

Section 3: Creativity, Nature, Play

Vignettes: Only 1-2 paragraphs each

- A. Includes "God's humor" and two others
- B. Includes "Teaching the spirituality of writing" and two others
- C. Includes "Baseball is my happy place" and two others

Lyrics to inspire this section:

The Love of God

Could we with ink the ocean fill
And were the skies of parchment made
Were every stalk on earth a quill
And everyone a scribe by trade

To write the love of God above
Would drain the oceans dry
Nor could the scroll contain the whole
Though stretched from sky to sky

O love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure
The saints' and angels' song

Portions of a hymn by Frederick Lehman, 1917.

A. God's humor

For many people this phrase, God's humor, sounds like an oxymoron. God and humor? Not one of the characteristics most of us learned about God. Loving, kind, challenging, faithful. For others there were quite negative behaviors depicting God. I'm here to tell you that the best secret I've learned about God is God's sense of humor. And the closer my relationship with God, the better and more alive I find God's humor.

Sometimes it's just little things, like when I'm worried about a health issue and the scripture card I draw from my packet reads "Here stands a woman completely whole by the power of Jesus." Little coincidences are all marks of God's humor in my experience. Nudges of joy to remind us we are thought of

and cared for. Chuckles of love. I especially like how God finds my lost items. I start looking and searching. I hear this little voice inside me saying "Stop looking. I'll bring it to you." But I keep searching and not finding. When I finally stop looking and trust that it will show up, sure enough, it's in a place where I wouldn't have thought to look but for some other reason I come upon it. In those cases, I turn to God and say "You think you're pretty funny, don't you?"

Beauty as a thin place

A thin place is where the veil between this world and the eternal is temporarily lifted and the two conspire for good. This can happen in deep conversations, in nature, in music, in sacred spaces and in art/beauty. I love when a musician is singing or playing from a deep place within themselves, beyond the technique. When I feel that, I notice something different about the music itself. I encounter it and absorb it rather than just hearing it.

This happens to any of us as we create from a deeper place within, whether gardening, cooking, working clay, taking photos. With my own fabric icons I've noticed that if I am quiet and pray for about forty minutes before entering my studio, a different process emerges. My art interacts with me, as if I've honored its voice and presence. And in that frame of mind, I've encountered beauty as a thin place.

Distilling your life into a memory box

I've been invited into an intriguing decision, whether or not to create a memory box of my life. Not for my ashes but for my life. The reason would be to choose my most cherished memories of my life, and to store those as mementos in a handmade box, made in the shape of a small lantern. It's such a new idea I'm still wrapping my mind around it. I do know I'd include the theme of my life "O Love that will not let me go" but how do I distill the rest? I think less is more so I might somehow represent love, beauty and healing. A bit of color or texture, some humor, a photo or two, the names of my women ancestors and my friends/family, and maybe a prayer and a baseball ticket! Distilling a life into a handmade 7 x 9 inch lantern!

B. Teaching the spirituality of writing

As a writer I am aware of how difficult and, at times, fragile it is to write what is clamoring to burst forth from within us. I think of it as putting our souls on

paper. One writer famously said that writing is like picking up a pen and opening a vein. And one careless or mean spirited criticism can silence a voice forever. I had learned that our souls beg to speak but can be thwarted easily. I had allowed my own creativity to be thwarted several times and it seemed that a more intentional spiritual process might be helpful to me and to others. So I designed a writing course called, *The Spirituality of the Writing Process*, or “Wrestling with your Angels.”

My guidelines for the class went something like this: “We are here to plumb as much of our depths as possible. Our process will be to learn how to wrestle with our angels, whose only desire is to take us to our best writing. We also need the courage to face our inner critic. I will create a safe place to do that, with no random feedback. But in exchange for this safe environment I ask you to take the largest risk you are capable of taking. And then tell us when you did it.” They did just that: took the risks. It was a gift to hear the truth and beauty of their stories. And it wasn’t until later that I saw the relevance of my class guidelines to my own life as well.

“What is it with me and these wild birds?”

I know people whose pets are family. Pets help us live longer and keep us healthier. What would we do without them? And what is it about the four-legged creatures that draw us so? It’s certainly the love (although most cat owners need to look for more than love from their independent felines). It is about companionship, a warm furry presence. I think it also taps into a part of us that likes the magical connection with these “knowing presences.” It may even tap into a bit of our wild, untamed side since our pets are ancestors of the wild. I’ve been mostly a cat person in my adult life—and what a gift they have been. A dear memory is of Mr. Nelson, my large gentleman cat, taking a yoga nap with me by lying on his back in what I called the inverted lotus position!

But my most mysterious relationship has been with wild birds, my totems. They seem like angels, breaking through the veil to speak directly to me. Robins, sparrows, cardinals, owls, heron, eagles. They have settled on my hand and held very still before important events or crucial meetings, appeared occasionally as messengers from those who have gone to the great beyond, sat on my shoulder for forty minutes as I walked along, guided me on a path in the woods during a time of decision making, sang certain songs that sent me a message, stared at me from close range. I welcome them. I feel their presence. I receive their messages. I delight in their connection. I do not attempt to explain it. I am utterly grateful.

Mother Mississippi

Nature is balm for my soul. Trees speak to me. Birds are my totem. Woods and water surprise me with their gifts. Flowers and colors enthrall me. Even storm clouds fascinate me. I don't study nature. I absorb it. So it is no surprise that the mighty Mississippi River near where I live is a place of wonder and hope for me. The river moves, it has deep undercurrents, it makes life-giving sounds, it is home for many birds and critters. It supports life. The river holds special meaning for me in two major ways. I go to the river to make big decisions and commitments. I release what I need to let go of into her current. I claim what I need to embrace as I stand on her banks. And my holiest experience of the river is that my friend, Michael, and I meet there to share our lives. And when we are not there together, we each feel the spirit of the other there with us. Mother Mississippi is my river of life.

C. Baseball is my happy place

I think we all have places or experiences that are almost guaranteed to make us happy even on rainy days or in rainy years! Baseball is one of those happy places for me. My baseball preference is the Minnesota Twins at Target field, the classiest little stadium in America. The view lines, St Paul and Minne figures, the shimmering wall off right field, the team spirit, the smells, the organ, the walk-on music, the crack of the bat—I love all of it. As a child I watched the team on TV with my dad, so it holds a special place in my heart, even though he usually fell asleep by the fourth inning. But when I was in my forties, my stepson, a sports writer, taught me how to keep score. That sealed the deal. It keeps me in the game and it is a nice record of historic moments. Baseball also reminds me that, as we round the bases of life and sometimes get called out, the goal of the whole game is to come home.

Beauty: the “bigger” picture

Nature and its beauty is just made to be shared; photos, poems, cards, bouquets. Since our family spent a great deal of time around water and woods I was comfortable in nature. At the lake cabin my father and his friends built for us in the 50s, I would often go for walks in the woods by myself and I always found a surprise from God there; moss, mushrooms, birds, bugs, flowers. On one nature hike I brought back a lovely bouquet for my mom, without knowing that I had picked six Lady Slippers, (Moccasins) the state flower, which meant I could be

subject to a stiff fine for each flower. My mother accepted this beautiful gift and promptly put the flowers in water, thanking me for the thoughtfulness. I think she saw the bigger picture, of my yearning for beauty and the gift. Yet I understood that in the future I needed to leave them in the ground for others to enjoy! I've had a fondness for the beauty of Lady Slippers ever since.

Zagorsk ignited a small flame within me

Sometimes it takes years for a vision or a dream that is planted in our psyches to come to fruition. Maybe it's timing. Maybe luck. Who knows the mysterious process that brings memories back to our lives just when we are ready for them. In 1991 I visited a small Russian Orthodox seminary and church in Zagorsk, Russia, just six weeks before the coup. It was, I think, the only working seminary at the time and we got to observe an orthodox service. When we walked into the worship space there were no pews. We stood. We were surrounded, floor to ceiling, by beautiful hand-painted Russian icons of the holy family and the apostles. Beautiful Russian chant music emanated from a choir that we could not see, behind wooden grillwork. It was far outside of my religious experience, and so focused on the senses I was mesmerized. It made an indelible impression on my brain and ignited a small flame within me.

But it wasn't until 15 years later that it had a more personal impact on me. I was drawn to making my own art icons, first on paper and then using fabric to make quilted wall hangings. They were contemporary and based on Biblical stories so they were different from the traditional icons I saw in the Russian church, but they were distinct icons for me—inviting me into the art in a sacred way and then pointing me and the viewer to God. They initiated a long and satisfying artistic period in my life. The small flame ignited at a precarious time in the Soviet Union became a fire in my soul.