

## INTRODUCTION

‘Words belong to each other,’ Virginia Woolf’s scratchy voice unspools from the only surviving recording of her aural presence. Indeed, words are our creation, but our Pygmalian love for them must not deceive us – they do not belong to us, for they are not static figures of thought to be owned and traded as artefacts. They are living organisms, elastic and porous, feral with meaning, ever-evolving. They possess us more than we possess them. They feed on us more than we feed on them. Words belong to each other, and we to them.

And yet the commonest words in our lexicon – those tasked with containing and conveying the most elemental human truths and experiences – are slowly being shorn of meaning: assaulted by misuse, abraded by overuse, overthought and underconsidered, trampled of dimension and discoloured of nuance.

In *Consolations*, David Whyte repatriates us in the

land of language by giving words back to themselves and, in this generous act, giving us back to ourselves – we, sensemaking creatures who navigate this old maze of a world through the mightiest figuring faculty we have: language itself. For each word he chooses – *anger*, *longing*, *silence* – Whyte composes less a redefinition than a reanimation, less Cawdrey than Montaigne. There is tremendous kindness and generosity of spirit undergirding his micro-essays, reinstating each word and the meaning it carries as a truth not only human but humane. ‘Friendship is a mirror to presence and a testament to forgiveness,’ he writes of a word so hollowed in our era of social media ‘friends’, in our culture so conditioned on unforgiving cynicism and distracted flight from presence. On the enchanted loom of his poetic imagination, Whyte mends these most threadbare words into splendid tapestries of thought and feeling, lush with reclaimed meaning. What emerges is that supreme gift of being: a deeper sense of belonging – of words, to words, and to ourselves.

Maria Popova

## ALONE

is a word that stands by itself, carrying the austere, solitary beauty of its own meaning even as it is spoken to another. It is a word that can be felt at the same time as an invitation to depth and as an imminent threat, as in ‘all alone’, with its returned echo of abandonment. ‘Alone’ is a word that rings with a strange finality, especially when contained in that haunting aggregate, ‘left all alone’, as if the state once experienced begins to define and engender its own inescapable world. The first step in spending time alone is to admit how afraid of it we are.

Being alone is a difficult discipline: a beautiful and difficult sense of being solitary is always the ground from which we step into a contemplative intimacy with the unknown, but the first portal of aloneness is often experienced as a gateway to alienation, grief and abandonment. To find ourselves alone or to be left

alone is an ever-present, fearful and abiding human potentiality of which we are often unconsciously, and deeply, afraid.

To be alone for any length of time is to shed an outer skin. The body is inhabited in a different way when we are alone than when we are with others. Alone, we live in our bodies as a question rather than a statement.

The permeability of being alone asks us to re-imagine ourselves, to become impatient with ourselves, to tire of the same old story and then slowly, hour by hour, to start to tell the story in a different way, as other parallel ears, ones we were previously unaware of, begin to listen to us more carefully in the silence. For a solitary life to flourish, even if it is only for a few precious hours, aloneness asks us to make a friend of silence, and just as importantly to inhabit that silence in our own particular way, to find our very own way into our own particular, and even virtuoso, way of being alone.

To inhabit silence in our aloneness is to stop telling

the story altogether. To begin with, aloneness always leads to rawness and vulnerability, to a fearful simplicity, to not recognising and to not knowing, to the wish to find any company other than that not knowing, unknown self, looking back at us in the silent mirror.

One of the elemental dynamics of self-compassion is to understand our deep reluctance to be left to ourselves.

Aloneness begins in puzzlement at our own reflection, transits through awkwardness and even ugliness at what we see, and culminates, one appointed hour or day, in a beautiful unlooked-for surprise, at the new complexion beginning to form, the slow knitting together of an inner life, now exposed to air and light.

To be alone is not necessarily to be absent from the company of others; the radical step is to let ourselves alone, to cease the berating voice that is constantly trying to interpret and force the story from too small and too complicated a perspective.

Even in company, a sense of imminent aloneness is a quality that can be cultivated. Aloneness does not

need a desert, or a broad ocean, or a quiet mountain; human beings have the ability to feel the rawest, most intimate forms of aloneness whilst living closely with others or beset by the busyness of the world. They can feel alone around a meeting table, in the happiest, most committed marriage, or aboard a crowded ship with a full complement of crew.

The difficulty of being alone may be felt most keenly in the most intimate circumstances, in the darkness of the marriage bed: one centimetre and a thousand miles apart, or in the silence around a tiny crowded kitchen table. But to feel alone in the presence of others is also to understand the singularity of human existence whilst experiencing the deep physical current that binds us to others whether we want that binding or no: aloneness can measure togetherness even through a sense of distance.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, to feel alone or want to be alone is deeply unfashionable: to admit to feeling alone is to reject and betray others, as if they are not good company, and do not have

entertaining, interesting lives of their own to distract us; and to actually seek to be alone is a radical act. To want to be alone is to refuse a certain kind of conversational hospitality and to turn to another door, and another kind of welcome, not necessarily defined by human vocabulary.

It may be that time away from a work, an idea of ourselves, or a committed partner is the very essence of appreciation for the other, for the work and for the life of another; to be able to let them alone as we let ourselves alone, to live something that feels like a choice again, to find ourselves alone as a looked-for achievement, not a state to which we have been condemned.

## AMBITION

is a word that lacks any real ambition. Ambition is desire frozen, the current of a vocational life immobilised and over-concretised to set, unforgiving goals. Ambition may be essential for the young and as yet unrealised life, but becomes the essential obstacle of any mature life. Ambition abstracts us from the underlying elemental nature of the creative conversation while providing us the cover of a target that has become false through over-description, overfamiliarity or too much understanding.

The ease of having an ambition is that it can be explained to others; the very disease of ambition is that it can be so easily explained to others. What is worthy of a life's dedication does not want to be known by us in ways that diminish its actual sense of presence. Everything true to itself has its own secret language and an internal intentionality with a secret, surprising



flow, even to the person who supposedly puts it all in motion.

Ambition ultimately withers all secrets in its glare before those secrets have had time to come to life from within, and then thwarts the generosity and maturity that ripens the discourse of a lifetime's dedication to a work.

We may direct the beam of ambition to illuminate a certain corner of the future world, but ultimately it can reveal to us only those dreams with which we have already become familiar. Ambition left to itself, like the identity of the average billionaire, always becomes tedious, its only object the creation of larger and larger empires of control; but a true vocation calls us out beyond ourselves, breaks our heart in the process and then humbles, simplifies and enlightens us about the hidden, core nature of the work that enticed us in the first place. We find that, all along, we had what we needed from the beginning and that in the end we have returned to its essence, an essence we could not understand until we had experienced the actual heartbreak of the journey.

No matter the self-conceited importance of our labours we are all compost for worlds we cannot yet imagine. Ambition takes us toward that horizon, but not over it – that line will always recede before our controlling hands. But a calling is a conversation between our physical bodies, our work, our intellects and imaginations, and a new world that is itself the territory we seek. A vocation always includes the specific, heartrending way we will fail at our attempt to live fully. A true vocation always metamorphoses both ambition and failure into compassion and understanding for others.

Ambition takes willpower and constant applications of energy to stay on a perceived bearing; but a serious vocational calling demands a constant attention to the unknown gravitational field that surrounds us and from which we recharge ourselves, as if breathing from the atmosphere of possibility itself. A life's work is not a series of stepping-stones, onto which we calmly place our feet, but more like an ocean crossing where there is no path, only a heading, a direction, in conversation

with the elements. Looking back, we see the wake we have left as only a brief glimmering trace on the waters.

Ambition is natural to the first steps of youth, who must experience its essential falsity to know the larger reality that stands behind it, but held on to too long, and especially in eldership, it always comes to lack surprise, turns the last years of the ambitious into a second childhood, and makes the once successful into an object of pity.

The authentic watermark running through the background of a life's work is an arrival at generosity and, as a mark of that generosity, delight in the hopes of the young: and the giving away to them, not only of rewards that may have been earned but the reward in the secret itself, the core artistry that made the journey a journey.

Perhaps the greatest legacy we can leave from our work is not to instil ambition in others, though this may be the first way we describe its arrival in our life, but the passing on of a sense of sheer privilege, of having found a road, a way to follow, and then having

been allowed to walk it, often with others, with all its difficulties and minor triumphs; the underlying primary gift of having been both a witness to and a full participant in the conversation.

## ANGER

is the deepest form of care, for another, for the world, for the self, for a life, for the body, for a family and for all our ideals, all vulnerable and all, possibly, about to be hurt.

Stripped of physical imprisonment and violent reaction, anger points toward the purest form of compassion; the internal living flame of anger always illuminates what we belong to, what we wish to protect and those things for which we are willing to hazard and even imperil ourselves.

What we usually call anger is only what is left of its essence when we are overwhelmed by its accompanying vulnerability, when it reaches the lost surface of our mind or our body's incapacity to hold it, or when it touches the limits of our understanding. What we name as anger is actually only the incoherent physical incapacity to sustain this deep form of care

in our outer daily life; the unwillingness to be large enough and generous enough to hold what we love helplessly in our bodies or our minds with the clarity and breadth of our whole being.

What we have named as anger on the surface is the violent outer response to our own inner powerlessness, a powerlessness connected to such a profound sense of rawness and care that it can find no proper outer body or identity or voice, or way of life to hold it.

What we call anger is often simply the unwillingness to live the full measure of our fears or of our not knowing, in the face of our love for a wife, in the depth of our caring for a son, in our wanting the best, in the face of simply being alive and loving those with whom we live.

Our anger breaks to the surface most often through our feeling there is something profoundly wrong with this powerlessness and vulnerability; anger too often finds its voice strangely, through our incoherence and through our inability to speak, but anger in its pure state is the measure of the way we are implicated in

the world and made vulnerable through love in all its specifics: a daughter, a house, a family, an enterprise, a land or a colleague.

Anger turns to violence and violent speech when the mind refuses to countenance the vulnerability of the body in its love for all these outer things – we are often abused or have been abused by those who love us but have no vehicle to carry its understanding, or who have no outer emblems of their inner care or even their own wanting to be wanted. Lacking any outer vehicle for the expression of this inner rawness they are simply overwhelmed by the elemental nature of love's vulnerability. In their helplessness they turn their violence on the very people who are the outer representation of this inner lack of control.

But anger truly felt at its centre is the essential living flame of being fully alive and fully here; it is a quality to be followed to its source, to be prized, to be tended, and an invitation to finding a way to bring that source fully into the world through making the mind clearer

and more generous, the heart more compassionate, and the body larger and strong enough to hold it.

What we call anger on the surface only serves to define its true underlying quality by being a complete but absolute mirror-opposite of its true internal essence.