

The Call

Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something.
—Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*

IT STARTS WITH A CALL, a summons to common sense. We know the call is important because it gets its own paragraph. The subject is serious, but the call is casual. Like, *C'mon guys, just admit it. We're undone by each other—there's no use pretending otherwise*. It's also an invitation, in which case one might respond, *Yes, let's*. Is there a party waiting on the other side? (Kind of.)

And, so invited, we face the proposition. The essay in which the proposition nests (“Violence, Mourning, Politics”) suggests that we treat the proposition itself as a face, in the Levinasian sense of the phrase (“The Levinasian face is not precisely or exclusively a human face, although it communicates what is human, what is precarious, what is injurable” [xviii]). If the reader brings enough of her openness, her permeability, to the words and thoughts of others, she might be undone by what she faces.

I've turned toward and over “Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something” for over a decade now. Like a shard of a beloved song, its fifteen words have, over time, become a part of me. At one point, I wrote that these lines were my own personal *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate* (“Abandon all hope, ye who enter here”), but then I took it back: it was too hard to explain what I meant. I didn't mean that “We are undone by each other” was a hopeless fact welcoming us to hell. I meant what I think Butler meant, via “Let's,” which is something like: I invite you to abandon the hope that we will *not* be undone by each other; I invite you to consider being undone by each other as neither a good thing nor a bad thing nor a static thing, but simply as something that happens; I invite you to consider that that undoneness can be devastating as well as exhilarating, and that neither sentiment means we have to chase after it or chase it away; I invite you to become one *who enters here*, wherein “here” means life, not hell, even if it can feel like hell (as grief and desire, Butler's two primary players, can).

So we've passed through the gates, we've accepted the invitation. We're facing it. But what, exactly, are we facing? What does "undone" mean?

There can be great pleasure in feeling "done." I know this pleasure well: I like to brush and part and tie my hair tight; I'm partial to top buttons. There can also be great pleasure in being, or beholding, an individuated, contained, self-sufficient unit coming apart upon contact with another; the physical undoneness is the (shaming, thrilling) mark of the encounter. ("That top button isn't fooling anyone," a friend tells Chelsea Hodson in her essay collection *Tonight I'm Someone Else* [86].)

And yet, as the specter of shame suggests, coming undone is not always desired or desirable. I brush and part and tie my hair tight because most of the time I *want* to appear—indeed, to feel—coherent, competent: nothing in my teeth, zipper up, well-chosen words coming easily out of my mouth, the marks of my despair or disrepair not involuntarily communicated. During the pandemic, I wore shoes and lipstick to every Zoom meeting, as a matter of preserving sanity and dignity; I desperately wanted—needed—what I presume many others wanted and needed, which was to keep the strewn Legos and dirty dishes and sociopathic dog out of the frame. It didn't really help if a kind boss said, "It's okay, we like children!" I like children, too, and I like my own child very much. What I do not like is the impossible task of trying to parent and enact a professional, focused self at the same time, a task that torments.

All of which is to say: it's easy to give lip service to the virtues of undoneness, and harder to accept its actual eruption in, and disruption of, our lives. This is especially so when it results from conditions that displease, surprise, or devastate us. This devastation is the primary subject of Butler's "Violence, Mourning, Politics"; its main exhibits are the violent wound of 9/11 and the speculative loss of a beloved.

In thinking about this unwanted devastation, I cannot help but think of my friend Christina Crosby, who repurposed Butler's phrase in the title of her 2016 book, *A Body, Undone: Living On After Great Pain*, which deals with the ravages of spinal cord injury. As it happens, *Precarious Life* came out just months after Crosby broke her neck; as one of Crosby's stunned caregivers, I took Butler's examination of injury and injurability personally. (So did Crosby.) As a New Yorker who had also been stunned by 9/11 and its aftermath, I deeply needed Butler's meditation, as the vulnerability, loss, un mastery, and anxiety unloosed by that event were not theoretical, but agonizing and engulfing.

And there was more. By the time *Precarious Life* arrived, I had been thinking hard about injurability for some time, via writing a book (which would eventually become two books) about the murder of my aunt. Even (or especially) after years of thinking and writing about her death, I had

become unsure as to what, if anything, remained to be known or said or gained from focusing so intently on sexualized female injury and injurability. Who needed the news, delivered, in this case, by two shots to the head and strangulation by pantyhose, of a woman's vulnerability to a man's murderous rage? It all felt so redundant, so "done." *Precarious Life* taught me otherwise. It provided a wider psychoanalytical, political, and even spiritual framework for absorbing and contemplating the various injuries before me, be they my aunt's, Crosby's, or my city's. No matter how much I thought I knew—about wounding, about aggression, about justice, about mourning—Butler asked me, asked us, to know more, to think harder.

And so, as I headed off, in the summer of 2005, to the trial of the man accused of murdering my aunt, I kept *Precarious Life* close by my side. Its observations about grief and storytelling—"I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by those very relations. My narrative falters, as it must" (23)—offered me not only insight and comfort, but also formal inspiration as to how one might allow narrative faltering to act as a powerful presence while one is trying to relay a story. (The working title of my courtroom book was *The End of the Story*, which eventually morphed into *The Red Parts*, a kind of in-joke with myself about my—and Christianity's—penchant for circling wounds.)

Crosby's *A Body, Undone* did not appear for another decade, but I still consider it a direct response to *Precarious Life*, especially to Butler's call to use the experience of being injured as an opportunity to think widely and generously about injurability. (Notably, Crosby's working title for *A Body, Undone* was *An Account of Myself*, echoing Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*, from 2003.) The word "undone" appears three times in Crosby's book; each appearance tells us something about the phrase. Here is the first:

Spinal cord injury has undone my body, bewildering me and thwarting my understanding. Yet I am certain about one thing—whatever chance I have at a good life, in all senses of that phrase, depends on my openness to the undoing wrought by spinal cord injury, because there is no return to an earlier life. I know that the life I live now depends on my day-by-day relations with others, as it did before, but to an incalculably greater extent. Now I need you to know from the inside, as it were, how it feels to be so radically changed. If I can show you, perhaps I'll be able to see, too. (20–21)

The undoneness of Crosby's body is, as she makes clear in the passage prior to this one, a horror. This horror is not to be celebrated or overcome, Crosby insists, only borne, with great difficulty and sorrow. And yet Crosby also knows—indeed, she insists—that a livable life (another of Butler's important, abiding phrases) utterly depends upon Crosby's openness to

that undoing. It depends upon it because Crosby knows—as does Butler—that denial, disavowal, or fantasizing about the restoration of that which is irrevocably changed or gone are dead-end strategies that do not, in the long run, ameliorate pain. More often, they exacerbate it; they can also make one more likely to cause it for others. As Crosby’s “If I can show you, perhaps I’ll be able to see, too” suggests, writing (and reading)—if undertaken with requisite degrees of honesty and rigor—can counter this disavowal and denial. They can be a way of facing things.

Crosby’s second use of the phrase arrives via a paraphrase of Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* (1985), in which Crosby writes: “Crying, and screaming, and raging against pain are the sign of language undone” (31). Language undone is, for Scarry, a hallmark of torture; Crosby, too, knows the threat of annihilation that great pain poses to language. Yet she perseveres, because she must: “I need you to know from the inside.” To convey to another, in language, however imperfectly, the feeling of being undone, of having been undone, of falling into and out of the undone, is an act of survival. It insists on the possibility of communication and connection in the face of that which individuates, isolates, shatters. Butler shares in this project in “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” albeit in a more philosophical idiom: the essay names no personal wound per se, but its anguished ambience, along with its copious, intimate deployment of “we” and “I,” suggest that its author, too, has been brought up against the shoals: “Who am ‘I,’ without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost ‘you’ only to discover that ‘I’ have gone missing as well” (22).

Crosby’s third and final use of the phrase arrives in a passage about the political activism of her youth: “I reserved my conviction that patriarchy could only be undone by radical feminists” (163). This use of the phrase is more pedestrian, but it matters. It matters because it reminds us that “undoing”—for Crosby, for Butler, and for so many others—bears a relation to dismantling unjust systems that decrease the possibility of livable lives. That we’re undone by injury; that we’re undone by great pain; that we’re undone in love; that we’re undone in grief: these are the pains wrought by impermanence, which is a precondition for change. If we can’t learn how to be open to undoneness—or if we are willing to be open to it only when we feel sure that the coming changes will lead to what we want, or away from pain—we risk not being open to any change at all. We may also miss out on the opportunity to train in “agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance,” which is how Butler describes mourning, but which could just as easily describe political and social upheaval of many kinds (21).

Undoing entrenched systems that we are deeply accustomed to—indeed, *abolishing* them—can create tremendous anxiety and destabilization, even for those who feel sure those systems need to go. Taking the leap toward a future undisciplined by a gender binary, or unstructured by carceral punishment, or independent of fossil fuels (to take but a few examples) requires, and will continue to require, courage from us all. Yes, we need plans and analyses, but we also need to be able to bear *not knowing* in advance the full result of our actions and desires, and we need to learn how to support each other through this not knowing, which will be—let’s face it—unending. Butler’s wise and compassionate mapping of this challenge struck me then, and strikes me now, as supremely important—certainly as important as the more combative rallying cries that come in at higher volume.

So those are a few aspects of undoing. But questions remain. If this undoing is so inevitable—if it’s something that simply *is*, whether we like it or not—what can/does Butler mean by: “And if we’re not [undone by each other], we’re missing something”? This is a tricky turn, as it reintroduces the possibility (and power) of denial, of disavowal. It allows for the possibility of *not* being undone by one another—the self staying brushed and tight and tied, dismissive of or insensate to its various dependencies and enmeshments, unable or unwilling to accept life’s motley penetrations and precarities. What’s more, Butler casts these phenomena as something that can be missed: missed, as in not apprehended, but also missed, as in occasioning a new form of loss or lack. It would seem that, even if our undoing by one another simply *is*, there still exists the possibility of missing it. If we don’t want to miss it, or miss out on it, we might have to do something. As is the case in most spiritual traditions, that something involves a paradox by which one is asked to accept, or surrender to, or open oneself up to, that which is already upon us or surrounds us or even *is* us (call it what you wish).

I love this line of thinking. And yet I must admit: the recovering codependent in me has awoken. Certain twelve-step knowledge systems encourage a practice and philosophy of not allowing the behaviors, struggles, thoughts, and feelings of others (alcoholics in one’s life, most pointedly, but the teachings apply broadly) to undo you. For those of us accustomed to feeling undone by others on the regular, learning the arts of individuation, detachment, and boundaries can be absolutely key to the development of more livable lives. As Al-Anon literature has it: “Detachment is essential to any healthy relationship between people. . . . Simply put, detachment means to separate ourselves emotionally and spiritually from other people. . . . [Detachment] does not mean detaching ourselves, and our love and compassion. . . . [It means realizing that] we are individuals. . . . not bound morally to shoulder the alcoholic’s responsibilities” (54).

Realizing that we are individuals? Not bound to shoulder the responsibilities of others? This doesn't sound very Levinasian, nor does it sound exactly simpatico with the imbrication Butler lays out in "I think I have lost 'you' only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well."

My ears may be pricked, but, upon close reading and rereading, I can see that Butler knows that our enmeshment with one another isn't all one thing or another, that our capacity to undo each other, to feel unsure of our borders, doesn't wash away the need for independence or autonomy. Far from it. "We are something other than 'autonomous' in such a condition, but that does not mean that we are merged or without boundaries," Butler writes in *Precarious Life* (phew!) (27). And so, as we bear down on "Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something," I hear a new question. What if, when we're undone by each other, we are also missing something—a necessary boundary, a healthy (if wavering) distinction between self and other, that isn't ontologically precise or total per se, but that makes possible certain forms of self-protection, self-knowledge, and self-care, all of which can play a crucial role in our flourishing? If we're missing something both when we're undone by each other and when we're not, might we be better off accepting a certain rocking in between, a flickering that characterizes both love and mourning? A detachment that connects, that makes relation possible, even as it distinguishes and (superficially) separates?

I suspect Butler would have some choice things to say about the "self" here conjured (see, for example, the analysis of self-defense in 2020's *The Force of Nonviolence*. "to understand [the claim of self-defense], we would need to know who the 'self' is—its territorial limits and boundaries, its constitutive ties" [11]). Nonetheless, despite the decisiveness of "And if we're not, we're missing something," these lines unsettle and open as much as they assert and resolve. Indeed, they wouldn't have stayed with me all these years if they didn't weave, or accompany me, in and out of clarity and bewilderment.

Butler is unafraid of that weave, as the opening pages of *Precarious Life* make clear. After speaking lucidly in somewhat familiar academic terms about the hope that our "inevitable interdependency" might become "a basis for global political community," Butler swerves: "I confess to not knowing how to theorize that interdependency" (xiii). This charming admission underscores the value Butler finds not just in not knowing, but in publicly confessing to not knowing. We know some things, or we think we know some things, and then we are humbled, and we realize how little we knew. We push into our thought and find its limit, then leave it by the side of the road for another to pick up and take for a ride. We come together, we fall apart. We merge, we separate. We attach, we detach. We produce and present

ourselves, we lose ourselves. We button and unbutton, various facets of our lives veering in and out of the frame.

Again and again, we set out to relate to others—indeed, to love them—even as we remain bewildered much of the time as to who or what they are, who and what we are to them, who or what we are together. As Butler writes with some measure of tragicomedy in *The Force of Nonviolence*:

I love you, but you are already me, carrying the burden of my unrepaired past, my deprivation and my destructiveness. And I am doubtless that for you, taking the brunt of punishment for what you never received; we are for one another already faulty substitutions for irreversible pasts, neither one of us ever really getting past the desire to repair what cannot be repaired. And yet here we are, hopefully sharing a decent glass of wine. (97)

This last line is a fun affective change from the solemnity of *Precarious Life*; maybe it's even the party that was promised! It's like—or I'm like—okay, I took you up on your 2004 invitation to face it; now it's 2022, and I've been facing it, yet everything remains a mess. I tried to figure out who you are, who I am, who we are to each other, who is responsible for what, where we begin and end, how to repair what can be repaired (and live with all that cannot), how not to punish each other or project onto each other (unduly), how to handle all the aggression and disappointment our interrelation arouses, how to mourn you. And I still haven't figured it out! And now you're retiring! And even if I wanted to share that decent glass of wine with you, I don't drink! What on earth are we—what am I—going to do now?

I confess to not knowing, and stand before you with imaginary glass raised, grateful to be one of the many who have answered the call, to be where we are.

References

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