

# Knee-Woman In Swan Song

THERESE SCHROEDER-SHEKER

Tomberg: *The desire and capacity to learn<sup>1</sup>  
from everything and everyone.*



THE *KNEE-WOMAN* IS AN 18<sup>TH</sup> AND 19<sup>TH</sup> century Scottish Hebridean term for the *midwife* as she once existed and served in remote island locations. In the setting of the far Western Isles, the *knee-woman* was a vital conduit between flesh and spirit, or stated differently, she served the traffic between worlds, be the travelers coming or going. On, off, or nearby, the *knee-woman* served as witness to and for the Sacred Bridge connecting two worlds. Not only did the *midwife* assist women in labor and during childbirth, but as *knee-woman*, she received and *baptized* the newly incarnating infant immediately upon birth, right there at the bedside, in the sanctuary of the mother's cottage.

Remember, the *knee-woman's* double role—medical and sacramental, physical and spiritual—emerged organically for a particular place, time, and culture. Weather tempests and gales frequently prevented sea passage from the mainland to the islands. Of the hundred or so islands in that Hebridean archipelago, many were without a residential or parish priest.

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<sup>1</sup> Valentin Tomberg's classic journey into Christian Hermeticism also warns that presuming our way of knowing is better than or above all those other kinds of people, sources, religions and religious cultures separate from our own prevents learning, stopping it cold. The hubris of "knowing better" is learning's *coffin*, he says.

The smallest of the islands might not receive a visit from a peregrinating cleric for years at a time. This circumstantial gap was not going to prevent a profoundly Christian culture from living and embodying their most precious religious and spiritual identities, no matter how removed the villagers were from the mainland. After an exacting review of the historical ethnographies, I am convinced that the knee-woman expressed only radiant faith; I found nothing resembling resistance to or subversive agenda toward an institutional church so much as I read of and drank in the beautiful news of a practical, wise, and inspired opposite. Knee-woman followed the footsteps of Mother Mary, in that as midwife, she too was called to make the timeless and regenerative *Yes* audible and visual. Those with eyes to see and ears to hear can learn much from this open, light-streaming, love-permeating Christian Hebridean “*Culture of the Yes.*”

*I go Sunways<sup>2</sup> round my dwelling, in  
the name of Mother Mary.*

The manuscript tradition shows that the customs and traditions the islanders cherished anchored sacramental life into the “most ordinary” gestures and movements expressed from daybreak to eventide: at home, on the croft, in the shed, in the fields, on the shores, on the waves, in the curragh. While walking, sitting, weaving, shearing, spinning, blacksmithing, fishing, turfing, rowing, smooing and more, men, women, and children sang little hymns. The coherence between life and religion manifested itself in thousands of Scottish rhymes, riddles, poetry, proverbs, prayers, incantations, hymns, laments and song lyrics. So please, hold the image of the *knee-woman* for a moment longer. Or better yet, sing!

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<sup>2</sup> I found this text in the first edition of the six-volume series of the *Carmina Gadelica*, and received the melody simply, while circumambulating the priory garden round my own dwelling here in Mount Angel.

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Handwritten musical score for "Jesus the Imagination". The score is written on two staves. The first staff begins with the text "text: CG" and "Sunways" above the notes. The tempo is marked "♩ = TSS". The lyrics under the first staff are "I so sun ways round my dwell- ing in the". The second staff continues the melody with the lyrics "name of Mo - ther Ma - ry!". The music is written in treble clef with various time signatures (3/4, 4/4, 3/4, 4/4) and includes a double bar line at the end of the second staff.

Merton: Try to recover<sup>3</sup> your fundamental unity. ~

Move forward now, in time and space. The contemporary palliative-medical practice of music-thanatology I pioneered at the Chalice of Repose Project is founded in the imagination of a *praxis* I call *contemplative musicianship*. Here, uniting vocation and profession, skilled musician-clinicians work in every psycho-social setting in order to lovingly *serve* the physical and spiritual needs of the dying through the delivery of prescriptive music. Working at the bedside, the music-thanatologist performs a kind of musical-sacramental *midwifery*, only the locus of birthing is now reversed.

What contemporary medical records typically refer to as *death* addresses the completion of the human biography, or identifies the end of a particular life in the physical body. Yet in a widened perspective, rather than seeing an air-tight finality or a measurable end, the cloud of witnesses sees transition differently and calls the very same moment the *dies natalis*. For many, dying to one world is birthing in another and vice versa: birthing into one world is dying in another. Dying and becoming are always united, each serving the process of metamorphosis, whether in

<sup>3</sup> Therese Schroeder-Sheker, "Garden Gate," in *Jesus the Imagination* Volume IV (2020).

the sanctuary of the inner life, the garden outside, or the bodily transitions of birth and death.

The symbolic thread between the *knee-woman*, the midwife and the music-thanatologist links flesh and spirit as naturally as breathing contains the coming in and the going out of inhalation and exhalation.

Yes, yes, all readers know and understand the Cartesian split that altered Western consciousness for several hundred years. Wittingly or not, this is the moment when Descartes induced the reign of the quantitative, that brilliance beginning as if a shining prince had just walked onto the world stage. How soon it desiccated into an unyielding and profit driven autocracy! The intellectual split rippled and made waves in every direction. Separating mind and matter from one another, the rip proceeded with surgical precision. It did indeed initially foster one kind of freedom, even a much-needed freedom, but it also enabled the mechanistic view of the human body and the human being. Without the qualitative soul or spirit, our human blood, bones and organs could be summarily counted, weighed, measured, dissected, replaced, augmented, utilized, harvested, analyzed, and rendered into abstract bits of impersonal data, *not to mention billables!* All this—metrics galore—in the name of objectivity.

However factual opposites like these are, (a unified one and a divided one), it is the place, condition and *praxis* of restoration that most moves me. Thomas Merton understood the impact of the Enlightenment upon every aspect of our humanity and appreciated its strengths and its limitations. He advocated on behalf of self-knowledge and understood the contemporary malady of fragmentation in human consciousness. “*Try to recover your fundamental unity,*” he urged novices and readers. Six words of wisdom; zero discursive ballast.

It is this Mertonian tincture where doing and being intersect and become incarnational that gives me so much hope. Doing and being can be harmoniously restored as a single, intentional,

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fundamental unity particularly in the ways in which humans communicate.

For this reason, the theme of Flesh and Spirit ripens for me in a trinitarian meditation on listening, receiving and responding.

The Cistercian milieu:

*Study makes us learned, but contact<sup>4</sup> makes us wise.*

I'm recollected within a single clinical narrative distilled from more than twenty months while being with and caring for a woman whom I attended in my capacity as a music-thanatologist. Over the better part of two years, the degree and kinds of communication possible between two are more painter's pallet than database. Her experience doesn't fit into the general query boxes of any biomedical software system. The listening and responding in which we experienced her process together created an opening that epitomized *direct contact*. She was very keen to leave a legacy of sorts for her loved ones but also for sojourning strangers she knew would follow later in their own good time. With her consent, my own hand-written notes relied entirely upon her very textured words and images rather than on any condensed abbreviations made by a clinician trained and required to speak in codes and abstractions. This woman chose to tell her *metanoic* and *kenotic* story in considerable candor and courage. Along the way, the transformational metamorphosis she lived so fully disclosed her movement from startled patient to conscripted warrior to sublime teacher. She rebirthed herself, and essentially became what she most loved.

It has been a privilege to learn from sitting at her feet, or by her side, across from her heart. When as reader you receive her voice through the written word, you draw near to a well-educated, thoughtful, articulate, self-possessed, funny and endearing woman navigating the rocky terrain generally identified as "cancer."

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<sup>4</sup> Jean LeClercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (Fordham University Press, 1974).

Although her privacy remains sacrosanct, she is not an anonymous case number. She is known and loved here by her unique particularity and by her first name: *Genevieve*. Narrative medicine is central to music-thanatology and emphasizes reversals while magnifying intimacy. Quoted directly, she is and remains the central player; she is not interpreted by others. She retains her voice and autonomy and embodies wisdom. Her many ensouled images and phrases speak to continual inner movement and transformation.

Because of this, her lived experience remains visceral rather than conceptual or theoretical. By receiving her attentively, our hearts can be synchronized and re-calibrated, and something generative and fresh can be experienced about the possibility of human-to-human communion, unmediated by technology. In communion, we are with one another.

If we choose to empty ourselves of our preoccupied distractions, and if we can make enough room available in ourselves to listen and to receive that which is wholly and entirely new, we are engaged in something akin to the practice of *kenosis*. No, we are not emptying ourselves as did Christ on the Cross, but emptying ourselves enough to make room in the inn, which is normally stuffed to the gills. Receiving another in the spirit of communion, or *direct contact*, we imagine that we are walking with our mother, father, sibling, friend or patient who is dying, but there might be more. Newly revealed, we might be welcoming the long-awaited Revered Guest from the Far Country.

Here now, you can receive *Genevieve* as she speaks in the first-person singular. Because I visited her many times over the twenty months, I was able to bring previous notes with me and read them out loud to her. Except for the final forty-eight hours, she was able to hear her own words and freely correct my omissions. She added words or phrases to make something she said clearer. I have indicated separate visits separated out across days and sometimes even a week for readers with the use of the little falling leaf.

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### GENEVIEVE SPEAKS

I'm a first generation American of Irish immigrant parents, a *magna cum laude* graduate of Yale Law School, and the first in my family to complete graduate school. I'm proud of my track record championing and publishing on behalf of social justice issues. I've represented some of the good guys in environmental issues, as well as the lost, scorned, reviled, and discarded groups who have suffered injustice during immigration procedures.

I'm a spouse, hopefully a loving one, and a mother of two happy children whom I adore. It's true, in private, I'm a Quaker. I have to be articulate and assertive within the practice of law, so the opportunity to reflect in prayerful silence, and to listen deeply while attending Friends Meetings. . . . . this is a path of renewal.

I'm a slightly progressive Democrat, a bit of a gourmet Sunday cook, an avid bird-watcher and proud herb gardener. I'm a nice-looking woman, and am fairly vain about having lush red hair, *move over Julia Roberts*. I'm a mediocre cellist . . . an occasional cellist. . . . . I love both Bach and cello, and don't want to live without either. You see? My life overflows.

When I received the pathologist's report out of the blue two years ago, I was stunned. No! Not me! Impossible. I'm strong and fit. I never smoked! I ate broccoli. At first, after receiving my diagnosis, I thought: I can do this. I will do this. Since I am still fairly young and as deeply connected to loving family and friends as I am to meaning, purpose and profession, I choose to fight like hell. All those years resisting corporate evil and supporting matters of conscience have got to have prepared me for mortal combat. This is a battle and I'm not going down quietly.

I perceive cancer as a menace and have decided to fight. I'm struggling to absorb mountains of information quickly, to comprehend and retain new terminology, and to make critical decisions about possible options. I'm fighting like a mama lion and my family

is fighting with me. So is my oncologist; so are my colleagues at the office. I want to live.

UGH! The chemo-induced nausea, the exhaustion, the shedding, the baldness, the scarves and wigs. But I can *do* this. I *will* do this. I have my pride and want to be a trooper, not a wimp, but after the chemo, a double mastectomy brings the full impact of disfiguration. Massive grief: looking in the mirror, I howl silently, asking myself who and what am I now? Slowly, I'm able to weep and roar and spend many more days adjusting while also barely treading the shock and pain. This is how it is now. Living becomes a question. *What am I now?* To myself? To others? To my husband Tim?

After first and second surgeries, there are follow up lab reports. The jury is back. I receive my sentence in five words. My doctor says: *They didn't get it all.* Additional sites are impacted; I'm shaken to the core. Rounds of radiation and burns compound this new and foreign emotional wobbliness. This is life now. I'm vulnerable in ways I've never known or imagined for myself.

Making senior partner at the law firm ceases being as important to me now as living long enough to see my children to safety. Practicing law is not as important as looking into my husband's eyes from across the room, or seeing a wind-swept sky, or inhaling the fragrance of the rosemary from our backyard herb garden. Wanting to see our sixth-grade daughter enter high school and our son make the football team takes precedence over everything, even representing clients, no matter how deeply I have previously derived meaning and identity by championing their causes. With reluctance, I ask my colleagues to take some of my full-time client load—just for a few months, maybe a year—as I struggle through the emergency procedures and protocols. I'll be back soon, better than ever, I say.



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Eventually, when I am feeling pain in entirely new ways, my oncologist tells me that the cancer has metastasized. They have identified eight other sites. This is the day and the hour I stop and re-consider everything I've managed to hold in suspense or avoid. I need to discover how it is that I will live the remaining time that is mine in the most meaningful and fruitful ways possible. At this point, I know I need to leave my law practice entirely.

Without realizing it, in a single hour, I have switched perspectives. The terrain has changed and it's not only that I have been ill. It's that someone has told me that *I am dying*. My entire identity is in flux, I am no longer who I was, and find myself moving rapidly towards another state, another me. But that new me is still foreign and unknown, and I can tell you that despite all this, *I am intensely alive*. While in concrete ways there is literally less of me, I am at the same time becoming much more than I have been. This is not a house of bended mirrors. I am abiding in and starting to enter some new condition though the flux is replete with contradictions. But none of them are confusing; some shed and usher in light.

I am learning how to *let go*. Even in the first phases of choosing to fight the good fight, I had to *let go of* several layers of my identity, the ones engendered by successive and at times simultaneous cultures: familial, corporate, linguistic, legal, religious, political, educational, financial, etc. Each of these is or has been important to me, my family, and my community, and without a doubt: formative. Each layer has contributed vitally to who I am and have become. Yet to my surprise, the assignment now is learning that *letting go* either happens gracefully, by thoughtful choice and consent, or unconsciously, by default, while I am not paying attention, or while I'm putting up fierce resistance. Letting go is not without challenge, but I quickly learn that both paths—acceptance and resistance—determine the degree and kind of emotional suffering I will or will not encounter in

the next phase. Surely the vigor of my dying and letting go at hand now determines the quality of rebirth in the next form.

With the letting go of my law identity, I am *dying to something*, dying to an earlier version of myself as an attorney and making room for someone new. I am also *letting go of* the terrific underlying autonomy I've cultivated and enjoyed for twenty years. Maybe I've been taking it for granted. I've been publicly acknowledged as a success, and in being known for my ability to reason, to advocate for others, and to construct a compelling argument, I've been lauded, appreciated, trusted. I *liked* being known to have made a difference in a brutally deceptive and frequently unjust world. I *liked* being respected. As an attorney, I refrained from wearing brass knuckles in back alleys, yet did develop the capacity to disclose and expose egregious deception when it was operative. On top of all this, I liked being able to earn a good salary. This law identity secured entrée at so many levels. Those doors are closing now. The "I am" I *used* to be is fading from sight.

I begin to leave the professional world in a series of stages while learning how to wade rough waters. No longer an expert, I'm in retrograde, scaffolding gone, and find myself as less than a novice. I am pouring through mountains of intimidating medical terminology and shuddering over procedures and technological medical devices. When did I become this small? Was I always this insignificant and just didn't know it?

Previously confident, decisive and energetic—someone others turned to without hesitation—I find myself now frequently confused and uncertain. Painfully slow. I am vulnerable and newly dependent upon my husband Tim, the engineer, and my family, and all loved ones in ways that I have never before lived. The vulnerability is piercing my heart, and this first experience of aching need and dependence brings about new gifts and capacities in others. My husband never knew he could be so nurturing.

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My children Molly and Jeff never knew they were brave. I can do nothing but marvel at the goodness at hand. Physically, I am growing smaller, weaker, but spiritually, my dimensions increase and expand. My family members, as individuals and as members of a team, are also growing in leaps and bounds. It is a new path for all of us. We are all in metamorphosis.

Oddly, several small things happen during the routine activities of daily life, letting me know that without my former title, without my seniority and authority as an expert in something, not to mention my gorgeous red hair, I no longer hold the same position in social space that I did eighteen months ago. I am marginalized, but learning how to navigate new waters and adjust to invisibility quietly, without putting up a public fuss. Inwardly, I groan. This layer of my identity only falls away with a furtive thud. Am I a nobody? *Shit.*

I've become so ill that movement is difficult and frequently confines me to bed or, at least, to home. I can no longer walk the few blocks to the Friends Meetings, or be active at our children's school events. As the tumors progress, I gradually lose sight *and* mobility, but hearing seems to be enhanced. I can receive the words spoken and unspoken, without being able to see the loving smiles my children and husband so easily lavish on me, but can hear *smile* color and warm their voices. I feel and smell the tears they try to wipe away. I can no longer help the kids with school projects or root for them in sports, hold the bow for the cello, or make love with Tim, the father of our children, the man whom I have adored and desired for seventeen years. Aspects of my identity are gradually peeling and falling away, sometimes in layers, sometimes in chunks, and now, the stripping away happens daily. I am being stretched beyond all previous limitations and imagination, yet I live each recalibration intensely, and am still very much alive and very much a person.

But *who am I now* that all of this carefully, painstakingly, lovingly cultivated identity has changed? Is changing? Is being changed, disassembled, bit by bit. The *persona* I hadn't realized I had inhabited before is now gone. Who am I when these roles, capacities, and identities cease to be operative or primary? When the role dissolves? What or who is left? Am I even me? Betwixt and between, I am no longer the attractive attorney, nor the same wife, lover, mother, activist. I'm not the musician, gardener, cook or mediator by which I have been known and perceived, nor am I merely my series of tumors.

Beauty as a Transcendent takes on a new face and appears continually, in unexpected moments and corridors outside of time.

In discovering—seemingly miraculously—that I am still loved, lovable, and capable of loving, despite these many changes in my being, I experience awe. . . . . gratitude for those very layers which are now falling away or from which I am letting go. Those layers once served me well and helped others. But I'm inside awe and gratitude together for discovering that even now in the absence of the old, *the power of love levels even cultural conditioning*. . . . . It levels the obsession with optics, the outside packaging aesthetic. I begin to get a sense that this is going to become more cleansing, expansive and potentized than negating. At this point, it is only whispered, but I am hearing Wisdom in these changes.

With weight loss, surgery, chemotherapy and (radiation) burns, my voice, face, skin, and bodily shape change. Most days I don't recognize myself. I grow to understand that so many things I mistakenly thought were earned or naturally mine were only fundamentally available on loan.

The JD degree I hold and the money stashed in the portfolio don't spare me from any of the human-making experiences I've been living so intensely. My spirituality, on the other hand,

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helps me enter the metanoic stripping away process profoundly, authentically. However disconcerting, it helps me start to meet the multileveled process as a *Beloved Friend* instead of as a *punishment or mortal enemy*. How could all this loss *also* result in so much gain? One of the gains is a new understanding of intimacy.

As I grapple with physiological pain, my own mortality and personal meaningfulness, and as so many parts of me change or fall aside, I am mightily becoming my most essential, definitive self: spiritually and emotionally more transparent. I am unable—and as I gain stride in this new nakedness—unable and *unwilling* to hide behind that which is old or armored, be it the dead wood of old roles, fruitless patterns, grey excuses or the unquestioned stuff that once passed for elegant reasoning.

I am and have become *supra-intimate* with *being rather than doing*. Slowly, I have turned my face from the tyranny of the urgent, including the distractions of endless deadlines and the illusions of their significance. I am befriending Ultimacy.

When it comes to effective palliation and quality of life in the face of very difficult physiological pain, my heritage, politics, and even the glow of my skin—these have become irrelevant to some degree. In many ways, these differentiations fall away, in the same way that the pealing of a bell in the next village dissolves in the wind. I am in the condition of continual flux, and the former layers of identity that used to separate me from others are no longer intrinsic to my existence. They are now only peripheral echoes where once they had seemed to be fundamental or central, both tonic and core. Even more, in their absence, I am becoming like a single burning flame than that neon-bright success story.

This new calculus teaches me that my educational pedigree and the quality of my once flawless skin haven't sheltered me from

cancer. Paradox abounds. As they became less important *to me*, I notice that, at times, they become more important and significant *to others*, to my loved ones, those brave but battle-weary survivors who are proud of me. They want to remember and cherish me especially within *their context*—me in my prime—me as I was outwardly—woman of action—the context in which we have known and loved one another. Cultural heritage and manifold cultural expressions help provide continuity that strengthens the survivors while my assignment is to let go of the meaning of the separatist details.

Part of my strength now is that I am vulnerable and utterly disarmed. Like St. Paul when he says: when I am weak, then I am strong. Big deal for an attorney whose ability with words once made liars tremble. I'm letting go of my expertise, my roles and identities, several of my intellectual, artistic, linguistic, and physical capacities. I made peace with the garden, kitchen, cello, and have said goodbye to the beauty I once knew in face and form. I often hesitate and struggle for words, and need help to pee and poop. Most difficult, I had to let go of being a mother. I trust that my husband will shepherd our children with love, strength, and wisdom, even as he is grieving. In the times to come, my beloved friends and colleagues will remember all of my earlier gifts and capacities with wickedly funny anecdotes as well as bittersweet longing and healthy pride. The photographs of me in my prime are out on the fireplace mantel; these images from the glory days comfort my kids whose friends do not know me now as anything more than a shade in the back room. Genevieve seems to be gone.

Time takes on a new and paradoxical countenance. The speed and sensitivity of the physician and nursing care providers are experiences that hold great personal significance, even though these are fleeting events. The way someone touches my hand and makes direct contact in passing, sometimes even wordless contact,

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truly matters. This Holy Touch can ring for hours. Equally, any avoidance of loving truth, any disingenuous communication renders the air stale—even putrid. But I'm humbled to discover a compassion has been born within; it comes from seeing through things rather than stopping to gaze at their surfaces or boundaries. When a new doctor approaches me in a distracted rush, with strategic ambiguities or nervous platitudes, I find myself capable of concern. Concerned for the depths of his fear of all that he cannot bear to see or experience first-hand. The me from two years ago could have muttered the tunnel vision reduction: *asshole!* But I can't now; it simply isn't true.

The tumors have brought me blindness; I am unable to sense the color of the physician's or nurse's skin, the ones on this shift, or know anything about the way they worship, if they do, or sense their sexual orientation. But I am able to experience their humanness and their presence of being, and, if there is a lack of it, that too finds me without rancor now. This is not only about new patience that has blossomed and translates as compassion. Somehow, heartbeat and breath are tracking what is essential. Keeping score about various shortcomings wastes love and harms only me.

There have been moments when I have soiled myself badly and the nursing care has been so tender and respectful that their actions take on numinous, almost priestly qualities. My Quaker friends visit and pray with me, and I lay there while they sit, we are together in silence, and this is so comforting.

But I am equally surprised to find that when a chaplain stops by and asks if I would like to be anointed, this small, ancient, intimate, Christian bedside ritual ennobles and fortifies me for the final mile, the final part of my journey. How different from my own Quaker sensibilities, but as other aspects of my being have fallen away and as time is running out, there is this mysterious

discovery of attention or awareness or energy available for living what I do live with all of myself, my whole self, not several divided selves, all of whom seemed so competent or impressive merely two and a half years ago. I have recovered something wondrous. Though I would not wish cancer on anyone, I am more whole now than when I enjoyed fame and success.

Daily and hourly, while living so intensely this process the world names dying, layers are indeed gracefully falling away. I am letting go. All kinds of odd branches *and* the leaves of my tree are falling away, yet there is no winter, there is a spring, as I am budding and growing interiorly. Some new part of me is being born. Humanness becomes more essential and clear, less burdened, and more meaning-filled than the old boundaries, qualifiers and competitive differences once unwittingly carried. I can no longer see with my two blue eyes, but I do have clear vision. The acknowledgement of my unique, irreplaceable, one-in-a-million particularity is what unites me as a human with other humans, loved and cherished and known by other humans.

I am not so much female *in distinction to* male; white-collar worker *in distinction to* blue collar worker; Irish in distinction from Asian; or Quaker as opposed to Catholic. My cultural heritage and this Ivy-League pedigree neither impede nor enhance the effectivity of the palliation, although in the initial stages of my cancer diagnosis, my capacity to understand the illness, to advocate for myself, to receive access to excellent care, and to make decisions is highly connected to privilege and educational background. These have profound political and sociological significance that would be foolish and mean-spirited to downplay.

I am attempting to witness that after a certain point of no return in the shifting terrain of a progressive, life threatening illness, when I am in pain, one's being Irish, Polish, French, or Asian doesn't change the metaphysical primacy of the human process



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of the art of dying. Dying is a kind of intensified living, a radical reformation where layers of former personhood are peeling away. I'm letting go of an earlier and very imperfect version, making way for someone essentially new. Someone who shall appear in a new form soon. This very present person is saying and transmitting: thank you, I love you, I forgive whatever wounds you delivered and entanglements occurred, I ask your forgiveness for the many ways in which I failed you, I will never forget or replace you. I am saying goodbye in ways that were not possible before, ways that are more like song, like a Pat Metheny "Letter from Home" than the nuts and bolts of accounting and duties. This process of *being carved out from within* makes room for something and someone entirely new. It is a birthing process.

When I'm hospitalized for a secondary pneumonia, an elderly Italian woman and I find ourselves together as roommates in a single small room. She is 87, and had been a cleaning lady, working nights, on her knees, for a fraction of what I earned. The antibiotics we both desperately need work powerfully, positively, for each of us, though our pre-illness backgrounds have been so different. *We* are given a few extra days to be with loved ones.

The question of humanity is written larger than life. Have I become fully human? I mean: *Have I? After all, that was the assignment.* Now as I am approaching my own end, when the precious interior work of letting go has been consummated, I cherish the long moments of loving and spacious silence. My own roles and identities have fallen away and reveal me as I truly am, unvarnished. The human-making curriculum has been completed. It's a graduation of sorts. What remains in the last days and what I share with others is *heartbeat and breath*. Not the fifty qualifiers that have separated me from others in daily life. Heartbeat and breath are the threads that we share, the threads that leave us connected and interconnected.

My upcoming death can't diminish the significance of my having lived and loved (or failed to love yet found a way to renew love) as a Quaker, or of my having tried to be the best spouse and mother I know . . . knew? . . . how to be. But, paradoxically, the actual process of dying entails letting go of much that once gave me structure, boundaries, specificity, meaning and strength. Not everything, but much. The form changes. The essence remains. I have lived to see the differentiating factors that separated me from the man or woman in the street and raised me into lofty social space fade quickly. However, there are elements of my cultural identity that will become ever more important to the loved ones and survivors than they are now to me. These are the ones that help them remember me after I'm gone.

In *letting go*, I've been allowed to practice a kind of transformative alchemy, and with the stages of metamorphosis come the opportunity to shine in new ways, as if illumined from within, all the while disappearing.

I'm spiritually naked and utterly disarmed. Can I be this way, will it be this way, as I stream into the cosmos, or as Dante calls it in the trilogy: Enter Paradise.

One of the greatest blessings about all this *letting go* is the stuff of the unbinding process. It's not doom and gloom. The radiance and the clearing and the expansion *are* mine but *aren't* mine. They become increasingly available and urgent for more than just myself. Many others are affected. The people who know and love me grow greatly, even my caregivers grow and will continue to grow long after I am buried or after my ashes are scattered in the winds. In other words: all of this is not for nothing—it bears fruit. The Gospel has St. John the Baptist saying: I must decrease that He can increase. One serves, completes the assignment, then gets out of the way, making room for that which is gleaming and wholly new.

## JESUS THE IMAGINATION

Some people die quickly; others don't. Some are called to practice this expansive, challenging, liberating *letting go* for a significant corridor of time and through thousands of little adjustment episodes extended over a few years. That's how mine is. Long. Others won't have the corridor. Many will unbind and go suddenly, in the flash of a moment, as if empowered to let go inside a single crowning gesture. I'm sure that the element of time and timing, long or short, is a genuine mystery in human biography. My own unbinding has required time. I had much to learn since the day of my diagnosis, and I've loved witnessing loved ones grow.

In moving towards my last breath, I've been given ample time to finish my assignment, grow into acceptance, and enter peace. I have learned the unity that dying and becoming are. A completion here is a beginning there, or on another level. While laying down my body, *I'm still very much alive*, though donning a mysterious fabric, and aware of changing form.

### KNEE-WOMAN IN CURTAIN CALL

*Author's Conclusion:* When I was in my twenties, and very much a cradle Catholic, I worked in a bookstore with a dear Buddhist friend named Kevin Dormeyer. He observed that sometimes strangers would appear and place books in my hands *as gifts*, not as promotional copies for the store. Egyptian, Persian, Tibetan, and more. One day Kevin took me aside and said: *Therese, these are Dharma gifts*. Well, I wasn't Buddhist, but was moved. It was easy to understand what he was urgently conveying.

I've been blessed with Dharma gifts all my life and whether or not this word is on your tongue, chances are that you have been gifted with them too. Though I'm an adult and a Benedictine oblate, the Dharma gift remains an essential part of my own spiritual biography. To the extent that one chooses to cherish such gifts that seemingly appear or land or arrive from out of an untraceable nowhere, they are really manifestations of grace.

Grace that unfailingly steers and guides. Grace doesn't control or demand; it leaves one free.

If the scales fall from our eyes, we can witness that the spiritual world *irrupts* into our lives amidst the most ordinary daily activities if we but turn to notice. I'm a great advocate of intentional retreats, and silent retreats, but the active presence of God or the manifestations of the spiritual world unfold into our lives while we're engaged with the perfectly ordinary activities of daily life: cleaning, shelving, cooking, studying, re-tuning the strings of a harp, grading papers, gardening, or taking out the garbage. Not just in exotic places or lofty moments, not only in prayer, meditation, contemplation, liturgy, ritual or ceremony, and not only if or when we're put together nicely. No, the spiritual world irrupts in every alley, kitchen, back porch, street and supermarket. . . .

Reading Tomberg in English in 1985 alerted me to so many aspects of the intelligence of the heart, as did Merton's advice to try to recover our fundamental unity. Opening ourselves to Teachers and Teachings and to the diversity of sacred texts amplifies and magnifies the love that moves mountains.

Opening does not pull one away from one's own religious or spiritual tradition nor seek to compress the many legacies into some syncretic blob. Instead, openness preserves the vital uniqueness of each tradition while helping an individual seeker to deepen and transform relationship to one's own commitments. Dharma gifts and the presence of the Holy Spirit help us equally. They help us transform some rough or blind spot while becoming more alive in and to our original religious tradition.

For me, the harp is a Dharma gift, as is the voice. Even though I would never wish the experiences of anguish or suffering on others, I've never met a soul or encountered an event, being, process, or a text that didn't also constellate a hidden Dharma gift. Sometimes even the tragedy, betrayal, gross injustice or stupefying evil contains the hidden pearl. That long view is transformative, integrative and luminous, and is how isolated

events can become transformed into a capacities. Especially in the face of that which is sordid and evil—war, betrayal, violence, deception—history shows us that the human being can rise to the occasion and become his or her most authentic self. Our final moments can be performed from within, as Karl Rahner says in his *Sacramentum Mundi*, and if so, are a consummation, which is different from annihilation.

Coming back full spiral, the desire and capacity to learn from everything and everyone quickly discloses its loving and wholesome orientation. It isn't fear-based, arising from in an elite collective. The hierarchical "*Culture of the No*" historically obstructs, prevents and excludes a large population, more than it welcomes, affirms and cherishes them. What is it Gabriel Moran says? "Community is obstructed by a two-class structure." He was referring to the ordained and the non-ordained; I grieve the sexism that generates so many dividing lines. The *Culture of the Yes* has roots and wings, is open, grounded in and born of love. As an integrative path, it can be practiced by all, even while each person anchors in their own inheritance: Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, etc. I can also say that I know many who self-identify as agnostic humanist realists or as atheists who also walk the path of transformation.

I have learned far more about life and living from the direct contact experiences of serving the "dying" as they unbind than I have learned from clinical textbooks to the degree that texts shore up abstractions removed from the context of living. Learning about the *mystery of paradox* and the transformative *power of communion* from Genevieve equipped me with more than that which is usually conferred by university degrees, even though I am grateful for these too. The two together which Tomberg identifies—desire and capacity—these are rooted in a mysterious potential to serve both flesh and spirit. In learning from everything and everyone, we witness the greening of the world, most often by virtue of invisibility. The implied assignment is

transmitted in a spiritual Morse code and sounds like this: *Show up; serve; disappear!*

It is known that mystics move mountains quietly. In August of 1960, Thomas Merton once journaled that prophets are known by their ability to *cut through great tangled knots of lies* – (distractions, propaganda, and illusions too are some of the biggest networks of lies). Mystics and prophets deliver via the intelligence of the heart, not abstractions. This is why mystical works are timeless and serve every culture. A Jewish man can read Meister Eckhart fruitfully, and a Christian woman can encounter Lao Tzu in awe. Texts and people are Dharma Gifts. Isn't it time to cut through tangled knots of lies, and develop the capacity to learn from everything and everyone?

Every Dharma Gift is Bridge, Grace and Teaching.

If you've received Genevieve lovingly, you've become attuned to her in her ultimacy. That is to say: beyond time. She exemplifies the human, divine, ordinary and regal, together in one shining singularity.

*The Chalice Well, Mother's Day, May 2022*