It made me see that a virtual goodbye could still be beautiful, that a message sent through the ether might mean even more for being so intangible and precarious. The written word can be an outstretched hand across the abyss; it can walk through walls.

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The most common way of thinking about our online lives, even among people who spend most of their lives online, is that they are unreal. To be online is to be disembodied, reduced to eyes and fingertips, occupying some elusive other realm, made of air and vapour. The web is eating up our lives, we fear, and disgorging them as a waking dream, or fooling us into thinking that some better life is being lived elsewhere, just out of reach. We

have gone down a rabbit hole of our own making. If it weren't all so addictive, we would come to our senses, power down our devices and return to the three-dimensional sensorium of real life.

But that's not right, is it? I mean, we should probably spend less time doomscrolling and hate-reading and getting pointlessly angry with strangers. And maybe we shouldn't lie in the dark so much after midnight, kept awake by the flickering light of our phones and the adrenaline rush that comes from eavesdropping on the babble of other people's egos begging to be affirmed. But still, our online lives are also our lives – extensions of our humanity, not some pitiable stand-in for it. *Man is an animal*, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz once wrote, *suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun*.

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Like us, the online world is both physical and ethereal. It is made of wireless routers, modems with blinking lights, vast data centres in unmarked buildings full of humming hard drives and glass fibres inside copper tubes, and hundreds of thousands of miles of cable, buried alongside roads and railways and crossing ocean floors, occasionally nibbled at by sharks. And it is also made of our lusts and rages and fears and desires, which are more real to us than our livers and kidneys.

And what do we learn in this virtual world that is nowhere near as virtual as we think? Only that the

deepest connections between us are the most fragile, because they are made of that filigree web of meaning and mutual care we all spin together. And we also learn that absence needn't mean obliteration, that someone you can't see or hear can still exist – that objects, even human objects, have permanence.

I wonder how all those people who had to say their final goodbyes on FaceTime are doing now. I imagine they were as angry as I was when the gaslighting sociopaths of Downing Street told them to *draw a line and move on*. I assume they felt the same guilt that I did about obeying the rules when the rule makers didn't. We feel guilty, as the historian Elaine Pagels says, because it is more bearable than feeling helpless, than falling through an unending chasm of meaninglessness. It follows that guilt is assuaged when we find meaning again. So I hope those people have come round to the idea that their online partings were still meaningful, and that they did, after all, convey something profound about human love – that the ties that bind us are as tenuous and transient as life itself, and yet they are made of the strongest material in the universe.

After all those texts I sent with no reply, I did get a final message. She must have found, on her phone, one of those firms that send flowers in a slim cardboard package that fits through your letterbox. On the day she died, a dozen stems of solidago and alstroemeria arrived, with a card. *All love to you*

my most amazing friend, it said. *It seems unfair that men don't get given things that smell nice.* I wonder if, like me, she was thankful in the end for our soullessly algorithmic online world – the one that requires us only to swipe and prod a glass screen to magic up flower pickers and delivery drivers and have our words, tapped out with our thumbs, transcribed in cards with handwritten fonts. I finally threw the flowers out after a month, when all but a few of the petals had shrivelled and shed. But I still have the card – my own *Noli timere*. 