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Arresting Time’s Arrow: Death, Loss, and the Preservation of Real Union

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“I shall lie down

With him in death, and I shall be as dear

To him as he to me.

It is the dead

Not the living, who make the longest demands[.]” –*Antigone*[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Introduction**

After the early death of his wife (“H”), in a small book called *A Grief Observed*, the English writer and theologian C.S. Lewis wrote, “I was greatly concerned about my memory of H. and how false it might become” (Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 50). Such a feeling is likely familiar to anyone who has lost someone with whom they had a close relationship. However, this concern did not occur to Lewis until after his wife’s demise. Even though many memories of her must have constantly been drifting further into his past, his concern over forgetting—over false memories—only arose once she was no longer living.

In this chapter, I argue that the loss of loved ones requires a revised vision of our relationship to past persons. In particular, I argue that relating to deceased loved ones as points on an ordered, forward-moving timeline—on which they grow more distant from us by the moment—has a distorting and damaging effect on our own identity. When a loved one dies and is relegated to the realm of past historical events, the forward progression of time’s arrow means that we may either detach our identity from the deceased individual or else be dragged into the past with them. Sometimes this is a choice we make—often, we have no choice. Both options, I argue, will result in the destruction of our individual selves. Detaching ourselves completely from those who sustain important aspects of our identity will change us deeply, causing a jagged break in our narrative where a new self must be constructed (whether by us or our circumstances) *ex nihilo*. On the other hand, in allowing ourselves to drift into the past with the dead—resigning ourselves to existence as an historical object—we find, as Lewis did, that we begin to fade. Either way, I will argue, both the self *and* the beloved are ultimately lost, since both depend on the lost union.

To reject both options is a tremendously difficult task that will require rethinking time and our relationship to the past. I argue that we can look to Kierkegaard’s work on maintaining contemporaneity with the historical past, particularly his warnings about how we must *not* respond to the loss of a beloved. In the last section of the paper, I offer some suggestions for how we might, in a Kierkegaardian spirit, strive to maintain real union with deceased loved ones, thereby rising above the destructive current of time

**Loss**

“I just wish Calvin were here,” my grandmother murmurs wistfully, as is typical, for the second time today. It is 2021. Her husband, my grandfather Calvin, to whom she was married for 59 years, died in 2015. The effects of time on her memory of her husband have been, in some ways, sweet. Missing someone leads us to recall many memories of them we had assumed were lost to time, when circumstance draws forth the unexpected prickly pain of tender recollection. In other ways, the effects of time have been cruel and destructive. Views of my grandfather once emotionally complex have flattened, softened with a warm haze into the confidence that he was the “best husband/father/grandfather,” ever gentle, considerate to a fault (or nearly, since he had no faults). We cannot hold such idyllic views of anyone we are currently in a close relationship with. The tipsy adore of new lovers meets a daunting enemy in the first shared case of food poisoning or flush of jealousy. It is a particular cruelty of death that it tends to send the living back into the “honeymoon” phase, but without the bittersweet promise of the eventual replacement of this feeling with complex and concrete intimacy. This is how my grandmother now exists, and it increases her sadness over her husband’s absence even as it pulls her further and further away from *him* and closer to a hollow simulacrum.

While there is much philosophical debate over whether death is bad for the dead (see Kamm, “Why is Death Bad,” and Bradley, “When is Death Bad”), there is less philosophical work analyzing the effects of death on those who remain living. Partially, I imagine, this is because it seems quite obvious that it is bad for them, in virtue of all the suffering it causes. I will not depart from the obvious, but I will attempt to add to it. I want to argue here that this effect of death and the passing of time is *more* dangerous for the living lovers than is often assumed. That is, I believe the death of loved ones is probably much worse for us than most believe that it is, for reasons unrelated to pain and suffering. And I want to suggest further that there remains at least the possibility of avoiding this fate when death claims a loved one. To what extent this possibility is feasible and, therefore comforting, I will leave up to the reader.

**Our Selves and the Dead**

In Lewis’ work on grief, there is a deep worry about bearing false memories of his beloved. Why? Surely Lewis was aware that he must have many false memories about many people, both living and dead. Why does the prospect of false memories of H. worry him more than the near certain fact of his false memories of countless others?

It seems unlikely that false memories of his wife would be harmful to his wife. Regardless of one’s beliefs about what happens after we die—we cease to exist, we enter the afterlife, we are reincarnated, we become united with the world-consciousness—nearly all potential views will rule out the possibility of the living exacting pain or injury to the dead.[[2]](#footnote-2) Of course, a more expansive understanding of “harm” may allow some unjust or unfair memories of the beloved to count as a kind of “harm”. Still, Lewis’ memories of his late wife were never offensive or uncharitable—to the contrary, they were falsely *generous*, if anything. Additionally, false memories do not often tend to harm the living, either. If my husband retains some false memories of me, I am generally not offended or hurt by that fact unless the false memories are especially negative or humiliating. Again, in Lewis’ case, the opposite was true: his memories of his wife were warping in a positive, warm direction, idealizing her in his mind.

It seems equally unlikely that Lewis’ false memories of his wife violated a duty he held, either in general or to her specifically, since he had done everything in his power to prevent losing his true memories of her. Such a presumably inevitable effect of the passage of time cannot amount to a moral wrongdoing on any plausible view of moral duties.

The obvious answer is that Lewis is especially worried about losing his memories of H because he wants his memories to accurately depict her. But the problem is not merely one of experience. Lewis is not worried that he will *feel* the loss of true memories of H, and therefore suffer as a result; he is worried about the objective fact of the matter, whether or not he notices that his memories are becoming less and less veridical. But if Lewis himself would not suffer or commit a wrong by having false memories, and if H likewise would not be harmed in any way, whence the badness of Lewis’ idealizations?

It is natural to respond to the above question by saying, “because he loved her”. Indeed, it is intuitive that loving someone entails that there is something good about seeing the beloved for who they truly are, which would in turn entail that having a falsely idealized image of them would be a bad thing. But what is it about love that would entail that such false memories were a bad thing?

While many theoretical aspects of love continue to be debated in the relevant literature, “it is a matter of widespread (but not universal) agreement among philosophers that love must involve union of some sort” (Jech, “The Twofold Task of Union”, 988). I will refer to a strong version of this idea as the Union Theory. Union Theory holds that love is the unified “we” that two people form when they are in a deep relationship with one another.

The first instance of this theory likely appears in Plato’s *Symposium* and is described via myth by the character of Aristophanes. The myth goes as follows: in the early days of humanity, people existed as pairs of “soul mates”, with two individuals sharing one (round-shaped) body. Humans in this form were very powerful, and often sought to overtake the gods. Zeus, wanting to quell human ambition in this regard, decided to have each pair cut in half. Aristophanes continues,

This, then, is the source of our desire to love each other. Love is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature. Each of us, then, is a ‘matching half’ of a human whole, because each was sliced like a flatfish, two out of one, and each of us is always seeking the half that matches him. (191d)

This allegory is an extreme version of this view that loving someone involves forming an existential unified “we” with them. Obviously, it was not ever taken literally, and the meaning of the allegory might seem opaque. Contemporary union views of love take seriously the task of uncovering what it means to form a “we” with another person, such that the two people are, in some sense, one being. Scruton (*Sexual Desire,* 230) writing specifically about romantic love, writes that this “we” is formed “just so soon as reciprocity becomes community: that is, just so soon as all distinction between my interests and your interests is overcome”. Scruton here argues for a literal fusing together of the interests of the lover and the beloved (see also Fisher, *Personal Love*, who argues for a literal fusing of at least some interests). That is, it is not merely that I happen to care, and therefore am affected when bad things happen to the one I love; rather, when something bad happens to my love, it *constitutes* something bad happening to *me*.

The union view of love involves a literal union, a literal fusion, of two people who love one another, although there is disagreement on the nature of this union. Some, particularly those in the Christian philosophical tradition, argue that it is a mystical or spiritual union that forms between two immaterial souls. Solomon (*About Love*) adopts a much different, less mystical version of the unified soul picture, arguing that love is the mutual redefinition of each party in the relationship, such that each party understands themselves as fundamentally part of a unified single “we.” But no matter the nature of the union, the love-as-union view requires that each party in the relationship is no longer “their own,” but rather it is inextricably part of a larger whole, such that, on a deep level, there is less of a meaningful distinction between the two individuals than there was when they were on their own.

Unlike other popular theories of love, the love-as-union picture can make perfect sense of the deep intrinsic badness of Lewis’ warped memories of his late wife. This should be straight-forward: if two people in a relationship of love form (in whatever sense we accept) a real unified “we,” then to the extent that I lose the one I love I also lose myself. That it is bad for someone to lose oneself should be relatively uncontroversial. So, Lewis’ loss of accurate memories of his wife is bad because (among perhaps many other reasons) it entails the loss of himself.

One of the many mysterious aspects of Union Theory is that it seems to say we can have multiple real unions with multiple people and yet each of these unions is totalizing. Parents may have one child or they may have twelve children, and each new child born to them initiates another totalizing union with a brand new loved one. Each new child born to them constitutes a point of the parents’ utter vulnerability—if that child perishes, so will the parent, in every way but the physical sense. This is why others cannot provide true help after the loss of a loved one; the loss is the loss of the particular individual, the particular relationship of union. At the loss of a child, no parent is comforted by the prospect of simply having another child.

All this is not to say that the presence of others is unimportant. Having people to lament with is one of the great gifts of a human life and is crucial to moving forward in life in the midst of grief. But while others can lament with us, sit with us, and even distract us from the immediate pain, they cannot make loss *better*. Something we learn with the death of a loved one is that the existence of our world—what the world is, for us—depends on the continued presence of each person we love. Attempts to bring comfort by relaying a positive or hopeful message can often backfire, as though the well-wisher were utterly unaware of the level of destruction the griever has experienced.

In a famous section of Viktor Frankl’s monumental *Man’s Search for Meaning*, he recounts a former patient:

Once, an elderly general practitioner consulted me because of his severe depression. He could not overcome the loss of his wife who had died two years before and whom he had loved above all else. Now, how can I help him? What should I tell him? Well, I refrained from telling him anything but instead confronted him with the question, “What would have happened, Doctor, if you had died first, and your wife would have had to survive you?” “Oh,” he said, “for her this would have been terrible; how she would have suffered!” Whereupon I replied, “You see, Doctor, such a suffering has been spared her, and it was you who have spared her this suffering—to be sure, at the price that now you have to survive and mourn her.” He said no word but shook my hand and calmly left my office. In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice.

This passage is well-known because it encapsulates the upshot of Frankl’s entire book: suffering becomes bearable and in that way ceases (to some extent) to be suffering when it finds a purpose. Yet, I cannot help but think that Frankl’s analysis misses part of the source of strength this man took away from their meeting. Imagine that Frankl had suggested a different source of meaning for the widower’s suffering. For example, suppose that the widower’s wife would have been fine had she outlived her husband but that outliving his wife allowed the widower to use her life insurance policy to fund a new wing of the local hospital (for the sake of argument, assume such funding would have not been possible had the husband died first). In this revised version of the story, it is less obvious that the widower would have been able to take comfort in the “meaning” of his suffering, even though his outliving his wife had positive benefits for many others. Perhaps this fact may have brought some happiness to the widower—most of us take pleasure in being able to help others, regardless of the circumstances—but it is not clear that it would make the suffering of loneliness more bearable or meaningful for him.

I believe this discrepancy between cases makes perfect sense. In our revised version of the case, the widower’s suffering had purpose, but that purpose was only incidentally connected to his wife. In the original case—the case in which the widower did actually find meaning and reprieve in the midst of his suffering—the suffering is reimagined by Frankl as an act of service *for the widower’s wife*. It is not, I suggest, just any meaning that can make suffering bearable. In this case, the widower bore his loneliness for his wife; he bore it in her stead. It is hard to think of instances where we can act in love toward a person who is already deceased, and because of this the kind of love we hold toward those who are dead shifts from something active to a kind of passive warmth of remembrance. Frankl here shows us a case where a man found a way to actively love someone who had passed on before him. Here, the widower was able to relate to his wife in an active, present sense, rather than as a feature of the historical past.

Given the love-as-union picture, it makes sense that Frankl’s widower was able to withstand the weight of loss and grief only after the circumstances of his grief became his means of actively relating to his wife. Namely, the ability to continue actively relating to her—and therefore actively engaging in the unified “we” of their loving relationship—allowed the widower to retain himself. And in returning this solidity, this selfhood, to his life, the widower found himself able to bear up under the pain of missing his wife.

The natural question is: can the unified “we” exist after one half of the union has died? Does death annihilate this union, leaving the still-living to rebuild themselves from scratch (if they can) or else remain half a self (if they can’t)? Without a true persisting union, the mere illusion of a union would be of little use to us. On the love-as-union picture, self-deception will not cut it. If there is not a real sense in which I may continue to relate to those I am unified with in love after they are deceased, then I should expect that the loss of a loved one will bring with it a loss of my self. If this is true, then the death of loved ones is very much worse for people than we typically assume. Rather than being merely the source of severe emotional distress, the loss of a loved one can constitute a genuine existential threat to the person who remains living. Søren Kierkegaard’s work was largely concerned with just such an existential threat in the realm of the religious life and had much to say on the topic of retaining such unions.

**Kierkegaard on Contemporaneity**

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard, writing under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, spins the following tale: “[A] young lad falls in love with a princess, and this love is the entire substance of his life; and yet the relation is such that it cannot possibly be realized, that is, it cannot possibly be translated from ideality into reality.” In this brief passage we are shown a union-creating love: the knight’s love was the “entire substance of his life,” making the impossibility of a physical, personal union presumably all the more awful. We are not given specific details but are told simply that there was no way for the relationship to be instantiated “in reality”—that is to say, in the world we live in (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 41). Silentio acknowledges that many may respond to such a situation by abandoning their love for the princess, writing off any continuation of the love as foolishness, and trying to move on to a relationship with someone they can be with. These people, Silentio says, are “the slaves of the finite, the frogs in the swamp of life” (*ibid* 41). With these harsh words, Silentio wants to distinguish the aesthete’s response from another “infinite” option. That is to say, the person who finds it foolish to continue loving the princess is stuck irremediably in the “finite,” unable to understand the situation from the perspective of eternity. Silentio sees such a response as foolishness given the nature of the love—a totalizing union in which the knight's entire being is inextricably wrapped up in the princess’ being and in his love for her. If we take this description seriously, we might think of the knight as having certain continuity conditions which make the response of the “slaves of the finite” wholly inadequate (*ibid* 41). Moving on from an impossible love may seem coolly rational and wise, but it ignores the true nature and import of the relationship. Silentio then describes two additional ways the knight may respond to this impasse—ways that indicate an eternal perspective—illustrating the choices in the form of two different knights, the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith.

The knight of infinite resignation is, as the label suggests, resigned to the reality of not being with the princess in this world. But the knight has an eternal perspective and is realistic about the necessity of this union for his own self-constitution. This knight has no desire to ignore his present realities by hoping ceaselessly, against all evidence, that the princess may one day be his. Yet, he also rejects the aesthetic response; the knight of infinite resignation refuses to relegate the princess to his past and move forward without her. While he is resigned to not being with the princess in this world, he turns his attention to another world—the spiritual realm, afterlife, eternity—in which he anticipates their union finally coming to fruition. The knight of infinite resignation not only gives up on the hope of being with the princess in this life, he gives up his mental presence in this life and turns his attention fully to eternity. Because he is deprived of his self-making union with the princess in this world, his earthly life is of little concern to him, and his love for the princess becomes, Silentio says, as a religious object, the sole object of his devotion.

The knight of faith, like the knight of infinite resignation, accepts that his union of love with the princess is the deepest aspect of himself and also that attempts to “move on” from this love will involve the loss of his own self. Unlike the knight of infinite resignation, however, the knight of faith does not resign his love for the princess to the spiritual realm or the afterlife. The knight of faith knows that his very existence depends on real union with the princess in this life, and he knows equally well that this union is impossible. The knight of faith makes what is well-known (but little understood) as a “leap” into faith (*Fear and Trembling*, 36) acting on his dual conviction both that he could never be with the princess in this life and that he *would* be with the princess in this life. The knight of faith succeeds.

This movement—or “leap”—to faith discussed by Silentio (called the movement of “repetition” in *Repetition*, p. 149) is mysterious. Additionally, there is no need to attempt to explain Kierkegaard’s objective in positing such an opaque concept to illustrate religious faith. Kierkegaard’s esoteric style is in large part a result of his conviction that on such matters of subjective (meaning, essential for the individual self) existential import we are forced into silence due to the inexpressible nature of the required actions—hence Johannes de Silentio. Again, what is important for our purposes here is Kierkegaard’s exhortation that, although the knight of infinite resignation appears to preserve the union, he only allows himself to be lost along with the princess. Regaining the impossible unions will require us to act, in a much more difficult fashion, on a much stranger hope.

*Fear and Trembling* is written pseudonymously and should therefore not be taken as a perfectly straight-forward picture of how Kierkegaard sees the world. But the idea of totalizing unions that require epistemic and pragmatic leaps from common-sense ideas of the possible is an important aspect of his general idea of religious—specifically Christian—faith. What we should notice in his descriptions of the two knights is that, even though the knight of resignation loves the princess as an object of religious devotion, he is *not* the knight who has faith. Rather, the knight who has faith realizes that union with the princess is an existential necessity for him *in this life*, and he make the paradoxical movement to faith by acting as though the (seemingly) impossible must be true.

We can see these themes taken up in his non-pseudonymous work on the practical ins and outs of Christian faith. Specifically, Kierkegaard is concerned with the question of how someone in the modern age can truly be a Christian when (as Kierkegaard argued) being a Christian requires responding to the person of Christ as the disciples did. This seems impossible, he points out, because we look from what was the future back on Christ’s life—the modern Christian cannot relate to Christ as the disciples did, because the disciples were ignorant of the ultimate trajectory of his life. Backhouse (*Kierkegaard: A Single Life,* 275-76) writes, “[T]o have the faith of the disciples Jesus demanded cannot be to assent to the historical and intellectual data that comprises the Christian religion”. Christianity, Kierkegaard contends, requires relating to Christ as though the human himself was before us in the same way he stood before the disciples over 2000 years ago. Anything less than contemporaneity is merely a historical interest in Christ, and history is essentially other than us; it is a realm we know about only through investigation—the more we come to know it, the more we objectify it and distinguish it from ourselves. The Christian, Kierkegaard argues, if she is to be a Christian at all, must relate to Christ as an event presently happening. Kierkegaard writes of those who “cannot bear contemporaneity” and eventually give up trying (Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 88).

The import of this theme should become clear to the reader by now: the person who has lost a dearly beloved, with whom they had formed a totalizing union, is herself under a kind of existential threat. The identity of a Christian is dependent relating to Christ as one relates to a living and breathing other, rather than as a mere historical figure, the narrative tragectory of which we know entirely. This is because, for Kierkegaard, to be a Christian is to be a union of one’s finite and infinite self—that is, a union of my bare self with the part of my self that has been made “crossed over into infinity” through a relationship with an infinite God (*Fear and Trembling*, 36) But if love of others forms a genuine unified we, where the beloved is an inextricable part of my identity, then I alsodepend on these relationships with *others* with whom I have formed such a union. And similarly, this relationship must be a presently-happening relation, not a relationship as we have to things in the historical past.

Under these conditions, it is not enough to be merely a knight of infinite resignation. It is not enough that we get dragged out of this life along with the one we love, trying to hold on to the union in the realm of memory or future hope. This is inadequate because it does not actually preserve the union, it merely preserves the *appearance* of the union to us. And his appearance can itself be a distorting screen between us and our beloved, as Lewis discovered when his memories of H. began to become distorted and idealized. Those who are separated but do not realize the separation are, in some ways, further apart than the partners who stare separately into the blackness of the infinitely deep dividing chasm. The knight of infinite resignation *believes* that he has not given up his relationship to the princess; but by relegating their union to the realm of the mystical and forsaking the possibility of their union in this life, his heart *replaces* the princess with memories and ideas of her. The knight of infinite resignation wants to be religiously devoted, but ends up merely haunted.

There are, of course, important differences between Kierkegaard’s idea of the need for the Christian to become contemporaneous with Christ and the existential necessity of retaining the totalizing unions we form with beloved others. For example, for Kierkegaard the self-making aspect of contemporaneity with Christ is necessary for the formation of a true self and is therefore of primary importance over and above the contingent unions we form with other people. But what is important here are the reasons why the responses of both the “slaves of the finite” (*Fear and Trembling*, 41) and the knight of infinite resignation fail as adequate responses to the impossibility of being with the princess. The knight of faith—the only knight who succeeds—does so by acting in such a way that he displays full confidence *both* in the impossibility of being with the princess *as well as* the absolute metaphysical necessity of the union with the princess for his existence. Kierkegaard is silent on how the knight of faith does this. In fact, the unspeakability of the act is central to his understanding of faith. Kierkegaard’s pseudonym of choice for *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de Silentio, is our first clue as readers that a key feature of the knight of faith (and Abraham, his primary representative of such a knight) is the inability to communicate his actions of faithfulness to anyone else. Elsewhere, Kierkegaard writes,

The truth can neither be communicated nor be received without being, as it were, under the eyes of God, without the help of God, without God’s being a participant, the middle term, since God is the truth. can be communicated by and received only by the single individual (Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 140)

By “single individual”, he means the person who has taken the steps to form a true, infinitized self. Each person individually has this potential, but can only receive truth *as* an individual, never through a means of mass communication. Thus, the knight of faith is unable to explain what he does to readers; thus, we are unable to understand Abraham’s act of faithfulness on Mount Sinai. While the knight of resignation can show us an insufficient way of responding to the potential loss of union with the beloved, the knight of faith cannot directly tell us how to respond. Whatever response is necessary to retain the union, it is, for Kierkegaard, largely incommunicable.

But here the reader may point out another seeming difference between Kierkegaardian contemporaneity and our existential need to retain our union with the deceased: while Christians believe that Christ overcame death and can communicate with them through the Holy Spirit, the deceased are cut off from the living. Regardless of what one believes about an afterlife, the separation between the living and the dead is thick and impenetrable. I cannot hold a conversation with a deceased loved one, nor embrace her, nor hear about her day, nor watch her walk through a room. How can we retain real union with someone from behind such a thick curtain? One possible answer, of course, is that maybe we cannot. While we may accept our existential dependence on these unions, perhaps this entails only that the death of dearly beloveds is magnitudes worse for us than we imagined. So much the worse, then, for the living. In the following section, I want to explore another response to the question of how such unions with the dead could be possible. The picture of time that I will describe sounds strange to modern readers, but, I believe, not for want of an argument.

**Time**

Charles Taylor begins *A Secular Age* (2007) with a description of the ancient distinction between “higher” and “secular time,” known perhaps more popularly as “sacred” and “profane” time (Eliade, *Sacred and Profane Love*, 10). Taylor admits this distinction can be understood better in our contemporary dialect as a distinction between “temporality” and “eternity” but argues that the perception of two distinct planes of time goes back much further than our modern notions of nature and spirituality. Profane time, which Taylor calls “secular” time, is the time of ordinary events, the regular goings-on of everyday life, which pass through the present in a familiar stream. It is time as a stream, running continuously forward. In secular time, we labor and live the ordinary bits of our lives. My trip to the grocery store takes place in secular time, where events are ordered as past, present, or future, and I must take them as they come.

The ancient conception of what Taylor calls “higher times,” as he describes it, “gather and re-order secular time. They introduce ‘warps’ and seeming inconsistencies in profane time-ordering. Events which were far apart in profane time could nevertheless be closely linked.” (*ibid* 55) Taylor illustrates the idea this way: when we, for example, participate in the liturgy of Good Friday, we are, in some ways, closer to the event of Christ’s death on the Cross than we are to yesterday or tomorrow. Higher time scrunches up the timeline, raises us to a plane above temporality, and places us beside the sacred things we revere and celebrate, to dwell beside them for a little while. Taylor argues that what makes this eternity “higher” than secular time is the idea, rooted in the Platonism that was influentially taken up by Plotinus and Augustine, that “the really real, full being is outside of time, unchanging. Time is a moving image of eternity. It is imperfect, or tends to imperfection” (*ibid* 54-55). The time that “passes” then is an output of Being and, therefore, imperfect. We who exist within secular time must take special measures to access these higher times. Most often, Taylor writes, this was the domain and purpose of ritual.

The idea of a “higher” time, over and above regular “secular” time, is retained in every ceremony and ritual practiced in commemoration of a past event or to mark a holiday. When a woman dons a white dress and walks down an aisle, wearing her grandmother’s veil and her mother’s pearls, with the intention to become bound for life to her partner, these traditions are ways of entering into a kind of “higher time” where otherwise ordinary actions take on the weight and authority of a marriage ceremony—the bride joins a long line of women who have individually chosen the same ritual acts, thereby enjoining her to this line during the wedding ceremony. But how do rituals propel us from the saeculum to the higher time? Taylor, describing Augustine’s work on the topic, describes the process as a kind of “gathering” together of time (*ibid* 55):

Unlike his Greek sources, who looked at objective time, the time of processes and movement, Augustine in his famous discussion in *Confessions* XI examines lived time. His instant is not the “nun” of Aristotle, which is a limit, like a point, an extensionless boundary of time periods. Rather it is the gathering together of past into present to project a future. The past, which “objectively” exists no more, is here in my present; it shapes this moment in which I turn to a future, which “objectively” is not yet, but which is here qua project.

Augustine, then, sees time as essentially a description of order that arises through living, rather than as a thing lived through. Because of this, the past is not a thing that I have left but is something that gets gathered up in my actions and projects and gives rise to what I do and to what I will do. And it gives rise to these things, not merely by causing (e.g.) what I do, but by making my actions what they are. Augustine illustrates this idea in book XI of his *Confessions* by comparing this “gathered” nature of time to a poem or song: “What occurs in the psalm as a whole occurs in its particular pieces and its individual syllables. The same is true of a longer action in which perhaps the psalm is a part. It is also valid of the entire life of an individual person, where all actions are parts of a whole” (Augustine, *Confessions*, 40) Because eternal things exist in ordinary time, and are drawn out over uncountable instants, the eternal in the saeculum “gathers” the past into the present to create the future (*ibid*).[[3]](#footnote-3) This is the very heart of ritual, where we intentionally take up a (kind of) dutiful work to gather the past together with the present. Rituals are, by nature, more intentional than ordinary actions extended over time, because we are not ordinarily in the process of, say, sitting down at a Passover dinner, or washing an infant of original sin, or joining two souls in matrimony. But on this (we may call it) Platonic understanding of “higher” time, ritual allows us to intentionally gather the past into the present. This in turn allows future actions that follow from the ritual to take on the character as a step out of the profane ordinary, the way that the beginning of a song can determine the nature of the ending.

So, on this ancient conception of higher and secular time, it is clear why ceremony and ritual held a place of such great importance. Rather than being merely tools for spurring memories of the past, they were literally our means of joining with historically past events in an act of shared presence. But this ancient conception of time has gone out of the intellectual mainstream (to put it mildly), and ceremonies are now often seen merely as a means of honoring someone or remembering an event. But if rituals can only serve to commemorate, rather than drawing up the past to meet us in the present, then the best we can hope for us to become knights of infinite resignation, clinging to the memory of our beloveds as spiritualized, idealized objects, and allowing ourselves to fade out of the present and into the past with the other parts of our unions of love.

It would be easy to think of the distinction between a higher and lower time as fanciful, a figment of ancient and medieval mysticism that should be understood purely allegorically in our present age. This question is important for our discussion here because, as I have previously argued, real union with the beloved involves a *two-way relationship* between us and them. If they no longer exist, then there is no way for them to really relate to us, and real union is impossible. However, philosophers have always taken seriously the idea that our perception of time as a flowing river—our intuition that the present is what is “really happening” and that there is an objective past and future—may be incorrect.

The view of time discussed by Taylor in the previous section—time as “less than real” in the deepest sense, as traversable, or gatherable, or able to be risen above—is also not at odds with any scientific or general empirical consensus on the nature of time. There is, in fact, no such consensus at all, and the scientific and philosophical communities have in recent decades found themselves divided on the question.

It is generally accepted that a view of the “arrow of time” as an illusion is far more compatible with general relativity than the “common sense” view of time. Einstein once wrote, “People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion”[[4]](#footnote-4) Hermann Minkowski, a mathematician who worked on Einstein’s theory of general relativity, concurred, arguing that a picture of space and time as “unified” was necessary to make sense of what we know about relativity. Complicating matters, however, those working on quantum mechanics argue that presentism—the view of time as a flowing river, with only the spotlight of the “present” as truly real and existing in reality—must be assumed to make sense of what we know about physics at the quantum level (Christensen, *Space-like Time*; Maudlin, “Remarks on the Passing of Time”).

John McTaggart was perhaps the first to bring the discussion of the nature of time into “contemporary” analytic philosophy, in his famous paper “The Unreality of Time”. Therein, McTaggart argues that the common-sense view of time as an objective and forward-moving arrow entail that tensed semantic expressions are full of contradictions. From this, he concludes that time must be, in a deep sense, “unreal.” There have, of course, been responses to McTaggart’s argument, and responses still to those in defense of the ultimate unreality of time. Still, McTaggart’s argument has had “staying power” (Emery *et al*, “Time”), and sparked a renewed interest in the topic of time in twentieth century analytic philosophy. Suffice to say, on the topic of time, philosophers and scientists are at a collective loss with no clear consensus emerging. How, then, ought we live in the face of the loss of a beloved?

If time could, as Augustine thought, be gathered together in simultaneity through acts that stretch across it like a song, then perhaps those acts could preserve our real unions with those who have gone before us. The nature of those acts is, I worry, not something that one can theorize about in the abstract, because they are themselves continuations of the particular relationships in question. Frankl’s widower patient gathered his wife to him through the act of carrying her would-be suffering for her, sparing her the pain. Other relationships may be continued through other forms of active relating: the continuation of shared projects, for example. What is important is that one is relating to the beloved herself, rather than to memories of her or an idealized picture of her. This is a difficult task under ordinary conditions—far more difficult, to be sure, when death separates you. We can only offer our best attempts, in what may fairly be called an act of faith.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have argued for a few things. First, that the Union Theory of love best explains why the distortion of our memories of deceased loved ones is a bad thing. Second, if the Union Theory is correct, then the death of a beloved with whom I have formed a unified “we” also entails the loss of that “we”—a loss of my self. Therefore, the death of our beloved is much worse for us than we think. I have further argued that our well-being depends upon our being able to retain our unions with the deceased. And finally, I argued that such a retention may be possible, especially given a rather plausible picture of time which has (in various versions) been accepted by philosophers for millennia.

In arguing that we may have, and should act in, hope, I am not arguing for something mystical. We should accept that, whatever may be true of life, death, and time, the living will be separated from the dead. The widower’s loneliness was not soothed by the opportunity to continue serving his wife. The pain itself was his means of continuing to serve and relate to her. Rather, what we may hope for is the ability to retain a unified “we” consisting of both persons in a relationship of love with one another, even if in all sensory respects they are cut off from each other. Doing so would be difficult. The temptation would be strong to become like Kierkegaard’s Knight of Infinite Resignation, clinging relentlessly to the memory of the beloved, or to try to move on from the beloved entirely. Rather than either of these actions, we should understand time as Augustine did—gatherable, the present drawing the past to itself and into the future via diachronically extended activities. It is in this picture of higher time as an instant of simultaneity that our hope lies. And it is indeed only a hope—the success of our attempts to retain real union depends on there really being two beings relating to one another. I ended my paper on a discussion of time and argued that we have good reason to doubt that the present is all that truly exists, and therefore good reason to hope that continued unions may be possible in theory. There is, therefore, equally good reason to *act in hope* that such real unions can be maintained even in the face of death. Genuine unions of love may, in fact, obligate us to do so.

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1. *The Antigone of Sophocles*, trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald. Harcourt, Brace and Company Inc., 1939, p.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Some belief systems may allow that the living can harm the dead by omission by e.g. failing to pray for their souls in purgatory. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This idea bears some similarities, though also many differences, to what Bergson called “lived time”—time as we experience it, as paused, gathered, and rushed, at various points—which for him was distinct from “objective time” (Bergson, *Time and Free Will*). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In a letter to the family of Michele Besso. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)