

as a peacemaker? How come all I seemed to stir up was an equal confrontational reaction? Where was my reward, I smugly wondered. I was screaming for peace to the outside world, not hearing it as a cry deep within myself.

Now I have my own beatitude. One for the less naive me, based on my experience of darkness as the paradox for finding light.

Blessed are the empty, for they shall be filled.

On January 11, 2003, the contents of my rather self-satisfied cup of happiness were spilled. Spilled? Shoot, the whole cup was shattered, for me and everyone else to see. Oh dear. Was this the end to any claim of innocence? Did I have to learn my lesson the hardest way possible? Was there another way out, or did I have to go straight through it?

When I first got the phone call, I was numb to all feeling, uncertain if I even still existed, or wanted to. Then as feelings returned, I trusted few conventional routines to tell me how to begin gathering up my shattered bits. I was scared of everything, except my pen and a few gentle friends. I had to learn a new way to rebuild, so I wrote. As I restructured myself with something lighter *and* more substantial, I could continue to clean out the layers of fears and regrets, as they were uncovered.

This has been my life review. Fifty years of how Laura has been defined. Reactions to the stimuli around me, as I learned to survive on earth. And now,

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releasing past responses I no longer want or need, I can make more deliberate, honest choices.

Emptying. To be fulfilled. It's a constant act of letting go and accepting the light from within and without. How could I have known more? I was doing the best I knew. I had to learn that I needed new ways.

Now I journal my thoughts, remove myself from situations that make me too anxious, consider what those feelings mean for me, and find ways to take care of myself, day by day. And each morning I wake to a list of intentions, aware that invariably throughout the day there will be adjustments. I am practicing the process of emptying from my egotistical expectations and desires, to be filled with a greater plan.

Blessed are the empty, for we shall be filled.

## Letting Go

My loyal Dell laptop was driving me crazy. I bought this particular computer based on Carlton's recommendation.

"Get a Dell," he said, "because they have great tech support."

I didn't realize then that great tech support to him and great tech support to me meant two entirely different things. If I ran into a problem all I had to do was call an 800 number and this very patient guy could talk me through it. But the process was complicated

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because I didn't have enough computer knowledge to know what he was talking about, which raised my stress level and tried his patience. OK. I didn't really want to know how to troubleshoot my own computer, so I found a local repair service. Merlin Computers. I chose it for the name. I needed something magical to get me through this labyrinth.

The computer's capacity, more than adequate five years earlier, was now rather limiting, even after Mr. Merlin added more memory. I trudged on.

Then as I was loading a new ink cartridge, the printer went nuts and the cartridge got lodged inside the printer case. I couldn't get to it. Argh. I took it to Mr. Merlin, the magician. After performing a C-section to remove the breech cartridge, he told me some little piece (he may have actually named it) was broken and would probably cause a slow leak inside the printer. Oh, great. But then he made the mistake of telling me that it would probably keep working for a while, and that was the part I heard, so I plugged it back into my computer and returned to work.

There was, however, a problem that was getting the best of me. I used my computer mainly as a word processor and for e-mail, and after all these years, it had developed an irritating stutter. I would type a story at a passable speed, only to look up and see little red squiggly lines underlining every other word, telling me they were misspelled. Well, I didn't purposely type "seemed" with six e's. This was becoming too much

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work. I wanted to spend my energy writing stories, not typing them.

So I drove to Office Depot to look at their computers. I didn't really know what I wanted, except that I didn't need the tech support of Dell. I needed advice, and this time I couldn't depend on Carlton. A nice young man saw me reading descriptions of the displays and may have also been able to read the clueless look on my face. (And the word "gullible" tattooed on my forehead.)

"Well, I'm just looking," I said, afraid he would launch into a jargon that might as well be Japanese.

"Do you know what you want?" the nice young man asked.

"Not really. I know what I use my computer for, but I don't want that to limit future possibilities."

Then we went to a monitor to "build" a custom computer. He asked questions, I answered them, and he made recommendations. OK, I realized I was pretty vulnerable here, but this was not an area I wanted a lot of control over. We talked over options, then he gave me some choices and a preliminary price. Well, it wasn't cheap, but still in the ballpark (Yankee Stadium, maybe).

I couldn't make a decision and I told him this, so he printed out the "custom" computer's specs for me to go home and think about.

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I left the store, tended to a couple errands, and found myself pulling into the bank, to transfer money from my savings account. I couldn't let go of this thing. I had no really good reason to put it off. As soon as I left the bank, I headed straight back to Office Depot with my printout in hand, put in my order, paid the cashier, and proudly walked out with the receipt.

Money was one of the issues holding me back while I insisted my old computer was good enough. When Carlton made and spent a lot of money in California, I worried. Obviously, having a Scottish father who grew up during The Depression made a big impression on me.

And the Dell laptop was a link to Carlton - the computer he picked out for me in 2000. That day I understood it was time to let it go.

## **Consider the Lilies**

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." (Matthew 6:28b-29 NRSV)

Another story was coming together as Princess flopped like a puddle across my legs. *Relax*, she reminded me. It was the gift of her royal presence.

My needs were being met. Not necessarily the way I would have planned. But I had been given an interesting mix of people, places and events, and ideas

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to sustain me. I had wasted a lot of energy struggling when life didn't match my expectations. I was fighting the Universe and everyone else's plans.

The blessings I was sent weren't always my first or second choices, or any I thought I might have, but then my idea of choices had been based on limited past experiences. There was the teenaged angel Avery, a nurturing group of teacher and writer friends, a fantasy cruise vacation, and enough insurance money to release me from some of my financial worry. I had a quiet comfortable house, a sunny library nearby, and a magical little school that continued to welcome my desire to connect. There were also the new beginnings of weddings and spring, playmates of all kinds, and a curiosity and creativity constantly challenging my former knee-jerk need for control. And a pen that documented everything.

*What will I do today, or tomorrow, or next week? All I have to do is look behind me, at where I've been. I recorded it for a reason. It is my proof that I have been given what I need when I need it. And time to understand and appreciate the "present" as a "gift."*

As I wrote these words the washing machine in the next room pounded a rhythm for my dancing pen, and the "book" became clearer. By the end of April 2005, I took a final trip to the Rocky Mountains of Colorado to present a draft of my "complete" manuscript. That May, Avery graduated from high school with sights and

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plans set beyond her hometown. In June, I took another cruise with Patricia, but this time to the frontiers of Alaska, without teenagers. And my once-new computer, full of potential, continues to accept and store my ongoing thoughts.

In one week I was part of two different audiences, as real-life authors shared personal experiences sounding much like my own. The nursing students took their math final, and everyone made 96% or higher. And Laura Beth, my precocious third-grade niece, timidly showed me her "writings" — her own journal, recording interactions with her friends. My eyes teared up with joy.

Life is abundant, with more than enough to sustain me. But I had to learn this by letting go of expectations and attachment to my plans, accepting what is, and recognizing that I, like Job, can't possibly know all my choices.

I'm not ready for my journey on Earth to be finished, even though I'm sure it will be full of new challenges. I want to keep trusting that my life unfolds in a beauty and awe beyond anything I can imagine. With the help of my pen, I will continue to welcome the adventure.

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## Master Teacher

The study skills class for nursing students used a book entitled *Becoming a Master Student*.

What kind of teacher thinks she can teach students to be masters of their own learning? Wouldn't it need to be someone confident about her own ability as a student? One who could assess where she is, and what lessons she needs? One who is able to choose effective methods and materials to fulfill the lesson's objectives, then check for understanding and be ready to offer an alternative method if re-teaching is in order? One who knows how to affirm and guide herself, finding assurance that mistakes are opportunities to learn information that hasn't yet been mastered? Yikes! This sounds pretty self-actualizing.

I was not sure how I could fine-tune my first sixty stories and write two more to "finish" this manuscript before I went to the final meeting of my Colorado writing group. What I was looking for was a concise bottom line to wrap up this meandering journey, and I realized that was no small task. But I needed to put words on paper; there was no more time for experimenting. A conclusion was in order.

So the master teacher/student kicked into action and formulated an effective lesson plan, using a standard form from years of classroom practice.

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**Objective:**

- The learner will write two more stories to complete the manuscript, *Writing Toward the Light: A Grief Journey*.
- The learner will continue editing previous stories to tighten the continuity of said manuscript.

**Materials:**

- Pen, yellow tablet, previously written stories, computer, blue-flowered sofa, journal, and watercolors.

**Procedure:**

- Journal — begin with warm-up journaling. Natalie Goldberg's timed writings or Julia Cameron's morning pages are effective exercises to clear out all other thoughts vying for the student's attention.
  - Sit still. Breathe. Breathe again. Repeat as necessary throughout the lesson.
  - Journal again to continue clearing out the distracting thoughts that are still getting in the way of the student's focus.
  - If a creative release is still needed, and words are not yet obvious, paint a picture.
  - (Recess) Take a walk in the park for exercise, fresh air, centering, and for reminding the student where she gains strength.
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- Eat lunch. (Do not omit this step.)
- Drive to the library. Look through the movie titles or new book arrivals. These are finished products as motivation for what you are trying to accomplish. Take a sunny seat by the window.
- Settle in with pen and tablet and begin writing.

**Evaluation:**

- Lesson is successfully completed when the two exercises are written.

Did I finish? Not that day. This was only the plan that needed to be continually adjusted as I assessed how much preparation I needed and how to best meet that need. It got me through the first of two stories. Then I needed to rewrite parts as I typed the story into the computer and revisited it several times over the next few days. When I was somewhat satisfied with this story, I could begin the final one. The one to sum up my experience of searching for light with the help of a pen. Of course, after the final story was rewritten, there would be a zillion other adjustments throughout the book.

It was a beginning to an ending, which was probably just a new beginning. A master student knows her learning is never finished.

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## **A Child's Spirit**

Where is Carlton? What happened to the light that was my son? I am introduced to his loving spirit through every person, place, thing, or idea that comes my way (and some have had to come my way many times before I see they, too, are Carlton's light) — those named and unnamed in this collection of experiences. He is everywhere I use my eyes and ears to find love.

One Sunday he was at the Trapped Truth Society meeting with my writer friends, eager to share their voices. Later that evening he was with us at my brother's house, as Bruce grilled chicken for supper, and Avery, Jake, and Laura Beth reported their latest school news. On Monday morning he was at *George's Grill* eating a scrambled egg and bacon sandwich and solving the world's problems with me and my brother Buddy.

Tuesday he was sitting in the calm, clean dayroom at the Northeast Louisiana War Veterans Home in Monroe with my mom and dad, a dozen war vets, and several cheerful attendants.

During the day on Wednesday he stretched out with me and Princess on the sofa in the middle of my living room to watch a dancing pen edit another dozen stories. That night he tried a new restaurant with

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Linda and me, as we shared the communion of our sacred friendship.

On Thursday at Stoner Hill he was with the kindergarteners painting watercolor blossoms for "Miller's Garden," and singing and dancing to the song, "Each of Us Is a Flower." That night he walked a labyrinth, spread out on the gym floor of Linda's church, with a dozen other silent sojourners and me.

Friday he lunched with the nurturing teaching staff from Our Lady of the Lake nursing program at Dena's sunny country home, and later that afternoon he connected at the circular table at Nicky's Mexican Restaurant with the Steel Magnolias.

He is here and there and everywhere in between — at the grocery store and the park, in the library, on the phone, through e-mail and snail mail. As loving connections are made from one energy source to another, Carlton's light flashes, or sings, or dances, or smiles, or scribbles, or cries. Everywhere I am, he is. I carry his spirit with me. The stirring, the warmth, the assurance I once felt in my womb and found again on the Caddo Lake Nature Trail, where his ashes are now spread, flows through my entire body.

And the void, that incredible darkness on the night of January 11, 2003, was just an illusion, my overwhelming fear hiding the light I had known. Carlton's spirit has been here all along, patiently waiting for me to learn how to see it, hear it, and reconnect with it.

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I had my own near-death experience as I tried to follow my son. But there was no great white light for me to walk toward. On that first night I grabbed hold of the two things I could trust, Leah and my pen. Leah provided me with initial safety through connections outside myself, and the ink from my pen identified flickering lights within me and gathered them together to form the brighter light that is my life now. I carry this journey with me — a combination of little Laura and little Carlton and every daughter and son of God we come in contact with. And that is where I find my child's spirit.

Safety, reaching out, connections, renewed energy, and ultimately new life. It's all God, and it's always there, ready to replace the cold, dark illusion of fear with the warmth and assurance of love. It will always be there, for it is a force death can not extinguish, a force made stronger for me by my own death experience.

It is now my responsibility to continue seeing, hearing, and sharing this connection, this light, this love, this energy spirit I call God, wherever my path leads me.

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## *An Attempted Ending*

I approached Carlton's thirty-first birthday, still looking for a way to end this book, when it finally dawned on me. There is no ending. Nothing is really ever "finished." Everything becomes information and experience, a foundation for what is to be.

My focus, to be finished, was my frustration. It's a journey, the wise ones say. And mine is still being recorded in a journal. Daily, one step at a time, one word after another. The acceptance phase of the grief process. Not acceptance because we're "supposed" to be grateful, but with open arms, like the little guy on the previous page. Bring it on, God. Let me be immersed in life. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross said, "It's only when we truly know and understand that we have a limited time on Earth — and that we have no way of knowing when our time is up — we will then begin to live each day to the fullest, as if it was the only one we had."

And what have I learned from my journey thus far? Better ways to take care of myself and accept the gift of life. The ability to find deep joy in a daily walk in the park, or amazement at the afternoon spent reminiscing with Ginger, my very first friend. The

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willingness to continue penning my endless questions and concerns into my journal, then either sitting still long enough to listen for answers, or getting up and participating in the world around me to find them.

The eagerness to find God everywhere, in everything. The Spirit that flows through the Universe, constantly inviting us to reach out, connect, renew and live. A song, a cry, a sunrise, a new moon, a touch, a look, a painting, a poem. A phone call, an e-mail, a circle of friends, a frisky dog. Tears and laughter, pleasures and struggles, routines and new adventures, births and deaths. Emptying and filling. Round and round. Up and down. Everything.

Building on my foundation, I'm back in the public schools again, supervising new teachers in lower socio-economic schools. It's where I began 35 years ago, but this time I have thirty years of teaching experience and a manuscript of recorded anecdotes. My doctorate from the University of Life.

And I'm working with children in after school and summer programs, exploring their creativity and helping them find their voices, based on the experiences from the last six years with my own inner child.

Who am I now? There's that question again. The one that haunted me that dark January night. I am Laura — the teacher, the writer, the lover of life, the nurturing parent who knows how to nurture herself. And the voice from my pen, sounding so many times like a loving

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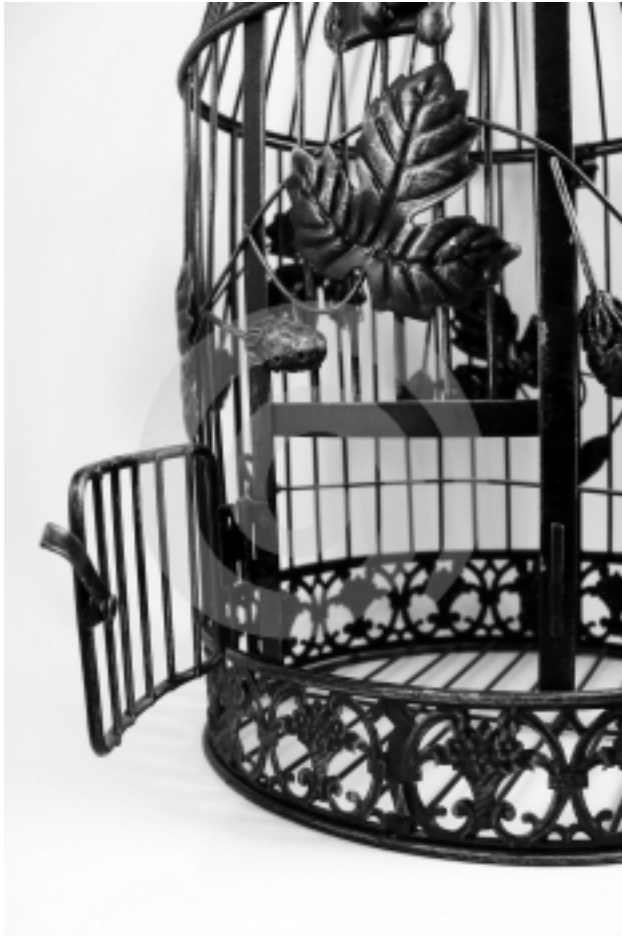
parent, has been with me as a loyal partner through this grief journey, teaching me to trust my unfolding as I write toward the Light.

I offer a final quote from Rachel Carson. "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in."

I take this as my personal challenge. I didn't know how to help my own scared child in his darkness, but the lessons I have learned from helping myself are to be shared now with others.

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## *Further Along*

May 30, 2009

When Carlton died, I was full of shame and guilt in addition to the overwhelming sadness. Maybe that's what I was calling darkness. A separation from all I once thought I knew. How could I ever face myself or others again? I'm not for real. My sense of worth was just an illusion. It distressed me to be around children. My child was gone. How unfair is that? Was this my anger stage in grief? Was I afraid of the anger I was feeling? Strong Southern ladies aren't supposed to be angry. I was out of control.

All I could do was write. I became more intimate with myself and began to feel more honest. This intimacy was like love, the unconditional kind. I know who you are and what you think, Laura, and I love you. It was the voice of God talking to a child. How could I be scared when my God-parent was so accepting of me? This new feeling made it more difficult to judge others. The light of God-love was teaching me acceptance for those so much more like me than I realized.

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This laser light of truth also began burrowing through my knee-jerk fears, old resentments, obsolete experiences, and outdated emotions. It was cutting away unnecessary clutter, leaving the treasure of reality clearer to see.

My brother Buddy contracted viral encephalitis last year, and I visited the ICU unit daily for the month he was there. Sitting in his room, watching his swollen, comatose body hooked up to monitors and a ventilator, I had to make peace over and over again with an uncertainty I could not control. It was not easy. I would need more help.

Returning home from Bud's second day at the hospital I had an incredible urge to go to another Natalie Goldberg workshop in Taos. I called the lodge that night and signed up for a silent retreat available only to those who have studied with Natalie before. Studied with Natalie? Did I qualify? Did I think I could sit in a meditation circle in the zendo with twenty-five experienced writers? Was I good enough? Some of these people had been together many times before. We didn't talk outside the lessons. We ate meals together in silence and quietly shared rooms with others. The focus here was on something else. We were participating in a deep connection while sitting in meditation, penning multiple timed writings, and walking slowly around the room, one behind the other. Something bigger was definitely in charge. An

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important reminder of where this gift of writing can take me.

I also began learning new ways to use my gift of teaching. But each new opportunity presented a challenge. As I would try to leave the house, waves of nausea and noisy doubts stood between me and the kitchen door. I pushed through them. In the car without my trusty notebook, I talked loud and long to God. *Help. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm going to mess up. I can't do this by myself.*

I must have looked pretty wild driving down the street, but by the time I got to my destination I was calmer. It's the way I feel after writing. Somewhere along the way I received the courage I was asking for.

This year I taught creative play and monitored homework at a low income after-school program, facilitated a seminar for students seeking alternative certification in education at a local college, and taught creative writing to fifth graders in seven public schools. I did not actively apply for these positions. I was asked by people who knew my work. It was gratifying to find new settings to use my gifts.

But now at the end of the day, I'm full of new experiences, images, thoughts and conversations, and sometimes this fullness can make me nervous. What's that new grinding sound in my 12-year-old car? Why did that phone call irritate me? What was the uncertainty before I went to class last night?

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I begin to spin. I don't have enough information; I don't know what to do. These are old reactions. Soon, however, I remember to tell myself that everything will be all right. I just need to give it time. In the morning everything will make more sense.

I knew I had to believe in something greater than myself - that what I was experiencing were not random events, and were not even that much about me. I am not in charge.

I can't spend much time now trying to second-guess what will happen, as if I could prevent all unforeseen challenges. I can't micro-analyze every conversation and event looking for answers. Surely awareness doesn't need such intense mental gymnastics. My fears made me pay close attention to everything I said and did, and I learned a lot. But now the authority of such fears has faded as they are replaced with new experiences, ideas and a sense of playful creativity. The "light" I was writing toward.

When I first wake up I still write three morning pages as described in *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron. It's a spiritual exercise of looking at my thoughts, dreams, and intentions. I am not alone as I work through these ideas. I am talking to God, asking for strength for my day. Asking for the next step. If I feel at loose ends during the day (my illusion of being separated), I return to my notebook.

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Twice a week at Barnes and Noble's cafe, I meet friends with notebooks, pens and a timer. I value this time of shared, intimate energy. We are not alone.

Would I not know this dimension of connection if I hadn't been plunged into such darkness? Is that what this is about? Did I have to have such a traumatic wake up call? I certainly can't answer that. I've learned to call my experiences lessons. It is something my teacher-self can identify with, so I won't dwell on impossible questions like "Why me?" Instead I spend my energy as the conscientious student, wanting to please the teacher, looking for new ways to assimilate what it means and finding my place in the world.

*In honor and memory of Carlton*

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