

Cut from the Loom

*I said: In the noon of my life
I have to depart
for the gates of Sheol,
I am deprived of the rest of my years . . .
My tent is pulled up, and thrown away
like the tent of a shepherd;
like a weaver you roll up my life
to cut it from the loom.*

from the canticle of Hezekiah
Isa. 38:10,12

In a search for a spirituality for those who care for the dying, the first questions that must be asked are 'Who are the people cared for? What are they like? What characterises them, marks them out from their fellows?' The dying, and here I include anyone with an incurable illness, are essentially people on a journey. They are an uprooted people, dispossessed, marginalised, travelling fearfully into the unknown. The conditions and speed of the journey may vary – sometimes the movement is barely perceptible, like the moving floors at Heathrow – but sometimes the trucks hurtle through the night, throwing their bewildered occupants from side to side with all the terror of the line to Auschwitz. Above all, the dying are alone and they are afraid.

Paradoxically these fears are rarely articulated, so strong is the cult of the stiff upper lip or the desire to protect those closest to them. The poems of the sixteen year old Indian girl Gitangali, found after her death from cancer, give us a glimpse into this lonely hidden world of the dying:

Tonight, as on other nights
I'm walking alone

Through the valley of fear.
O God, I pray
that you will hear me
for only you alone know
what is in my heart.
Lift me out of this valley of despair
and set my soul free.

Gitangali
from *I'm Walking Alone*

What they want more than anything is that this thing should not be happening to them, that it should turn out to be a bad dream, that they should be rescued, cured, kissed better, made whole. But since this cannot be they want someone to comfort them, to hold their hand, to face the unknown with them. They need a companion, a friend.

So the spirituality of those who care for the dying must be the spirituality of the companion, of the friend who walks alongside, helping, sharing and sometimes just sitting, empty-handed, when he would rather run away. It is a spirituality of *presence*, of being alongside, watchful, available; of being *there*.

It is interesting in this context to explore the meaning of the word *companion*, for it gives us a deeper insight, not only into the role but also the experience of the carer. The companion is one who shares bread: and the dying complain like the psalmist:

The bread I eat is ashes
My drink is mingled with tears.

Ps. 101:9 Grail

He who would be a companion to the dying, therefore, must enter into their darkness, go with them at least part way along their lonely and frightening road. This is the meaning of *compassion*: to enter *into* the suffering of another, to share in some small way in their pain, confusion and desolation.

Put like this, the care for the dying seems an impossibly daunting task. Who but a fool or a saint would deliberately expose themselves, day after day, to intolerable pain and sadness? And yet of course people do. Why? Who knows. I suppose the obvious answer is that it is a calling, what in religious jargon is called a vocation. Some people are attracted

to this kind of work, they find they have a gift for it and discover that it is enormously rewarding. It is not easy – never that, but somehow what one pays out is given back a hundredfold.

What sort of people find themselves called to accompany the dying? At the psychological level one needs three basic attributes: the first is an intensely down-to-earth practicality that does not flinch from the impact of the disintegration of human bodies and minds; the second – and I believe it to be equally important – is an oversized sense of humour, for life and death is a terrible tragi-comedy and as the saying goes, 'If you didn't laugh, you'd have to cry.' The third quality is a very special sort of sensitivity: a vulnerability to the pain of others that is often, but not always, the result of personal experience of suffering.

At a religious level perhaps the most important gift is a sort of paschal overview – the ability to hold *in the same focus* the harsh reality of suffering and the mind-boggling truth of resurrection, of life after death. One must develop the ability to stand with feet firmly planted on an earth inhabited by wounds and vomit bowls, but with the gaze focused beyond the mess of the here and now to a future of hope beyond imaginings. More than anything, one must know deep in one's guts that death is the beginning, not the end.

Arising from this concept of death as birth is the image of the carer as midwife. If death is in reality birth into new life, then the carer is one who attends the person in labour, comforting, encouraging, facilitating as new life emerges from the old. Watching people grow in spiritual stature is one of the most exciting aspects of working with the dying – as indeed it is in any ministry. Growth, however, is always the work of the spirit – one cannot make it happen; just try to provide an environment in which it can occur if it is meant to. And occur it does: people who seem quite ordinary gradually transcend their human bonds of fear and self-interest, until their only concern is for others. They become somehow translucent, incandescent, glowing like candles in the dark.

As I write today I think of three patients at present in the hospice: there is Arthur, the elderly cockney tugboat man from Gravesend who worries that his wife has made a terrible mistake in uprooting herself from London. He is sad that he is dying and he hates it when his leg hurts – but his real

concern is for *her*. Then there is Margaret in her fifties, paralysed from the waist down by the cancer in her spine, and worrying, not about herself but that Gordon, her husband, will not cope without her. And lastly, of course, there is Andrew, a bright thirteen year old, concerned above all to be the man about the house for his divorced mother and busily painting pictures which he sells to raise money for our building appeal. These are just three people we are caring for at the moment. I could think of so many more. Oddly enough it is the selfish ones who are uncommon and always take us by surprise.

From time to time I am asked if my contact with so much suffering makes me doubt the existence of God. Perhaps it should – but I can only grin and try to explain that, paradoxically, this work has given me an ever-deeper conviction of the existence of an all powerful, all loving God who has the whole world in his hands.

This conviction, I know, is shared by many people whose life and work brings them into immediate daily contact with suffering. True, there are the flashes of anger, the moments when heart and mind cry out why, why? What reason can there be for this monstrous pain, this anguish, this injustice? And yet, right in the midst of pain are the shafts of pure joy, the acts of generosity, of selflessness and of heroism which reveal the face of Christ.

It is my experience that those involved in caring, whether it be for alcoholics, drug addicts, the handicapped, the poor or the otherwise dispossessed, are called to a particular experience of Christ and his kingdom. They are called to share in his ministry of healing, of forgiveness, of the washing of feet – and in doing so they are caught up in the whole drama of redemptive suffering. This involvement can be like meeting a giant wave: it can catch you unawares so that you are bowled over and over, terrified, with your lungs full of water and mouth full of sand. Then after a while, if the ministry is right for you, you learn to cope with the sea. Sometimes you ride waves, sometimes you duck just in time, diving blindly into the dark water – and sometimes your timing is wrong and you get knocked over again. Then, just as you think 'I've had it', you surface, amazed to find that you are still alive.

Let me share with you the poem from which I took these images of the sea. It was written by an American missionary

sister whom I met in Chile, not long before I was arrested. She showed me the poem and I loved it so much that I copied it out and kept it in the pocket of the white coat that I wore at the hospital. When things were quiet I would take it out and read it again, pondering over what she meant. When I was arrested the poem remained safely in my locker at the hospital, and when the British consul offered to collect a few of my possessions to take back to England I asked him to look for the poem. He found it – the only one of my papers to escape the secret police. Now, I give it to you:

I built my house by the sea.
 Not on the sands, mind you,
 not on the shifting sand.
 And I built it of rock.
 A strong house
 by a strong sea.
 And we got well acquainted, the sea and I.
 Good neighbours.
 Not that we spoke much.
 We met in silences,
 respectful, keeping our distance
 but looking our thoughts across the fence of sand.
 Always the fence of sand our barrier,
 always the sand between.
 And then one day
 (and I still don't know how it happened)
 The sea came.
 Without warning.
 Without welcome even.
 Not sudden and swift, but a shifting across the sand like
 wine.
 less like the flow of water than the flow of blood.
 Slow, but flowing like an open wound.
 And I thought of flight, and I thought of drowning, and I
 thought of death.
 But while I thought the sea crept higher till it reached my
 door.
 And I knew that there was neither flight nor death nor
 drowning.
 That when the sea comes calling you stop being good
 neighbours,

Well acquainted, friendly from a distance neighbours.
 And you give your house for a coral castle
 And you learn to breathe under water.

Carol Bialock

Now the curious thing is that all the time I was in Chile I understood the sea in this poem as an image of the presence of God – the way he takes over our lives. When I showed it to a monk friend, however, he saw the slow advance of the sea as the gradual encroachment of the agony of the world upon one's consciousness. It is only now, ten years on, that I begin to understand what he meant when he said that the great mystery is that the two are really the same.