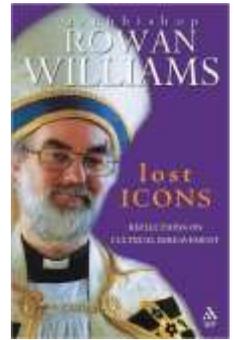# Rowan Williams
Lost icons – reflection on cultural bereavement

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4 essays on aspects/themes of life which have been undermined by cultural change. Not an easy read, although he doesn't use particularly complex vocabulary – but worth it.

Introduction

Book maybe is a sort of journal of the 90s. Icon as understood in common parlance – part of the code of a community, an image that binds people together, provides a common point of reference. In art - not a reproduction of reality, but the significance of what it shown against the background of a source of illumination independent of it. Here – verbal and moral icons are patterns of reading and understanding human behaviour and relationship that represent some of the basic constraints on what human beings can reasonably do and say together. Not universally the same. Eg conventions to do with death, with sex, kinship, understanding of common history. Book chooses a limited number of areas in which some kinds of discourse are getting more and more laboured, inaccessible to our culture: childhood, charity, remorse; and concludes that what we are losing is language of the soul. 'Soul' he understands as 'a religious style of talking about selfhood', p8; question is, can a wholly secular language for the self resist trivialisation and reduction?

1. Childhood and choice

Educational writings no longer make use of the words 'childhood' or 'play'; they reveal a profound impatience. Education now seems to be about pressing the child into adult or pseudo-adult roles as fast as possible. Children used to be carried by society as passengers, with initiation rituals to mark transition to adulthood; we no longer have the patience for that. But childhood needs to be a period where we can make mistakes, try things out, explore projects and identities, without having to be bound by the consequences. Hence role plays, fantasies, playground rhymes; stories that sit light to realism/moral tidiness; magical and mythological and frightening worlds; moral exploration. We don't want children not to be children – hence our outrage at child soldiers, prostitutes, murderers, street children. Bu we ourselves are turning children away from the traditional grounds of childhood and making them into consumers: which has the same effect.

Child as consumer – link between films and the consumer goods marketed with them, designed to stimulate further consumer desires. Child becomes an economic subject, subject to advertising, treated as a pseudo-adult, but lacking the adult awareness of cost and risk, how economic activity commits and limits you. Child also becomes a sexual subject; advertising suggests this is unproblematic, that sexual opportunity is, like economic opportunity, risk-free. So the task is to learn what it is to be desirable; and then what things you need to make you desirable. Results seen in children's talent competitions and fashion shows, where sexual stereotypes are thought cute. We no longer safeguard a space where identities can be learned and tested in imagination before commitments have to be made. Child as erotic and economic subject cannot learn to choose. It's worst in areas of poverty, where the environment is one in which material poverty sits beside the pervasive images of consumerism, and there are few ways to gratify the desires they nurture. It's least marked in middle class children's literature, for it was the middle classes who from the Industrial Revolution onwards gained the time to protect and prolong the space which is childhood.

The result is often a situation in which adults revert to childlike behaviour, uncommitted and fantasy driven, and children and adults may become rivals, bidding for the same space; eg single parent leaves child alone and goes on holiday. A society which is disabled in its ability to make choices will produce childish adults who in turn do badly at nurturing children, because they are not secure in their adult freedoms. Choice in our whole society is more varied and more pressured than ever before, often spilling out into a cycle of violence and powerlessness where the powerless, childish male adult abuses still more powerless woman, and she the still more powerless child; need for feminist analysis of cycles of violence and powerlessness,

and work on male self-perception. Often the assertion of right becomes a less than adult claim to access to an open market – an assertion of the right to compete.

If children are to be allowed to be children, we need to ask what prevents adults being adults. Nouwen on Prodigal Son – it is easy to be the younger son; but do we want to be the older son, the father?

Our society claims to maximise choice. But take schools. Parental choice is everything. Sounds good – but which parents choose the 'failing' schools? Choice is competitive; those who choose remove choice from the others. Everyone competes in a market, schools and parents alike. And effectively the language of choice sets aside questions about our corporate responsibility to induct children into a social environment with common values; and masks the morality of an unseemly scramble for a share of limited resources. Is competition the best framework for the moral education on which a society depends? Or is it a system whose methods already communicate the moral message of conflict and rivalry, which covers up the truth that choice for one group is preserved at the cost of the freedom of others? So even in education choice reduces us from agents to consumers. Or take not schools but the right to abortion – 'choice' turns out to mean the freedom to protect your own interests at the expense of other makers of choice (the child, the father).

The language of selfhood has to be learned as we grow. Children have to be equipped to exercise power, and this can only happen if they are not simultaneously treated as subjects who have it already. The reluctance to think about nurture and the learning of choice is fundamentally a reluctance to think about the role of time in the formation of identities. We live in a society which suggests that identities can be purchased and discarded; but people are formed in both biology and psychology by the passage of time. A world of timeless consuming egos is a social and philosophical shambles.

Education is suffering a steady attrition of resources and imagination, is under pressure to give priority to narrowly functional concerns; it is treated politically as a consumer good to be marketed to parents or students. The protection of the imaginative space of childhood needs a background of security, adult availability and consistency. Instead we offer a shifting environment of divorce. Conciliation services help; but we need a process which will challenge the sovereignty of individual will, so that a potentially endless spiral of competitive struggle is checked and negotiation becomes possible.

2. Charity

Middle Ages – universe is a system of cross-references, resemblances and continuities. Charity meant Christian love, that which binds people together in context of relationship with God. Sense of integration, belonging more widely than own natural loyalties based on kinship or affiliations of interest; the worshipping community. It was secured by public festivals, especially Corpus Christi; mystery plays, the procession of the sacrament of Christ's body, the history of God's dealings with the world. This charity offers the opportunity for suspending relationships characterised by competition and rivalry. It is like a game; and games are unproductive. The point of the game is not concrete reward but participation; in contrast to social activity outside the framework of charity, which is characterised by rivalry for limited goods. It's to do with conversation.

We no longer do this. We can't play in this way. When we play, play is loaded with the hopes and terrors of non-play. Our play (sport) is competitive, it's what professional others do. They win not just in terms of the game, but in terms of the rewards that publicity confers, the 'goods' that go with celebrity.
Or take monarchy. Monarchy used to be part of the social game, a ceremonial representation of social cohesion; monarch as icon. Then they became, here since Victorian age, an icon of ordinary secular and familial life instead – they are now meant to be publicly what everyone else is privately; hence the interest in the Royal *family*. But they turn out to be just that, depression divorce and all. When Diana died there was a public call for the return to the ceremonial role; Queen required to be in London symbolically summing up the grief of her people. What we saw then was a potent lament for lost sacredness. The lost icon was not just Diana; it was a mythology of social cohesion around anointed authority and mystery.

Where does charity linger in our society? Dance culture, perhaps – the rave. The offer is to become no one in particular, attractive to those who've not managed to shape much of an identity in other ways, by sexual bonding and entry into a lifetime's job. It offers a mix of tribalism and a quest for anonymity. With it goes an under-25s politics of charity – centred around one-off issues such as veal calves and bypasses. But it often ends up as a politics of extended childhood, with no real negotiations. A politics based on charity, in sense of egalitarian transcendence, non-competitive communion, etc, fails to be a politics at all, because it fails to deal with the conflicts of interest and desire, the unavoidability of loss, which the non-charitable world habitually deals with. But as the institutions and rituals of charity decay, we lose the controls on rivalry and

give way to the picture of social life as primarily conflictual. More and more people are excluded from decisions and are left with no stake in their social environment.

Language is a part of charity. Le Guin distinguishes between 'father tongue' – the language of getting things done, the language of analysis – and 'mother tongue' – the language of conversation, of network, exchange. Philosophy of government in the 80s was based on a minimalist picture of the state as a mechanism for getting things done; and a strong commitment to family values, the expression of kinship bonds – with not much in between. State is detached from local concerns; and a whole structure of rights and claims is spawned as people try to protect their interests in the hinterland between the state and the kinship group.

One thing that should live in the hinterland is the arts. We should be aware that the processes of art as well as its content enlarge the imagination of social belonging by insisting on patterns of relation drastically different from those that prevail in a context where goods are competed for. Public subsidy of the arts recognises this.
Another is education. A good educational institution would be one in which conversation flourished, where activities were fostered that drew students away from competition as the norm. Competition is *not* the sole guarantor of excellence; cp drama. Competitiveness erodes other kinds or learning that occur through particular sorts of process. We should foster collaborative creation. No use talking about communicating 'values' if the whole style and pace of an institution allow no room for understanding the experiences of learning in their diversity; or if the institution moves more and more towards an understanding of learning as training, or if it sees its job as the anxious passing on of information and skills at the expense of reflection.

Where charity is eroded, so is the freedom to question the self and challenge the mythology of desire. Conversational models of social existence are withered or marginalised; and social experience in the acquisitive-competitive mode corrupts our awareness of our selves.

3. Remorse

We no longer say sorry, specially in politics; we get a combination of unaccountable behaviour and individual scandals, all pounced on by the press. Who do politicians answer to? To the imaginary public created by professional image-makers, the iconographers of the media culture. Failure is failure to sustain a visible style, a particular kind of presence, and reversals of policy are to do with assessments of gains and losses in these elusive currencies of style or presence. Individual scandal gets measured here, not in any moral court. Clinton – the losses that matter are losses to an image, and these are what have to be calculated before the way forward is planned. And so one of our major cultural bereavements is remorse. Related to loss of a sense of honour and shame. If you lose honour and shame, you adopt the assumption that what secures my identity is the exercise of my will, the resources of my individual identity. And then you base everything on choice; or by definition for some, on lack of choice. An inner life which is centred in itself rather than on the self's existence in others becomes just another production. Point is that my publicly identifiable history does not belong just to me; I can't claim it and rewrite it just because I want to. Denial, claim to be victims all makes healing impossible. But remorse makes us vulnerable, and it makes us internalise what we have been in the eyes of others. It is a confession of weakness, it opens the question of reparation. It locates identity in time. It isn't so much a confession of guilt as admission that we are real in the language and narrative of others and not only in a privately scripted and controlled story. Remorse has to do with finding the self in the other.

Inhibiting factors in expressing remorse : the language of right and claim. Responsibility means liability, and the victim is then a competitor instead of a partner in the work of restoring thinking. Tribunals where we discuss right and claim can't restore thinking – Rwanda? N Ireland? Where then is public morality? Being a victim is becoming the essence of moral presence in our society. But to settle for being a victim is to say that my identity is buried and static, not something for which or in which I labour; victim and oppressor feel secure because they keep control of their identities (denying responsibility) - but are both denied healing. Look at S Africa, where so much is left unresolved by failure to relinquish the easy and fixed roles of oppressor and victim. Or Holocaust, where we tend to either identify with the victims or ask ourselves in anguish if we could have done this, but where perhaps we should ask, could we have allowed this to be carried out? There is an alienation between public and private goodness, law and morality, which leaves us with no vocabulary for thinking about good and evil in the public, political sphere. We are relieved, because we can't say who is responsible. But we do avoid the risk and powerlessness of

remorse, where forgiveness can be asked for but may not be given, compensation may be demanded by those who wish to see themselves as victims rather than to embark together on reconstruction.

What works against all this? Comedy, satire. News presentations - our media takes for granted that information means a succession of unrelated complex images; the flickering image of modern media communication represents a powerful bid to define what counts as knowledge. It leaves little room for irony, imagination, sense of a slow unfolding of the consequences of acts and choices. And so we come back to time. We are not timeless deciding mechanisms with an abstract self that as no life in the lives of others. The self can be formed only in time and relational space, in the uncertainties of language and negotiation – this kind of self is what was once called the soul.

4. Lost souls

The postmodern self thinks it can invent itself. It can't: what I want now and how I feel now and what I am capable of inventing are all grounded in language and culture. What I feel is structured by how I have learned to talk; what I want is what I picture to myself in the images I have learned to form. The chosen self is no less formed by language and culture than the traditional model of a continuous and reflective self.

Every telling of the self is a retelling, and the act of telling changes what can be told next time, just because it is an act. The self lives and moves only in acts of telling, in the time taken to set out and articulate a memory, the time that is a kind of representation of the time my material and mental life has taken, the time that has brought me here. We don't notice it, but we are making a self by constructing a story that is always being retold. What makes us notice it? Two things: frustration and love.

Frustration means not conflict, but not having. I desire peace, I desire to be at home with myself; but the edge and energy of the desire comes from the knowledge that I am in fact dispersed in a multiplicity of unstable feelings and changing relationships. The self I know is not at one with itself, but always moving and changing, and we recognise it whenever there is a gap between desire and reality. I can only be where I am by recognising that there is no fixed place where I am innocently and timelessly alone and incorrupt; and the recognition of how I negotiate is what gives me the material for a telling of my self. The self is itself only in the act of self-questioning; we develop not by escaping or resolving conflicts but by deepening them.

It follows that one of the most powerful enemies of the self will always be anything that encourages us to imagine an environment without friction [which is what our culture spends all its time doing; instant gratification and quick fixes is what we are all about]. Steiner – no one has ever learned or achieved anything worth having without being stretched beyond themselves, till their bones crack. We find enemies of the self in styles and fictions that erode difficulty.

Self? Soul? Subject? Needleman – Christian doctrine is meaningless in a context where we have no idea of what sense of self such teaching is addressed to. The soul is what happens when we attend to the moment of self-questioning by holding on to the difficulty we are facing. Not dissimilar from psychoanalytic thinking which regards the analytical relationship as a place for planned frustration – patient expresses the needs, but analyst won't meet them. The self is what comes to birth in the process of experiencing frustrated desire. My wholeness is a matter of recognising the error in the picture of a buried self whose needs are met once they've been brought to light; instead, I come to see that I cannot fail to be involved in incompletion – that no thing completes me. My health is in the recognition that I exist in time (change) and language (exchange). Only works if the analyst resists the pressure to become necessary to the patient.
It follows that the world is such that no thing will give the self a rounded and finished identity; and that the self is dependent on the existence of the Other.

Love is not just the experience of desiring or being desired, or the obsessional preoccupation with another, but the moment of acknowledged conviction, shared by 2 people, that each is accepted, given time and room, treated not as an object of desire alone but as a focus for attention and fascination. In love, what prevents fantasies of wholeness and gratification is the need to go on discovering the other as well as to have the other as a listening presence for my own self-discovery. AS Byatt – 'a kind of storytelling that makes you coherent is part of falling in love'. A sort of naïve pouring out of feeling and memory goes with an equally naïve absorption in the other's difference and need. Love offers the promise that I have a solidity and

complexity that demands time to be taken in exploring it, a promise of being shown to myself in ways I couldn't have realised for myself. In simple terms, I am interesting. But how and why can be discovered only by listening, somewhere in between egotism and self-denial. It is an unstable state: I may mistrust the other's capacity to go on being interested when faced with my mediocrity, and cut back or edit what I say (egotism end); I may lose the ability to see myself as solid, and get my self-worth mixed up with the other, allowing myself to be invaded or exploited (self-denial end). It can produce strong anxiety made up of both longing and fear. But when love manages to escape obsession, terror and passionate hunger as its dominant modes, it is because it is grounded in the knowledge that I can be the cause of joy to another in virtue of something more than the capacity to meet their needs. It has a gratuitousness about it.

If you want frustration to be removed and love to satisfy – ie if what you want is possession/gratification - then you lose what he now wants to call the soul. This is because it is only in *relation* that the soul can exist; it isn't an immaterial and individual substance, as in early modern philosophy, but a whole way of speaking, presenting and uttering the self which supposes *relation* as the ground that gives the self room to exist. Neither therapy nor love can be reduced to a transaction between two desiring egos; there is always something that is gift - and for a Christian the source of the gift is God. The models we have inherited do not allow us to think through what it might be to be alive and concrete only 'in' another, as we become aware of when we meet frustration and when we fall in love. Our experience of being in language and in time invites us to think through what it might be to be alive and concrete only in another; but we don't do it. Postmodernity argues for the self as a 'site' on which speech, power, desire play themselves out. The result is often addiction; and a loss of the codes which make it possible to relate securely to others – codes of hospitality, courtesy, sexuality. But these codes were not arbitrary; they were part of a mesh of ways of seeing the self in relation to others. Violence and abuse is often the result of the loss. Other trends: Why the cult of the body/sexual experience? Why the desire to make animals seem human? Why the subject in search of an audience, prepared to be self-obsessive on a chat show? Why the endless search for therapy (not a problem that it's available, only a problem that we don't know what it's for)? Because we have lost our relationship with the other, and we don't know what we're looking for.

Lost souls – that is what the lost icons point to. The skills have been lost of being present for and in another, and what remains is mistrust and violence. Souls occur when trust of a certain kind occurs, the trust implied in the invitation of the perpetually absent Other. If it makes sense to imagine the absent Other as analogous to the giver of a gift, then it makes sense to give a religious construction. Contrast here between the Buddhist and Christian answers. The lost icons of the book have been clusters of convention and imagination, images of possible lives or modes of life, possible positions to occupy in a world that is inexorably one of time and loss. But the discussion has hinted more and more at a single focal area of lost imagination: the lost soul. And this loss, he suggests, is linked with the loss of what is encoded in the actual icons of Christian tradition and usage – the Other who does not compete, with whom I can't bargain, the Other beyond violence, the regard that will not be evaded or deflected, yet has and seeks no advantage. What has been culturally lost : the sense of being educated into adult choice, the possibility of social miracle, the possibility of letting go of a possessed and defended image of the moral self – all this will remain lost without a recovered confidence in the therapeutic Other.