

5th October 2020

Gone

**“For death and life, in ceaseless strife, beat wild on this world’s shore,
And all our calm is in that balm – not lost but gone before.”**

Caroline Norton, Now lost but gone before

I’m writing this in the aftermath of the death of a good friend. To be honest, there is an important therapy in writing as I’m doing, because, for many years I didn’t allow myself to speak about my feelings and struggles with loss. So you, the readers of this, are the therapists I need right now.

“Not lost but gone before” is a familiar epitaph inscribed on countless graves and uttered at many funerals, as we reach for an answer to the heart-rending question of where a person has gone when they die. Perhaps Norton got the idea from a song title from Edinburgh in 1829. For the idea isn’t original, and in the search for meaning in the face of death it comes up regularly. In *Human Life*, Samuel Rogers wrote in 1819:

*Those whom he loved and sees no more,
Loved, and still loves – not dead – but gone before,
He gathers round him.*

And a couplet ascribed to Philip Henry in the 17th century reads:

They are not amissi, but praemissi; not lost but gone before.

So where am I with the death of my friend? He *has* gone before. It matters not where or how or why, painful and searching though these questions are. It is enough to acknowledge that he has gone before me, died before his time, left me, and all his loved ones, to mourn his passing. I have no choice but to face the reality of his death. He has gone before.

And my hopefulness? I am weary with asking questions for which there are no answers; worn out searching for meaning to a death when there is none. So I hold on to “not lost”. My friend is *not* lost to me. His love is not lost to me. I don’t have to do what Samuel Rogers suggests and gather him around me. He is with me, not lost, but eternally present.

Here is my meaning in the death of a friend. I turn the epitaph on its head. Simply put, he has gone before, but he is not, and never will be, lost.

A prayer for today

Love will not be lost when love has been our gift. Amen, and amen, and amen!

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