

It was just an ordinary day. Well, pretty close anyway. It was a normal procedure, gallstones are not life threatening, painful maybe, but not life threatening. Kisses, hugs, an overnight bag; nothing out of the ordinary

It wasn't until they tried to remove them that they discovered more. Not gallstones – but cancer. The entire gallbladder had to be taken and what was a simple procedure became a life changing event, for everyone.

Fine one day, terminal cancer the next.

I was washing the dishes when the phone call came. I could hear in her voice something was wrong. My hands lay stationary in the sudsy water as I held the phone between my shoulder and my ear. I hung up the phone and continued my washing. I used to do this all the time with the children in my daycare place them at the kitchen sink when the pain of separation from their parents caused them to weep.

We didn't get to talk until well past 11pm. I was there sooner of course but there was the family, the kids, baths, more dishes, toys to pick up, laundry to be folded. We nestled ourselves into the calmness that the ordinary tasks of our lives can bring. The routines that we can move through without nary a thought. Working meditations, I call them.

The tea carafe between us, our hands warmed by our mugs, we sat in silence until she said, "I had a dream. I had a dream that gave me comfort when I was in a deep sleep." "There were others", she said. "I wasn't alone and God said not to be afraid. Our suffering had meaning."

We held hands and cried.

"I don't want this, she said. I didn't choose this. I wish God could take it away."

There's a well known Zen parable about a man crossing a field when he sees a tiger charging at him. He runs as fast as he can but the tiger keeps gaining. Finally he reaches a cliff and has no choice but to leap. He grasps a branch hanging from the side of the cliff thinking he has saved himself, only to look down to see another tiger. Looking to his left, a few feet off, he sees the most beautiful and ripe strawberry he has ever seen. Letting go of the branch with one hand he stretches himself to grasp it. Just barely reaching with the tips of his fingers, he brings it to his lips. It is the sweetest strawberry he has ever tasted.

Tigers either way. In such a situation, one looks for blessings,

I had this strange feeling sitting with my friend, this uncanny feeling that something terrible, but beautiful was happening all at once.

"I don't know why I feel this so strongly", I said, "but I think you're going to teach all of us how to die well."

“Yes”, she said, “I think I am.”

It was if we had been privileged to know her death and found it the most terrible and beautiful thing all at once.

Have you ever heard of hurricane chasers? They are a group of scientists who follow hurricanes, trying to get as close as they can to measure its wind velocity, and to try and understand the hurricane’s nature. There is something exhilarating and terrifying about it at the same time. An 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Edmond Burke, defined these times as, “not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror”.

Simon, James and John have gone fishing as they always do. There’s not been much luck today and that’s certainly disappointing, but nothing tragic; worrisome, maybe, but certainly not a crisis.

Their nets have been cast off all day, and pulled back in with nothing to show. Nets are precious to each fisherman because they are the source of their lives. Without them, they and their families will starve. Their nets are their life line. Tossed and pulled in, tossed and pulled in, each time disappointed - each toss hopeful.

It’s just another day for Simon Peter. It seems perhaps he has met Jesus before or at least heard of him because he complies without question. “Out in the boat? Sure why not.”

“Let your nets down Simon”, Jesus tells him and Simon begins to explain how try as they might the fishing’s no good today.

“You must go deeper”, Jesus says, “Into the deep waters.”

The deep waters were not actually places the fishermen liked to go. Sea monsters were in the deep, chaos threatened to over turn boats and if you capsized, it is very unlikely you’d survive.

“Go deeper”, Jesus says.

Simon rows into the deep waters and fish seem to practically jump into the boats themselves. In fact, too much fish fills the nets and the boats begin to sink. One moment life is good, the next frightening, as you are faced with this strange, but amazing phenomena and your boat starts to sink.

“Enough” the fishermen are yelling.

And amidst the outpouring of fish, Simon begs Jesus to go away, “Stop all of this and go away.” Simon doesn’t want to meet God yet. He is overcome with feelings of awe and terror all at the same time.

“Do not be afraid” Jesus says, “do not be afraid”

We never know when to expect God. And we never know to what we’ll be called. Moses was minding his business tending his sheep when the bush burst into flames; Abraham and Sarah were old when they had Isaac and Jacob was running away from a brother he’d betrayed. Joseph was

hated by his brothers and sold into slavery; David was a kid with a sling shot, Peter was a fisherman and my friend Lynne is a professor with cancer.

We all want to know the formula for a good life. We read magazines with quick fix techniques, or manuals for dummies, or watch cooking shows to learn just how much curry that recipe really needs.

If we're putting something together, we quickly scan the instructions and get to the how to – you know, the bullets. We approach life the same way. We all want a learner's manual, the steps and techniques to ensure a good life. We approach life like a problem and go about the business of finding the solutions: 6 steps to a flatter belly, 8 steps to a better you, 5 steps to finding your mate.

We choose to see life as a technical matter. But there's no technical solution for fish mysteriously jumping into a boat or a rhyme or reason why my friend has cancer. The only thing left to consider is the mystery itself. If we stay in the shallow waters we may feel safe, but we'll never know the riches of the deep, the mystery of God.

At some point in life all of us are confronted with something that is so powerful, bewildering, joyous or terrifying that all our "efforts" are futile to fix it. Each of us are brought to the cliffs edge, to the sinking boat. At such moments, we can either back away in bitterness and confusion, or leap forward into mystery.

And what does that leap of faith ask of us? Presence. That we fully, consciously, whole heartedly give ourselves to it. We can participate in the mystery only by letting go of solutions.

Author Phillip Simmons calls this "learning to fall." Like the game I spoke of last week where you open your arms and just fall back, trusting others to catch you, he suggests that we learn to fall from ego, from our identities, our reputations, our precious selves; that we fall from ambitions, fall from grasping and at least temporarily, fall from reason.

And what do we fall into? Passion, terror, joy. We fall into humility, compassion, emptiness, oneness with forces larger than ourselves, into oneness with others. We fall into the presence of the sacred, into godliness, into mystery, into our better, diviner selves.

Jesus is asking Simon Peter to learn how to fall. To go deeper, into the unknown, into the terrifying yet beautiful deep waters and let down his nets. For when he does, when he falls away from fear, away from self, away from ego, he falls into God and a deeper meaning to life. His nets will be full of abundant life.

I stand in amazement of my friend. She is learning to fall with extraordinary grace. Everything she learns she shares, she teaches. She has created a website so others with this rare form of cancer can come together and share. She talks about her journey, her fears, her sorrows, her anger, her whys. She talks about her illness with a matter of fact façade, much like we talk about what we had for breakfast. She has brought normalcy to her disease, encouraging questions, encouraging conversation. And she tells others, "don't be afraid to talk to me just because I have cancer. I still want to know about you. I still care what happens in your life. Don't let the cancer come between us."

Christmas Eve, sitting in services, Lynne had a call. She was to create an intentional community. She emailed her circle of friends and asked us if we'd like to join her. She suggested we read a book by Marianne Williamson, "The Gift of Change: Spiritual Guidance for Living your Best Life" and create a blog, a sort of chat room, on the internet. The Introduction to the blog reads: We are a group of disparate individuals who wish to live more intentionally.

Lynne is calling to each of us to examine our lives, our actions, our words, and how Love overcomes Fear.

"Do not be afraid", Jesus says again, and again and again.

I know our Christian theology speaks to the resurrection as the glorious promise after the fall. But Phillip Simmons suggests that perhaps the first lesson is the victory in learning how to fall, to find victory in falling well, falling into life, falling into each other, falling into the terrifyingly beautiful moments of our lives when we sink or swim, when we hang from the branch between twin tigers and wonder, "do I hang on until I fall to my death, or do I take my last breath tasting the strawberry?"

Spiritual masters say that in order to grow, we need more tigers. Simon Peter faced the deep waters and then went on to face a life with Jesus; a life that asked him to fall from his way of life, to fall from his family, and to fall into deep waters, and hard journeys, to fall into the terrifyingly beautiful mystery of Christ.

Because that is how we catch others, not by staying in the shallows waters, but by venturing into the unknown, mystery of God. We catch others by who we are ourselves. How we live our lives, what we hold as important, what we are willing to risk to be our best selves.

#### References:

*Learning to Fall, The Blessings of an Imperfect Life* by Philip Simmons