

May30

Haunted

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It's true what they say, that the older you get, the more familiar you become with loss.

I've grown accustomed to death.

First, there are the somewhat expected ones: grandparents and elderly family friends. Next, parents, godparents, aunts, uncles, and teachers. Then contemporaries, siblings and friends. Interspersed throughout are the tragic, unexpected and "too soon" deaths of the very young. As a child, dumbfounded by loss, I thought I'd never get used to it. Now, with age, it has become all too familiar.

If I were to place all the people I have known in my life in two columns, one for the living, and one for the dead, I'm sure that second list would outstrip the first one by a mile. Fortunately, my memory is not nearly good enough these days to even attempt it. It might make a slightly morbid but entertaining group exercise, sometime.

But I am not haunted by the dead.

My Dad, long removed from this earth, often accompanies me as I work in the garden. We keep a running dialogue going, in my head, as I make the furrows and plant the seeds. He offers bits of advice that I've heard many times before, and sometimes I get a brand new kernel of wisdom from him. He hasn't softened much, in his opinions. Flowers are still "Nonsense! A waste of time and garden space!" And "that damned quack grass" is still a mortal enemy. Still, it's always a pleasure to have a chat with him.

Others visit me when I'm asleep. When my dreams are peopled with friends and dear ones who are no longer here, I wake up smiling. How nice to have had such a good conversation with my Mom! Or, there was Vince, such a comforting presence, talking fervently about local politics, and offering me tea. Grandpa Ted. Ernie Martin. Muggs Bass. My brother David. Being just as predictably maddening as he always was in life.

The difference is that, having experienced the loss of my brother David, having realized what a treasure he was, having spent much time missing him, and mourning him, in my dreams I now know better. No matter how annoying his behavior, I look at him with love. My precious little brother. I wish I'd seen it when he was alive: how special his own crazy personality was; how fleeting his life. It's things like that that haunt me.

When I was much younger, I used to be haunted by moments when I looked foolish, or did something that embarrassed me. Now, I'd be hard-pressed to come up with a single example; they all seem so trivial. But I remember times when I could have easily been kind, but I was curt or short-tempered instead. As a parent, a sister, a daughter, a friend, I have fallen short. *Why* did I not listen better, show more appreciation, hug longer? It makes me cringe to think of so many incidents that I should have handled differently. Better. In some cases, the people are still here, so I can hope to turn it around, make up for it in some way. Too many are gone. When they visit my dreams, I try to do better.