

Looking for Spring

The calendar said spring would begin in two days, but the bright blue skies and budding trees didn't seem to be waiting. It had been two years and two months since Carlton's death and my mission on this day was to take Leah's kindergarten class on a hike around the schoolyard to find spring. We discovered tiny purple flowers on the redbud trees, clumps of yellow daffodils, flitting butterflies, crawling ladybugs, and fragrant wild onion flowers. It was hard to contain these puppy-like five-year-olds in such a playful setting. The surge of spring energy was obviously running through them, too. When we finally got quiet enough to listen for the sounds of spring, we heard a cacophony of birds, squawking much like I did, trying to rein in the children.

Back at home a male and female mallard duck sat in a neighbor's sweet gum tree, but before I had a chance to go outside and point them toward the nearby duck pond, they were off. How could anything stay centered on a day like this? Soon we would celebrate Easter and resurrection and here it was, in all its glory, demanding my attention. The stirring from winter's tomb — emerging sweet smelling flowers, sunny skies, dancing butterflies, lucky ladybugs, frisky children, singing

birds, and returning ducks. Reassurance that life goes on. A few days later I sat with my journal.

How can I hold onto the amazing warmth and light I feel in my heart? The stirring of joy in my soul? How can I remind myself that this happens year after year? That each turn of the seasons was important to spring's new growth? Last year's flowers become fruit in the heat of the summer, dropping their seeds to the ground in autumn to remain through the long winter months, as the Earth subtly shifts its position on its circle around the sun.

Today is the official vernal equinox, yet the other 364 days of the year had been preparing for its arrival.

When I pulled weeds from my garden, I felt the sun on my back and the stretch in my winter-atrophied muscles. I was a butterfly, slowly emerging from my cocoon, spreading my new wings, and allowing them time to strengthen and dry in the sun.

I want to remember these special moments — the way they look and sound and smell and feel. I want to be able to recall them on days when my heart needs a bit more warmth or my soul needs a little more joy. For 55 years I've experienced this cycle — this phenomenon arriving as spring, and today I do so with all the awareness I can muster, like it's the first time, and with a determination that it will not be the last. I want to be able to pull it forth and replay it any day of the year, over and over again.

Writing as Spiritual Practice

The news was not good. The war in Iraq, rising gas prices, violent crimes, terrorism threats, and endless lawsuits filled the television screen. Anxiety built inside me as I watched these images. How would I survive with all this negative activity? What could I offer as a creative response for a hurting world? These were the issues Carlton and I discussed the last time we talked. We shared our frustrations. He said it was time for a people's awakening.

One thing I knew to do was go to my Sunday afternoon writing group. They weekly affirmed my writing and encouraged me to explore what was coming from my pen. But on this day everyone sounded so angry; their writings were the same rants and judgments I had heard on television. When it was my turn to read, I began by apologizing for my naive little-girl writing, and I didn't like that about myself. When the group didn't break up at its regular time, continuing instead to feed on its angry words, I knew I had to leave. I drove home with an unsettled feeling. I needed to talk to my notebook.

Why can't I just let them be that way? Why did it make me so anxious? These are writers. We share a common bond. But I've been writing to find peace, serenity, and a feeling of redemption. I'm eager to share

what it is I am finding, and I'm tired of the television news confronting me with its endless problems. I need energy to confront my own. I know this world is a mess and I'd like to offer hope, but I'm not always sure how. The only thing I feel sure of at the moment is that I don't want to add to the negative discussion. When I feel frustrated with the news, I shut it off, and when I'm in a group of people spinning on this negative energy, I say what I can, then leave. If I get home and my insides are still churning, I write. I don't know any other way for now. I believe I have been filling these journals in search of my own peace of mind. I don't want to add to the suffering of others. Today I shared the piece "Looking for Spring," my simple way to consciously take in the visible rebirth all around me, and I apologized for it. Apologized for it! Why, for goodness sakes? Maybe the fight I am having is with myself. Maybe I wonder why I continue to question my work. I want to share my serenity with this talented group of people. I want to be able to stay in this messy world and find light and hope. Maybe I believe these writers have similar potential, but just need to be reminded. Maybe I need to remember that I too am a talented writer with potential. Ah, there's the affirmation I wanted. The encouragement I needed to explore what is coming from my pen. The reminder of how I find creative responses for my own hurts. Maybe it's my middle-age hippie contribution to a people's awakening.

Making Friends with the Critic

As I wrote and edited the stories for this collection I was constantly confronted with a very vocal and determined voice inside my head. For days or weeks she could keep me away from writing anything except journal observations for my eyes only. When I picked up the legal pad I have set aside for developing stories I want to share, she began filling my head with nagging doubts.

"You don't know really what you're talking about, do you?" she brayed. "What do you think you're doing? Why would anyone want to read this?"

I quickly set the tablet down, picked up the friendlier marbled composition book and began jotting notes to myself again.

Little Ms. Perfect, where did you come from? Was it because I was once a language arts teacher and every red mark I ever scratched on a child's paper, pointing out the all important incomplete sentences or misplaced modifiers, has come back to haunt me? I was a teacher, not a writer, as I passed judgment on others searching for their voices.

Is it because my beautiful, talented child killed himself? It must have been something dreadful that I did. I was, after all, his mother. Who are you, screaming in my head

with so many critical thoughts and shaming words? How do I convince you I am doing the best I can?

Fortunately, when the overwhelming news of Carlton's death arrived, I had been listening to another voice, the quieter one that gently penned loving words into my composition book, helping me sift through all the noise.

But now with an intense desire to share my story and a belief that if I told it in an honest way it could have meaning for others, all I could do was sit paralyzed on the sofa and stare at the yellow pad. Was I still afraid of the voice of the language arts teacher, haunting me with technical difficulties? Or the mother whose only child committed suicide?

Of course, the rather large stack of past rejection letters in my guest room did not add to my confidence. Their presence continued to remind me that anything I have ever written is nothing anyone else would ever want to read. At least that's what the fussy critic told me.

I wanted to be able to write more than daily ramblings to myself. I'd been removed from the world long enough. I believed these fears and doubts I've been listening to in my grief were universal, and if I could risk sharing my journey with others we could connect. How do I work through her noisy self?

One thing my notebook has taught me is that I cannot be a better speaker without becoming a better

listener. Maybe all I needed to do was compassionately pay attention. Listen to what she was telling me of her experiences. Let her teach me how to speak to her.

So, Little Ms. Critic, never any farther away than my overactive imagination and lingering past regrets, you can hang around if you want. You are the voice that keeps me honest and alert. But I think it's only fair to let you know, you are not the only one I listen to now. My gentle pen isn't completely convinced of all your anxious concerns. It seems I still have a story I want to share.

The Creative Urge

I'm having another day of avoiding the yellow pad, wondering if I'll ever be a writer. All I can do is scribble in my notebook and watch my thoughts appear on paper. Ah, so here I am in black ink on white paper, showing myself how creative I can be. I can write myself back into existence.

Christmas, 2003, nearly a year after Carlton's death, I sent handmade cards to special friends who had been so supportive on my journey, congratulating them on being entered into the National Angel Registry. Two of my friends asked me how to get in touch with the registry so they could nominate others, and I had to sheepishly admit to making the whole thing up. Maybe I was warning them of my awakening imagination.

In 2004 my pen began spitting out short thoughts, proverbs, little sayings. It didn't seem to take as much effort as a story, but it was satisfying when I couldn't find courage to commit to anything bigger. I filled small notebooks with these brief efforts, shared them at my writing group, and received encouragement. I was connecting. I might be dancing around a bigger idea, but at least I was moving in the right direction. Maybe it was a warm up-exercise.

When visiting Oregon with my mom I took pictures of a hand puppet from Leah's class enjoying the sights, then made a book for the kindergarteners. The positive results motivated me to rewrite the story for my family and make everyone a spiral bound copy for Christmas. I now had a "published book." It felt as if I had cleared some kind of a hurdle.

My creative energy continued to look for ways to connect.

I made bracelets with clear beads and elastic string for the five-year-olds to wear to remind them they are children of God, then wore one on my wrist to remind my own kindergarten self. When the opportunity arose I took mine off and passed it on to a friend.

I brought home smooth, round, quarter-sized stones collected from the beach in Oregon and gave them to the kindergarten and nursing students. "Don't Worry Stones" I called them because Mother Nature's salt tears have already worn them smooth. I knew this

from the personal experience She and I shared in October at the seashore.

Christmas 2004, I again felt the creative call, so I handed out magic mirrors, face down, to friends and family. I told the recipients that if they wanted to see a child of God, all they had to do was turn theirs over and look in. I kept one for myself.

In 2005 I filled dozens of tiny plastic Easter eggs with fuzzy baby chicks from the craft store and added a message folded like a fortune cookie. It said, "Break out of your shell and sing." One egg still sits on my kitchen window now, a morning reminder as I pour my first cup of coffee.

I know these activities have been necessary for me, reminding me of my ability to create. But I believe they were also opportunities to teach me how to connect to others. So I continued to scribble in my notebook, filling myself with new ideas. And when I felt full, I found ways to release my creativity.

It's how Mother Nature spreads seeds, and I smile at such a pleasant image.

The Pen as Witness

Every time I looked over this evolving collection of stories emerging from my constant journaling, I saw new patterns. Sentence by sentence, story by story, I was rebuilding myself. In the darkness and in the shattered illusion of who I thought I was, I had recorded each person, place, event, or idea that came to share their light with me, like the flickering votive candles in a Catholic church.

I didn't do this "coming back" into the world by myself. Most of the time during the first few months, and often thereafter, I didn't really want to stay here. I wanted to leave and find Carlton, whom I perceived as my scared child, and thus relieve myself of my own overwhelming fears. I would lie motionless on the sofa as something separated and lifted from my body. But all I could do was watch. I couldn't end it. There was unfinished business I wanted to address; it was not my time to leave. I kept picking up my pen and writing myself back into existence.

*Look, Laura, you're still here and
life is happening all around you.*

I don't care. I don't like being here.

*We'll think about it. Write down
your thoughts and don't take any
other action just yet.*

*But, God, you don't understand. It's
real painful down here. It's not fun.*

*I know, Laura. I know. Just hold
on a little longer.*

So I would hold on a little longer, making notes to myself about the pieces of this world I liked. Avery, Stoner Hill, my friends, and my dog were all diligently documented. And word by word these gentle loving pieces of light were woven together to create a brighter glow.

I even discovered that bleeding into my notebook was releasing pain and uncovering more light that my fear had been hiding.

I began finding other reasons to stay. People were telling me how well I was doing. I liked the affirmation and hesitated to tell them otherwise, so I kept writing, telling myself how well I was doing.

I liked the things my pen told me about myself and the world around me. They were tender, nurturing words, as if from a minister or counselor or teacher. Was this God? Was this the loving parent for the scared child?

My pen had been gently, patiently talking me back into the world, showing me light and beauty amidst all the pain, and teaching me how to recognize the unconditional love I hungered for.

I continue to write, the pen as my witness, reminding myself I can't leave now. There is too much

unfinished business. There are other scared "children" who need this amazing love I continue to find, and now it's my turn to share with them — the way Avery, Stoner Hill, Princess, my friends, and my pen have done with me.

Make Me Feel Better

Several years before Carlton died, a long-time best friend sent me a letter telling me I was too needy, then put a moratorium on our friendship. It hurt, as I read it over and over, trying to understand. I wasn't available when she needed me, and this was her response. She wouldn't be available to me. But because she had been such a close friend for so long, I also took that comment very seriously, agonizing over what I did that appeared to be so needy to others.

What's causing this behavior? Is it my ego taking valuable resources from others? I don't mean to take more than my share. Maybe I am letting others take too much from me. Like the food chain. But I'm human, with free will and something more than instinct. How do I get myself into such a feeding frenzy?

I struggle with my part in the world's problems as I watch the evening news, and am convinced I have much to account for. But maybe I also just like the attention that comes from playing the martyr. How can I expect anyone else to participate in an honest

conversation with me, when I'm having so much trouble being honest with myself?

I need to see these words before I hurl them out into the Universe. Let my neurotic lambaste the narcissist, and the narcissist return the favor. My own personal drama played out in the safety of my notebook. Me, the human animal juggling shame and blame, bad and good, shadow and light. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Tell me I matter. Reassure me. Make me feel better. Please don't let me expect others to fix me, and begin that feeding frenzy all over again.

Don't let me impress them with my accomplishments. Or intimidate them with my anger or power. Or overwhelm them with my depression or my innocence. Back and forth, over and over, I can mindlessly manipulate words and actions trying to get the response I want.

Does this behavior make me a bad person? My self-will imposing itself on others. I don't mean it as bad. But its destructive quality is only amplified when I deny it or believe I'm somehow not like everyone else. My feelings are real to me. They are based on my experiences, my source to tell me who I am.

When I hurt, I write. When I get lonely, I converse with my pen. I feel fear and turn to the safety of my notebook. Make me feel better, I plead, and as if by magic, the swirling ink knows just what to say, how to comfort my pain, loneliness, and fear, using healing

words stored deep within me. It's the still small voice that sings to me through a Uniball Gel Grip pen. Then after listening to this calming song of myself, I can go back out into the world with a confidence and kindness that comes from truly feeling better. With this awareness I can recognize my feelings for what they are and take them back to my notebook, if I need to, before I inflict them on someone who doesn't have the resources to help.

My dear friend who told me I was needy gave me a priceless gift, the kind only a true friend can give. A challenge to look at myself, and the time and space to do so. A wake-up call. The push I needed to learn how to take better care of myself, without being so dependent on others. A lesson on how to be my own best friend.

Releasing Shame

One night I received a phone invitation to a casual dinner party with people I wanted to reconnect with. The conversation was pleasant, but when I hung up, anxiety raced through my body. What still triggered that feeling? I finished one satisfying phone call with a good friend, but an hour later this one set off alarms.

I don't know what to bring. I'm not sure I'll fit in. I'm afraid I'll get lost following his directions to their new home in the country. They

invited me based on the me they knew five years ago. I'm not sure who I was then. I feel so much more aware of myself now. What if I am too different? What if they've changed their minds about me? I don't feel safe and I'm not sure why. Why am I so scared? Why do I think I should know more?

God answers Job by asking where he was when the world was created. Job's not supposed to understand everything. That's impossible. Let go and trust there is a big picture. Tend to your own little path. You'll learn what you need to know when you need to know it.

So every time I feel shame for messing up and not knowing better, I guess this retired schoolmarm is forgetting to let go and trust the process — the process of learning. But it's been a long, painful journey of letting go of the if-only-I-had-knowns and then forgiving myself.

All I know to do now is pay attention to everything that crosses my path and recognize the invitations to participate in life again.

My son went west to seek his fame and fortune, and I stayed here to find mine. As my journey takes me deep into this experience of Carlton's death, I am discovering a treasure I wasn't expecting. My life.

So what about the party? I had been invited; they must want me to come. That was all I knew for sure, and by knowing better who Laura is, perhaps I would bring exactly what I needed to bring. It would probably be a lot of fun. After all, I wanted to reconnect with them. Maybe they just wanted to do the same with me.

So the next day I got ready. I had decided what to bring. I got my offering and the written directions to their house and climbed in the car, backed out of the driveway, circled the block and pulled back into the garage. All I could do was sit in the car and cry. When I finally dragged myself into the house, I fell on the sofa and picked up my pen in resignation.

I can't do it. I'm a failure. No wait. That's not true. I've been learning what triggers my fears. And I have to recognize those triggers before I can do anything about them. I'm learning what I need to know.

In God's Hands

Those were words I said to Carlton in December 2002, the last time I talked to him. He had quit his job and was rather evasive about how he was looking for another one. I didn't know how to get any more out of him without sounding too pushy. He had assured me he was OK for money a couple months earlier, but none of us knew there was to be a slowdown in computer jobs

and financial strife in the Golden State. At least I didn't know.

We had an interesting conversation about the state of the nation as it teetered on the brink of war, the paranoia stirred by 9/11, the Patriot Act, homeland security, and a growing need for a people's awakening. I heard his concerns. He was having a hard time watching the evening news, too. I heard him ask if I knew why I was here, and his statement that he wasn't sure why he was. I said he would figure it out, trying to reassure him; I wasn't sure when I was his age. I wish I had told him that *he* was what gave my life meaning when I was 27. But I was busy questioning my own reasons to be here at age 55, after retiring from teaching to write. I barely knew how to reassure myself. I heard his request for money and told him I was rather strapped. He said that's OK, or at least that was what I heard; I was concerned about my own ability to exist on a teacher's retirement. I listened as best I knew how, but I was distracted by my own doubting voice.

I told him I loved him and was putting him in *God's* hands. Again, it was what I was trying to do for myself. Maybe he didn't want statements like that. Maybe those were empty words for a scared child. What did they mean? What did he hear? Maybe he wanted something less abstract, something easier to understand. I was his mom; I should have known. But I

wanted something less abstract myself, something easier for me to understand.

There have been so many times I wanted to rewind that conversation and start over. I believed he was finding himself, like he said he was, because I needed to believe I was finding myself. I believed he was OK where he was because I needed to believe that about me. They sound like such empty words now. What did he mean? What did I hear?

I asked if he wanted to come back to Shreveport and look for a job around here. He said no. When he didn't want to talk about the job search, I didn't pursue it. He'd been so eager to leave, and still pushed me away if I asked too many questions. Now I wish I had asked more. Maybe I could have done it gently. Maybe I should have risked being rejected again rather than fight the regret.

I knew he tried suicide once before, but I thought getting out of Shreveport was what he wanted, so I got out of his way and let him go, like a good mama bird. He just wasn't a very loud squawker, and there were more than enough noisemakers, both around me and in my head, vying for attention.

I didn't know what was going on with him then because I was busy trying to figure out what was going on with me. No wonder I didn't know how to help better. I was recovering from an unhealthy marriage that still had too many unanswered questions, and 30 challenging years of public school teaching. I had left

organized religion after a lifetime of belonging, frustrated with the worldly side of it. I was trying to find balance in my new, all-consuming passion for writing. I had aging parents in town, one showing obvious signs of dementia and the other mirroring his behavior.

Help, God. I thought the decision I made to pull away and take care of myself was a healthy one.

Maybe Carlton's pulling away and taking care of himself was where I got the idea. Maybe he was checking to see if I could give him a reason to come back. So he called. And I, busy looking for my own reasons to stay, didn't know how to help. I don't like feeling that responsibility. I didn't like all the responsibility I felt in my marriage, in teaching, in working for my church, and in tending to my parents. But he was my son. He should have had first priority.

Where did I go wrong? Maybe I had let too many louder, fussier voices take over. I was just beginning to hear the sweet, quiet song of my pen, and it had given me the confidence to leave the church, retire, and tell my parents I couldn't move in with them.

But then I said to Carlton, "I don't know how to help."

I agonized after that phone call. What else did he need me to hear? How could I have gotten him to tell me more? What else did he want to hear from me? All I knew to do was keep writing in my journal, hoping

answers would appear. They were, in my own handwriting, in my own voice. I just couldn't yet see or hear them. They were the words to teach me how to communicate better with others by learning how to communicate better with myself, and I had not learned how to turn such honest conversation outward.

I can still feel grief when that conversation runs through my head, wishing I knew then what I know now. I was doing the best I could, as I learned of myself. Today I have ways to watch and listen more selectively to myself and the world around me. The awareness of my participation in an unhealthy marriage has become clearer, and my parents don't look to me for their care.

Every face I see, including the one in the mirror, can be Carlton. The quiet ones especially get my attention; I guess those are the ones who have his voice. I don't always know how to help, and I still put all of us in God's hands. Those words are not empty to me. Maybe I just needed to learn how truly powerful they can be.

I don't like thinking of this as God's plan, that Carlton's earthly death was necessary for my own life to become more authentic. My beautiful son chose to leave, and it became my responsibility to choose to stay. Once upon a time his birth saved my life and now, it seems, facing his death is saving it again.

Life on Earth is a process. If I can't move on from this experience, I leave with him. So I write, day after day, page after page, asking myself more questions, listening to my answers, and then watching for

opportunities to take my improved communication skills back into life.

Blessed Are the Empty

The beatitudes are such a paradox. They certainly didn't make much sense to me as a child. How in the world could the meek inherit the Earth? What would they do with it, for Pete's sake? Or the poor in spirit getting to be the ones to see God? Now that seemed highly unlikely to my way of thinking.

So I was given other ways to try and understand them. Substitute the word "happy" for "blessed," the Sunday school teacher would say. Well that didn't make much sense to me either. Happy are those that mourn? Yeah, right. That was not my experience.

Then there was the suggestion to break up the word beatitude. Be attitude. Make it a plan of action. Be meek, be poor in spirit. Be mourning. Hmmm. I did not like where that was going. This beatitude stuff was tricky.

As a young adult the one I liked best was, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God." (Matthew 5:9 NKJV) I add "and daughters" after sons. I was a passionate hippie protesting the violence of the Vietnam War with angry, accusing placards and loud, long marches. Didn't that qualify me
