



ST. ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

LENTEN STUDY GUIDE

Based on Mark Nepo's
As Far As the Heart Can See

Lent 2020

Lenten Study Guide 2020

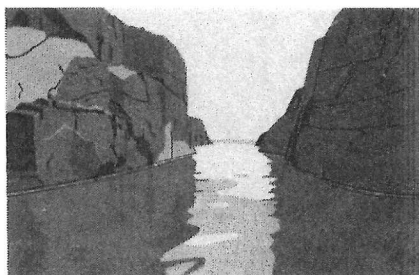
Based on Mark Nepo's
As Far As The Heart Can See

This Lenten Study Guide is divided into four sections 1) On and Off the Path, 2) The Life of Obstacles, 3) Suffering and Loving the World, and 4) The Invitation to Grow.

Each section is comprised of selected short stories from Mark Nepo's *As Far As The Heart Can See*, and a Biblical story further exploring the theme of the section. Following each short story, you will find a heading titled *Journal Questions*. These questions are meant to help you reflect upon the story and the theme of the section. You do not need to journal, but you are welcome to if you so desire. Likewise, following each Biblical story, you will find similar reflection questions. Again, these are meant to help you put the story in the context of the theme of the section. Further, the facilitators of each group will be using, in part, the "table questions" referenced in section one.

Stories are at the heart of the Gospel. Stories are what connect us. Let us journey together this Lent through story.

On and Off the Path



*The world is not comprehensible,
but it is embraceable.*

—Martin Buber



Staying Close

SINCE EVERYTHING IS SACRED, staying close to what is sacred is a matter of presence and attention more than travel to some secret place. In essence, staying close is a pilgrimage to the heart of where we are. Since it is we who lose our directness of living, our task is often to restore that freshness of being alive.

Stories help us. They are teachers. They are medicine. They keep us connected to what matters. They keep us awake. This has always been true. And so, *As Far As the Heart Can See* is a book of stories and parables about staying awake and staying close. Each story has a life of its own that simply used me to become known again in the world. And each has some residue of my life on earth, for no story can come through without some taste of the teller.

The idea to assemble these stories and parables came from the workshops and retreats I have been blessed to guide around North

America and abroad. Regardless of the various reasons to gather, all the workshops have been about staying close to what is sacred. Like roots finding water, we always wind up moving toward what sustains us. Many of my readers have kindly asked for these stories, and it was my wife, Susan, who urged me to make them available in such an interactive way. Putting them together has taught me even more about staying close.

Some of these stories are personal. Some have come from dreams. Some have knocked on the door of my consciousness so persistently that I had no choice but to create names and contexts for their pleas. Quite simply and with wonder at what I've found, I am passing them on. They have all been teachers and continue to be so. I invite you to listen to them, to be with them, and to keep telling them. I hope they will evolve and shape-shift for being in your hands. For every story has in its marrow the accumulated voice of all of its tellers and listeners. Ultimately, I hope they will evoke your own stories and your own sense of what is sacred. I hope something here will lead you to ask others about their stories.

The truth is that long before disciplines of knowledge were formed, long before degree programs were certified, the quandaries of living were addressed and carried forward in pouches of wisdom we call stories. This is how a tribe and its elders would pack their questions and pass on their meaning, as if to say, "We have done all we can with this. Now it is your turn."

We often need to tell our stories over and over, not because we are forgetful or compulsive, but because their meaning is too great to be digested in any one telling. So we recount them, again and

again, till we can absorb their meaning and learn to love each other on the way.

I have always been compelled by stories. Like most people, I started out as a witness, retelling the episodes of life that would unfold around me. But as life will do over time, what seems so far away and irrelevant is slowly brought very near; and up close, we discover it is essential. In this way, I have come to realize that we are *in* stories more than outside them. We are more like fish in the stream than fishermen sitting in the grass. More like clay formed in the fire than potters poking at the embers. We are singers waiting to be birthed by a song.

This book then is an invitation to be in relationship with deep and life-giving material. The stories gathered here carry seeds of our humanness. They delve into the courage to listen to your own life, the gift of vulnerability, the willingness to experiment and explore your own voice, the abiding commitment to respect your own journey and the journeys of others, and the life skill of working with what we are given. No experience is required, just a Beginner's Mind and Heart. And the willingness to hear one story and tell another. A willingness to keep listening and trying.

How to Use This Book

There is no need to read this book sequentially. You can discover these stories one at a time, like shells along a shore, or string them together as you would beads on a necklace. It is more important to

stay in relationship with them. Discuss them with a friend or a colleague or a child or an elder. Leave them for strangers. If moved, sing them to the moon.

After each story, you will find a set of questions, offered to initiate various forms of conversation: questions to reflect on, to journal with and dialogue with, questions to bring back into your life. I am indebted to my friends for the idea of Table Questions. One day after dinner, Jill blurted out “Table Question!” and began to wonder out loud about something that life had brought her. Two hours later, we were deep in sharing stories and learning even more about each other. From that night, every meal with friends is accompanied by a table question. In response, we roll up our sleeves and drop our stories into the sea of life, like oars that bring us a few strokes along.

As with the stories, use the questions you are drawn to. They are not meant to be sequential, but a series of starting points. They are also interchangeable: questions to journal with can be table questions for conversation and the other way around. If any of these stories or questions can be kindling for some light still out of view, ignite them. If you are stirred by your own stories and questions, I invite you to ignore the ones I’ve offered.

It doesn’t matter how, but if you can rub the pulse of life hidden in these stories and your own, even briefly, like a genie’s lamp, the sense of what is sacred will show its magic and usefulness. As sheet music is a riddle until played, the stories we carry and stumble through wait to be held and listened to. For beneath all of life’s difficulties, we are brought alive and kept alive by holding and listening.

We all have a need for stories that, when heard and retold, reveal stories within stories which bring us, if awake enough, to the one song at the heart of all stories. I'll meet you there.

Want to hear a story?



Looking and Seeing

WE OFTEN LOOK BUT DON'T SEE until something shifts how we experience the world. Then, the basic habit of our understanding is altered: shattered or expanded, broken apart or open, turned upside down or reduced to the beginning. We call this a paradigm shift. We dread and yet need these unexpected moments to return us to the hidden wholeness in which all things are connected. However, these shifts are not something we can teach, but only lift up and share, only understand better over time.

During a critical time in my cancer journey, I was plagued with deciding the next course of treatment. All the options seemed difficult. We had an unusual winter storm that October. While agonizing over what to do next, I remember watching as the heavy storm brought all the colorful trees down. The leaves, no matter how brilliant, weighed the trees down. If the leaves had let go, the snow would have left the trees standing. This was a stark paradigm shift

for me. At a crucial time, it helped me to see holding on and letting go differently.

In the movie *Phenomenon* (1996), the main character has a garden that is pestered by a rabbit eating all his vegetables, no matter what kind of fence he constructs. One night, he wakes to a paradigm shift and sees it all differently. He rushes out under the night sky and opens the gate to his garden and waits. Sure enough, the rabbit wasn't trying to get in. It was trying to get out.

The story of St. Paul is an archetype of a paradigm shift. Saul was a persecutor of early Christians until a moment of revelation knocked him off his horse, and he rose as Paul, a devout follower of Jesus. We could say that the experience of undergoing a paradigm shift is like getting knocked off our horse.

Another example is Sir Isaac Newton's legendary experience with an apple falling on his head and how that opened him to the understanding of gravity. So often, as with Newton, we are led or forced to see anew what already exists. Our very personal awakenings are much like this—sudden and perplexing experiences that restore our original sense of being alive.

How we see matters. In truth, our ability to see with our mind and heart is the only window we have on life. It reminds me of my dear grandmother in Kingsbrook Medical Center in Brooklyn at the age of ninety-four. Upon being told on a beautiful afternoon that what she thought was a gray day was just a dirty window, she shrugged and said, "Got a dirty eye, see a dirty world."

Perhaps the work of love is to help each other clean our minds and hearts so we don't keep seeing a dirty world. Perhaps the work

of friendship is to help each other break the habits of mind that prevent us from seeing at all. The stories in this section speak to such shifts in perception and to the friendships we encounter as we stumble on and off the path.

The Cyclist



ON THE DAY OF THE RACE, he waited with the others and felt that life was waiting in the hills. He couldn't quite say why, but a blessing was about to happen. As the gun went off, he could hear the rush of all the racers breathing—like young horses in the morning.

He had trained for months, up and down the sloping hills, cutting off seconds by wearing less and leaning into curves. His legs were shanks of muscle. He often said, "It's the closest thing to flying I know."

On the second hill, the line thinned, and he was near the front. They were slipping through the land like arcs of light riding through the veins of the world. By now, he was in the lead. As he swept toward the wetlands, he was gaining time when a great blue heron took off right in front of him, its massive, timeless wings opening just in front of his handlebars.

Its shadow covered him and seemed to open something he'd been chasing. The others were pumping closer, but he just stopped and stood there, straddling his bike, staring at what the great blue had opened by cutting through the sky.

In years to come, others would ask, "What cost you the race?" Wherever he was, he'd always look south, and once in a while, he'd say, "I didn't lose the race—I left it."



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *Tell the story of a time when your hard work had an unexpected outcome and what you learned from that experience.*

About to Leave the Earth



WE WERE WAITING IN THE AIRPORT FOOD COURT. It was early, and he was sitting by himself stirring his coffee. I could hear the wooden stick against the Styrofoam. He had a hitch of sudden pain. It was then I saw the growth like a softball on his right shoulder. There were only a few of us, waiting for security, trying to wake up before being carried from the earth.

Maybe it was being half-conscious, almost removed for a while from our lives, quietly chewing like chipmunks before dawn. But he started telling his story as if we all knew each other. He was dying, and it only seemed frightening when he kept it to himself, "The damn thing is too close to my spine to operate, so I've just got to wait." Then he laughed, "But hey, we've had a lot a' practice at waitin' eh?"

He'd pulled back the curtain between us. Now we were warming each other around the fire, the one that never goes out, the one kept going by the pain we throw into it. A kind flight attendant on her

way to Japan moved closer, “You just stay positive, sweetheart, that’s what my Daddy used to say.”

I felt my own history of cancer, of bursting through the pretense that we’re strangers. The flight attendant left, and I wanted to speak to him, to tell him that either way he’s already aglow. My heart was pounding. Then his flight was called. He was startled, and I knew, recognized, that he heard the call, for a second, as the one into his doctor’s office when he was diagnosed, and then, as the one that brought him into chemo. He went more urgently than he had to and left a small bag.

I grabbed it and ran after him, tapped him on his other shoulder, and began to confess, “I too—” He dropped his shoulders, the one with the tumor making him look like Atlas. He took my hand and comforted me, uttering, “I know.”



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *Describe a time when you felt the urge to share something personal with a stranger and didn't. What would you have said, if you could?*
- *In your opinion, are strangers just friends who don't yet know each other? Or do we carry genuine differences that keep us apart?*
- *How do you decide whether to share with someone you don't know?*

Moses Has Trouble with God's Instructions



*About to die, Moses wants to return to the living,
then recalls, after retrieving the Tablets the second time,
his trouble with God's instructions for how
to make the candlestick holy.*

IT SEEMS ODD. THE THINGS I REMEMBER MOST are circumstances of my deep forgetting. When the Tabernacle was near completion, I climbed the Mount for Your instructions. You were quite specific. You even showed me how to hold, how to bless, how to maintain. I focused on every flash of light You washed across my brain.

But as I walked back down the mountain, as I saw the people milling, as I heard them discuss their problems—their squabbles of whose children were aging better, whose parents acted younger,

whose lovers were more loving in more imaginative ways—I forgot how to build.

I stopped and cleared things out, certain it would all re-enter. Nothing. Blank. Gone. I was enraged. I couldn't pull a corner of its image. The carrier was barren. I had no choice. I stomped around, kept on stalling, but finally started up again.

This time, You went more slowly. I repeated each part deeply, put every other issue of my life in the basin. I descended to the world again, repeating Your instructions to the rhythm of my descending. I made it to the marketplace where a young woman was washing clothes. The sun enlarged her bosom and splashed her arms yellow. I found her sudden and alluring. I carried on and heard her clothes slosh against the stone. Then I shut my sense and let her go to nothing. But she had rinsed all Your instructions.

Again, I was just empty. I rushed back to find her. Of course, she'd vanished. I calmed, tried not to panic, closed my eyes, began to imagine the slow descending, the deep repeating. Not a trace! Twice more, for different reasons, the same thing happened. No matter what I tried, it escaped me. I couldn't properly seize the idea, could not form a clear conception.

There are only two conclusions: The thing remembered will choose itself its channel of remembering. The light will choose the day, the heart will choose the special words or warmth with which they're said. But some things defy construction, defy being anchored in the world: the light refuses to be carried, the flame itself is brilliant when using up the stick.



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *What is the difference between things that remain unknowable, such as why there is suffering, and things that are deeply knowable, such as our truest sense of self?*
 - *Describe one thing that is unknowable for you and one thing that is deeply knowable.*
 - *Why is it hard to keep track of what we know inside?*
-

The Work of the Worm



THE STORY IS TOLD by a member of the Ojibway tribe that the Great Spirit had trouble keeping the world together, when a little worm said he could help. Knowing that the secret of life lived in everything, the Great Spirit welcomed the little worm's help. So the Great Spirit said, "Help me little worm," and the little worm slowly spun its barely seeable silk, connecting all of creation with a delicate web. The Great Spirit smiled, and Its smile cast a light across the earth, making the web of connection briefly visible. The Great Spirit marveled at the little worm's industrious gift. For the worm was not clever or brilliant, but simply devoted to being and doing what it was put here to do: to inch through the earth, spinning from its guts a fine thread that holds everything together. And so the Great Spirit said to the little worm, "You have saved us little worm not by being great or bold, but by staying true to your own nature. I will let you live forever."

The little worm was stunned and somewhat frightened. The Great Spirit saw this, "Don't you want to live forever?" The little worm inched closer, "Oh Father, the earth is big enough to cross. I fear so many years if I can't grow." The Great Spirit smiled again at the wisdom of one of Its smallest creatures.

"Very well, little worm, I will only let you *grow* into forever. I will give you the ability to spin this precious thread that connects everything around yourself. When you can enclose yourself within that web and quiet your urge to inch and squirm away, you will emerge after a time with the thinnest of wings full of color. Then you will know the lightness of being that I know." The little worm bowed and began to search for a leaf on which to grow. And this is how the Great Spirit enabled the worm to spin a cocoon and from its quietude become a butterfly.

The story tells us that everything in Creation is connected, and that what holds it all together comes from the humble work of living on earth, spinning from our guts a fine thread that holds everything together. It tells us that the experience of eternity is possible, if we immerse ourselves firsthand in the barely seeable web of connections.

Humbly, like a little worm, it is in us to work our experience—our pain and frustration and confusion and wonder—into threads of silk. Freely, it is our choice to first connect everything with our experience; and then, to make a cocoon of those connections; and third, to enter that cocoon of experience—the way a Native American sweats in his lodge, the way a yogi holds his third eye, the way a monk maintains his vow of silence. The story tells us that if we still

ourselves long enough within the web of all there is, we will eventually come to know the lightness of God's being.



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *Describe three significant experiences of the last year and explore how they might be connected.*
- *What are they trying to say to you about the nature of life and where you are in your journey?*

With Great Effort



THERE WAS A HUGE STONE BETWEEN THEM. For a while, each thought the other had brought it, but it was there long before them. Neither could budge it, but together they could rock it a little.

So, with great effort, they rocked it enough to create a dark space between the stone and the earth it had packed for so many years. They could have walked away, but somehow they knew: if they did, it would always be between them. So they kept rocking and wedging, believing there would be a tipping point.

And on the third morning, the huge stone, like the heaviest of tongues, finally rolled over with a thud they could feel in their throats, its underside dark with clumps of soil and broken roots. In its unearthed cavity, worms and bugs scurried from the light. Breathing heavily, they stared at the huge unearthed thing and smiled.

Now they began to roll it enough to fit a broken bough beneath it. This, too, took enormous effort. But very slowly, they were able to lift

the heavy thing between them, roll it slightly on a branch of a dead tree, and do it again. And again. And again. This work went so slow, it seemed a way of life. But in this way, they moved the unearthed thing across a field to the mouth of their garden.

It was here that they washed the thing that was between them, but which was there long before them. Here, they washed it clean of clumps of earth and insects hidden in the cracks.

Once clean, they could see the veins in the stone hidden for so long. They were really quite beautiful. So they pressed their tired palms to the veins in the stone and closed their eyes in a form of unexpected prayer.

Then, they rolled the washed unearthed thing one last time and where it landed, they began a path, and this huge thing, which no one before them could move, became the first stone. Though they seldom speak of it, those who hear the story somehow know that this is how what seems immovable becomes a foundation.



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *Tell the story of your own great effort—on your own or with others—and where that led you.*
- *Is there something in your life right now that is asking you to give more effort to it? Describe the situation and what giving more effort here would look like.*

Matthew 15:10-28

¹⁰Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." ¹²Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" ¹³He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." ¹⁵But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." ¹⁶Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding?¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

²¹Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.²²Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

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***Notes:**

Matthew's story of a Canaanite woman follows a controversy with some Pharisees and scribes (Matt. 15:1-9), inviting comparison between the two incidents. Care should be taken not to stereotype these Pharisees and scribes. They should be treated as raising their own questions and not as representing Judaism or even all Pharisees or scribes.

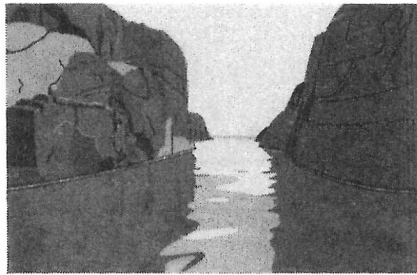
Nevertheless, two points of comparison are significant. In the first incident, people who are socially accepted emphasize external differences and miss matters of the heart, whereas in the second, a woman who is socially marginalized breaks through external differences to claim God's mercy. The comparison produces a startling surprise. In the first incident, Jesus has the punch lines that enlighten his questioners, whereas in the second, the woman has the punch line that alters the way Jesus responds to her.

- Jaw Won Lee, "Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word*, p. 357-361.

Questions for Reflection:

Inside this story and inside our own stories, Jesus does not always conform to what we hope for. How do we respond honestly and reengage our faith when Jesus does not come through for us as we expect?

The Life of Obstacles



*Love is the extremely difficult
realization that something other
than oneself is real.*

—Iris Murdoch



The Life of Obstacles

Pursue the obstacle...

It will set you free.

GANESH IS THE HINDU GOD who is the provider and remover of obstacles. He is typically depicted as an elephant. Ganesh is the lord (*Isha*) of all existing beings (*Gana*). Legend has it that when given the task to race around the universe, Ganesh did not traverse the outer surface of the earth, but simply walked *inwardly* around Shiva and Parvati, his mother and father, who are the source and center of all existence. This is the secret understanding of Ganesh. For all too often, the obstacles we experience are presented as ways to remember that *the inner walk around the source*, not the outer race, is the purpose of living. The obstacles are presented to break our trance with the race and jar us humbly back to the source, and they are often removed once our deeper sense has been restored.

It is important to realize that Ganesh is a god of *embodied* wisdom who knows the life of obstacles of which he is guardian. He is a god because he has *lived through* all the world has to offer, not because he transcends it. Often, he holds in his right hand one of his own tusks, which he broke off in a fit of anger and hurled at the moon. But the moon spit it back, and he carries that broken piece of himself as a reminder of the earthly journey no one can escape.

Often, in living through what the world has to offer, we find ourselves in our own way, stubbornly gripping our own broken tusk—stubborn in what we want, how we see things, how we approach things, and how we respond to things. And so the life of obstacles, or what we perceive as obstacles, is suddenly there to break our stare and return us to what matters. Another name for Ganesh might be God's Timing, through which we are humbled to realize, again and again, that we are not the center but of the center. These stories speak to the life of obstacles that we conjure or find in our way.

A Guide to Rock Climbing



SOMETHING MAKES ME WANT TO CLIMB THIS ROCK, the way I sometimes get the urge to step into traffic or lean over the rail, thirty stories up. Not much is said. I don't resist. I lift my arms, and he snugly knots the rope around my waist, "When I tug, push out and walk right up her back."

I watch him scale the face in perfect rhythm without a rope. He tugs, and I begin sliding my legs in and out of thin cracks, working to hook my hands on small angled juts. Jamming knees and toes, I test and reach with chafed fingers and wonder: *Will the tug burn if I slip? Will the rope cut sharp beneath a rib?*

I can't find a foothold and tremble like a cancelled suicide teetering from the top floor. "Push out—" He is distant. "Push out—" I quiver and stare at this piece of stone, which in years will be worn by the wind from Whiteface over my shoulder. I freeze. My nails go still, no feeling to the knuckle.

I see nothing but small protrusions and this hand-shaped rock leading with its atrophy to my shaking wrist. My soul has rushed to my fingertips, and to let go, to slip, would let it stream like a punctured hose. My feet scramble. I fall and cling to the mass of rock too big to hug.

I am spread, vulnerable. Fear surges electric, forcing me flatter. I scrape a few yards and then the snap, the tug, and I'm a dog shot, hauled in on a leash. I hug tight. My cheek presses the stone. It grows hot from my heaving. I am seven or eight, hit between the legs with a line drive, falling to the street flush, cheek pressed to the asphalt, hearing feet and screen doors.

But the rock face is steep, and I have just lost my soul out my scraped cheek and I am stiffly being reeled in. My palms flatten as they search the stone like fossilized braille and there, just above—the same arm's reach as before—the jut of stone I slipped from. The reach seems longer, but I stretch and stretch till I breathe like a fresco, a naked figure spread on a wall with nothing left to do but reach.



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *Describe a time when you were winded or knocked down—physically, emotionally, or spiritually—and the only way to proceed was to get back up and face the same person, situation, or force that had winded you or knocked you down to begin with. How did this experience affect you?*

The Bridge and the Elephant



IN THE DREAM, I WAS WORKING HARD to finish a bridge to cross some river whose current was strong. It seemed important to get where I was going, though I couldn't put where I was going into words.

Just as I finished the arc of the bridge, an elephant appeared in the water. It was stepping down the middle of the stream. When it was squarely beneath my unfinished bridge, it stopped to douse itself with water. Then it stared at me.

All at once, the sheen of water on its back made me question why I was building a bridge in the first place. It made me question if what I was crossing really needed to be entered. It made me wonder: If I were to enter the stream rather than cross it, would I have a different sense of where I was going?

In the days since the dream, the image of the elephant under the unfinished bridge has made me consider obstacles differently. Now when I stumble before things I don't understand, I try to remember

the elephant dousing itself in the middle of what I thought I had to cross and ask myself: Is the thing in the way something I need to cross or enter? If it's a difficulty involving love or fear, where will I be led by crossing it? Where will I be led by entering it? At each turn, I find myself needing to know: What must I face and what must I bridge? And when are facing and bridging deeply the same?



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *Describe something currently in your way. Consider whether it is something you need to cross or enter.*
 - *Where might crossing this obstacle lead you?*
 - *Where might entering this obstacle lead you?*
-

Abe and Phil



ABE GREER WAS EIGHTY-FOUR. He'd lost his wife, Helen, almost ten years ago to emphysema. Reluctantly, he moved to the Bay Area to be near his children, Phil and Rachel. Rachel was the firstborn. She was a nurse at Pacifica Medical Center and Phil, well, Phil was a disappointment. Abe had wanted his son to become an architect. He thought architecture was a noble profession, a place where function and beauty met. He thought it a useful art, and it was his chief failing in life that he didn't have the aptitude to become an architect himself. But how his son became a reporter was beyond him.

When Phil graduated from San Francisco State, he returned to Brooklyn to gather some things and let his parents know he was going to stay on the west coast. He liked it there. The night before he was to leave, the chasm opened between them again. It happened around dinner. It always did. Abe was buttering his bread, "So, do you have a job?" Phil looked to his mother quickly, as if to say, "Are we

going to start this again?" Helen answered for her son, "He just graduated, Abe. Give him some time." "I'm just asking." He put his knife down hard on his plate, "What kind of life is reporting? You watch. Is that a way to live? Just watching?" They'd had this conversation repeatedly. It only made Phil feel more alone and misunderstood.

So when Helen died, Rachel approached Phil, "We can't let him stay there all by himself." "Why not?" "C'mon Phil." "Well, he can't stay with me. We'll kill each other. You know that." Rachel had inherited her mother's role as peacekeeper, "I know. He can stay with me. I only ask that you help out when you can. I know he's been too hard on you. He doesn't—" Phil didn't want to hear it, "All right. Just don't make excuses for him. He's so self-centered that one life isn't enough. I've always had to live up to the life he wanted. Well, I'm done. I don't wish him any harm, but I'm done. You understand?"

Rachel had married John, a cardiologist, and they had a very sweet boy, Kevin, who, as time would tell, had a stubborn streak that Phil recognized as skipping through the gene pool from his father. And so Abe lived with Rachel and John and Kevin. Abe was lucky to have a nurse for a daughter. Since the onset of his senility, he split his time between Rachel's home and the geriatric unit at Pacifica.

As Phil's inner tensions kept mounting, he had less and less patience for his father's imposing nature, which was at times brutal and unpredictable. Today, Abe was in the midst of a particularly bad episode. Rachel called Phil to stop by the hospital. She met him outside his room, "He's been calling for you. You know what this is like." She sighed, "Just stay back a bit and don't be surprised." They could hear their father bellowing from his bed, "Where is Phil?! I want to

see my son!!” Phil rolled his eyes and tried to muster some resolve as Rachel gave him a kiss, “C’mon, I’ll go with you.”

“Where is Phil?! I want to see my son!!” Phil was amazed at how frail his father looked lying in that bed. There were a few stray hairs zigzagging from his balding head. He’d lost weight in his face, which made his eyes bug out. It made him look mad. Rachel went to one side of his bed, and Phil softly walked to the other. He leaned close and said, “Here I am, Dad.” Abe stared at him blankly. Phil took both his hands and stared back, “I’m your son.”

His father looked to his daughter and barked dismissively, “Who is he?! I want to see Phil!!” Though he knew his father’s condition, this cut Phil deeply. To him, this outburst wasn’t so much the Alzheimer’s speaking, as it was the unmasking of how his father had regarded him for years. Nonetheless, Phil pushed on. He pulled an old photo from his wallet and showed Abe a picture of the two of them, confirming gently, “See, Dad, it’s me—your son.”

His father grabbed the photo and scrutinized their likenesses. For a second, there seemed to be a softness rising in his frazzled face. Phil tried to move into that opening, “I’m your son. See?” But Abe hardened his stare and barked, “I know that! But I want to see Phil! Where’s the *Real* Phil?!” This made Rachel end the visit, “Why don’t you rest now?” “I don’t want to rest! I want the *Real* Phil!!” Abe was getting louder, and Rachel reluctantly buzzed another nurse, calling for a sedative.

Back in the hall, Rachel tried to console Phil, “I’m so sorry. He doesn’t know what—” Phil put his hand up, “Don’t. We both know he meant it.” They hugged each other, and Rachel tugged her brother’s

sleeve as he began to turn away. "Hey, I love you." Phil gently pulled her ear, "I know."

This moment of trying to appease a crusty old man had burned to the core of Phil's sense of worthlessness. He would never stop hearing his father bark madly in public, "Where's the *Real* Phil?!" He couldn't escape it now. It frightened him and exhausted him. He just walked the streets for hours, hating his father and longing for what they never had. Finally, he met his friend Ephraim in their favorite bar. Ephraim patted the empty stool next to him, "You look terrible."

They talked it through, and while he felt some relief to be sitting there with his dearest friend, he couldn't rid himself of this growing agitation. Now he was carrying a low-level rumble of fear in his chest. Even while they talked, even while he felt understood by Ephraim, even as Ephraim confirmed the cruelty of it all, Phil was obsessed with his sitting on this stool. He had sat there hundreds of times, but now he couldn't help but wonder if this was who he was—a stool sitter. His father's bark was taking over his self-perception. He was beginning to hate himself.

When so many things start to unravel at once, it's a sign from the gods. It's more than tragedy. It's nothing less than the beginning of a rearrangement of life. This is what Ephraim had read that morning in a book about the sages of India. And here, his friend was being rearranged.

Ephraim thought to tell him all this. But he knew Phil wouldn't be able to hear it, precisely because he was experiencing it. So he simply listened and asked more questions. And listened some more. Phil talked about his mother and his sister and growing up, and the tough, relentless immigrant Abe.

Phil paused and stared at his feet while Ephraim looked at his friend, trying to imagine the picture Phil was carrying inside. Phil was tightening with anxiety. He felt a complete failure and, through the haze of the beer, he looked about the bar at all his counterparts, and, for a moment, he couldn't find the door. It made him panic, "Ephraim! Where's the door? I can't find the way out! Where's the door?"



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *Is there a voice that takes up too much space in your head? Whose voice is it? What does it keep saying to you about yourself and the world?*
 - *Enter an imagined dialogue between your true self and this dominant voice with the intention of quieting that voice so that your own voice can be heard.*
-

Wu Wei's Pot



THE KING ASKED THE MASTER POTTER to shape a pot with a strong foundation and a thin lip from which to drink. Wu Wei had made many in his time. This was a simple request. He asked to watch the King and his chancellors to see how they used such pots. So Wu Wei attended a banquet where he saw the hard use and breakage of rough living. Then he went to work.

He spun the clay on his ancient wheel. But this pot resisted being brought into the world. It would not center. Wu Wei had to hold the clay for a long time before it would yield to his hands. Once trimmed, it had to dry. The King was impatient, wanting something special to show his court. But Wu Wei said that this pot had to be wood-fired for many days to tame its shape.

The King didn't understand but left the potter to his secret ways. Not wanting to fire it alone, Wu Wei sat the stubborn pot on a shelf in his shed for months till the other potters had enough. Together, they fired the large sleeping giant that was their kiln. For one week,

day and night, the fire was fed constantly, and the King's pot waited to be born in the midst of hundreds. Not special in the least.

It took a week for the fire to cool. When opened, many of the pots and urns were warped and brightly flashed. When the King's pot was handed to Wu Wei, it was still warm and the reddest markings made it seem perfect. The lip was thin as flame itself. But the bottom had a crack. Wu Wei was pleased, but tired. He went to sleep.

The next day, he brought the beautifully cracked pot to the King. At once, the King saw the unrepeatable coloring and the utter thinness of the pot's fine lip. Then he felt the crack underneath. He gave it back, "You call yourself a Master? This is not finished!" Wu Wei put it back in the King's hands, "The fire always has the last word, your Highness." The King was insulted and ordered Wu Wei to try again.

Wu Wei bowed and withdrew. On his way from court, a little boy was dumbstruck by the coloring of the pot. Falling to his knees, the little boy could see the sky through the crack in the bottom. Wu Wei helped the boy up and gave him the pot. Overjoyed, the boy ran home and hung the cracked pot from the edge of his roof. Meanwhile, Wu Wei began again.

It took several months, but the Master Potter chose another lump of clay, which also resisted being centered. And after stilling it, and shaping it, and fixing its form, after waiting for the others, after stirring the sleeping giant of the kiln once more—another pot was born. This one even more colorful than the last, its lip even thinner. But in the bottom, another huge crack. Wu Wei was doubly pleased as he let it cool.

The next day he brought the second cracked pot to the King, who was more eager than before. The King at once was stopped by its beauty. But as he held it, he quickly felt the godforsaken crack. He smashed the pot and dismissed Wu Wei.

That night, while Wu Wei dreamt of flames cracking the sky, the King dreamt of being a little boy. And as a little boy, he fell in love with cracks and the pots that reveal them. In his dream, the King was startled to see his heart as a cracked pot hung from the edge of a roof. But this cracked heart was his and not his. Somehow it belonged to everyone. And suddenly, those tired of the world were falling on their knees to drink from the rain that was dripping through the crack in the heart that belonged to everyone.

The King woke in tears and rushed to put the smashed pot back together. He couldn't and summoned Wu Wei to make him another. After several months, the Master Potter returned. This time, the King closed his eyes and searched right away for the crack in the bottom and was relieved to find it there.

From that day, the King forbid anyone to call him King and when alone, he drank from his knees, accepting a drop at a time through the crack in his heart.



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *Tell the story of a time when what you felt was a crack turned out to be an opening.*
-

Jonah

1Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

⁴But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. ⁶The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.” ⁷The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.⁸Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” ⁹“I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so.

¹¹Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹²He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” ¹³Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. ¹⁴Then they cried out to the Lord, “Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.” ¹⁵So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. ¹⁷But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish,²saying, “I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. ³You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. ⁴Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?’⁵The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my

head ⁶at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God. ⁷As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. ⁸Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. ⁹But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"

¹⁰Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

³The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²"Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." ¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

⁴But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

⁵Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. ⁶The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." ⁹But God said to Jonah, "Is it right

for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." ¹⁰Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night."¹¹And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

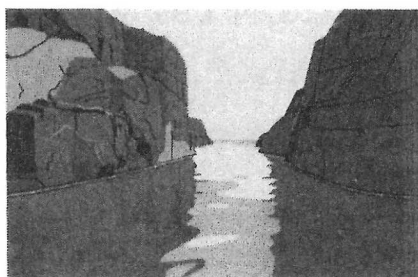
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Question for reflection:

Can we lift up our eyes from our own concerns, just for a moment, to see God acting right in front of us?

When was a time that God worked in and through your life despite your attitude?

Suffering and Loving the World



*My barn having burned to the ground,
I can see more completely the moon.*

—from a Japanese card found on
Phyllis Harper's dresser



The Arts of Liberation

RECENTLY, I SPOKE IN THE PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, on the subject: What is Liberal Arts? After all these years, after the many ways experience has worn my tongue, I come to this with a belief in the arts of liberation. For me, underneath all attempts at education is the question: How do we live together in our time on earth? What does it mean to be alive? And what are the deeper skills—the ways of seeing, being, holding, knowing, feeling, and perceiving—that help us through the miraculous and dangerous corridor it is to live a life on earth?

One of the professors asked with pain and sincerity, “How do we open the minds and hearts of young people, unsure if they can go where they are opened?” He paused a long time, then said, “I’m concerned about leading people into places that will undo them.” But this is the crux of it, the wonder of it, the pain of it: To be alive,

in every way, is both astonishing and full of peril. It can be abundant and collapsing. And nothing else matters but gathering the resources to make it through these paradoxical and poignant straits. We must be honest about this. Seeking what matters is an adventure that will inevitably undo us. And I believe every discipline—be it dance, botany, math, or psychology—every path of knowing has something to offer to the journey of being alive and being undone.

Several of us talked further into the night through dinner and a bottle of red wine. At last, we stumbled into the deeper notions of faith—faith that when people are invited more fully into the light, that experience makes resources available that can help us negotiate the dark. So, though the prospect of pure being—of seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary—can take your breath away, it will show you eternity. Though loving everything until your heart feels it might burst at the sight of rain can make you think you will vanish, it will cleanse you of all that is false. Though watching a mother dog lick her stillborn pup will make you cry out in silence, “I can’t take anymore!”—it will steam away all pettiness. Though the passages are not always fun, there is a bedrock of calm that they can return us to.

I am more concerned with those who don’t open enough. As Rilke said in one of his more strident poems, “I am alone but not alone enough to make every moment holy.” This is the razor’s edge between suffering and loving the world.

Just what, then, is the realm of the responsible teacher? If you squeeze a drop of iodine into a glass of water, it will color the entire glass. So let’s not talk about teaching only to the mind. Whatever

drops we carefully place will stir through the entire beings before us. And what are we to do with that? How are we to hold them? How near is appropriate? How far away is criminal? True education is messy, never clear, and the lessons shift and the boundaries change.

So much of what we're called to do for each other is to simply listen and tend; to hold up as a mirror the shape of what the other is thinking, and to echo back with clarity and compassion what the other is saying. The job of the noble teacher or loving friend is to guide someone so thoroughly to their own center that they, in hard-earned innocence, become the teacher.

The stories in this section speak to the journey of being alive and being undone and keeping each other company as we suffer and love the world.

The Burglar



1

AFTER A SMALL SILENCE, Ted changed the subject, "Tell me the one story I should know about Melina." Bill immediately knew which story it would be. It took a minute to shift their conversation, but he wiped the blackboard of his heart clean with one long breath and began, "Well, she doesn't like to talk about it much. So, please—" "I understand." Bill took another long breath and, as they drove closer to the hospital, he related how five years ago Melina was robbed, her home ransacked. All her belongings were trampled and broken in the haste of making off with the sellable products: her stereo, VCR, television, halogen lamps. One item in particular—a small wooden sculpture of a deer nibbling on some grass—was broken beyond repair. Her grandmother had given it to her. It was Babba's deer. Her Babba had carried it through the Holocaust. It got her through Treblinka.

Melina came home just as the thief was leaving. They looked at each other squarely for a few clear seconds before the young man ran off. After being questioned by the police and filling out all the papers, Melina went home to the rubble. She was devastated and frightened. She began to withdraw and became unusually tentative. The world had come in on her and, in the days that followed, she started to shrink inside. She started to feel hidden. It was affecting her work as a therapist.

They were now at the gate of the parking garage where everyone took a ticket to be stamped inside with the name of their loved one's malady or need: oncology, medical imaging, emergency. They found a place to park on the third level. Bill turned the car off and went on, "About three weeks later, they captured him. She had to go to the precinct to pick him out of a lineup. Once she did, they held him while she filed charges."

At this point, Bill's tone shifted to one of awe and puzzlement, "Then, as she tells it, something came over her, and she felt a need to confront this guy in order to go on, in order to reclaim her space. The detective advised against it. But you know Melina. So they finally let her speak to him with an officer in the room. The detective watched through the one-way window."

Bill looked at his watch, "Oh Jesus. C'mon. We can talk as we walk." As they crossed the glass skywalk to the hospital, Bill resumed, "Well, she sat down opposite the thief and began to look him in the eye. He was uncomfortable, but after a few minutes, he started to look back. The officer moved closer. Finally, Melina asked about his life. At first, he thought she was trying to manipulate him, but

it's hard not to feel Melina's presence, and so, he began to tell his story. Turns out he wasn't some villain or maniac, but an out-of-work electrician in his thirties, with a wife and a baby. And yes, he had a drinking problem, and the rent was overdue, and their baby needed medicine. And he had a bad idea."

But Ted wasn't thinking about the electrician. He was holding the image of Melina just corridors away. Little by little, Ted was falling in love with her. He was planting each story in a small garden that he was clearing for her in his heart. As they followed the signs to oncology, Bill went on, "Then she told her story: about growing up in Chicago with her grandmother; about becoming a therapist; about her belief in needing the help of others to make it through. Finally, she spoke about his breaking in and destroying her home, and breaking the one treasure she had from Babba, who was gone.

"By now, they'd forgotten the officer. They'd forgotten they were in a police station. They'd forgotten what brought them there. The thief broke down a bit and began to tremble. Now, as Melina says, they saw each other. I can hear her telling me, 'We were no longer victim and perpetrator. We were simply two ordinary people trying to make our way.'" Bill shook his head gently, "She said he no longer looked evil, just troubled."

Stories like this opened a trust in Ted that he kept hidden. Bill kept going, "Well, damn if he didn't apologize. The detective didn't trust what was happening. Melina finally stood and said, 'I accept your apology. I hope you find your way.' With that she left, and before the detective could say anything, she calmly said, 'I've decided to drop the charges.' The detective argued, trying to convince her

that people like that need to be kept off the street. He tried to tell her that people like that are good at pretending and manipulating. But Melina insisted.”

Bill stopped to look at Ted, “And with that, she left. On her way home, she wondered if she’d done the right thing. She hadn’t planned any of it. She just wanted to face the stranger who broke Babba’s deer. And, as she said, that moment kept unfolding. She surprised herself when she dropped the charges. The detective kept him for another thirty-six hours, but had to let him go. He walked right out.”

Ted had to ask, “Did she ever tell you why?” Now Bill’s love for Melina was everywhere, “She said she hoped that someday someone might give her a second chance.” They found themselves in the green waiting room outside the oncology wing, sitting in two large blue chairs, surrounded with tall ferns, knowing that Melina was somewhere down the hall beyond the white swinging doors.

2

It was good to see Bill. He was such a good friend. And now, as Melina waited for Ted, with her head turned to the sun, something in the smell and moisture of the morning made her close her eyes and think of the burglar years ago who had broken Babba’s deer. She wished she had that wooden deer to hold onto today. Just then, she heard footsteps and knew it was Ted. This made her smile. She opened her eyes as he entered the room, “Ted! Ted! Come. Sit near me.” She held his hand and closed her eyes again, for the sun was too delicious. “Have I ever told you of the time I was robbed?”

Ted found this eerie. He hesitated, feeling Bill’s plea for secrecy,

but decided to be honest, "Bill just told me about it." This made Melina laugh, "What an experience." Ted watched her closely and decided to ask, "Any idea what happened to him?" She opened her eyes and took a long, deep breath. "Well, he wrote me a card of thanks. I don't know how he got my address. I cringed at first, but then I thought of who he was underneath all that. So I wrote back. Part of me thought, *This isn't a good idea*. But the deeper part of me thought, *If not now, when?*"

She paused and sank below her smile, "Eventually we met for coffee. I know. It sounds crazy. But I think I did it just to see if what happened in the police station was real. There was never anything between us. It wasn't like that." Her attention was drawn to a sudden breeze that moved through the flowerbed, as if the truth of that time was a fragrance that followed her. "Anyway, we actually met for coffee for a while. Then we lost touch."

"Did you ever hear from him again?" She tipped her head, "No. But a year later, I learned that he'd been shot and killed in a robbery of a sporting goods store." She bit her lip, "Ever since, I've wondered if I did the right thing. Or did I contribute to his death?" Ted was struck by how alive this incident was for her. Melina continued, "I've been around it in my mind, but I think he was in a war with himself." Ted wanted more, "What do you mean?"

Melina sat up straighter, "Let me tell you a story. I heard it from a client around the time I learned of his death. It seems there was a Cherokee chief who wore a two-headed wolf around her neck. Yes, a female chief. Anyway, the wolves were carved out of abalone and hooked with porcupine quills. One was dark, the other light. The two

wolves faced each other, mouths open at the base of her throat, teeth bared. One day, her son asked, 'Mother, what do they stand for?' After a long silence, the chief replied, 'One stands for the forces of love, and the other for the forces of fear.' After another long silence, her son asked, 'Who will win?' And the chief, without hesitation, replied, 'The one I feed.'"

Now Ted was taken by the breeze through the flowerbed, which had returned, but Melina went on, "I realize now that I helped us feed the lighter wolf. If only for a while. I also know that I didn't drop the charges for him, but for me. Had I not, I would've disappeared in the feeding of my own dark wolf." Now they both were watching the breeze through the flowers, as Melina admitted, "He wasn't alone or unusual in this inner war." She kept staring at the flowers, "No, I've come to believe that those who are cruel are simply those who are losing the war."



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *What kind of food does the wolf of fear want from you right now? And what kind of food does the wolf of love want? Which has your attention?*
- *What enables you to trust someone?*

Hill Where the Lord Hides



IN THE SUMMER OF '41, the same summer Ted Williams hit .406, the city of Kovno in Lithuania was being liquidated by Germans whose fingers, sore from firing, twitched. The same summer Joe DiMaggio hit safely in fifty-six games, a notice was posted in the Ghetto saying there was work for educated Jews.

Hundreds assembled—musicians, scholars, rabbis, elders, architects, writers, lawyers, engineers, doctors—and on August 18, while Boston played New York in a doubleheader, the educated of Kovno crowded the gate, waiting for work, and as Ted doubled off the right field wall, a grey truck pulled up and a squad of expressionless Germans shot them all.

I don't know what to do with this. I don't raise it to say we shouldn't play ball. But what do we do with this kind of cruelty. My grandmother's sister and her husband and son died in Treblinka. My grandmother sent them steamship tickets in 1933, and they sent them back.

Hitting, sending, giving back, waiting for work—how do we keep alive what is alive? Does tenderness matter when a throat is cut? They say a great hitter's hands pulse in the night and that survivors hear shots forever. But how do we find, tame, release these things in ourselves? What enabled Commandant Jäger to kill so many and still dab the corner of his mouth with linen after dinner, and what made Dr. Elkes cough his heart into prayer while starving in Auschwitz?

The whole world lives in each of us. Where the Auschwitz? Where the sun? How do I breathe in a sky that has accepted it all?



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *Describe a time when you experienced or witnessed both kindness and cruelty at the same time. How did this impact you and your understanding of life?*
- *Throughout the ages, in the midst of our suffering, humans have always cried out, "Where is God?"*
 - *Explore your own feelings about the difference between suffering and cruelty.*
 - *Given your own experience with suffering and cruelty, what is your current answer to the question, "Where is God?"*

Two Monks Climb a Mountain



IT WAS AMAZING HOW MANY PEOPLE were coming to his talks. Many were curious. Many were lost. Many wanted to see him trip. Many were ready to be offended. The tall grasses where people gathered had been trampled and matted from the many crowds, and there was something holy about the blue emptiness of the sky. It was midmorning when Rammohun appeared.

The crowd buzzed and bowed as he walked by. Once he reached a slightly elevated patch of ground, the crowd grew quiet and Rammohun began, "Let me tell you a story. There are two monks. Both have followed the Buddha's teachings all their lives. They are considered to be holy men who have prepared many years for a sacred journey. And one day they begin. Together, they start to climb a holy mountain. For they believe that the Buddha himself waits at the top. But halfway up, one of the monks breaks his leg and can't go on."

Now half the crowd identified with the broken monk and half with his friend.

Rammohun allowed the notion to sink in, then went on, "Well, they stay the night, hoping to continue in the morning, but the broken monk now has a fever. It's clear he can't go on, and, indeed, he can't stay there either. He needs to be brought back into the world so he can heal. Just what should the other monk do? Should he leave his brother so he can achieve nirvana? Or carry his brother back into samsara? Tell me, what would you do? Tell me!"

A young man full of devotion blurted out, "I would make him as comfortable as I could and keep my destiny with Buddha." Rammohun spoke to him directly, "And what if you were left behind?" The young man was proud of his clarity, "I would accept my failings and get out of the way." The prophet looked at the young, devoted man for a long time and finally sighed, "And who among you will travel with this holy man?" The entire crowd laughed.

He pointed the young man out to the crowd and said kindly, but sternly, "If you were broken on the mountain, it would be your good fortune to have traveled with me. For I would forsake any goal to preserve life. But if I were broken on the mountain, it would be my great misfortune to have traveled with you." He stared at the young man with an air of disapproval, then spoke to the larger crowd, "Now you can make the mountain what you will—whatever you desire, whatever you aspire to be or have. But is any goal worth a single life? Even meeting Buddha? And what if you are meant to discover that caring for another is the summit?"

The crowd went silent and Rammohun brought his insight into

the open, "You see, all beings can be understood in this way. There are those who would leave their brothers broken on the mountain, and those who would forego the mountain of their dreams to preserve life." He kept penetrating through the opening he felt in the crowd, "The history of this kind of suffering is vast. For each era has its share of those broken along the way. When most are left behind, we have an era of cruelty. When most are cared for, we have an era of compassion. It's as simple as this: Which are you? And what will you teach your children?"

Embarrassed and offended, the young, devoted man stormed his way out of the crowd. At this, Rammohun barked, "I can't tell if he's racing up his mountain or going back for who he left behind!" The entire crowd laughed its nervous laugh, for everyone wanted to see themselves as the monk who would forego his dreams, but many realized that they were, in fact, the other who would climb the mountain at all cost. Sensing this, Rammohun declared the talk complete, "I see you've plainly landed in the middle of it. I think we're done."



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *Describe a time when you struggled between your commitment to where you felt called to go and your commitment to others.*

The Falcon of Truth



THERE IS A POWERFUL MYTH that connects our heartache with the reservoir of universal truth. I'm not sure where it comes from, for it appeared to me in a dream. But the vivid nature of the dream was so convincing it seems clear I am not the first to dream it. In fact, I feel I was allowed to witness something believed and told for generations in some indigenous tribe now forgotten.

In the dream, a godlike falcon sights the opened heart of a man and dives to nibble the piece of heart exposed. The man's pain of living culminates in almost unbearable heartache as the godlike falcon eats that piece of exposed heart. This relieves the man of his heartache, which is replaced by a certain pocket of emptiness—not an emptiness of lack, but a bareness beyond any one person's experience.

It's hard to unravel such a scene in words. We could say that a reward for the open-hearted is that a piece of their heart is forever in the truth that flies over everything. And wherever truth flies, the open-hearted see part of what it sees. And whenever truth opens its

wings, no matter what we're doing—sleeping, eating, or churning in our own confusion—an awareness overcomes us momentarily. In time, our piece of heart is mixed with the heartache of others. And so we get back more than just our pain and more than just our own view of truth.

I imagine this deep-seeded myth began when some experienced hunter, waiting in the brush for an antelope to die from its wounds, saw to his amazement a falcon descend with such authority that he tucked himself further in the brush. And there he watched as the lightning bird tore the meat of the wound, and, for a moment, it seemed as if the antelope might rise and run off; but as it dropped, the spirit of the antelope seemed to be in the falcon's mouth. No doubt by the time the hunter's son told his son the story, the antelope did rise and run off while a part of it was forever in the sky with the godlike falcon.

From the earliest times, we have known that opening a wound to air, at some point, is healing. Similarly, when opened by experience, our soul is healed. Yet like a caveman who only dared to leave his wound open because he had nothing to cover it, we await that same moment of undoing. Except for us it takes much longer, since we have endless coverings.

Regardless of whether we are willing or forced, the release of our heartache into the Universe is at once painful and enlightening. Whether we consider this a tragedy or a transformation, to be worn open to truth in this way alleviates some of our pain and bestows in its place a sense of the Infinite, which leaves a sweetness in the world.



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *What do you think the relationship is between your personal truth and the truth of the Universe?*
- *Describe one covering—of thought or belief—that is keeping you from a more direct experience of truth.*

Keeping the Dish Alive



WHenever he'd travel to Lansing, Don would go to a Middle Eastern restaurant he'd stumbled into years ago. He loved their Kibbe Nyah, a dish of freshly ground lamb mixed with herbs and olive oil, seasoned but uncooked. One day, it was off the menu, and Don spoke to the owner, Abu, who said it wasn't worth it. Too few people ordered it. But Don said it was exquisite and pleaded with Abu that the dish shouldn't be lost. Abu said, "You call before you come, and I'll make it for you." So whenever Don would go to Lansing, two or three times a year, he'd call Abu and remind him, "My name is Don. I'm the one who—" But Abu always remembered him, "Yes! Yes! Kibbe Nyah. How are you? Come. I will make it for you." Each time Don would try to tip Abu or pay him extra, but Abu refused, "No. No. Together we keep the dish alive."

After a year, Don asked one of the waiters, "What can I bring Abu?" His old friend smiled and said, "He loves flowers." So the next time Don went to Lansing, he called and Abu said, "Yes. Yes.

Come.” And Don walked in with four bouquets of lilies and iris and daffodils. The entire restaurant gathered, clapping and hooting, as Abu wiped his hands on his apron in order to receive the beautiful flowers. The music of his world was turned up and the smell of freshly ground lamb filled the one room and everyone ate with their hands. Abu took stems from the bouquets and placed them around his restaurant. A few of the waiters put iris and daffodils behind each other’s ears. Everyone was smiling. And for a long moment, the world seemed right.



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *Tell the story of a friendship that grew out of an unexpected kindness.*

Acts 6:8-15; 7:1-2a; 7:51-8:1; 9:1-22

⁸Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. ¹⁰But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. ¹¹Then they secretly instigated some men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹²They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. ¹³They set up false witnesses who said, "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; ¹⁴for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us." ¹⁵And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

7Then the high priest asked him, "Are these things so?" ²And Stephen replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me.

⁵¹"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. ⁵²Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. ⁵³You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it."

⁵⁴When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. ⁵⁵But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶"Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" ⁵⁷But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

8And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.

9Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"⁵ He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord."¹¹ The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying,¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem;¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name."¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel;¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized,¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus,²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."²¹ All who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?"²² Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

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For Reflection:

For every experience of conversion, there are preliminary experiences which lead to the conversion. Some call these experiences “gifts” and others call them “grace.” Nonetheless, these preliminary experiences, or pre-conversion experiences, create a path to conversion – the path being an awakening of our awareness of these “gifts” or “grace.”

Another way to say this is that our path to conversion is simply becoming aware of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The “gift” is that the Holy Spirit is given to us by God without our knowledge. Theologians call this gift “prevenient grace,” but we could just simply call it “grace.”

As we become aware of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we can see these preliminary experiences through clearer lenses. Our perception of these pre-conversion experiences can be both positive and negative. On the positive side, these experiences can make us aware and appreciative of love, nature, and things greater than ourselves.

On the negative side, we may notice our own shortcomings and can even develop self-hatred over our actions, our sins. These negative experiences are also grace. While hard to imagine, experiencing something as sin is also a grace. When things are so bad you cannot see them as bad, to suddenly see how bad things really are is the first step to transformation – the first step to repairing the brokenness. This is grace. This is a gift.

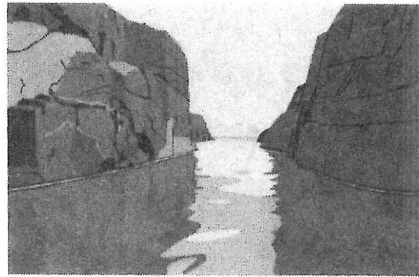
**The concept of prevenient grace has a long history in the tradition. If you are interested in learning more about conversion and early grace, please see Robert Davis Hughes, III, Beloved Dust.*

Questions:

Do you think that Saul/Paul’s participation in the death of Stephen was a pre-conversion experience on the path to Paul’s awareness of the grace of the Holy Spirit at work in his life?

Can you trace the pre-conversion experiences of your own life?

The Invitation to Grow



*"Why is the road to freedom so long?"
asked a troubled apprentice.*

*And the master replied,
"Because it has to go through you."*

—an old Zen story



The Invitation to Grow

IT TAKES YEARS FOR SEEDS TO GROW INTO TREES, and the seasons shape and scar each tree into place. You could say that the journey of being a spirit on earth is the human equivalent, and the years of experience shape and scar each of us into place. You could say that this is the long road to freedom—inner freedom. It is our invitation to grow.

When I was starting out, I wanted so badly to become a poet that I held it in view like some hill I needed to climb to see from. But getting to the top, something was missing, and so I had to climb the next hill. Finally, I realized I didn't need to climb to become a poet, I was a poet.

The same thing happened with love. I wanted so badly to love and be loved, but climbing through relationships like hills, I realized again that I was loving and loved all along.

Then I wanted to become wise, but after much travel and study, it was during my bedridden days with cancer that I realized I was

already wise. I just didn't know the language of my wisdom.

Now I understand that all these incarnations come alive in us when we dare to live the days before us, when we dare to listen to the wind singing in our veins. We carry the love and wisdom like seeds, and the days sprout us. And it's the sprouting that's the poetry. It's the sprouting that's the long road to freedom.

Another lesson is more recent. It comes from a conversation I had with a very wise woman who was a mentor to me. She was the Jungian analyst Helen Luke. I knew Helen during the last two years of her life, and during what turned out to be our last conversation, she said to me, "Yours is to live it, not to reveal it." This troubled me, for I have spent my life becoming a writer, thinking that my job has been just that—to reveal what is essential and hidden.

In the time since Helen died, I've come to understand her last instruction as an invitation to shed any grand purpose, no matter how devoted we may be to what we are doing. She wasn't telling me to stop writing, but to stop striving to be important. She was inviting me to stop *recording* the poetry of life and to *enter* the poetry of life.

This applies to us all. If we devote ourselves to the life at hand, the rest will follow. For life, it seems, reveals itself through those willing to live. Anything else, no matter how beautiful, is just advertising.

This took me many years to learn and accept. Having begun innocently enough there arose separations, and now I know that health resides in restoring direct experience. Thus, having struggled to do what has never been done, I discovered that living is the original art.

The stories in this section speak to the original art of living and how experience keeps asking us to grow.

The Desert and the Marketplace



A SUFI MASTER AND HIS APPRENTICE were traveling across the desert to a marketplace by the sea. Crossing the desert, the apprentice didn't see very much difference between himself and the master. To himself the apprentice mused, *it's not as far to truth as I thought*. But once in the marketplace, the apprentice couldn't take a step clearly. He saw a beautiful woman from afar and wanted to touch her. And wrestling with his desire to touch her, he stopped experiencing her. Now he was fishing in the break of his heart; mourning the last love he'd known, wondering where she was. Then he saw an angry father strike his son and everyone else kept walking by. But he was now feeling his anger at his own father and was no longer experiencing the street. Then, beyond the fish peddlers, a snake handler was dancing his snake in the air and the apprentice was now caught in his mother's fear of snakes. When the master

reached for the young man, it was as if he were reaching through a dark fog. The apprentice was startled. The master held his face and said, "When you can walk the city like a desert and the desert like a city, the sun will be your heart above you and your heart will be the sun inside you."



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *Being human, we are easily clouded by a fog of associations that keep us from direct experience.*
 - *Give a recent example of when you, like the apprentice, were jettisoned from the moment you were experiencing into your own parallel world.*
 - *Give the history of this one association and where it lives in you presently.*

Crossing Time



DESPITE HIS AGE, HE WAS TALKING FAST, excited about those long gone, about their greatness and courage. Since I'd never heard of them, his eyes became a window to another world. Each name unstitched a story too complex to convey, too searing to leave alone. He sipped his tea and I realized that I will speak of him this way.

We talked long into the night, and he started to drift. I moved his cane and touched his shoulder and he smiled his way back to now. I said, "Shall we go?" He whispered, "We're already gone." Then slapped his knee, "But it's all right."

I bent over to help him up when he held my head with both his hands and kissed my forehead. He then put his palm firmly on my chest and said, "You know." As we waited for his car, he smelled a weed like a flower and sighed. And still I wonder what it is I know.



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *Bring to mind someone in your personal history or in world history that you have always admired, and, though you might know the events of their time on earth, look into the story of who they were as a person. Then, enlist them as a guide, and journal an imagined conversation with them.*

Facing a Demon



A LARGE DEMON APPEARED IN THE VILLAGE ONE DAY. Out of fear, the blacksmith poked its cheek with his hot iron and the demon ate him. With the wound on his face, the demon seemed scarier. All the men started to carry weapons. This made the demon more cunning and more ferocious. Two brothers decided to hunt the demon. One was a dancer. The other, a butcher. When they found the demon, the dancer distracted it with his dance, while the butcher went to slice its throat. The demon ate them both.

In desperation, the mayor of the village went to the old shaman for advice. He was so old that he was losing his sight. While people pitied him, he considered his slow loss of sight a protection of sorts. He said it kept him from misusing his gifts. When the mayor explained what had happened, the shaman said, "The dancer misused his dance. The butcher misused his knife. And the blacksmith misused his iron. Now the demon is stronger, and it embodies the grace of a dancer, the skill of a butcher, and the strength of a blacksmith."

The mayor and the people felt defeated. It was then that the shaman offered his secret, "You must feed it light and wait."

Fear sapped the kindness of the village. In their growing agitation, they beseeched a gentle young monk, the one who as a boy would cry if he stepped on an ant. They gave him a dagger of light and pleaded with him to face the demon. The young monk, who was privately unsure whether to keep his vows or launch headlong into the world, said yes.

He sat at the edge of the forest, with the dagger of light on his lap, and waited. On the third day, the demon, hungry and frightened, appeared. The demon had been cut so many times by swords that the sight of even a lighted dagger made it growl and rear. To the demon's surprise, the young man quickly swallowed the dagger of light, as the shaman had instructed. It cut him on the way down. He stilled himself and waited. The demon waited. And then, the demon spread prone on the earth and opened its mouth like the gates to another world.

The gentle young man could feel the dagger of light move inside him. Though weakened, he carefully rose and entered the demon, walking through the gates of its mouth down the tunnel of its throat. Once in its belly, he heard desperate voices pleading to be released. Once his eyes adjusted to the dark, he could see the butcher in the corner, and the blacksmith, and the dancer. They were trembling. Then, in the center of the demon's belly, a raw and tearful being approached him. But instead of hurting him, the being began to plead, "At last, can you save me?! Please! You must get me out of here!"

The young monk sat before his darker self and said, "I have entered your belly. You must enter mine." At once, the frightened being trapped in the belly of the demon understood and reached down the young monk's throat to pull the dagger of light from *his* belly. It cut the young monk's innocence and he passed out.

The frightened being trapped in the belly of the demon lifted the dagger of light. And with the strength of a blacksmith and the skill of a butcher and the grace of a dancer, the frightened, trapped being stabbed the demon from inside. The opening let in the light, the unending light, and the demon's body shriveled and vanished, leaving them all as they were the day they were consumed—the same but changed.



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *The story suggests that a demon is some aspect of a situation that we enlarge and empower by how we feel about it and think about it.*
- *Describe a situation that is currently very large and troubling for you and your attempts to silence it or thwart it.*
- *Trace the origin of this situation when it was smaller and how it has grown large and troubling.*
- *Imagine that in the center of this large and troubling thing there is something raw and tearful which, if given the*

Hands Like Wings



FROM AN EARLY AGE, Cheryl thought hands were like wings searching for a way to fly. So naturally, when she started to sculpt, she made the hands bigger. Her mother assumed that big hands meant they were angels. Cheryl will tell you that her angels are meant to be mounted on walls. They seem to rise out of whatever wall they find themselves on, the way the deeper self arises no matter what impediment we grow in its way. Her sculptures seem to have a life of their own. She releases them more than creates them and so has never felt particularly attached to them. Except for one. Her sculpture of Sophia. This one felt like it had arisen from behind her own wall. It was no surprise that this sculpture drew everyone. Wherever she'd show it, people would quietly start to touch the overlarge hands, then touch their lips. Some would touch their lips first. Quietly, when no one was looking, her angel of Sophia began to bless those who reached for her.

Sophia came to Cheryl after her mother died. When the grief would get too heavy to bear, Sophia would flutter between the weight of it and the sculptor's tired heart. She never knew this, but it was after the weight of her grief fluttered that the presence of such a sculpture awakened in her.

About six years ago, she was asked to mount an exhibit in the local hospital. Her flock of angels with overlarge hands arose from the walls offering grace to the sick and lame and those rushing around helping everyone. She never knew the full impact of her angels. She just knew that hanging such a show in a hospital seemed absolutely right.

The show had been up three months when Cheryl got a call. One of the angels was gone. Her immediate fear came true. It was Sophia. Of all her pieces, why Sophia? The only one she needed. The one she loved the most. Her first feeling was one of fear and emptiness, as if the secret of her creativity came from Sophia. How could she continue without her? It was raining that day, and as she drove to the hospital, she felt that a deep part of her had been violated. The wipers squeaked as they kept clearing small pelts of water from the sky.

As she raced past the emergency room, her other angels said nothing. Her heart was pounding. Turning the corner toward outpatient surgery, she saw the empty wall. It was quiet and no one seemed to notice. Everyone was busy being ill, being afraid, wanting help, fearing help, caring for each other, and feeling overworked. She stood and stared at the empty wall for a long time.

The art therapist who had arranged the show arrived and was

very apologetic, "I can't imagine who would steal an angel." An old man with a walker overheard and muttered, "Someone desperate for grace." No one heard him. And no one was sure what to do. Cheryl was heartbroken. The art therapist somehow felt responsible. Soon a hospital administrator arrived. He was thoughtful but impatient. They walked to the security office where a young man in blue brought up tapes on a camera from the night before. He was fast-forwarding to the suspicious part. It seemed odd to Cheryl, watching the lives of others speed by just as life was standing still for her.

"There," said the young man in blue. He backed up the tape. In the empty hall, a thin man with Sophia over his shoulder was slipping across the bottom of the screen. The blue man froze the scene. The numbers in the corner read 10:43 PM. It was impossible to see his face. He had a bulky jacket on. But there was Sophia, her fluttering eyes staring at Cheryl through the camera, her large hands on the thief's back.

Don's heart was breaking. He had never taken anything in his life, not even candy as a boy. But his mother had just died before his eyes and he was spinning, groundless, feeling desperate and alone. The weight of this angel on his shoulder was a comfort. From an early age, Don had a special closeness with his mother. She was a kind force in the world, as quiet and steady as a sunny day. No matter the harshness that life would present, Don could retreat into the force of his mother's kindness and repair. What kept Don from himself was how he hid in his mother's kindness rather than gaining strength from it. This kept him from finding the force of kindness in his own soul.

Don was never good with people, though he liked to be around people. He never married and wound up managing a local diner. He was in his forties when his mother began to fail. She never wanted him to circle her as he did, but she thanked God for his devotion. She had Parkinson's, and over time her limitations grew. Don would always tuck her in and she would motion to him just as he neared the door. Without a word, she'd smile like the sun itself and cup his cheek. This small moment became Don's rosary. It kept him going.

There were no siblings and no intimate friends. So as Don's mother failed, she became like a beautiful coastline reclaimed by the sea. Whole parts of her were no longer visible, except to Don in the shrine of his love. About eighteen months ago, it was discovered that his mother had cancer. The journey, already difficult, became overwhelming. For the last six weeks, she was hospitalized.

Of all the people in the world, Don thought, why her? The only one he needed. The one he loved the most. Now his first feeling every day was one of fear and emptiness, as if the secret of his ability to live came from his mother's kindness. How could he continue without her? It was raining the day that she would die, and as he drove to the hospital, he felt that a deep part of him was being violated.

He knew something was different the moment he entered her room. She seemed to dim before his eyes. Her kindness was there, but faint, like a song suddenly heard through a pillow. He leaned close to her all day. Finally, in the evening, when the nurses were elsewhere, she looked to him. But she was too weak to cup his face. She simply smiled at him and died with her eyes open, her kindness streaming at him like a sun he couldn't prevent from setting.

He had no idea how long he stayed there. Life had torn open and some bottomless place he'd kept hidden was screaming silently within him. He felt desperate to run from it. Of course, he couldn't. He couldn't stop staring into those eyes that had sent kindness to him his whole life. When he let go of her dead hand, it seemed larger than in life. He backed out of the room into a world without her.

In the hall, nurses were chatting about overtime and doses of medicine, and one fanned herself with a chart. Someone asked him how she was doing. He walked right by her, unable to speak. How could he continue? Where would he go? Everything seemed insignificant. He wandered about the hospital, trying to catch his breath. He was afraid to cry, afraid if he let that flood begin, he'd drown there in the hall. The shock was making him weak. He was buckling at the knees. He braced himself against the wall.

When he looked up, there was a sculpture of his mother with her dead, large hands. And there were her dead eyes, which had sent kindness his whole life. How was this possible? He stroked Sophia's face and touched her large hands. He began to sob. He felt, for the moment, that if he let go of this angel, he'd be lost forever. He backed away and felt terrified, out of control. He fell back against the wall and cupped his hand on the angel's face, the way his mother cupped his face. He stood there for a long time, his hand on the sculpture mounted on the wall. It felt like a raft in the storm.

Don couldn't go back into the world and he couldn't stay there. He was sobbing and drowning, and the only thing his broken heart could think of was to take the sudden angel with him. At least for a while. He had never taken anything in his life, not even candy

as a boy. But his mother had just died before his eyes and he was spinning, groundless, feeling desperate and alone. The weight of this angel on his shoulder was a comfort.

Cheryl never knew who had stolen her angel. And though she never saw the tape from the security camera again, the image of the thin man with Sophia over his shoulder slipping across the bottom of the screen was imprinted in her mind. Six years have passed and Cheryl has come to see Sophia's sudden absence as a teacher. She admits in quiet moments that she was heartbroken for a long time. Then, somehow, she realized that Sophia was alive within her. Somehow, Cheryl was forced to see need as a messenger of light. She still coaxes hands into their largeness, still invites angels to rise through walls. To no one in particular, she admits that all this has made her a better artist. She will tell you that kindness flows from living thing to living thing. "We only borrow it," she says. Then she chuckles, "Or rather, kindness borrows us."

Don is still not very good with people, but managing the diner keeps his loneliness at bay. And every morning, as he leaves his apartment, he reaches for the table near his small window and cups the angel's face and touches her large hands. Doing this, he feels strong enough to enter the world.

He has no idea that in a few days, the sun will come out and he will feel a kindness at work in the world that he hasn't felt since his mother died. He has no way of knowing that he will stop on the way to work at the edge of a small park to watch a pair of chickadees peck through the snow for fallen seed. He has no way of knowing that as

he watches the small birds feed, Cheryl will be waking slowly from a dream in which she has become Sophia. At that moment, Don will sit on a snow-wet bench and close his eyes before the warmth of the sun and briefly he will feel whole again, ready to live. He will wake the next day, no longer needing the stolen angel. And too ashamed to return her, he will start looking for a place to leave her, to thank her, to bless the sculptor he will never know.

But today, as Don shuffles to work, the early light through his small window falls on Sophia's large hands. As she waits for someone else to create her. For someone else to steal her. Waiting for who will need her next.



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *Imagine that you are interviewing Cheryl and Don separately.*
- *What would you ask each about how this experience has changed them?*
- *What would each offer as their understanding of how to live through the heartbreak of loss?*
- *Journal these conversations.*

The Illumination



ALISON'S GRANDMOTHER ANNA IS 103. She lives in a retirement village. Alison is one of eight grandchildren, and she has learned that her grandmother, at one time or another, has told each they are her favorite. Through the years, Anna has showered each of them with an unrestrained love that has illuminated their specialness. Far from feeling misled, Alison feels grateful for how endless her grandmother's love has been. When Alison visits her grandmother now, it's clear that Anna can no longer retain who people are or how she knows them. Even when she does, she doesn't remember for long. Now everyone is a stranger and everyone is her favorite. Everyone is special.

Alison settles into a peaceful place of awe as she tells me this. "Now it's just pure love," she says, "for everyone and everything." Alison shakes her head and smiles, "Grandma's love is no longer reserved for family because everyone has become family." It is profound and humbling that it should take a hundred years to find our way to this. Can there be any greater ambition?



JOURNAL QUESTIONS

- *Tell the story of a relative who welcomed a stranger into your family and how your family reacted.*
- *Describe a time when you were unexpectedly made to feel like family by someone other than family.*

Ecclesiastes 8:14 – 9:9

¹⁴There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. ¹⁵So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun. ¹⁶When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one's eyes see sleep neither day nor night, ¹⁷then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.

9All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate one does not know. Everything that confronts them ²is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. ³This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone. Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

⁴But whoever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. ⁵The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost. ⁶Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun. ⁷Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. ⁸Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. ⁹Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

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For Reflection:

The title Ecclesiastes is a Latin translation of the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Qoheleth, and Qoheleth is the pseudonym used by the author of the book. It has been suggested that the fierce faith of Qoheleth has been summed up in the following statement:

You cannot know what is next, only that whatever it is – good or bad – it is the reality you must confront. People complicate things in order to avoid having to face the reality of life. Wisdom brings the advantage of not suffering one moment longer than necessary. Wisdom is realizing that if you wait for the ideal conditions before taking action, you may never take action. For, you may not know which moment is the perfect moment. In reality, all you know is the moment at hand. Just as there is no perfect moment, there is no perfect knowing, there is no certainty. The one thing you can be sure of is that if you plant nothing you will have no harvest. So, act without knowing. Life is an experiment, live into the curiosity. The best we can do then is strive for the good life, and the good life is simple – eat and drink in moderation, engage in meaningful work, and avoid loneliness by cultivating good friends.

*See William P. Brown, *Interpretation: Ecclesiastes*; and Rabbi Rami Shapiro, *Ecclesiastes, Annotated & Explained*

Question:

- If we cannot know what to expect in the next moment, how do we meet what comes to us each day?
- How do you strive to live the good life?
- It has been said that we die little deaths in the life. How does hope in the resurrected life shape the way we meet these little deaths?