



“COMING HOME TO WHO WE REALLY ARE”

A Transcription
Of A
Homecoming Speech by Melissa Bradley (now Bradley-Ball) for
Lake Hills Presbyterian Church, Knoxville, TN – March 12, 2006

Thank you for being here tonight... I've been looking forward to this for over a year. It has been a joy to see you again. I also want to thank my Nashville folks for supporting me tonight –Janet XXXXX and Cara XXXXXXXX.

I also recommend that you say a special prayer of protection because this is the first time I have spoken from the pulpit and I don't know what the consequences of that may be!

I'd like to begin our talk about “The Heroic Journey: A Sacred Path” with words by theologian Anthony deMello:

*The spiritual quest is a journey without distance.
You travel from where you are right now to where you have always been.
From ignorance to recognition, for all you do is see for the first time what you have always been looking at.
Whoever heard of a path that brings you to yourself?
Or a method that makes you what you have always been?
And yet, spirituality, after all, is only a matter of becoming what you really are.*

These words have great meaning for me – particularly tonight.

I left here 22 years ago – as your organist and choirmaster and TONIGHT...I have come home...in more ways than you may realize.

When I think about all the years of my childhood, as well as the years of my adult professional life spent with this congregation, I am grateful beyond measure. I have so many wonderful memories associated with this church. The last time I stood before this congregation was as organist and choir director. I look at this audience gathered here and I see...friends... school mates, former neighbors...the faces of some I have yet to meet...and many former choir members. I notice a lot of you now have children, grandchildren and even great grandchildren. I am always amazed how much life can be lived in such a short time.

When I worked and worshipped among you, I now understand I was perceived as happy and confident. Many of you knew my parents...XXXXXXX and XXXXXX Bradley, or my brother... XXXXX. I am often told they were liked and respected. My deep respect for my loving and supportive Dad was well known in the church; and I was awe-struck by my Mom's beauty and feisty nature. We may have given the appearance that our life was only fortunate, loving and full of fun. My adult years spent here were extraordinarily important because the choir was an emotional and spiritual lifeline. Ironically, while I helped lead worship services, I seriously doubted my own worthiness of God's unconditional love.

The choir was a close-knit group who cared deeply about one another. We cried and made music together and we had a mission. And we laughed...A LOT... probably when we should have been more reverent. With our large group of practical jokesters, it doesn't take me long to find a funny memory when I need to smile. Among my favorites was the third Sunday in October 1982 – which all University of Tennessee Vols know as an important weekend. The SEC rivalries of Tennessee Volunteers vs Alabama Crimson Tide did not stop at the steps of the church. During our “time of greeting,” the blood-runs-orange-choir members pulled out pom-poms and yelled: “Gooooooooooooo Vols!!!!!!” This was a historic Sunday after third Saturday because Tennessee finally



beat 'Bama (while Bear Bryant was still there). Our Roll-Tide-Graduate Pastor at the time, John Carothers, was known for weaving UT/Bama jokes into the service after each Bear Bryant trouncing. After the choir cheer, he stood there speechless and stunned. His face, now the color of his dear Crimson Tide, turned toward us at the end of the prayer of confession... He smiled and said, *"You are forgiven."* There's some connection between God and football in the South because it isn't the last ribbing I've shared with clergy, although I haven't instigated pom-poms again. There was humor and love even during the seriousness of

faith. And although it was not enough to heal, it provided connection until I was able to dig deeper.

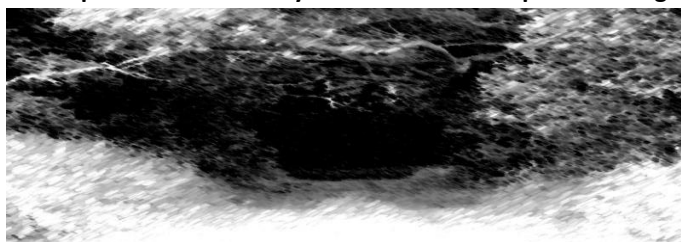
In 1984, I left this community and my career to move to Nashville with my then husband, for him to enjoy the fruit of his professional success. My life changed, dramatically, with that move.

As I prepared for tonight, I spent a lot of time considering what I should share with you of what happened during that time between then and tonight. Do I tell you *the truth* of *what really* transpired in those two decades? Or do I simply tell some of the spiritual stories as a road warrior? I have decided to do some of both and I may cry when I do this hopefully not one of those "ugly cries" as Oprah calls it. If I do, they will be tears of gratitude, love, relief and hope and no longer tears of sadness.

For you to understand how I "see" the spiritual lessons as a road warrior, I must tell you how I developed "new eyes" of seeing. The story I am about to share has been aired on national radio and has been told to more than 100,000 clinical professionals over the years, even though I've never told most of you – the very people who have known me for nearly 50 years. Like many, I hid my real story from everyone – my parents and brother and even my lifelong best friend, Jenny. I even tried to hide it from God. These were secrets I wouldn't and couldn't tell a soul, even to myself, until long after I left Knoxville.

The move to Nashville caused me to lose any sense of identity. It was my first time away from family and friends. I was newly unemployed and removed from my entire support network. There was no Internet, long distance was expensive, and letter writing was not quick. An already strained marriage eventually wouldn't weather the unknown disease that was killing it. Although my husband was a good man, he could not repair me. The choir had been my sole identity – or perhaps I should say "SOUL" S-O-U-L identity. After leaving this community, I plummeted into an abyss of depression.

While struggling with Major Depression, I cried continuously. Because depression in the early 80's carried such a powerful stigma, I told no one about it or the fantasies of suicide. Where others thought I was simply "blue" or homesick, I now know I should have been hospitalized. It was only through the grace of many kind, unknowing individuals that I didn't meet the same fate as 19 other family members.



I searched for a new job, in a new city. Just what Nashville didn't need was yet another unemployed and depressed musician. Since I had only just received a graduate degree in counseling with no useful experience, finding a job in that field appeared impossible and shameful considering my internal turmoil.

Nearly a year passed before I finally landed a full-time job, as a child sexual abuse investigator. I held a church job, but it carried no connection for me like this congregation does, and I did not have the energy to build anew. The news that I had been hired for the investigator position came, literally, within minutes of Dad dying after unexpected heart surgery (21 years ago this week). In fact, his last words to me were: "I love you and you will get that job."

As many of you know, my Dad was always my cheerleader, mentor and philosopher. His profound and positive impact on my life continues to this day. But at the time I didn't understand his great interest in me getting the job as a child sexual abuse investigator. Years after his death, I learned that my Dad had experienced many years of brutal and unrelenting abuse and

molestation by his father.

After I began the new job, the impact of my own adult rape and four years of my own child molestation (by a distant family member) all began to crystallize. Grief continued to pile up. More losses followed. My mother died, two close friends suddenly died and my marriage eventually disintegrated. I felt as if I was in the ring with a boxer, reeling from hit after hit. I fell many, many times, but I didn't give up...even when I thought I might. Instead, I entered what is known as an emotional winter.

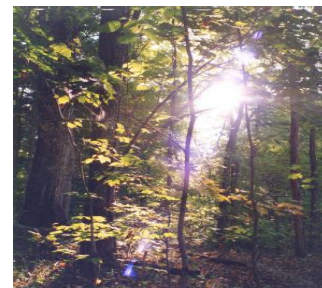
Author Wayne Muller says:

Within the sorrow, there is grace. When we come close to those things that break us down, we also touch the things that also break us open. And it's in that breaking open, we uncover our true nature.

An emotional winter is when our zest for living goes into dormancy. During the bleak times of life we often want to withdraw from the coldness and pain of life and wrap ourselves in a blanket of numbness, staring blankly. Those times in my own life have caused me to contemplate living, but I often found it much more comforting to contemplate dying – to imagine falling asleep for a day or an eternity, in order to block out reality. Fantasies of suicide comforted me, because they were my own way to titrate the pain. In clinical circles, “titrating” means to let the pain in a little at a time. Fortunately, I had several things going in my favor. First, my father had taught me the heroic framework since I was a child. I learned that there would be times in life that would be scary, filled with confusion and doubt as well as times I might want to give up. Second, during graduate school, one class spent an entire quarter on “Suicide” and the professor told us one day that the suicidal moment lasts only seven minutes, which I now understand is untrue. Third, I was stubborn and tenacious. Fourth, I was ridiculously curious. Fifth, I was not the least bit impulsive at the time. All of those elements conspired together help me stay alive.

When I would get to the end of my capacity, I would focus on the seven minutes. “I can do this seven more minutes.” It didn't matter, at those times, that what the professor had said was not true. When I was able to get many seven-minutes-at-a-time under my belt, I would do a day at a time. Then it was three months at a time. I would set a suicide date – three months into the future – with the promise that, “if I don't find some glimmer of hope in the next three months, then I will complete the plan.” I also made myself another promise. If there WAS a glimmer of hope, I would have to move the date out to three months again. I never got any closer than six to eight weeks. There was usually relief when there was the awareness that the pain would not last forever. There were many three month times and I look back now at how much courage it took for me to say yes to one more day.

I journeyed this time alone because of the fear and shame of telling a clinician that I had a graduate degree in counseling and was in so much pain that I found comfort in fantasies of dying. Years later, I finally reached out to a therapist who finally told me, “You were a human being before you were a clinician. You must grieve like anyone else does.”



I don't presume to be the only person here tonight who has experienced very painful challenges. But many of us choose (or sometimes are forced) to experience our hell privately. The primary lesson I learned during those dark days was to see with new eyes. *I became conscious of the Divine order of things:* pain and joy, losses and gains, perceived weakness and authentic strength.

The basement of the soul time – as Henri Nouwen called it – was a time to grieve: grieve my identity, my father, my mother, my childhood, my life, my perceived future, the choir, the support network and all my child-like illusions of life...all while knee-deep in child sexual abuse investigation. It was one of two emotional winters in my life that I have experienced to date. The average person will experience three to five emotional winters over the course of a lifetime. My second emotional winter is another story for another time.

What happens during a spiritual or emotional winter? Winter is a time to gather energy rather than expend it. Nature validates this as bulbs go through their dormant period in order to gather enough force to break the surface with a beautiful spring blossom. A spiritual or emotional winter is an important time to gather our emotional and physical energy, to listen to God or a Higher Power and the wisdom silence brings. We are to remember the playfulness of summer, the vibrancy of fall and to trust

that spring will eventually return.

In the depth of winter it's hard to imagine spring will come again. Yet one day in early March, the sun comes out to warm icy branches, while the ground is muddy from cold winter rains and snow. We may notice a tiny dot of green beginning to peak through old mulch, promising the birth of a fragrant crocus. But sometimes spring isn't quite ready. There may be another month of ice and cold winds.

My journey from the shadows is really a story of hope...of resilience... of tenacity...and the ability to find beauty in extraordinary pain and lessons in ugliness.

I can give hundreds of examples of how life prepared me to "see" with new eyes. One night – as a young child, I was awakened with the sound of someone at my window. I yelled for my parents, and soon heard the gentle voice of my parents calming my fear. After investigating, my father told me there was nothing to fear and he took me out the door and showed me the culprit. Next to my bedroom window was a parecantha bush blowing in the summer wind, scratching on the screen. That experience was a subtle, but powerful lesson to face fears. Over the years, he told stories about some of his childhood, and the pain he endured, but he also taught me how he got through them. He told me that God is always with me and is a God of love. I feel Dad was always preparing me for my own dark night of the soul.

That phrase, "Dark Night of the Soul," was coined by St. John of the Cross. The concept of the Dark Night provided me a framework of hope. Many authors have since written about The Dark Night of the Soul – such as Thomas Moore and Gerald May. A dark night is when we feel empty and disconnected from God. We may question why God "allows" painful things, as we feel abandoned or betrayed by Him.

Once we can be still enough to notice and learn, the gifts of the dark night become apparent. Although these gifts are always present, much like stars, we often don't notice until nightfall. When we are thrown into sudden darkness – as when electricity goes out – we're often disoriented, particularly when we are in an unfamiliar place.



As we become still and grow more acclimated to the darkness, we begin to sense things around us – sounds, sensations and any smidgen of light to orient us. We put our hands out as we feel our way through the darkness. With halting steps, we move forward and slowly begin to get our bearings. At those times we're more open to accepting guidance from something outside of us.

Since I didn't yet feel worthy of God's love and guidance – not yet knowing that my own sexual trauma had made me too ashamed to ask God for anything – I began by praying to my earthly father now deceased, since I believed he loved me. I later found a church community which truly exhibited unconditional love and healing and learned to pray to God, rather than to my Dad. While still yearning for the light of day, I was no longer terrified I wouldn't survive. As surely as night follows day, day also follows night and its rhythm is a part of a Universal truth.

Years later, when a 12-year career as a psychotherapist for a large corporation in Nashville ended I experienced another huge change, but wasn't paralyzed by this loss. There was no dark night of the soul. I trusted I would be okay. And sure enough, one week later, I was granted a longtime goal: I was hired to be an international trainer.

I spent three months in solitude, immersed in writing a huge training manual and seminar on the clinical aspects of healing from sexual trauma. Following those three months, I spent ten days in a monastery. My experience at the monastery became my first writing of the spiritual lessons on the road. Many of you may have read that story on my website. It's called Lessons from the Big House. Here are some excerpts from that story.

TAO OF THE ROAD WARRIOR: LESSONS FROM THE BIG HOUSE

I checked into the 100-year-old gothic building in a small town in Alabama, with its hundreds of acres of beautiful gardens, ponds,

fountains, and labyrinths. That beautiful setting was to be home for ten days while I “vacationed” with God.



During my first few hours at the monastery, my old fantasy of becoming a nun resurfaced....I guess I was going to be the first Presbyterian nun! That fantasy began when I first saw *The Sound of Music* – in 1966 – with Debbie XXXXXX XXXXXX (who is sitting on the second row and you all know).

Those ten days and nights were spent in Grand Silence...when you don't even make eye contact. We were encouraged to paint or journal, but it was recommended we refrain from reading.

Each day we would have nine 20-minute “sits.” A sit is a time of

intentional silence and stillness with God...praying not by talking to God, but by listening to God. A “sit” usually helps us to let go of the “monkey mind” that chatters incessantly in many of us. And when we are finally still enough and quiet enough, we may feel God's guidance and gift of peace. Since some of you remember me as a kid, being quiet and still wasn't my forte, so ten days would prove to be a challenge.

The first day I was awed by the sacredness, and it reinforced that Sound of Music fantasy. For two full days of silence, I felt like I was experiencing heaven on earth. That was the spiritual infatuation stage, where we feel a lot of spiritual euphoria, with little effort. But like any intimate relationship, a relationship with God takes commitment and work.

On day three, I began to get in touch with what I had stashed in the basement of my soul. New people often experience agitation on day three... so I was right on track. For those who have never tried this, the psychology of “centering” (as it is called) – unloads the unconscious mind.

You've probably heard of people getting in touch with their Inner Child. Well, on day four I got in touch with my Inner Tasmanian Devil. I became extraordinarily irritable and critical. Instead of gently returning to my internal sacred place, I began looking around the room making silent judgments. “That's a stupid looking outfit.” Or “I bet he's the one who snored during that last sit.” In the tomblike silence of the meditation room, you can often hear a deviated septum or a bean burrito making its way through someone's digestive system! I learned that when we want to take the focus off the internal hamster wheel, we often focus – negatively – on others. So began my obsession about the woman beside me. She was a loud swallower. Every time I tried to get centered, I would hear her swallow – with a gulp...and she kept clearing her throat.

I wanted to throttle that unknown woman, and I've never hit anyone in my life – unless you count the time when we were kids, I trapped and pounded Jenny between a locked back door and the storm door. She is here with us tonight, having survived that part of our childhood!

I decided my agitation was the fault of the unknown woman beside me, because I felt relief and was able to center when she missed one of the sits. The relief, however, was short-lived, because when she returned she was wearing a quart of Estee Lauder perfume and a bracelet that jingled. With assigned seats, I was sentenced to spend the next seven days next to the irritating woman.

I tried to still my mind enough to listen to God, while my head was exploding from her perfume. I, THEN, began to plot my escape. I wasn't in lockdown – although it sure felt like it. I fantasized going home, but didn't act on it, because I knew if I returned home seven days early I would have to tell my husband that I had flunked silence – to which he would have replied, “Why doesn't THAT surprise me?”

Stuck there, I continued to obsess by counting her swallows...and found that after every fourth swallow, she cleared her throat. My chest ready to explode, my jaws clinched, I had never felt such anger.

Then I noticed something seemed familiar about her...and the epiphany came. For the first time in three days, I realized the stranger reminded me of my Mom – who, by then, had been gone for nearly a decade.

Some of you may remember...Mom wore Estee Lauder perfume. She also wore a charm bracelet that jingled and EVERY morning

of my childhood, Mom ate grape-nuts and bananas for breakfast. I listened to the chomp, crunch, crunch, crunch, swallow and occasionally one of those “thingies” would get hung in her throat and she’d make sounds like a cat coughing up a hairball.

As I realized the connection, I began to cry. Why is it we often miss THE MOST irritating things about people after they are gone? While I cried, I noticed her profile...her size... her clothes and hair ...even her toes.....all just like Mom’s. I thought I had finished THAT grieving. Or do we ever?

Occasionally, the woman would break from the protocol and gently rub my back and I would bust into explosive, loud sobs. I didn’t know whether to jump in her lap telling her I missed her, or slap her for dying.

For the next three days I cried, and much to the dismay of other retreatants, I didn’t miss a sit. I figured it would be good for them, too, if they got in touch with their Inner Taz! By day six, with my blotchy chapped face, red crusty nose, and swollen eyes, I was done!!! It was time to break from the Big House. So I decided to run away. I figured if I was gonna sit next to Mom, I was gonna act up.

I left the monastery, without my belongings, having no clue where to go in that tiny Alabama town. So, I did what I do when stressed out: read voraciously, or shop. My first stop was an office supply store to buy boxes of highlighters..... And I needed something to go with the highlighters – books...lots of books. So I found a bookstore and bought about 30 pounds of books. I still didn’t feel much better. I found a shoe store to buy yet ANOTHER pair of black shoes. It was still not enough. I needed comfort food. And while sitting in a Pizza Hut snarfing a huge pepperoni pizza, I began to feel like my old self.

I did return to the monastery and the twinkly-eyed Benedictines busted me. Maybe it was the content look (which most new people don’t have on day six), or maybe it was the shopping bags or the pepperoni breath at the vegetarian monastery. Rumor has it, one person usually runs away at the long retreats. The staff must have had a parlay board and made bets on who would and with all the sobbing I had been doing, I was favored 2 to 1. *Amazingly I finally completed all ten days and learned what I tend to do instead sitting with God. When I experience chaos I can be still. But when I am still... I become the chaos. Perhaps, that is why our society is so into DOING than BEING.*

Six days after getting out of the monastery, I began my first tour as a trainer. The first city was Knoxville – which, interestingly, the seminar company didn’t know was my hometown. My first clinical training on healing from sexual trauma was held two miles from where four years of child molestation occurred and across the street from where the adult rape happened. Life is a Divine cycle.

The Spiritual Lessons on the Road began immediately, but really escalated eight weeks later, when 9/11 occurred.



I struggled with letting go and letting God when I had to get on a plane for tour a few days after the airports reopened. Journaling became very important as I began to notice many things. For instance, I realized the stranger sitting beside me might be the last person I speak to in this life. It became more apparent how much of a community we are and how much we need one another. I was also reminded that we are not guaranteed another minute of life. I questioned whether I had cleaned up all my relationships, said the things I needed and wanted to say, taken the risks I wanted to take; and I pondered if I was ready to “go” at any time. It was frightening, exhilarating and freeing to live with the realization.

I could say I learned that nothing in life is certain, but that would be untrue. Being lost in New Jersey IS A CERTAINTY.

TAO OF THE ROAD WARRIOR: LOST – REDUX

I now understand what it feels like to be a rat in a maze because I HAVE been lost in New Jersey. With my perception skewed from exhaustion and frustration, the roads in New Jersey seemed like a 60-lane racetrack, with tollbooths every five feet. I lost a bucket of change because my left-handed throws continually missed the receptacles. On one particular day, I spent hours in



bumper-to-bumper traffic with drivers yelling and flipping me off and horns honking. My rental car was a cute, fuel-efficient KIA (which I think stands for Killed In Action). The engine had the power and sound of a sewing machine and when leaving the tollbooths, the sweet little thing couldn't merge into the aggressive traffic. I was forced off several unintended exits and became very lost. As my composure unraveled, so did my already challenged ability to read a map. So, I called home to get directions from my (then) husband...again.

Calling home for directions became a ritual during tour weeks. Whether I was lost on a deserted interstate in northern Nebraska with a large moose-like object in front of my car or in a downtown labyrinth on the wrong side of the Boston Harbor, my husband became used to giving me directions and crisis counseling. When I called from New Jersey, his first exasperated question was, "Where are you this time?" The former Boy Scout, Army veteran couldn't fathom my answer – "I have aaaaaabsolutely no clue." With an "extra crispy" tone he replied, "How in the heck am I supposed to help you when you don't even know where you are??!?!?!? Don't you have the compass I gave you?"

Now it was confession time and I replied, "Yes, I have the compass, but still don't have a clue how to use it." A few months back, he had given me the Army Ranger version of compass reading. I was taught about "clicks" and the difference between true north and magnetic north. He had not picked up on my glazed and befuddled look. He didn't understand the art of teaching Compass Reading for Dummies. I thanked him for teaching me and I put the compass in my briefcase for good luck, where I had never thought about it again...until now. He continued, "This is one heck of a time to tell me you didn't understand!"



Frazzled and feeling thoroughly incompetent, I began to sob. As a long-time crisis counselor volunteer, he began to reframe the situation.

"Okay...breathe...breathe..." he said using his soft counselor voice as I continued to cry.

"You aren't really lost. You're just confused."

"You're on the planet Earth. In fact, you're even in the United States."

"Since you've been driving for two hours, you're probably either in New Jersey or New York. And that means I have you on this map," he said in a comforting and confident tone.

Ahhhhh...that reframing helped so much. A tune danced through my head – "I once was lost, but now I am found..."



As I now reflect on the comforting words he spoke that evening, I ponder: How often do we feel lost with no sure direction? Maybe we know where we want to go, but don't know how to get there? And sometimes we are just simply too scared or tired to keep going and need a little encouragement from others.

When I take a moment to still my heart and mind, I know God is always by my side, even when I don't "hear" or "feel" that Divine presence. In the meantime, I need to make sure my "map" is correct...and that I am moving correctly toward God's purpose for us. Feeling lost is completely different from being lost. God always knows where I am because of being equipped with a GPS – God's Positioning System. But I must tune into it. And nature is the primary way I can find God.

The Tao of the Road Warrior stories would find the spiritual lessons through the metaphors in nature which always surround me. One was about dancing with the sea.

TAO OF THE ROAD WARRIOR: DANCING WITH THE SEA

One day, during a transition time between tours, I found a nearby beach with hopes of physical and emotional renewal. Nothing is more relaxing than listening to the sounds of the shore. I love hearing waves crash as they make their way to land and the sensation of wind massaging my body. It's a bounty for a weary road warrior.

While standing numbly on that sandy shore, with water lapping against my tender shins, my breathing became deeper after weeks of traveler's fatigue. I was thoroughly enjoying the moment and feeling a bit more grounded, when Mother Nature tapped me on the shoulder to teach me another lesson. The undertow was so powerful I couldn't remain in one place. But I was intent on remaining rooted to my chosen spot. As water receded, I would be forced off balance and my heels would end up in a hole from eroding sand. I was irritated that I had to adjust my stance.

After moving to another place, a firmer place, there'd be a few moments of peace until the next wave came to shore, forcing me to move again. I didn't want to think, but a metaphor intruded. Nature was in charge. As I moved down the shore, finding one temporarily solid place after another, the similarities with life began to gel.

The existence of the ocean is constant, yet there's never a duplicate moment. Its form is forever changing. The tide comes in and goes out and life is like that. People come in and out of our lives. Jobs may come and go. We can't wait to get old enough to drive, and then we want to stop time as we age. At the same time we are gaining wisdom and developing new dreams, we may be smarting from our losses. The waves continue to come to shore at the same time the undertow carries out the previous surge.



I often have been so complacent or exhausted I didn't want to be bothered by change. In a self-induced inertia, I have often resisted the ebb and flow of life. Even now, I continue to resist my graying hair, the increasing slackness of my jowls, the aging of elderly family. For years I fought inevitable layoffs. My day at the beach reminded me of the lessons of acceptance, movement and growth.

The more I tried to remain rooted in the same place on that beach, the more off balance I became. I realized, *"Why should I, as a human being, expect to be above the natural laws of the universe?"* Life is about movement and growth. There's an ebb and flow of the tides, the changing of the seasons, the migration of birds, and the dormant season of plants. I don't *expect* a beautiful blossom to remain on the stem forever.

While I danced with the sea that day, I realized those movements actually made me feel more alive. Respecting, rather than resisting, the rhythm of nature brought me a sense of peace. Resistance to movement in life is what actually causes the exhausted numbness I sometimes feel.

Have you ever "danced with the sea"? If not, try it and see what you take from its teachings. By walking through a stream, watching the seasons change or even returning to a family photo album, you might be reminded of life's movement. Do you still have your bronzed baby shoes? I bet they no longer fit.

At some point, we all make conscious or unconscious decisions as to whether we wish to merely survive or to thrive. A thriving life means continually adjusting and growing, and we'll be enriched from the experience. It may not be convenient or comfortable



to have to move, but if we don't dance, the undertow of life will topple us...so dance we must!

Spring is coming, as it always does. Crocus will bloom, emitting their sweet fragrance. And just as surely as flowers bloom, we too can get through our emotional winters and live to enjoy a hopeful spring, a beautiful summer and radiant fall...or the time we have left.

I trust winter is a part of the life process, and it is comforting to know that theologians and philosophers - much greater thinkers than I - have frequently pondered this for centuries

I always learn lessons from winter and in the stillness, I will notice, a patch of green and the fragrance of new life.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AROUND YOU? LOOK.

WHAT DO YOU HEAR RIGHT NOW? LISTEN.

WHAT DO YOU FEEL EMOTIONALLY? FEEL.

AND IN THIS MOMENT, WHAT DO YOU SENSE PHYSICALLY? OPEN.

We must take time to be still and be fully present in our life and not simply mark things off our to-do lists. I think few people on their death-bed are ever upset about not completing chores, but many often regret not savoring the time they have had.

So my message is simply to notice. Can we see the beauty of the barren trees of winter, or know the bulbs hidden under the earth carry within them new life waiting for the right moment to emerge? Do we see the wisdom of the tides that remind us of life's ebb and flow? When we notice, we will see all sorts of metaphors to remind us to live our lives more fully.

Thank you for coming. Thank you for being such integral parts of my spiritual journey. I love you and I will never forget you.

Let us pray a prayer inspired by John O'Donohue:

Dear God,

Please help us to awaken to the mystery of being here and enter the quiet immensity of your own presence.

May we have joy and peace in the temple of our senses.

May we respond to the call of the gifts you have given and find the courage to follow our path, knowing you are always with us.

May we be open to the warmth you provide, even during our spiritual winters.

May we always know you are with us, even though we may not always feel your Presence.

Please help us to remember that we are the ones who turn from You, not you from us.

May we be consoled by the secret symmetry of our Soul.

May our sore wells of grief turn into a well of your seamless Presence.

May we be conscious to experience each day as a sacred gift woven around the heart of wonder.

May we be embraced by you in whom dawn and twilight are One.

For this we ask of you, in love and gratitude, our Divine creator...AMEN.