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<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00332920600998353>

The God of Missing Articles

By Pamela Freundl Kirst, Ph.D.

"Goma is a vindictive god," my sister declares across the miles between Los Angeles and San Francisco. She is speaking of the God of Missing Articles, a god she, herself, has named. Who among us, though, does not know of him? He is a thief.

"He returns something, and makes off with something else," she continues. How true, I reflect. I have found the metronome at last (after months of searching), the excuse for my ebullient call to her, and lost my keys (for the moment only, I trust).

When I repeat her wisdom to a friend, he observes, "Scratch a Catholic, find a Pagan." He goes on to tell tales of a German grandmother with a cellar full of ritual folklore, sturdy bedrock for an overlay of Christian propriety.

Scratch a Protestant, find a Pagan, I realize. Scratch the surface, find the deeper layers. Scratch the surface and stare down into the world of the gods.

Whatever his origins, I am interested in Goma and his behavior. He is a Trickster, I am certain, and he is male. He delights in teasing the goddess of the hearth. (Perhaps these are aspects of Hermes and Hestia, their cooperative relationship disrupted by the vicissitudes of modern life.) He upsets rather than supports smooth domestic functioning. Not vindictive, I would argue, so much as mischievous and annoying.

Recently, two important items (in addition to the metronome) returned to me following lengthy absences. One was a black tank top missing for many months. The second, a black t-shirt I had despaired of ever finding, surfaced following a year-long disappearance.

The tank top appeared in a drawer, spit out by a black hole tired of it. Not quite the drawer where it belonged, but close—a decidedly well-searched drawer. One day, there it was, returned by Goma in a benevolent moment. A gift to meet the summer.

Remarkably, not long after this I found the black t-shirt, scooped at the neck like a leotard--reminding me of a former life as a dancer. There it was, lying quietly on a shelf in my closet buried beneath seldom-worn shimmery stretchy things. I could not believe my eyes. I could not believe my luck! I could not believe Goma's beneficence.

The black t-shirt reminds me of dance and the wonder of movement. Dance was stolen, too, and I have wept bitter tears over this loss. Finding the shirt could mean change is in the air. Maybe dance is in the air.

Sitting here, I know the gods operate in ways both obscure and unpredictable. They are many and they war over the successes and failures of individual humans. Take Odysseus, for instance: while Athena supported him mightily, Poseiden had a big grudge against him and lots of power--the power to nearly do him in several times over, and add years to his journey.

If we could see the entire pantheon in operation in our own lives, it would help make sense of things—the pulls and tugs on our own experience. Their moods, actions, preferences, and rivalries offer so many ways to think of losses and gains; so many ways to make meaning from events. There are many gods to understand and honor as we navigate through life's struggles, big and small.

At the moment, I am sifting through events and whimsically ascribing patterns. Even so, I am reminded of the painful, deeper play of losing and finding. Lose a husband, discover your soul. Lose the capacity to dance, and find humility: the necessity of an entirely new relationship to your body.

Goma, it seems, responds at times, to "letting go;" making peace with the disappearance of something. Deciding, for example, I could live without my scooped-neck black t-shirt, even if I can't quite live without dance.

(I dream of dancing; I dream of searching for my dance clothes; I dream of trying to get my dance clothes on, and finding it an enormous struggle— my tights are wet, and I am trying to drag them onto my legs. Imagine trying to stretch soggy, wet nylon, and pull it onto your legs, fast. In these dreams, it must be done quickly.)

Goma sometimes rewards letting go of attachments. He's a little Zen-like in this. "You see you don't really need this shirt? Here, have it back." Or, to be kinder to Goma, perhaps he is saying: "You see the shirt is just a shirt? Ok. Lesson learned. When you look on that shelf in your closet where you hardly ever look, you will find it. Search through the shimmery stretchy things." Here he speaks through intuition.

But there is nothing Zen-like about his turning around and robbing me of my favorite grey t-shirt. It was charcoal grey and long-sleeved and had just the right amount of cling to be comfortable under things, like sweaters and other shirts. And, it was long enough. (This is momentous. A rare and valuable quality in a shirt. Being uncomfortable with the gap between the top of my jeans and the bottom of most shirts, I long for length.) It was purchased several years ago on sale. I wore it often, under things; two or three times a week even. I loved my grey shirt.

I loved it so much it made me nervous to wash it. I worried. Would it make the journey into laundry basket, washer, dryer, and back to the closet, safely?

My intuition foretold Goma had it in his sights. I could sense his interest. I could feel him lying in wait, ready to pounce.

Sure enough, not long after Goma gave back my tank and black t-shirt, he took the grey one. I have looked everywhere. Even beneath, behind, between and beside the washer and dryer: nonexistent places all furry with lint. I've

looked through my closet, underneath things on hangers, and inside all my sweaters and shirts, even ones that never mingled with the grey shirt.

I have searched, but it is gone.

I am reminded of a book I read, over and over once upon a time, to my child, called *The Blanket* by John Burningham. I love this simply told story of the search for a child's missing blanket. Each family member searches for it, and the places they search are spelled-out and pictured. I even like the Library of Congress summary printed on the back cover. It elevates the tale, clarifying its dramatic structure, much as our dream class taught us to illuminate a dream by finding its bones: the skeleton of dramatic structure. In the end, the child unearths the blanket, near but not quite in its prescribed place of rest. In this story, Goma is outwitted and peace and unity are restored.

But my grey shirt is gone, as is a pair of my son's school pants. With these, as with my grey shirt, there is little reason to suppose they have gone missing anywhere other than inside our house. My son is much too young (or old) to be leaving his pants elsewhere by accident. (And the reverse is true for me: I am too old, or too young--to have taken off my shirt in a burst of passion or forgetfulness, and left it behind.)

The missing-pants phenomena may involve a god or two in addition to Goma. Friends who cooperate in mischief-making, stacking frustration upon frustration on the unwary human.

A goal toward which I strive with mighty effort is providing my son with enough clothes to get him through a week of school (or life) without my doing laundry more than once or twice. But there are never "enough" clothes (particularly pants) of the right color/style/fit (insert your own choice here) to achieve this end. And the moment I gleefully anticipate we might get through a week without a tearful battle over unwashed clothes, or a frantic late night wash-dry binge, Goma joins his companions in sartorial sabotage and homemaker harassment and steals a pair of my son's pants. They are whisked away and hidden.

The whisking action verges on the miraculous, if annoying trouble-making qualifies as a miracle. It is peculiarly miraculous that we have lost two rash guards (those swim-shirt things) while traveling in the car between Ventura and Los Angeles—on two separate trips, returning from two different locations. How Goma managed to remove them from a moving car is a mystery, indeed.

Once I had a housekeeper who believed the trick to finding a lost object was to give up looking for it. Her Paganism was not quite Zen, though. The twist here is she believed the desired lost object emerged only when searching for something else gone missing.

Admittedly, this approach works at times. Perhaps it happens like this: Goma, distracted by the new search, relaxes his guard and the old lost object slips his mind and grip. He has already been propitiated with a new lost object, you will notice. The "taking" clause has been fulfilled.

Many things vanish other than clothes. Papers, especially bills; important notes, written on any available scrap of paper in an emergency; school reports and other completed homework; these are delicious tidbits for Goma. Keys, cell phones, books, shoes, socks, clarinet reeds and music, are all Goma's delights. Big things fall outside his realm, however. Good sense, friends, lovers, peace of mind, security: losses such as these are not Goma's province. Nor are husbands and souls, for that matter.

Goma, though, plays a role in preparing us for these larger losses. Outside Goma's territory, are losses big and painful. Losses so wounding, so wrenching, we are ripped apart by them; dismembered.

We reconstitute—all the while fearing we will not--gathering as many pieces as we can, and allowing them to be reassembled and reworked. Only then can we bear the loss. Only then can we comprehend what has departed, and what has not. As we do this, we are mourning the loss, mourning all that is missing. Undergoing this process we are unalterably changed.

None of us is spared loss. We may turn our faces away, wanting not to see, but it is there. The older I grow, the more I see how loss visits each of us--like death--a specter on the wall; a shadow in our lives.

Loss on this scale is a demanding teacher. Heartbroken and alone, we hope to find ourselves whole enough to bear the unbearable. If we are blessed, we find there is more to us than we ever would have guessed--more life, more depth, more possibility, more resources. The psyche, leaned into, supports and gives back. The psyche, attended, transforms.

Less demanding, Goma plays with a lighter hand; educates through small thefts and minor chaos. We get to practice in his realm. Through his lessons we learn the rhythms and pangs of loss. We learn about holding on and letting go. We experience the frustration, the absence of control, the sinking sensation accompanying the recognition that something is missing. Or the rising pleasure and relief when it turns up again (the cell phone rather quickly discovered in a different purse pocket--not left behind in Target, after all.)

Sometimes, when we are lucky, a creative impulse moves into the empty place of loss. We invent a way to "make do" that delights--fills the empty space, and carries us across the void. We discover a way through or around the space the lost object has vacated. A solution comes; we improvise and move on. We decide, for example, clean clothes are less of a necessity than a good night's sleep for all concerned, and turn a blind eye to spots and mud. Or buy 4 brightly-colored, very long tank tops and tuck them under all manner of shirts and sweaters, enjoying the colors peering from necklines and below the hems of other shirts. In so doing, we collect the energy of the small loss, reclaiming what we had given away. Thus, we, ourselves, enlarge. We invent living with loss, creating a present, imagining a future.

We learn in these minor daily lessons, how buried within any loss there is some kind of gain. We come to accept and trust this archetypal truth. We can

be certain of the coexistence of these opposites. Where there is one there is the other, despite our best-laid plans. But there it is, like it or not. And we may very well not like it.

There it is: the foundation of the opposites; the cadence of losing and finding; and the chaos and invention that swirl around and through loss and gain, binding them together.

We learn to seek, or at least consider, the meaning in the loss. Goma is a small god, but he serves a big purpose. He urges us to let go and notice how small we are in the face of what is big beneath our lives: the gods who really run the show. Goma whispers to us, at all the wrong moments--or so it seems--the deeper truths of life.

In the disarray Goma causes we notice how little control we truly have. We notice the deeper, soulful timbre giving resonance to life. In the rhythmic pulsing there is the certainty of change; coming and going; loss and gain.

We notice we survive, and may even thrive in the new place where we've been thrust, shirtless.

We lose and search and sometimes find. Although our searching matters profoundly, we need to open our minds and hearts to what turns up in the search--even when what we find isn't at all what we'd hoped; isn't at all what we thought we'd lost.

It is easier, though, to be objective about loss in the abstract. Right now, I would like my grey shirt back. I miss its usefulness and known comfort.

Wisdom is on the horizon, though. I know it's not about the shirt.

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