

Section 4: Finding God in the Dark

Vignettes: Only 1-2 paragraphs each

- A. Includes "Talking to God at 3 AM" and three others
- B. Includes "Healing estrangements" and two others
- C. Includes "Joy emerges from pain well attended" and three others
- D. Includes "Get out of the car" and two others
- E. Includes "A stunning question" and two others

Prayer to inspire this section:

My Prayer in the dark

Help me, my Beloved, to befriend the darkness, the grief, the fear, the loss, the betrayal, the lingering lost hope, the anticipated dread, the inevitable endings. And then help me to stay present, without shrinking too far back, long enough to gaze up at the stars, representing those beloved souls who have pierced the darkness ahead of me. Show me how to be still in the dark and trust the reverence of the impending dawn. Amen

A. Talking to God at 3 AM

Why is it that so many people awaken at 3 AM? Someone told me that the liver has completed its work and there is a natural lull. I don't know. But in my spiritual life, that time of morning seems to be when God can best get my attention with no distractions. On one such occasion, I was awakened and felt mad at God. So I voiced my anger. The response I heard like a whisper within me was "Do you not see this time too, as sacred?" I made it clear that I did not feel like sacred things were happening, after six years of working on an unhealthy relationship with no apparent change. I just wanted God to give me what I wanted or to give me more understanding. God gave me more understanding. "For what I am asking you to do in the world, you need more than six years of courage. You need prolonged courage." That was not happy news to my ears but I understood that there was a bigger picture. Within a short time, I found out what God wanted me to do, and, of course, God was right. I had to develop deeper courage to face higher stakes in my work life. I also found out that God's grace was, indeed, sufficient and it solved a childhood conundrum about God's grace that went all the way back to confirmation.

Dry Bones

There was a multi year segment of time in my life in which many things fell apart. And also—eventually—many things fell together in new ways. The Phoenix rising out of the ashes or as I affectionately describe it, going through the Wall. During that time I wondered how to encounter God since many of the “sunny” scripture passages didn’t speak to me at all, nor did most of the gloomy, angry or shaming passages. I can’t quite remember how I came upon the old Ezekiel 37 passage about those dry bones that slowly came back from the dead, but it was the story that spoke to me most fully. I also remembered the old spiritual, “dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones, now hear the word of de Lord.” So sometimes I would just hum that song instead of praying a more focused prayer.

I was especially drawn to a verse at the end of that chapter, and at my spiritual director’s suggestion, I prayed with just that verse, one line at a time. I ended up praying with it for several years. It reads like this (Ezekiel 37:14): “I will put my Spirit within you, and you will live, and I will place you in your own land; then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it, says the Lord.” I would take just one phrase like “I will put my spirit within you” and ask God to show me how the spirit was coming alive within me. Then I would watch and write anything in my journal that I noticed about feeling more alive. Slowly, sometimes painfully slowly the verse started coming alive within me. I could see that this slow growth, the slow work of God, was transforming my dry “dead” bones into a more vibrant life. Now when I think back on that time, it was one of my richest times of transformation. And I still refer back to that verse and reclaim it, chuckling at the image of the bones being aroused from a dead sleep.

High school memories haunted me for thirty-five years

Some folks discover their gifts in high school and they soar, others peak in high school, and others, like me find ourselves later. I began to bloom in college and beyond. It’s not that I didn’t like high school. I did. I had good friends and I was active and I did relatively well in school. But high school had a much more narrow range of what was popular and acceptable behavior. So I have embarrassing memories of what I did in high school to be more with the crowd or to seem like I belonged when inside I really didn’t feel that. These strong memories lingered after high school so when each reunion came around I found myself fearful because even walking up to the reunion party setting, I could feel myself being pulled back into who I was in high school, and that was not the self I wanted to be. It took me about thirty-five years to be really comfortable at a

high school reunion. Now I love my classmates. And I can now see that high school left an indelible impression on my psyche.

#Metoo; a sign of our times

#Metoo is bringing up a sad commentary on our culture; but one that continues and is certainly not new. Story one: true confession. Three of my bosses came on to me sexually when I was in my twenties. One physically assaulted me. I was petrified. I was the only wage earner in my marriage and when I obliquely referred to our working relationship not working for me my boss threatened me, saying he was going to talk to his boss about me. I went to his boss' boss (a no-no in organizations) and eventually got a different job, but I never mentioned the harassment. Story two: One Thanksgiving, in the nineties at the dinner table, our family somehow got on the topic of sexual harassment. There were five women and five men present, ages 25 to 70. To our astonishment, everyone except the matriarch, had been sexually harassed by bosses or roommates of the same or opposite gender. This occurred in the fields of education, military, business and social service. In the words of the old folk song by Pete Seeger, "When will we ever learn, when will we ever learn?"

B. Healing estrangements

Nothing is quite as fraught with conflicting emotions as estrangements in relationships. Anger, hurt, regrets, resentment, pride. Estrangements strain and even sever relationships and, though we rarely talk about them, they are quite common. I've had several estrangements; some have healed, others are still waiting for healing. Some were reconciled, others not. What to do about estrangements and how to do it are big issues and warrant a spiritual consideration. BTW, this is the single most visited topic on my blog!

There is an alternative to the lingering pain of unreconciled estrangements. There is a healing process but it takes a rethinking of our natural tendencies. I usually start with my wounded feelings and try to think of actions I can do to fix things or to get the other person to see what they have done to hurt me, and apologize. Finally when all else fails I turn to God. So the opposite may be worth trying! When I start with God and take my estrangement to prayer, in the quiet I often find more life-giving ways to deal with the estrangement and not make it all about getting what I want or expecting too much.

For example, my brother and I were estranged for years due to untreated alcoholism. When I realized that nothing I had done to work things out made any difference, I took it to God. What emerged was a suggestion to make a photo album of my brother's first 25 years of life and take it to him on his birthday, expecting nothing from him but offering this as a gift. I would never have even imagined doing this before I brought it to God. When I brought the album to my brother, he looked through the whole thing and responded with one sentence, "You've put a lot of work into this." I later found out that he kept the album in his truck and showed it to his friends. We did not become friends or reconcile as a result of my gift, but it did open a door for a brief encounter during his dying process, for which I am grateful. Reconciliation is not always possible because that takes both sides, But taking this spiritual approach I was more likely to have an open stance towards him and experience a state of grace no matter what happened. Tamra Koehler and I developed a model for walking people through this process of healing from estrangements. For details see my web site www.janethagberg.com Under the heading Learn, scroll down to estrangements

The sound of angel wings

I remember during my divorce and the move from my home of fifteen years, sitting on the basement steps in the dark, in tears, afraid, alone, despondent. Calling out to God. I did not see God or hear words that comforted me. But I did hear and sense a sound like that of wings moving the air and swishing around me. At first I was afraid they were bats but later I came to experience them as God's messengers—angel presences to guide and accompany me into and through this darkness to a more spacious life; a new land, my own land, infused with God's Spirit. The theme verse that first came to me during this period of my life still sings to me; "I will put my Spirit within you, and you will live. And I will place you in your own land. Then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it," says the Lord.

What to do in times of desolation (dark and difficult times)

Wise principles of St Ignatius (16th century, saint, founder of the Jesuit order) quoted from *The Inner Compass* by Margaret Silf.

1. Tell God how you feel and ask for help.
2. Seek out companionship.
3. Don't go back on decisions you made in consolation (when times were good)
4. Stand still and remember your inner map.
5. Recall a time of consolation and go back to it in

your imagination. 6. Look for someone who needs your help, and turn your attention toward them. 7. Go back to 1...

C. Joy emerges from pain well attended

I do not enjoy pain. In fact I usually try to avoid it. Yet I've learned that, when I face into fear, pain or loss something else opens within me and I frequently emerge from the experience with a deeper appreciation of myself, of others and of God. Many times this process has released something like celebration, freedom, a burden made light, a new courage revealed, a deeper stability. And that all feels, strangely enough, like joy. I use the phrase "joy emerges from pain well attended."

I accompanied an aunt-like friend of mine on her life journey for 43 years. In her dying process she became demanding, accusatory and at times abusive. I had to make an excruciating decision to stop contact with her towards the end and find others to tend to her. This was difficult because of the guilt since I was her power of attorney and executor. Yet as she died and I sought healing from that experience, I noted that owning my decision as well as my faithfulness over the years and then reclaiming my love for her, caused a sense of deep beauty to bloom within me. The best way I can describe it is that I entered into a creative renaissance in my life.

From victim to healer: a transformation

I said to my therapist, "I'm too smart to be a victim." She gently told me that smarts had nothing to do with it! I was a victim of emotional abuse and verbal intimidation that I seemed unable to stop or counter. But over a number of years and with strong support from her and my spiritual director, I found my way out of victim hood. I learned and travelled on a transforming progression of healing stages.

Simply put, these were my steps: From being a victim (seeing *no* choices) to becoming a survivor (choosing more stable life-giving ways to live). Then I moved to being a victor (no longer a candidate for abuse but now for health) and then to being a healer (helping others see ways of growth and strength). Finally I experienced the role of master healer (teaching others to be healers so wellness can spread farther). Denial and shame may have deterred me from healing at first but learning the path of healing allowed me to use my therapist's mentoring, and my own smarts, wisely. Amen.

“We tried everything”

In my marriage, when we hit very difficult times, I thought if we just tried hard enough and found the right professional resources we would heal. I even had some personal pride about it, for us to be role models for other couples. We had great therapists. We both had spiritual directors. We went to marriage encounter. We even found a new treatment model. We worked on our marriage on and off for years. In the end none of it was enough to save our marriage. I grieve that. And I've learned an important truth from it as well. I have developed humility and I have compassion for anyone else who tries everything, whether it be in child rearing, health, work, mental illness or marriage and it doesn't work. And perhaps I can even acknowledge, in my most self-compassionate moments, that I became more of who I was intended to be by things not working out.

Delectable pain

I like some change. I even think it is good for me. But that's usually the kind of change I initiate. Losses or change that I have no say about or which are hard for me to face are another story altogether. Things like releasing a friend, leaving a job, a church, a home, a committed relationship or the death of a loved one. These are, as we say, gut-wrenching losses. I try to avoid them.

And yet...what I've found when I get underneath the grief and fear, is this. If I really liked/loved or respected the person or organization or experience or place I am leaving or losing, having loved or learned so long and well, this loss is part of the price I pay for that strong and deep investment. I've lost homes, which I still love. I've lost friends whose dying process brought us much closer. I've lost co-authors whose deep imprint on my life is a priceless gift. I've released a few work experiences that transformed my life. I've lost a marriage that brought me to my core and healed me. If I am able to see these truths and take them in, the loss is still there but the pain becomes, in a holy way, delectable.

D. “Get out of the car”

It was late at night, in the country on a gravel road. It felt a bit spooky. Yet I stopped the car and said “Get out of the car.” This short but clear phrase marked the point my life turned in a new direction. I had been in an emotionally abusive relationship with my companion in the car and at that moment, I moved from feeling hopeless and unworthy of better treatment, to a place of inner truth and

courage. I'm not sure what allowed me or caused me, at that moment, to say "no" but I knew I would be different from then on, that I could never fully go back, even if I wasn't sure how I would go forward. I had come home to myself.

I left church to find God

Sometimes my experience of church and God coincide and at other times they seem like sandpaper rubbing against one another. Over the years I've found much healing and love from God—mostly outside of the church through spiritual direction and groups in which more depth and healing are invited. I continue to periodically struggle with church, especially when it becomes isolated, patriarchal, or shame-based. I've left church on sabbatical, I call it, several times, from months to years. The essential things for my faith are intimacy with God, prayer, Eucharist/communion and community. Two or even three of those I can get outside of church. I find "church" in coffee shops, at musical events, in deep conversation, in healing moments. I also feel it is important to give back, and not focus solely on what I get. I give back by bringing my time and gifts to the community and by being a healer in my daily life. A friend calls it stand-in church. I agree.

So why do I still seek a worshipping community to be part of? Because I feel a special touch of the spirit in a word, in music, and in the quiet moments at most of the services I choose to attend. Because I love to kneel at the altar while taking communion and feel Jesus feeding me with the bread and wine. Because I desire the regular rhythm of a community of people worshipping together on the way, walking hand in hand and caring for one another.

"Are you going to have boundaries for the rest of your life?"

Property lines are boundaries between homes that we do not cross without permission. The same holds true for humans. We can have clear boundaries but we need to be conscious of them, and know how to enforce them. My spouse had a habit of pushing my boundaries until I gave in or held tight. Both were difficult for me but my counselor taught me that if I wanted to grow I had to honor my boundaries and thus honor myself.

An example: my spouse misplaced his cash card, which he needed for travel. So I loaned him mine three times when he asked. However, I was then without my card and he was gone for days at a time. A simple phone call to our bank would replace the card, which he didn't get around to doing. So I said, in a calm voice, that I knew he could make that call, and the next time he asked me for my cash

card I would say no. Sure enough a few days later, he asked for my card as he ran out the door to the airport. I said no. Rage ensued. I held my ground—very difficult for me to do in the moment. But miraculously, no more cash card requests. At one point in our marriage he asked me if I was going to have boundaries for the rest of my life. I said, “I certainly hope so.”

E. A stunning question

I was having a conversation with a wise colleague recently, sharing our lives and our current experiences, to see where and how God was at work. I mentioned a transition I was in professionally that was shaking my confidence. I wondered if I would find meaning and identity after I released my current activities since they had been a big part of my life. My friend told me a story about a woman she counseled who was in a difficult situation involving a dating relationship that seemed destined to fail but which she was still pursuing. My friend asked her a simple, but for me, a stunning question. “Do you believe it cannot get any better than this?”

A dark and holy time

The day my husband moved out of our home after twenty years together was a dark day for me, even though I knew it was a necessity. I felt a deep sadness, intense shame and a betrayal of hope and love. I stayed away all day and went to a high school concert with friends that night. As I was commenting on going home to a half empty house, my friend turned to me and said, “I’m not letting you do that alone. I’m coming with you.” And she did. I lived a considerable distance away. We drove in tandem at 10:00 PM to the next phase of my life.

First we walked through all the rooms as I cited things I remembered about each one. I cried. We cried. We held each other and rocked. Gradually we made it up to my bedroom on the second floor. By that time my grief and our presence to it had left us both spent. As we walked around my room I noticed a box of my deceased aunt’s vintage hats. I pulled them out and we began trying them on and modeling them. In a few minutes we were tentatively laughing and posing with those 30s and 40s styles. A generous friend. Raw grief. Empty rooms. My own space. Holy invasion of hats. I knew I was going to be OK.

Great Losses

Great losses; deaths, loss of babies, betrayals, disease, suicide, tragic accidents, estrangement, prison, mental illness, divorce. All of these have a way of shattering us, of casting doubt on all we've held dear. At the time there seems to be little to console us. For me, deep grief rips out a piece of my heart and steals it away. An emptiness prevails. I go numb. I get angry. The lament Psalms become real and familiar. What helps? There are no easy answers in the dark. Sometimes the loss is just too overwhelming. And what helps me may be different from what helps others. When I look back, what helped most may seem deceptively simple yet divinely profound. My best guidance is to bring it all to God and then watch and listen to my heart.

Sometimes a simple hug from a friend matters most to me. Or a meal. Or a call. Or silence together. Or a note. Or a healing story. Or just cleaning the kitchen. Parker Palmer, a wise teacher, said that in his deepest depression a friend came and simply rubbed his feet without saying a word. Deep loss hollows out a space within me. I howl at that truth. At some point I surrender. I allow the hollow space to be hallowed. Slowly, ever so slowly I find solid ground again. In these times of loss, I have to remind myself not to close my heart or withdraw into total isolation. I need to retain enough vulnerability to receive my friends' embraces and hear their loving words. My deep desire is to let God hold me, even in the silence. In that embrace I can more intentionally lean toward the hallowed hollow space.