

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Valentine's Day Redux: a Second Chance at True Love

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Everything Sonnet

My Love, may I bring you everything?
Or perhaps lightly touch your foot just so
And watch as sparks shower and shoot and sing
And rise through your eyes and so brightly glow
As all life sprung from just one tiny spark
Our world now bathed in color and wonder
It was your true light that pierced through the dark
Rending the shroud that I had been under
Some mornings I wake and stare as you sleep
The light caressing your cheek so softly
Your lips at rest, a small smile that they keep
And I am safe from the dark where you found me
Colors now burst as the sun finds your ring
My Love, may I bring you everything?
—Steve Hochman
January 2021

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The Bundle Keeper

It was an icy road, the kind I swore I'd never walk on again.
It was 4th of July but there had been snow.
It was a pilgrimage, like the Camino de Santiago or Route 66.
It was full of strangers, all heading in the same direction.
It was mostly unpaved, but concrete in places.
It was like trudging on the side of a highway.
It was Arizona to New Mexico with my son and new husband.
It was a road trip without a car and we were determined.
It was time travel as my son was 11, not the young man he is now.
It was exhausting but we had to move forward.
It was finding what matters most, what matters least.
It was jarring when my new husband told us he forgot his cell phone.
It was he who started walking back to Arizona to retrieve it.

It was just me and my son, just us again, but not for long.
 It was my former husband, dead a dozen years, who came to greet us.
 It was Who invited you back? and Why'd you ever leave us in the first place?
 It was he who sidled up and started walking alongside us.
 It was he who pointed out the fire across the road and the people running from it.
 It was as if they were half human, half Pac-Man.
 It was my eyes that veered toward my new husband, in the distance, returning.
 It was my old husband who forged ahead, sensing he was no longer welcome.
 It was necessary to allow him to walk on, by himself, and not look back.
 —Susan Hayden
 February 2021

Conversation

The things that matter most in our lives are not fantastic or grand. They are moments when we touch one another, when we are there in the most attentive or caring way. This simple and profound intimacy is the love that we all long for. ? Jack Kornfield

Susan: When I first saw you, I remember thinking, “Why do I have to sit with this bereft stranger and make small talk until our mutual friend arrives?” You looked as if you’d had the life force syphoned out of you.

Steve: I had. But I wasn’t aware it showed.

Susan: There was a real struggle to connect, until I discovered that, like me, you had been widowed. This blew open the conversation, created an instant welcome mat of mutuality. Everything transformed. We both softened. We weren’t being fixed up, but as the evening unfolded, I went from being sort of repelled by you to never wanting to leave your side. Until I found out you belonged to someone else.

Steve: And then later, you asked me that question.

Susan: “So, are you happy ? or sad?”

Steve: And I answered, “Yes.” It was true, I was both. But I was mostly sad. The very asking of that question, though, reached inside me, touched me deeply ?that you could, and would ask that question ?opened up something in me, to you.

Susan: I wanted to know if there was any hope. For us. It was love at second sight. You were a miracle to me. You ARE a miracle to me.

Steve: I was falling for you, even before you asked me that question. That just confirmed it. You saw me, in a way I hadn’t been seen since my wife died. You were daring, you weren’t going to let caution rule you. You were electric, you took great joy in connection and creativity, you were engaged with the world in ways that I found very exciting and enticing. I’d had that in my life before but it had been gone. And I craved it. I needed it. And here it was in you, but I was terrified.

Susan: I knew I had to see you again. I needed to be alone with you, to hear your whole story. The

more you spoke, the more you came to life and showed your vulnerability. And I recognized the rare, enchanting person that you are. But I soon realized that, even though it had been eight years since your wife Mary died, you were still in Stage One of grief.

Steve: We were in very different places in our progress or lack thereof.

Susan: I thought, “Well, I guess we won’t be running off together, but I think I was brought here to redirect this guy back to himself.” You seemed to have lost your sense of self. In grief, we sponsor each other, informally. I urged you to get some support and reassured you that you would emerge from the loss if you put the time in.

Steve: Clearly, I hadn’t given myself the space to heal, avoided it by diving into a relationship that proved destructive and all-consuming.

Susan: Grief loves a good project. After my husband Chris died, there was so much love left in me, I just wanted to glom it on to someone, make them the container. It took ten years (of therapy, bereavement support, writing, failed relationships and fortune tellers) to recognize I had to sit in the sadness and stop running. I had to walk the aloneness road.

Steve: I guess I got on another road that I hoped would take me away from all of that.

Susan: I think having lived with Mary’s cancer, and the fear that you could lose her at any time, made you feel like you’d been grieving along the way. So that, when she finally did die, you just wanted to feel alive, instead of rooting yourself in sadness.

Steve: Perhaps during those twelve years, somehow I thought that was the road and that, after her death, I’d already arrived somewhere. And maybe I needed to believe that I was okay, that I didn’t have healing to do, that I was ready to cope and carry on as me. The fact is, when you and I met, I’d stopped feeling like me. I was conscious of that. It wasn’t vague, intangible. I was in a situation where I wasn’t allowed to be ‘Me’ and I just accepted it. I felt like I had no choice.

Susan: Reminds me of that R.D. Laing quote: *There is a great deal of pain in life and perhaps the only pain that can be avoided is the pain that comes from trying to avoid pain.* You postponed your healing.

Steve: It doesn’t feel like postponement when you’ve convinced yourself that there’s nothing to heal. With your loss, there was no preparation and your lives were shattered in an instant.

Susan: That’s true. Our family was demolished, for a time. My son, Mason, was only eleven. I threw myself into making him feel some semblance of safe, stabilizing him. I put my own healing on temporary hold. We were severely traumatized, in shock. Sometimes I can’t believe we survived this profound loss. But we were fortunate enough to land at Our House Grief Support Center, where we began to slowly heal and rebuild our lives.

Steve: I didn’t do that grief work and I fooled myself into thinking that I could take what I’d had with Mary and transfer it to a new life with someone else. Of course that was destined to fail. Especially because I got into a relationship with an alcoholic and stayed with it. And by the time you and I met, I couldn’t allow myself to believe that I’d ever be able to open my heart again fully.

Susan: Grief makes you hungry. Until it doesn’t. I found flashes of intimacy and long stretches of

much-needed company. I found a version of love, it was tender at times but plagued, on both sides, with fear and avoidance. And constant conflict. Friends would tell me, “Love shouldn’t be painful like this.” Many tried to propel me to the next level and into forward motion, force me to face my own stagnant mindset, which prevented me from making a healthy, conscious choice. But I wasn’t ready.

Steve: I think it’s interesting that we each separately held onto the same picture; that one day, we would find someone who would be a traveling companion, a comfort, never mind another great love. That seemed impossible, out of reach.

Susan: Once Mason went off to college, I began to envision a partner who would be able to accompany me on my travels. Like you, I was resigned to believing it wouldn’t be in the form of a great love. I knew that falling for the right person and completely merging lives would mean one day having to suffer enormous loss again. And that’s the last thing I wanted. Staying stuck seemed less risky. I ended up finding my courage in poetry and literature. Jack Gilbert wrote, “We must risk delight” and Louise Erdrich wrote, “You are here to risk your heart.”

Steve: Whatever else was going on in my life, the one thing that really mattered in this is that it was YOU. So whether I was ready for something or not almost seems irrelevant, or at least fades behind the key fact of the matter, which is I fell for YOU. The leap I took was for YOU.

Susan: I knew within 45 minutes of meeting you that you were who I’d been afraid to dream of. It was undeniable. You are so loving and entirely generous with your love. I had never experienced that before. I had to build a new muscle to accept it! The more I got to know you, the more I knew it would be worth it to take this leap with you and risk delight, risk my heart, because otherwise, I wasn’t really living.

Steve: I told you early on that you were my light, that you’d given me light, shining through your multi-faceted beauty. And I saw in you something I thought I would never find again, someone with so much to give, to share, and who saw things in me that I wanted to share too. Not to mention that you are gorgeous.

Susan: So, are you happy ? or sad?

Steve: Happy. Ecstatically happy. Ecstatically happy in love!

Photo credit: Hannah McCarthy

About the Authors:

Susan Hayden is a poet, playwright, novelist & essayist. She’s been published in *Los Angeles in the 1970s: Weird Scenes Inside the Goldmine* (Rare Bird Books), *I Might Be The Person You Are Talking To: Short Plays From The Los Angeles Underground* (Padua Playwrights Press), *The Black Body* (Seven Stories Press), *Storie: All Write* (Rome, Italy), *Jewish Journal* and elsewhere. Hayden is Creator/Producer of the monthly show *Library Girl*, presented at Ruskin Group Theatre and named “Best Local Literary Series – Editor’s Picks” (The Argonaut -Best of the Westside, 2019). In 2015, she was honored with the Bruria Finkel/Artist In The Community Award by Santa Monica Arts Commission for her “significant contributions to the energetic discourse within Santa Monica’s arts community.” Her proudest achievement: raising her son, singer-songwriter Mason Summit. She lives with her husband, writer Steve Hochman, in Sunset Park, Santa Monica.

Steve Hochman has covered popular, and unpopular, music for more than 33 1/3 years, these days for the web publication *The Bluegrass Situation* and the New Orleans' monthly *OffBeat*. He's best-known for his 22+ years with the *Los Angeles Times*, as well as long stints as music critic for two popular radio shows: Pasadena station KPCC's *Take Two* and San Francisco-based KQED's *The California Report*. He's also had hundreds of bylines in *Rolling Stone*, *Variety*, *Billboard*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *BuzzBandsLA* and others. In recent years he's savored the new challenges and inspiration given him by his wife Susan Hayden of writing with a more personal, poetic approach for her illuminating literary series *Library Girl*.

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