

Section 2: Like a Bridge over Troubled Water: Mentors, Family, friends

Vignettes: Only 1-2 paragraphs each

- A. Includes "Where is Home?" and three others
- B. Includes "We all need a Joseph" and three others
- C. Includes "If Marjorie can do it, I can too!" and three others

Lyrics to inspire this section:

Like a Bridge Over Troubled Water

When you're weary, feeling small
When tears are in your eyes, I'll dry them all (all)
I'm on your side, oh, when times get rough
And friends just can't be found
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down

Sail on silver girl
Sail on by
Your time has come to shine
All your dreams are on their way
See how they shine
Oh, if you need a friend
I'm sailing right behind
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will ease your mind
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will ease your mind

Simon and Garfunkel

A. Where is home?

Where IS home? Both my concept of family and home have been sources of intense reflection for me over the years. When people ask "Are you going home for Christmas?" it raises the issue again, where's home? For more than 30 years I've had no family home with a parent or sibling. So it raises the question of what is home for me. Conversations, reflections, and spiritual direction have all helped me see that home is a symbol for where we are loved and accepted, where we

truly belong and where we can rest and be revitalized. So for me now, home is three things; first it's with those who love and accept me (my dear friends); second it's where I rest and revitalize (my own nest, my condo). Yet primarily home is where God is, which is everywhere in my life, so wherever I am, if I am aware of God—or even if I'm not-- I am home.

God bless people who mentor others

Mentors can make all the difference in a person's life. The research even shows that. I've been particularly graced with several strong women mentors who were courageous enough to challenge my assumptions and teach me wisdom. From Liz I learned not to look for raisins in a hardware store. From Kay I learned to embrace my shadows. From Mary Sharon I learned how much God loves me. From Marjorie I learned a new way to think. From Aunt Lill I learned not to let men control me. From Thelma I learned that sewing is a love language. From Jan I learned that women can change the world. From Margaret I learned how to pierce the darkness. From Mom I learned to trust in angels. From Teresa I learned that "all is gift." From Masha I learned to honor my art. From Hildegard I learned to not give up. Wisdom of the ages. (Men had mentored me too, but I'm highlighting the women this time!).

Friends

Ah friends. My friends. Soul friends. One of my finest experiences on earth. To "click" with someone, a new friend perhaps—or to re-click with an old one is like wearing your favorite shirt and drinking your favorite mocha coffee at your favorite hangout. It just fits. It's also true that some friends come and go, others just wear out. But best friends (BFFs), the best fits, can stick with you no matter what. And who each of you is outside of the friendship is not essential. The friendship is what matters.

Friends are not blood family so they do not have the same obligations or perhaps connections as family, for better or worse. Yet they can act as an extended family. As Frederick Buechner reminds us, even God made friends with humans; for example speaking to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to a friend (Ex 33:11), and calling Abraham his friend (Is 41:8). Jesus even says "You are my friends if you do what I command you—love one another (John 15:12-15). So I savor my friends. I want them to know how much they matter. After all is said and done, they are better and longer lasting than any mocha.

My idea of family needed to change

What is family? Why does it matter? My mother died when I was in my early twenties. My dad died when I was thirty-nine. My brother and I were estranged for years. I have no biological children. So how do I conceive of a family? Where do I really belong, for that's a lot of what family is about. It's not been easy because I've had to be intentional about it, and it gets especially lonely on holidays. But my solution has been well worth it. I "adopt" family members. I've got stepsons, adopted sons and daughters, brothers, sisters, moms and dads. I have deep and rich friends, especially women, who seem even closer than sisters. And I have young people who I love and who invite me into their lives as mother, mentor or muse. And of course, I am God's beloved. God is my instant family, always present. I'm still sad that my mom died so young but I also credit that loss with a more expanded experience of family and belonging. For that I am grateful, sometimes even on holidays.

B. We all need a Joseph

The Joseph of the nativity story is a favorite of mine. He's a hard worker from a small town. He falls in love. He survives a holy scandal by trusting God and his dream life. He acts courageously to protect his family. He remains a stable rock for a lot of people. He is humble and faithful, even when his wife and kid get all the attention. He cares about bigger things than himself. He is a consummate gentleman.

We all need a Joseph in our lives. I have one. He's become my artist mentor and also a friend. On the surface there may not be obvious reasons for us to connect. He's southern. I'm northern. He's a man. I'm a woman. He's black, descended from slaves. I'm white, descended from Swedish farmers. We've never even met face to face. But what we do have in common is our love for fiber arts and faith. He's a tapestry artist and I'm an icon maker. We both adore God. My Joseph is stable, humble, supportive, courageous, gently challenging, loving, artistic, encouraging and optimistic. He's a miracle in my life. He's like a ray of sunshine. Maybe that's why his nickname is Sunshine Joe!

Outrageous Ralph

A large man with flowing white hair and a waxed curling mustache. A man who'd lived much of his life on the margins. And here he was stirring up conversations and asking difficult questions at a big active suburban church. He

asked a friend of mine and me to go with him for a poetry reading group at one of the men's state prisons. Naively we said yes. Although that experience only lasted a few months it led to a similar experience at the women's prison. And that led me to volunteer there for several years. I learned a lot from women in prison about generosity and survival. But what I learned from Ralph mattered even more. He taught me to face my fears of people who are different from me and to open my heart to learn from them.

Fear of people who are different from us is a national pastime or maybe a national disease. And we so rarely have an opportunity to get to know someone who we would normally not know—or be afraid of. So how do we connect? Sometimes with just a fluky chance to try something different, like I had with Ralph.

The Black Madonna

Most religions have a female deity who balances the male and brings another perspective to the tradition. Christianity has struggled with this because of its patriarchy, yet it has somewhat embraced the female holiness of Mary, Lady Wisdom (Sophia in Greek), our Lady of Guadalupe, Shekinah (female Hebrew name for God), and the Holy Spirit. I am especially drawn to a side of Mary called the Black Madonna. All over Europe pilgrims come to her shrines for succor, strength and healing. She is the dark skinned patron and mother of sorrows, one who knows suffering and darkness, but who does not succumb. She offers calm and a way through.

I spent two contemplative days in her presence at a Benedictine monastery in the mountains of Spain during a difficult time in my life and we bonded our hearts. I felt her warmth, her compassion and her courage. She asked me to bring the same calm and strength to others in the dark. How could I refuse?

Children are a generous gift

I experience children as a generous gift and a large opportunity for growth. Children offer us insights into the world and into ourselves that are like no other experience. They are the source of some of our greatest joys and our deepest challenges. My life with children and young people has been as a stepmother, an extra mother, mentor or muse. I've also come to see that my written works are my "children," who invited me to birth them, raise and release them with intention. I am deeply indebted to all forms of mothering I have been granted.

What I have learned from these mothering experiences is to be grateful for the opportunity to be an extra witness and a presence to a young person's life, to carry the events and memories I share with them close to my heart. I have learned to value them as individuals and not make the parenting experience all about me (which was difficult at times). I've learned to be honest with myself and with them, to hold a space for them when they disappear for a time or forever, to be a source of forgiveness and mercy. I've learned to absorb the love that flows into my life from theirs and to shout for joy within when I recognize that my love mattered. Children are a generous gift and a large opportunity for growth.

C. "If Marjorie can do it, I can too!"

I've noticed that the voice of the culture can drown out my own voice quite easily if I'm not attuned to my own voice. So sometimes I need assistance. For instance, in my college and graduate school years I got the impression that there were good things to read and then there was a whole realm of "other lesser" writing, deemed frivolous or worse; mysteries, science fiction, westerns, romance stories. Even though I grew up loving Nancy Drew mysteries I felt they were now suspect. So I dutifully refrained...until I visited my college advisor in her home in Oregon. I was shocked to see a whole bookcase filled with classic mystery novels; Dorothy Sayers, Josephine Tey, Sherlock Holmes, Ngaio Marsh. The reason this was so shocking was that Marjorie, my college advisor, was the smartest, most academic woman I'd ever met, so if she could read mysteries, I certainly could! How liberating. To this day, a well written, well plotted, character driven mystery is my favorite read. (I. Penny, J. Winspear, D. Sayers, L. King, A. Perry, PD James.)

In her very own voice

There are moments in our lives when something so astounding happens that time seems to stand still. We know we are in the presence of something way beyond us. We get a similar emotional reaction just recalling it. It could be a perfect game in baseball, a sudden recognition of a life changing truth, the moment of birth, a visit from beyond, a near death experience—whatever it is, it matters.

My moment was standing in front of a plexiglass covered pedestal in a library of a castle thirty miles outside of Madrid, Spain. I had spent six months tracking

down the original manuscript of a spiritual mentor of mine, Teresa of Avila. I was anxious and excited approaching this library. Would it really be there? How would I find it? As I entered the library and walked its length, there it was. In the middle, on that pedestal. Teresa's handwritten manuscript of a book that had deeply affected my life. Not only her book but also her wooden pen case, ink well and pen. Awe is too calm a word for what I felt. I felt her presence. But something more astounding happened as I stood there. I heard her say, within my psyche, "My dear, power and courage and love. One without the others is nothing." She speaks to me still.

"Basta, basta, basta"

When I need bolstering in a difficult day I chant the words, "My entire life is in God's hands and it all unfolds as you intend" or I sing "I want Jesus to walk with me." They help soothe me. My favorite and most humorous example of a soul soother comes from the life of Teresa of Avila in the 1500s, a saint and one of only two women doctors of the church. Her life was full and difficult, reforming her Catholic order and setting up fifteen new houses for her nuns, sometimes bringing nuns to these homes in the night so they wouldn't be harassed. And she did all of this during the inquisition, having to appear before the inquisitors on several occasions. She even had Jewish blood in her family so it was precarious. She loved the Spanish phrase "Solo Dios Basta" which means that God alone suffices or the shorter version, God is enough. She shortened it even more, focusing on just the word enough! As she walked through the monastery grounds she could be heard muttering, "Basta, basta, basta." And she ought to know.

"You betcha. Ya sure!"

If I am really observant of my life—and honest—I'd have to say that who I've become, the woman I believe God intended me to be, is more the result of what happened in the difficult or dark times of my life than the light ones. My Swedish dad would say, "It's not what we do when times are good but what we do when times are bad that makes the difference." You betcha. Ya, sure!