

from the chapter of *The Dance* "Dancing with the Mystery"

This is my secret that all other truth telling seeks to disguise: I have always felt the presence of that which is larger than myself.

This is my earliest clear memory: I am lying in bed, curled into a tight ball, listening with every cell in my body. I'm cold, but it's fear and not a lack of heat that chills me. I must be three or four years old, old enough to be sleeping in a bed without railings, young enough to have been put to bed while there is still enough light coming in through the window to see the color of the pale pink walls of my room. I can hear my parents arguing in the next room. I cannot make out their words, but I recognize the sounds of anger and tears. The periodic silences are worse than the words—a separation that threatens the wholeness of my world.

Although they do not seem young to me, my parents are only in their early twenties. Later, as an adult, I will appreciate how they weathered the stresses and strains of being married and having two small children at such a young age. Later, after I have been twice married and divorced, I will wonder how they stayed together, I will marvel that there weren't more arguments, and I will be grateful that there was no violence. Later, when I crawl into a dark corner beneath the desk in the apartment I share with my first husband, pulling my knees up under my chin and hoping to make myself so small he cannot pull me out and hit me again, I will think of my parents. And when my husband tries to convince me that all fledgling marriages are like ours, that behind closed doors all young couples are living with unhappiness and violence, I will almost believe him. Almost. What will save me is the memory of my parents who, even when they were young, argued without violence, laughed more than they cried, and played more than they fought.

But at three years of age, lying in the dark listening to the sound of their voices, I have no such perspective. I am simply frightened by the sound of their disagreement. I strain to hear their words, waiting for them to stop, willing them to turn toward each other. Gradually the anger in their voices is replaced with weariness and the silence is shared. Relieved but still worried, I cannot get to sleep. My body stays curled in a hard tight knot, and I can hear my own heart beating loudly. And so I pray to the God I've heard about in my Presbyterian Sunday school class. I ask him to keep us safe, to stop the fighting, to help me go to sleep. And as I pray, I begin to feel a presence with me in the room. It is a warm strength that surrounds my bed. My muscles relax into this presence that seems to hold me, and I imagine lying in a giant hand—the hand of God—there in my bed. And I fall asleep, held there by a great tenderness....

...To call this presence the Mystery is to be deliberately mindful that all the ideas we have about this presence are simply that—our ideas. I do not know what it is; I only know from my experience that it is, even as I use my imagination as a key to open the door to this experience. Every day, sometimes when I am doing my meditation practice and sometimes when I am working at my computer or sitting in my car waiting for a traffic light to change or sharing a meal with friends, I turn my attention to my breath and visualize myself on some inner plane of the imagination turning my face toward that which is larger than myself—the Great Mystery. I only have to turn my face toward it. I become aware of the temperature of the air touching my cheek. I imagine the molecules of oxygen and hydrogen and carbon dioxide colliding in exuberant activity, caressing the skin of my face. And I become aware that these molecules are

alive with a vibration, a presence that is there also in the cells of my skin and in the molecules of those cells and in the atoms and subatomic particles of those.

Slowly I turn my attention to an inner view of the landscape around and within me, and I become aware of this presence, like the hum of a great song constantly reverberating throughout and emanating from my body, the chair supporting me, the ground beneath me, and the people around me. And I know this presence as a whole that is larger than the sum of the parts and yet inseparable from the parts—including me—which are in a state of constant change. And I experience this presence, this blood red thread of being that runs through the dark tapestry of daily life, as that which gives me the ability to truly know each other as another myself—as compassion. When I open myself fully to the awareness of this presence, my shoulders drop a little and my belly softens and releases the accumulated deposits of small daily worries that build up in my insides like mineral deposits from hard water springs. If I stay with my awareness of this presence, I know it as the heat at the center of life, as the innate orgiastic joy that shouts “Live!” even as it spends itself fully. I know it as the essence, the very stuff of which I, and everything that exists, am made, and I remember that this—this Mystery that is sacred—is who and what we are.

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