

## Welcome Home

It's been one hell of a year on both the personal and global front. In March we bury our beautiful and beloved Aunt Beverly after she dies from a debilitating stroke. Thousands of innocents die in senseless wars; hundreds of thousands are injured. There's my tumor and hysterectomy. Oil prices balloon to \$100 a barrel, and the economy collapses. Then, are you ready for this? God and I get a divorce.

It's not the first time we've broken up; we've had issues off and on over the years. When we first got together I was just a kid; I worshiped the ground he floated above. Shields Boulevard Baptist Church was my home. I belonged there with my friends and family. I sang out a longing to be whole, to be healed, to be loved.

*“Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind; Sight, riches, healing of the mind, Yea, all I need, in thee to find, O Lamb of God, I come.”*

Music filled every sad, empty void in my life, those real and imagined.

*“Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care? Precious Savior, still our refuge; take it to the Lord in prayer. In his arms he'll take and shield thee; thou wilt find a solace there.”*

But there was something tenuous about our relationship. For all the assurances of unconditional love, it was pretty easy to piss him off. I had to watch everything I said and

did, because he was always watching, always stalking. I was terrified of losing him; his moods changed faster than the Oklahoma weather.

As the years passed, I grew more and more uncomfortable with the feeling that I couldn't be fully myself. I was a dog begging for a bone, desperate for approval, and I knew I could never measure up. Something was missing. I tried to talk with him about it, and all I got back was “just because,” or “my ways are not your ways,” or “you'll understand it in the sweet bye-and-bye.” Why couldn't God be more like Paul Harvey and fill me in on “the rest of the story?” Did I really have to die before I could get some answers to life's deepest mysteries?

Then, a few years later, as a junior in high school, my friend Ian committed suicide. The Sunday after his death, Mrs. Box, our pastor's wife, was leading our Sunday School lesson. The scripture for the day was from Ephesians, chapter six.

*“Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.”*

Somehow she segued that into the news that Ian was going to hell. Not because of the suicide (I guess God can overlook that), but because Ian was Roman Catholic and not “born again.” It seems that heaven functions much like an exclusive country club, and all sorts of people aren't allowed in. So I pretty much decided that I would rather be in hell with Ian than in heaven with any nasty, mean-spirited God who would send him there. I

stayed with church until I graduated from high school (“you’ll do as I say as long as you live under my roof, young lady”), but it no longer felt like home.

The break-up lasted about nine years. At 27 I’m divorced with two children and dead broke. On a humid July Sunday a new boyfriend takes me to St. Michael's Episcopal church just south of Highway 9 near the banks of the South Canadian River. The sanctuary is modern and has a soaring wooden ceiling that reminds me of the bottom of a boat. The clear glass window behind the altar stretches from floor to ceiling and the view of the river is broken only by a large wooden cross. Everything is foreign to me, so unlike the Baptist churches I attended as a child, and I feel strange. There's an altar and incense, candles and icons. During Holy Communion, an usher stands at the end of my pew. She smiles. We get up and make our way to the front of the church. Someone is strumming a guitar and softly singing.

*“I am the bread of life, he who comes to me shall not hunger, he who believes in me shall not thirst.”*

In front of the alter, there's a short metal rail with red embroidered cushions. I kneel on one covered with a sword, and remember St. Paul's admonition from Ephesians. The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness. What does the sword stand for? I keep one eye on the people kneeling next to me so I'll know what to do. The priest comes by with outstretched hands and whispered words, and my tears start flowing. I ingest the small bite of bread and take the sip of wine, and I'm unable to stand. I'm Lawrence Oates headed for

sure death in an Antarctic blizzard when God invites me to come in out of the cold. He wraps me in a heavy woolen blanket and pours a cup of steaming hot cocoa. I am enveloped by love for the first time in many, many years. My head keeps saying, “this is crazy, you’ve gone insane and over to the dark side.” But my heart is at home. In the dim stillness, in the bread and the wine, in the quiet presence of the community I can see and taste God. And I keep coming back – week after week – to be filled.

But if everything was so great, then why the divorce? How did we get from there to here? When did the good feelings stop?

I guess that's the saddest part of our break-up. The good feelings never left me. My spiritual road map has taken me from being a Bible-thumping, “Jesus died to atone for my sins” Christian fundamentalist to a “What Would Jesus Do?” “love mercy, do justice, walk humbly” evangelical to some mixed-up mishmash of Star Wars theology – God is love, love is a force, may the force be with you. And through it all my church was my home. Week after week I placed my widow's mite in the passing plate, shared the chalice, or ladled out hot soup not because I espouse a particular religious dogma, but because I love and need community. It is the community, and not the teachings, that call me to the best part of myself.

But eventually, my spirit and my mind collided. No longer did the steady stream of pabulum spouted weekly from the pulpit feed me. I couldn't hear or recite the Apostles'

Creed without making an internal translation of “I believe in God, maker of heaven and earth” into “I believe in love, the creative force in the universe.”

I couldn't taste the bread or drink the wine without telling myself that all of life is sacramental and that everything I encounter is an exquisite reminder of the grace inherent in our very existence.

As much as I love Celtic hymns I couldn't sing “*Be Thou my battle-shield, sword for my fight,*” without thinking of St. Paul's armor and cringing. I couldn't sing “*Your eyes are watchful, your ears are list'ning, Your lips are speaking, Friend at my side.,*” without compulsively looking over my shoulder for the God stalker.

And after years of a conscientious and complicated quest to love myself, on Good Friday I could no longer kneel at the foot of a wooden cross and sing the words, “*Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee? 'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee; I crucified thee.*”

No, I did not crucify thee!! And I've sweated too much blood and tears in therapy to wallow in guilt for even a single day.

So God and I go our separate ways.

Divorce is often compared to a death. And as with other deaths, the first year is the hardest. My first Easter without God, my first Christmas without God.

I miss the Feast Day of St. Francis when my faith community gathers in the courtyard, sings a wonderful hymn about salmon, and blesses dogs and cats and guinea pigs with bowlfuls of holy water. I miss the Feast Day of American Independence when we serve up apple pie with cheese slices and sing all four verses of “America the Beautiful,” including verse two, the one George Bush must have overlooked, which is all about mending our flaws and needing more self-control.

I miss holding hands and praying with total strangers; knowing that they are my brothers and sisters, that we share a bond that transcends any racial, sexual, ethnic, or class identity. I miss singing music that transports me to a place where I can be my deepest, truest self.

God be damned! I knew you would get the house, but who are you to keep all the good stuff? I miss my community. I miss my voice.

Then last November I attended a benefit concert Aurora Chorus gave for a young Iraqi boy who had been injured in the 2004 shelling of Fallujah and brought to the US for treatment. Its members are Portland-area women, and its mission is to sing for peace. Throughout the concert I was utterly, unabashedly blown away. Women who sing for peace. Where do I sign up?

I get on the chorus wait list, and receive an invitation to join on January 3<sup>rd</sup>. Within a couple of weeks we begin preparing for our May performance. This year's theme is

“Well-behaved Women Rarely Make History.” Some of the music is hard to sing – it changes keys, has up to eight different parts, and trips me up with crazy syncopated rhythms. A single rehearsal is more of a workout than two hours on an elliptical machine.

Before the fourth rehearsal, Bunny, the membership chair, and very much our den mother, calls a new member orientation. At the meeting, we hardy band of nineteen newbies get a dog and pony show about the Chorus’s structure – the Board of Directors, ACT, section leaders, music librarian, the harmonizers. We learn what we might expect at the retreat, the rules about absences. Bunny is still talking when choir rehearsal starts up in the sanctuary next door (we rent space in a downtown Jewish synagogue). The other members are warming up on the one song we’re supposed to have memorized, “Peace, Salaam, Shalom,” which is sung in a round. From the room where we’re sitting, I can finally hear how the parts weave in and out; floating, falling, melding disparate voices into the vocal equivalent of a Borchelu rug. At the end I want to stand and applaud, but Bunny is still talking.

Finally we’re told to line up by height and walk into the room single file. We process in through the center aisle of the sanctuary between the alto ones and soprano twos, and we form two rows on the short dais where our gifted conductor usually stands. Then the chorus begins to sing.

*“Welcome to the circle. How far have you come? Do you need some company, a candle and a song?”*

I am enveloped by the rich, thick harmony of their voices.

*“Are you feeling weary? Tired of being strong? Welcome to this circle. It’s a place where you belong.”*

One hundred and twenty women sing to me, caress me, love me, accept me. A community of strong, powerful women calls me to the best part of myself.

*“Do you have a burden that feels too much to bear? Do you have a bitterness you don’t know how to share? Do you get too angry to breathe, to laugh, or pray? Well there’s no one in this circle who has never felt this way.”*

I’m the Cheshire cat. My smile nearly splits my face in two. I look across a sea of faces. Strangers catch my eye, hold my gaze, and keep singing.

*“So welcome to this circle, whatever brought you here. The valleys and the mountain tops, the muddy and the clear.”*

All across the room women hold hands. Some encircle their arms around a neighbor’s waist or shoulders. Some weep. I’m so happy I’m about to blubber like an American Idol contestant who was just awarded a golden ticket to Hollywood.

*“And know your work is worthy, and know your heart is true, and know that all you give away will come circling back to you. You gotta know that all you give away will come circling back to you.”*

The song lasts a little more than three minutes. When it's over there is thunderous applause for us, the new members. The sound washes over me like waves crashing on Cannon Beach, and its rip tide pulls me into an ocean of good will. We leave the podium and make our way back to our seats. As I walk down the aisle a fellow second soprano, and now a new sister-friend, whispers "Welcome Home."

Can this be true? Am I falling in love with the powerful goddess I see and hear in these women? Maybe it's time I start dating again. Because I'm in the circle and I am home.