

**Casper Star Tribune, Sunday, July 12, 2015: “I love you’ can mean many things”**

**Wyoming Tribune Eagle July 11, 2015: “The time comes to let go”**

As a conversationalist who is politically astute and socially conscious, he is sometimes charming and always interesting. He supported my various causes. He commented on my columns and “active-listening skills.” Over eighteen months a relationship progressed from casual notices to engaged dialogues. In time I got to know his significant other, a woman considerably younger than he who, it turned out, was in the process of severing their arrangement.

To be sure, there was an oft-repeated story about a dysfunctional son that, I began to suspect, served to screen something else. Still, I was delighted, surprised and elated when he said, “I love you.” Nevertheless, the occasion, and the manner in which the comment was offered, gave pause.

The occasion was this. From a visit to Texas I returned with several bags of pecans as gifts for friends. Knowing he had studied at Texas A & M, I handed him a brown bag that bore the logo of a pecan farm near that particular Lone-Star university. It held a container of pecan halves for which I expected a “Gee, thanks.” Instead he said, “Let me count the ways I love you.”

Let me count the ways I love you. I imagine he was pretty sure I’d recognize the phrase as his take-off on a Barrett-Browning poem. The utterance was a delightful riff, though it also struck me as premeditated and contrived. Was he being enchantingly creative? Or had he used the line before? Let it be said, when it suits his purpose, my friend readily avails himself of poetic license. Hence, I determined to ask what exactly he meant with his Barrett-Browning paraphrase. Sadly, I never got the chance.

Our Barrett-Browning devotee is 77 years old and a retired professor from a university in another state. A good-looking oldster, very tall with dark, dark eyes, he sports a small mustache and still owns most of his hair. He tends to coast along on surface relationships, but in recent conversations has delved deeper. One time he confided a setback that happened in another country, entailing serious financial losses. “When I got back I sat down in my house and cried and cried,” he said.

It’s not often that, as a matter of conversation, someone we cherish utters an “I love you.” When it does happen, it’s a powerful motivator. And so, I resolved to nudge my friend toward examining his family engagements, suggesting he consider the term “complicated grief disorder” as applicable to his son’s and, perhaps, his own flighty ways. Next I urged him to rethink his band-aid solutions and instead, search within. “You’ll be unable to grasp what’s up with your son until you take a close look at whatever went on in the first year(s) of your own life. A variant would have happened to him, maybe to your daughter as well.” (This is not the flight of fancy it may seem. Bits and pieces of family life, including something about his early childhood, had come through in our talks.)

From painful experience I have learned the pervasiveness of grief disorders and attendant repetition compulsions. As mentioned before in this space, my two youngest brothers killed themselves. Helmut, in Idaho at 32, repeated our youngest brother’s suicide in Germany, at age 18, which Helmut witnessed. Karl, my last remaining sibling, closest to me in age and psychological make-up, closest also in physical locale—he and his wife settled in California near the town where my husband and I raised our children—managed to hang on until 46, when he died in almost ritualistic reenactment of our mother’s

too-early demise. Just as she did, and just as Helmut did, so Karl left behind small children who found life difficult indeed.

Years, decades would pass before I freed myself of the self-absorption of grieving. Similar fixations informed my parents' lives, I recall. Largely unacknowledged by the other spouse, each mourned bereavements that, even though all of us knew of the losses, proved altogether debilitating.

Apparently my learned interlocutor is unaccustomed to—or unwilling to tolerate—any doubt pertaining to his actions, decisions, and relationships for I came to find, his “I love you” masked a punitiveness that put a swift and irrevocable end to our conversations. Ouch! Nothing doing but relinquish a friendship I had reason to believe would continue to evolve. “We are damaged goods, all of us,” I emailed, thinking, ‘tis sad as the ballad of “The Three Ravens.”

“There’s but one thing in life, and it is to let go,” reads the conclusion of an essay, as yet unpublished, on the demise of my brothers. Our losses, inevitable endings even when life is lived to the fullest, do take their toll. We must accord them due respect even as we remind ourselves: Time to let go.