

Newsletter September, 2008

As many of you know, my sabbatical ends this month. Some of you have been checking in to see what's next. It's been a challenging and rewarding three years. Like most things in life it didn't go as I'd expected. I wasn't surprised to find that inner stillness and silence were intermittent and inconsistent, at times profound and at other times elusive. It was never, as I'd thought it might be, boring. I was disappointed that my health didn't flourish as I'd hoped it would with lots of rest. A relapse of Chronic Fatigue (CFIDS/ME) in the past year has been discouraging although for the first time guilt free since I knew it had not been triggered by my usual over-doing. As my energy levels stabilize a little more each day I am cautiously optimistic about recovery.

The good news is that despite my ever-eager personality and past patterns of drivenness I managed to slow down. I settled into a daily rhythm of slow mornings journaling and reading, and afternoons of cooking large pots of vegetable soup and watching the cardinals at the bird feeder. I loved the daily solitude (Jeff being gone most days from 8 am to 6:30 pm) and often just sat and watched my breath and the world around me for long periods of time. I don't want to paint too idyllic a picture. There have been the usual ups and downs of life, some of them- like my father being diagnosed with Alzheimer's- heartbreaking. But being with whatever comes our way is easier when we aren't hitting the ground running every morning, and the sabbatical's slowness has been a great teacher in being present.

About half way through the sabbatical I spoke with my agent about two new book ideas: a novel about a group of lucid dreamers (the adventures of Isabel mentioned in a previous newsletter) and a non-fiction book about faith based on some of my experiences over the last three years. He was enthused (as you'd want your agent to be) and started to talk about publishing possibilities. But I was still in sabbatical mode, so I said, "Joe, I have to wait for God to say 'Go!'" Joe, being Catholic, was not offended by the first "G" word, and being an agent, loves to hear the second. I did do some writing, mostly on the novel, but last January I put it aside. I felt that some kind of internal shift needed to happen before I wrote more. I waited for God- the Beloved, the Mystery, the Great Mother- to say "Go!"

In my defense, I have felt Spirit say "Go!" in the past- as in, "Go, leave your job and teach workshops on spirituality!" or "Go back to university and write this book!" It didn't seem to be too much to expect that I would once again feel guided with some kind of hopefully detailed game plan for the next phase of my life.

But that's not what happened. What happened has been and continues to be a slow and gentle unfolding of self knowledge, awareness and acceptance. It's been like a light on a dimmer switch being turned on very slowly, revealing things in the room that have always been there. I discovered that I am an introvert, an extreme introvert, with a highly developed extrovert function. I can do public speaking and teaching, and I certainly value and even enjoy some aspects of these activities, but they cost me, they take energy.

I discovered that when all else falls away what remains is my writing. I am a lover of stories, of words and the imaginative worlds they evoke. My heart races a little when I begin to read a new book or when I start to write on the first page of a fresh journal. When fear or confusion arise

moving my pen across the page reveals the meaning and the mystery in the life I am living. Writing is my way of praying, of paying attention, of making love to the world, of opening myself to wisdom that is larger than myself. And, being a solitary task, writing suits my introversion well. It does not cost me. It gives me energy. I need to shape my life around my writing.

So, as the date for the end of the sabbatical approached, I got ready to launch myself back into writing. I contacted my agent and told him my plans. I set my alarm clock and got geared up to fling myself into eight hours a day of writing as I had done for my earlier books. I had not heard God say "Go!" but the insights about myself seemed sound, the sabbatical was finished, and I felt I could go with what I had- a clear commitment to continue to write.

And twenty-four hours into my new work schedule, I collapsed. It was like those old cartoons where Wylie Coyote goes barrelling straight into the side of the mountain where the Roadrunner has painted a picture of a tunnel on solid rock. Whap! Just like Wylie I hit what felt like a stone wall and slid down in a daze with those little stars and birds flying around my head, although in my case it was a four day migraine and fibromyalgia pain. Lying in bed I prayed, and I listened. And I did not hear the Presence that is always with me say "Go!" I heard, "Move slowly and soften."

And that's what I keep hearing, whenever I pay attention. I have started to read through the work I'd done on the novel. I am also reading the forty journals I filled over the last three years, finding the ends of threads for the nonfiction book. And each time I pause, I hear it again. "Move slowly and soften." So there will be no eight hour days at the keyboard. I am living- moving, reading, writing, cooking, eating- slowly. And I am softening: to the part of me that wants to run and cannot; to the body that is slowly regaining strength and energy; to impatience, frustration and fear when each arises. I will write these books, and it will take whatever time it takes. I will not be traveling while I write, but I cannot say I will never teach a workshop or do a speaking engagement again. I will move slowly and soften to all the possibilities as they arise, following the ones that fit who I am and serve the writing, and letting go of the rest.

I have to smile at my resistance to writing this newsletter I wanted to arrive at the end of the sabbatical with some Big News, some kind of Grand Announcement of the vision I had had that would guide the rest of my life. Well the vision I have had is of continuing to be here writing, remembering (and no doubt forgetting and then hopefully remembering again) to move slowly and soften to myself and the world.

But now that my fingers are moving on the keyboard I find myself asking, what else did I learn in the last three years? And, in this moment, this is what comes:

* That life does not travel in straight lines, does not produce what we think of as clarity according to our preferred time schedule. Life is meandering and messy, full of surprises, confusion and unexpected moments of struggle and beauty.

* That life is short and sweet and hard- too short to wait one more moment to move toward the beauty you love even if it is not what you were taught had "real value" in the world; too sweet to

miss the moment that is here by striving to get elsewhere materially or spiritually; too hard to sit in judgment on ourselves or anyone else.

* That absolute certainty about life, ourselves, the world or others may temporarily alleviate some of our immediate anxieties but leaves little room for the mystery and makes it difficult if not impossible to cultivate faith. I think of faith as that indescribable experience of the sacred that buoys us up and lets us greet what comes each day- the uncertainty of life- with open hearts.

* That often we have to be willing to act even without certainty, to let our hearts guide us, to be willing to make mistakes, to do the best we can, and let the rest go.

* That anxiety is a part of every human life, no matter the circumstances or the perspective. That our hopes and ideals of creating an anxiety-free life cause us to judge ourselves and others and to pull away from life as it is, diminishing the small daily pleasures and putting us on an endless and exhausting treadmill of inner and outer self-improvement. That consciously choosing to be with some anxieties as they arise can sometimes prevent the cultivation of others I know to be life-destroying. So, I willingly embrace the twinge of guilt that arises when I disappoint another rather than cultivate the resentment that can grow from trying to live a life according to someone else's ideas of what is good or right for me. I willingly sit with the small anxiety that arises about future finances instead of moving too quickly to agree to work that I know in my body will most likely create illness at this time.

* That my father was wise, when he told me as I was growing up, "Everyone does the best they can with what they have to work with." How I have struggled with this notion, seeing within and around me actions and attitudes I felt could and should be better. And let's face it: some days our best is not so good, some days we cause a great deal suffering for ourselves and others. But, when I choose the perspective my father advocated it is easier for me to keep my heart open to all of our human frailties. We are all, in this moment, doing the best we can. What is available to any one of us in the next moment- the quantity and quality of information, energy, courage, awareness, trust, and faith we can access- will change, and so too will our best. But in this moment you and I- everyone, is doing the best they can. There is nothing to be gained by thinking otherwise and everything to be gained by approaching the world and our lives from this perspective.

May you be well and happy, Oriah