

So, what's so good about goodbye, anyway?

Early in life, we start saying goodbye. Perhaps it's when we lose a beloved pet. Later it could be when we move, graduate from school, get divorced, change jobs. We say goodbye to people we may or may not see again.

And then there are more permanent goodbyes. Death takes our grandparents, our parents, our friends, perhaps our spouses. It's brutal, this being human.

Supposedly, it is better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all. But that can be cold comfort. After a goodbye—a loss, a separation—we're more likely to be numb, putting one foot in front of the other.

How to make sense of it? How to get something good out of goodbyes?

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My son, Ben, at age six, was in love. He came home starry-eyed from a picnic given by one of his teachers. This young woman—no dummy!—had introduced her pupils to her cat's three newborn kittens: Winken, Blinken, and Nod. Winken and Blinken were quickly spoken for. And Nod?

"A kitten needs a lot of love," said Ben, dreamily. "I think Nod would be happy in this home."

And so...she took up her place in our household.

Over the years, Nod was the subject of many a school assignment, including an essay entitled "The Queen of All Cats."

The years passed, in what seemed like the twinkling of an eye. Now Nod was an old lady and Ben was about to go off to college. The car was loaded, but he still had to say goodbye to his cat. “Just a minute,” he said, and disappeared into the house. When he reappeared, his eyes were red, and he couldn’t talk.

Later that weekend, the goodbye to us, his parents, was less emotional, although I don’t think he loved us too much less than he loved his cat. Never mind. Saying goodbye to her tore him up at a very primitive and intimate level.

So did the loss of another cat, 25 years later. Otto was a feral kitten Ben had rescued from a Brooklyn Alley and gradually tamed. Otto inspired Ben’s art work. He appeared in a Youtube video that got a half million hits.

Otto grew old and arthritic and late in life, his kidneys failed. Ben kept him going by injecting water into the nape of his neck. Finally and sorrowfully, one day he made an appointment at the vet for the following Monday, to put Otto to sleep.

Over the weekend, however, Otto took matters into his own hands. He rested on the living room couch, and the family kept him company. On Sunday, Otto died at a moment of his own choosing. The family goodbye, I think was a good one—long and quiet and peaceful.

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Now I’m thinking about an annual ritual of goodbyes that I used to participate in as a teenager. That goodbye took days, even weeks. It was at Woodstock School, the missionary boarding school I attended in the early 60s, at 6,500 feet in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains.

Woodstock's academic year went from late June to early May. We broke for a three-month vacation around the first of December. The winter months were cold and snowy, the school wasn't heated, and they drained the pipes and sent us home.

The goodbye process was quite drawn out. Weeks in advance, students would ask each other, "Are you travelling with the Delhi party?" Or the Lahore party, in Pakistan? Or the Calcutta one? Party meant the group, chaperoned by teachers or parents, who would be traveling by train to destinations all over India and beyond. But there was a party, the night before departure.

There was a special going away dinner—a good curry, better than the usual boarding school fare. And then, a talent show took place in the auditorium. Forget Mozart and Haydn. That night, it was rock and roll with guitars. Calypso songs with bongo drums. We did skits that lampooned the teachers.

Late in the evening, when it was really cold, we gathered around bonfires on the athletic field. We didn't pay much attention to curfew or lights out in the dorm.

The next day, we'd be sleep-deprived but excited. We walked the three miles to the bus station and climbed on to the buses. Then we took off, hurtling down twenty-two miles of hairpin bends. Choruses of "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall" rang out, before we reached the train station in the town of Dehra Dun.

There, the busloads of students split up into those respective "parties." Kids boarded the various trains. We went back and forth, jumping on our friends' trains to check them out. I wonder if anyone ever went to the wrong destination.

But soon the whistles would blow. Excitement would turn to tearful leave-takings. “Make sure to write! Promise! Promise!” The separation was going to be for only three months, but we sobbed as if we’d never see each other again.

In retrospect, there was something delicious about those tearful, cathartic goodbyes. They were an outpouring of affection, even among the shyest of us. My first year, many of us had been strangers only a few months earlier. The “mish kids”—children of missionaries and those of more secular families—sometimes called “government kids”—had viewed one another with distrust. Now, the first leave-taking showed that we were friends. We let those tears flow. What good goodbyes, really! In fact, what wonderful goodbyes.

In contrast, my final parting from the school was not a good one—I was being pulled out to go back to the United States after 12th grade had started. This time I didn’t know when or if I would see my friends again. When I walked away from them, especially from my first serious boyfriend, I was mute with grief. It was too painful to say anything, or to cry. I call that a bad goodbye.

Separation often meant silence. An air mail letter to the States from India could cost a week’s allowance. A phone call was unthinkable.

What I didn’t know then, is how temporary those goodbyes actually were. Over the years, our classmates kept in touch. First with address lists mimeographed in purple ink, then with email lists, then with Facebook and texts. Phone service got miraculously cheap. The communications revolution changed the nature of goodbyes tremendously. I *still* participate in a monthly Zoom with many of these friends.

We also get together in person and we take up where we left off. The lesson for me is that you can't always tell whether this goodbye is for the short run or the long run. Forever? Or just for now. There is often a story still left to unfold.

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But what about the truly permanent goodbyes? The ones you make to loved ones departing for the great unknown? Can those ever be good? Can you ever pull something joyful out of searing grief?

Perhaps. You can't expect it to be pure joy or pure grief. But it may be a mix.

The death vigils for both my parents I now think of with a sense of privilege. It was actually an honor to be present at the end of long, satisfying lives.

My dad died in the Clough Center in New London (NH), now itself defunct. He'd been in long-term care there for over a year.

One day at the end of July, in 2007, they moved him into a nicer room than his usual one, because he was in hospice care. I visited him, as usual, and then took my leave and left to go to the dentist. After my appointment, something made me turn back.

I had a phone with me, and he said he wanted to call my sisters. He joked about his impending death. Joked! "I understand it's the Illusion Fields for me," punning on the Elysian Fields, the Greek vision of the place where one would spend a happy afterlife.

I phoned my sister Lee in Washington, DC. “I just wanted to say hello,” my dad said. She felt an instant flash of alarm. As soon as she hung up, she made her plane reservation for early the next morning.

My sister Jane was on vacation on the Cape. “I’ll be there first thing,” she said.

I had thought that my dad had several more days, maybe even weeks.

But it turned out to be hours. The next morning, I again arrived with a phone. But he never regained consciousness to use it. The nurses told me that at midnight, he had kept them laughing.

Jane and Lee arrived before noon. “Can he hear us?” we asked the nurse. “Maybe,” she said. We talked to him throughout the day. You don’t aim to be original in these circumstances. Over and over, we just told him we loved him.

Night fell, and Lee and Jane and I pulled out the sofa bed in the room, planning—all three of us—to sleep in it that night.

But at about 10:30 in the evening, he drew his last breath. We didn’t spend the night there. All that was left was to keep crying and hugging and telling each other, “I love you.”

One good part of that goodbye was the three of us being together.

Three and a half years later, my sister Jane and I had another vigil, over a weekend, for my mother.

She was very much herself up until the last minute.

“How are you, Mom,” I asked—stupidly—on the Saturday morning.

“I’m fine,” she said. Dying, but fine.

Jane arrived. When she took up her knitting near the window, Mom said, “Do you have enough light to do that by?” She was still taking care of us.

Again, we thought we had several more days with her, and again, things happened much faster than we expected. Jane and I sang to her, and she died in the middle of our singing. “I think we killed her,” I said. Somehow gallows humor sneaks into these situations. Jane laughed, but then we sobbed and sobbed and hugged and hugged.

“I love you,” we told each other. The searing grief was mixed with the comfort, even the joy of being together. It made for a transcendent moment—something surpassing the ordinary.

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I recently had another goodbye, one that I had dreaded. My friend Will was leaving our senior living community to live in a facility in the Washington, DC area. He needed more help with daily living than I could give, and was looking forward to being near his son.

But... “Will you be all right?” he asked me. Would I be all right without him. I wasn’t at all sure. Would *he* be all right without me?

At dawn one morning in August, my sister Lee and I and Will climbed into a taxi, for a six-hour ride from the Hudson Valley. We didn’t know what would meet him at the other end.

What met him was a hero’s welcome. When we arrived, the staff, as was their custom, was lined up to greet him. They clapped as he came in the door. It was a great hello.

The next day, we visited Will after breakfast and found him relaxed and cheerful. We sat on a beautiful terrace, surrounded by flowering shrubs. A warm breeze made it feel like a tropical resort.

He suddenly started a sentence. “This place is...”

We waited in some suspense, wondering what the verdict would be. This place was what?

“...good,” he said. “For me.” I was flooded with relief.

At lunch a couple of days later, an Indian woman, another resident of the place, came over to our table. She’d heard that *we’d* lived in India. Astonishingly, she turned out to be a graduate of our own Woodstock School. She ran to her apartment and brought back the alumni magazine. This was a time of goodbyes—but here was also an amazing “hello.”

A little gift. A silver lining to the cloud.

Even with the worry and the sadness, there was the hope that there might be a happy story left to unfold.

If you have goodbyes coming up, may they contain something comforting. Something good.