

PROLOGUE

There are many ways in which the course of our daily life is altered. The ravages of war can cause the loss of home, business and loved ones, as we see in Iraq year after year. So, too, with natural disasters. After a tornado leveled an entire town in the Midwest, I heard a woman who had survived say on the radio, "I have to reinvent my life." When a whole way of life is changed, the greatest loss may be that of hope.

On a smaller scale, a chronic illness can require changes in daily living, limiting our options, and forcing us to choose different priorities. The altering may be gradual, as it is when we age, losing mobility, or hearing, or our independence. It is death, however, that alters life forever. This is especially true with the death of a spouse, the person with whom all the rhythms of daily living have been shared, at all levels: body, mind and soul.

In all cases we experience some shift in consciousness, some change in the way we see the world, ourselves and God. This is the point at which an authentic change of direction may begin, a change for the better, what Christians refer to as *conversion*. Initially, we may be so intent on survival that we do not view the change as a conversion. But in the midst of survival, and all its attending techniques, we can sense the challenge to find ways to get in touch with the richness of life *here and now*, and to welcome the next chapters of a life newly unfolding. Therein lie the seeds of resurrection.

More than twenty years ago, novelist and poet Reynolds Price was diagnosed with cancer of the spine. He was treated and lived, but his way of living was completely changed. Though he is now wheelchair bound, he writes that these last decades have been the most creative and productive of his entire life, and his work confirms that.

When he realized the enormous change that had taken place he asked himself: Who will you be tomorrow? That, I think, is a question that all of us in the midst of change or conversion might ask ourselves.

A Personal Narrative

The question I framed a few years ago was this: How is it possible to realize a future of creativity filled with God's abundant love when my heart is broken? My heart broke early in the morning of June 23, 2003. My husband, Tom, who had suffered from serious cardiac problems for years, went to the hospital on our forty-sixth wedding anniversary, not because of a cardiac event but because he had bronchitis and couldn't stop coughing. He remained overnight for observation, not in intensive care, but in an ordinary hospital room. We fully expected he would come home the next day.

At 5:30 the next morning my phone rang. I knew immediately it was the hospital.

"How is my husband?" I asked. A doctor said, "I'm sorry to tell you...he's not going to make it. He tried to get out of bed and hit the floor; people are working on him, but he has no pulse." This doctor—a stranger to me—then ordered me not to drive and she called my son. I called my pastor. All this bad news was being conveyed by phone, and with every number dialed I could feel my heart breaking, piece by piece. I remembered a poem about how bad news always comes by phone; before a word is spoken you can sense that life is now different.

Our children, all of whom were in town for our anniversary, joined me in the hospital room where their father, still warm, remained. My pastor came, bringing experience born of dealing with losses and lamentations. There was oil for anointing, the prayer of commendation ("May the martyrs welcome you") and sacred bread to remind us that we all belonged to one another, and to Christ, and that would never change. Hours passed, and Tom grew cold. It was time to go home.

At home I stared at a woodcut of the Sacred Heart by Robert McGovern which we have had in our home for many years. For so long I had prayed to the Sacred Heart (“heal his heart...,” “bring peace to our hearts...,” “give me a loving heart...”) and now a Jesuit friend stood in my dining room and suggested that the devotion is rooted in marital love. And so I buried my beloved with his bruised and battered heart on the Feast of the Sacred Heart.

Home. The place of shared life in all its joys and sorrows was now profoundly silent. I who have always cherished silence and solitude experienced it in a different way: the silence of absence. At first it was overwhelming. Alone I wept and groaned, sounds reminiscent of Irish keening. I struggled to get balance, some understanding of life in the present. Three old trustworthy aids came to me. One was writing, the others ritual and prayer. They wove in and out of each other.¹

Many books about grief were given to me, some of them modern classics such as C.S. Lewis’s *A Grief Observed*. They were not what I needed. Then I came across a book by mystery writer P.D. James, *Time to Be in Earnest*. It was not a grief book but a memoir of sorts, covering one year in her life—her seventy-seventh. What I saw in those pages was a woman, a wife and a mother, who had lived alone for many years because of her husband’s mental illness. The account of ordinary days and nights was both consoling and energizing. I needed to see meaningful patterns in the lives of those living alone, and P.D. James fulfilled that need.

At the end of the summer, as my lamentations slowly subsided, I began my own journal. At first I wrote as a way of coping. My focus was a particular love—our love—and writing was a way of connecting to that love. But in the writing, and the living, of days, weeks and months, a story of different proportions began to emerge. Love stretched. The communion of saints, a cornerstone of Catholic belief enshrined in the creeds of Christian faith, became palpable. Traditionally the communion of saints has referred to the dead only.

The communion I experienced included not only my husband, but friends, public figures, culture in its many forms, and the social contexts in which we all live. The difference between loneliness and aloneness took on a new clarity as my life experience expanded into communion. I began to probe the meaning of resurrection, our resurrection, the resurrection of the body, or, as earlier translations of the creed stated, the resurrection of the flesh. I had given it little thought before, but now I had the desire to understand what this means.

Why This Book?

The decision to write this book can be traced to the idea that the most personal human experience is also the most universal—like Eucharist. Hence, journal entries, some of them deeply personal, form a key element in this book's structure. These entries are not really spiritual journal-writing. There is no crisis of soul evident in the entries, although there are crises recorded, large and small. But mostly they are about everyday things. I realize now that I chose this mundane form because what I needed was to recognize in the dynamics of everyday domestic and professional life the traces of God, and the dynamism of grace. That's what I spotted in the P.D. James book, although it does not move from the experience to theological reflection, which I try to do. (By theological reflection, I mean a form of theologizing that draws upon lived experience as much as classic texts.)² The journal covers one year, from September 2003 to September 2004. Some narratives and theological reflections were added later.

Divided into four chapters, this book follows the liturgical cycle of the year: Ordinary Time (chapter one), Advent, Christmas and Epiphany (chapter two), Lent and Easter (chapter three), and Pentecost, the extended season of the Holy Spirit lived in Ordinary Time (chapter four). The influence of Bernard Lonergan, S.J., is seen in the structure: Journal entries provide the data of experience; there is reflection on the data in an effort to reach understanding; there is the desire for responsible action; and throughout, there is questioning

and the recognition of art as a bearer of meaning. Initially, this influence was unconscious, but over time I saw what was happening. *Vespers* is the centerpiece of my reflections.

About Vespers

Monasteries are places where Saint Paul's directive to "pray always" is taken seriously. Since the Second Vatican Council, it is less usual for monks and nuns to rise in the middle of the night for prayer. (Trappists—men and women—are one exception.) Rather, the rhythms of our waking moments are honored in prayer. Morning Prayer typically occurs in the early hours of the day, at sunrise or shortly thereafter. Midday Prayer is around noon, and Vespers is prayed as evening descends. The last prayer of the cycle is Compline, the prayer just before sleep. The sun is gone; only moonlight, starlight and lamplight guide our final steps. The blessing in that final prayer of the day is one my husband and I said for many years: "May the Almighty Lord grant us a restful night and a peaceful death." As my husband's health deteriorated it became an ever more precious prayer. But it is Vespers that guides me daily.

I think of this book as celebrating Vesper time for several reasons. A central one is that Evening Prayer became a support for me in my loss and mourning. It also has been, and is, an open door to the abundant life that pours from the heart of God. I have always loved evening. The sky changes color, lights go on in homes, and there is a feel of Dutch paintings with their emphasis on the interior. Sometimes the sun and the moon appear simultaneously. Vespers, filled with psalms of praise and longing, struggle and truth, climaxing with Mary's prayer, the Magnificat, provided a doorway to other forms of prayer, like silence—not the silence of absence that had been so painful in the first months after Tom's death, but the silence of a rich presence. I felt at ease talking with Tom, asking for guidance which unfailingly showed up in some form. Talking to the dead might seem strange, but it is clearly embedded in Catholic tradition.

Vesper time also refers to this particular period of my life (and the lives of many women) when we are vividly aware of the passage of time, just as evening reminds us of the passage of a day. So I think of this “third third” of life (a term used by a physician friend) as Vesper time. It’s a time to reflect on what has been, to be grateful for what is, and to prepare for nightfall.