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7/01/2018 | Monthly Topic, grief and transition

Sacred spaces that require no words

by Ralen M. Robinson

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. (Psalm 46:1)

The sun slowly crept into the room as I held her frail bony hand, pierced with needles and festooned with tubes. As the light cascaded into the sterile, impersonal room, it highlighted her sunken face. I peered into her half-closed eyes as low murmurs, beeping machines, and soft weeping filled the air. I tightened my clasp as my prayer joined the sorrowful hospital orchestra.

For a year, I had held grieving women and men as they cried out for their loved ones to come back. I had held weak hands that grew cold as life slipped away. For a year, I had shuttled between hospital bedsides and the family consultation room, accompanying people as they transitioned into death, as they grieved the loss of a loved one, and as they encountered the true darkness of the world, perhaps for the first time.

This past year, I walked the hospital halls as a chaplain for a major hospital in the inner city. I saw brokenness consume families and witnessed grief so overwhelming that it took my breath away. I walked with people as they experienced the most devastating moments of their lives, moments that left them only a fragile shell.

Early one morning – or was it late one night? – I was called to accompany two young adults who were losing both their parents to their father's violence. That morning, I sat with the brother and sister as they held their dying mother's bloodstained hands.

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The young woman, through tears, said goodbye to her mother. She would have to finish growing up without her mother's guidance. Her brother was filled with rage at his father's unimaginable act. I sat with these children and saw them become parentless young adults in this broken grim world.

I had no words to console them. Words were so inadequate. The usual cliché phrases like "You will get through this" or "She is in a better place" would not, could not possibly suffice. In this moment, as sorrow and anger and horror choked the people around me, words seemed obsolete.

There are times in life when we confront real devastation and brokenness, times that are so hard that we cannot see the light. But even then, even through the most difficult times, God is still with us. God is that much more present with us as the light that holds back pitch-black despair.

I learned that for us mere human beings, simply being present and holding people in their grief is all that is needed. There are no right words to say, no quick fixes. Words cannot ease the pain that can overtake someone so completely that life seems like a dim light. It is in these dark and sorrowful times that, through silence, people can simply be. No one has to name it or express how it feels – people can just feel. People can let the diagnosis sink in. Silent moments are imperative for people to face the horror, experience the sorrow, and begin to heal. Death is beyond our human understanding. People need wordless moments to grasp that.

This past year, I silently walked with parents as their children's lives were cut short, with people as they were told that their cancer has come back, or that their time on this earth would come to a far too early end. The hospital houses the sick, the lost, and the despairing. Yet, within these walls, God

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brings comfort, strength, and solace. As chaplain, I stumble, cry, and joyously witness the brokenness of the world. The hospital is a holy place, and there I find and experience the beauty of sacred, wordless moments.



Ralen Robinson is a Seminarian student at United Lutheran Seminary at Philadelphia seeking a call to be an ordained minister. She will be going off on her Internship year this fall at The Lutheran Church of the Holy Communion in Center City, Philadelphia. Ralen believes her faith and a good pair of shoes can take you a long way.

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07/01/2018 | Faith Reflections, Monthly Topic, grief and transition

We are claimed in the wilderness

by Joy McDonald Coltvet

And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. (Mark 1:11-12)

Jesus is baptized and named the Beloved and then is immediately driven to the wilderness.

Comforting or disturbing, this is life. From one moment to the next, we are celebrating a wedding, then grieving a loved one not present. We are feeling calm, cool, and collected, and then are thrown off balance by a horrible news report. We are bathing in the refreshing waters of baptism, then all of a sudden are driven out into the wilderness.

In each community where I've lived and done ministry, there has always been transition. In college and at seminary, we went through presidential search processes. In a former congregation, we completely restructured our way of doing ministry together. At Holden Village, a retreat center in Washington, we called directors, a pastor, and new staff, and said both hellos and goodbyes every day to guests who came and went. These experiences seem to have prepared me well for campus ministry, where there is constant change and transition: different schedules every semester, students coming and going, people rising to leadership and then moving on. I'm beginning to think that this is more and more not just a way of life for young adults but increasingly for many ages.

Whether dramatic or subtle, whether gradual or immediate, life is changing and we are changing. We are called to places we would never choose. We suffer and wonder if we'll make it. We stretch and grow stronger.

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In all of this a voice calls out from heaven, "You are my beloved children." We remember how water splashed on us has claimed each one of us forever, no matter what. Wherever we are on the timeline of life, God claims us. We are not protected, though, by some kind of magic that keeps us safe and secure from brokenness and the cruel realities of this life. Instead, we are called immediately to struggle in the wilderness.

"For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." (Esther 4:14)

Esther is a beautiful young Jewish woman who becomes queen of Persia. Throughout Esther's dramatic life transition, she has a valuable mentor — her uncle Mordecai. When he hears of an evil plot to kill all the Jews, he asks Esther to go before the king on behalf of her people. Esther is afraid and tells Mordecai that she can't do that because she could be killed. Mordecai responds with strong words, telling her that she must do it, not only for her own safety but also because this may be her purpose in life. To this glimpse of her reason for being, Esther responds with courage. She not only does what Mordecai asks her but wisely arranges a series of events so that the king will know the truth about both the corrupt leadership within the palace and her identity. She saves not only her own life but the lives of her people.

Times of transition often present us with opportunities to step forward in ways that we would not have imagined before. When it seems that we are hard pressed on every side, God makes us bolder. We find strength and courage that we didn't know were there. Think of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; he was born of water and the Spirit, but it was the injustice of white supremacy that propelled him to bring his faith and convictions into the public arena.

In our day, what is God calling you to courageously face? You have been raised from death to life for just such a time as this.

The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore. (Psalm 121:8)

There are times in life where we would just as soon not get out of bed. We are consumed by grief or fear. We cry out like Job for God to hide us or take us or save us. Despair looms close by. In those

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times, as we're looking to the hills wondering where we'll find help, we need to be reminded that God keeps us. God keeps us in community when we want self-obsessed isolation. God gives us solitude when we want busy distraction. God provides a way out and reminds us that neither life nor death nor anything else can separate us from God's loving embrace. Not now, not ever. God calls in transition; God calls right on time.

The Rev. Dr. Joy McDonald Coltvet is pastor at Christ on Capitol Hill, Saint Paul, a diverse urban worshiping community where she has the opportunity to talk daily with people experiencing transitions. She is also experiencing her own transitions through the journey of family, watching the seasons change, and the Spirit's transforming power.

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