

Reflection

A Place of Peace

JEAN MONAHAN

“In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.” —Canticle of Zechariah (Luke 1:78-79)

Amidst the planning and paperwork that preceded my husband’s retirement, we made a resolution: to return to volunteering at a food pantry, something we had foregone when our children were young and life was hectic. That was June. My husband died in August, and by summer’s end I was channeling my grief and anger into tossing canned goods into bags.

Miss Berdonna was one of our regulars, faithful and upbeat, so the morning I heard her sobs rising above the routine clatter of the pantry, I was surprised. “I’m tired; I’m so tired,” she wailed. Her purse had been stolen (no money to speak of, but her prescriptions were gone), and taxes were due on her little house... and her mother had died and ... I understood. Arms entwined, we swayed back and forth, mingling our tears and our pleading. *“One day at a time, sweet Jesus, that’s all I’m asking of you; O give me the strength to do what I have to do.”*

Somehow, here, among the marginalized and poor of spirit, I found my footing.

I have a friend who finds solace in nature, and this week she will retreat to a cabin deep in the woods to pray for peace after a painful divorce. Many others I know find healing fellowship in support groups. But so often those who dwell in darkness — the critically ill, the dying and the bereft — are not surrounded by beauty or a circle of companions. They must make do with spaces that are circumscribed and

small and unfamiliar. No choices here: a curtain for privacy, a loaner bed, a view of the institution’s air conditioning unit. (Smiling ruefully, a hospital chaplain tells of softly singing “Amazing Grace” with a patient, only to hear a gentleman several curtains over take up the refrain.)

As space shrinks in tangible – and maybe intangible — ways, the merest touch, sound or image becomes an instrument of healing. Recently a hospice nurse described one of her final visits with a terminally ill woman with “a hard shell,”

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who, she said, “held things tightly inside, until I asked about the lone picture hanging over her bed.” The woman proudly identified it as the “Little Brown Church” from the beloved 19th-century hymn later made famous by Rosemary Clooney — “No place is so dear to my childhood as the little



brown church in the vale” — and told of how her son had taken her there years ago. As the woman began to reminisce, her tears flowed and she opened up about her pain and her fears.

But how does a healer traverse the distance from success measured on charts to peace proffered in tender touches and familiar hymns? Years ago I was moved by the story of a young doctor in a NICU who, anguished at the sight of a mother weeping with empty arms next to her preemie’s crib, and knowing the child would not/could not survive, removed the wires and tubes, swaddled the infant, and placed the baby in the mother’s arms. It is moments of balance and unknowing, played out from premature birth to final breath, that must challenge the spirit and the spiritual for the health care provider. Where is *their* healing space?

The well-known author and lecturer Henri J.M. Nouwen aptly summed up burn-out as “a convenient psychological translation for a spiritual death.” He spoke from personal experience, his own “dark place.” After 20 years teaching at Yale, Harvard and Notre Dame universities, and feeling dry to the bone, he lumped it all for life with the mentally handicapped residents of the L’Arche community near Toronto, Canada (appropriately called “Daybreak”).

At Daybreak, Nouwen found refreshment among people “who were considered, at best, marginal to the needs of our society... those who don’t demand of us — except to touch and love.” In his book, *In the Name of Jesus*, he described how “These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self — the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things — and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am com-

pletely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of my accomplishments.”

It is summer again. This time I make my way to the food pantry literally stooped with grief and loneliness over the death of my youngest son. (A concerned neighbor asks if I have been checked for osteoporosis ...) God willing, this place will again be a healing space, just as Nouwen found his at Daybreak.

Something — a metallic clang, a shadow — causes me to glance at the dumpster in the parking lot where a volunteer has just tossed a collection of clothing rejects from the thrift store next door. I watch as one of our clients scurries up the surface of the bin and drops

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— HENRI J.M. NOUWEN

down inside, leaving only his feet visible as they cling to the ledge to keep him from tumbling in. Within seconds he re-emerges with a pair of shoes and slips them on. As he turns to give me a sheepish but triumphant grin, I feel a deep urge to run and embrace my dumpster-diving friend whose simplicity has washed over my grief with the coolest and tenderest of touches.

JEAN MONAHAN, a mother and grandmother, resides in St. Louis. She was formerly a pre-med advisor and assistant dean of academic advising for Saint Louis University.

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