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"THE ONE WHO TRUSTS THE LORD WILL NOT SUFFER LOSS."

—SIRACH 32:24
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STORY TIME

She is on her way from a retreat in a distant parish to a friend's new home. On her lap are the e-mailed directions from Emily, guiding her from Bangor to Gorham. Her breathing is shallow. She is anxious as a blind person venturing out for the first time with a seeing-eye dog. As the Portland traffic picks up, her grip on the steering wheel tightens.

Ever since her husband of thirty years filed for a divorce, driving has become hazardous duty for her. She often stops to ask for directions, and promptly forgets them. A four-hour trip takes six because she repeatedly misses her exit on the turnpike. Even if she sees the exit sign, she cannot trust that it is the right one.

Now she finds herself at a traffic light where Emily's directions leave her marooned. Left? Right? Her indecision prompts strident urban honking behind her. Hands shaking, she pulls into a Dunkin' Donuts parking lot and calls her friend.

At the sound of Emily's voice, the driver sobs like a toddler lost in a department store. "I don't know where I am. Somewhere in Portland," she says, looking around for a street sign. The maternal reassurances and repeated directions from Emily are offered in a language she can no longer understand. "Either you'll have to come get me or I'm going home," she insists, as though she could find her way home. "You stay right there," says Emily. "I'll be there in ten minutes." The driver slumps over the steering wheel, drowning in her own inadequacy.

Emily, ever confident in the domestic fortress of her husband and eight children, soon arrives to rescue her. However, before leaving the parking lot, she rushes out to embrace her friend, make her laugh, assure her that coming to get her "is no trouble at all."

Be Comforted

Only later does the divorced woman learn from others who have “been there” that being physically lost is a common tribulation in the first stages of spousal loss. Whether the husband was a skilled navigator or not, his empty seat in the car symbolizes abandonment. The discarded wife cannot get her bearings. Having lost her accustomed way in life, she is thrashing through the woods without a compass.

She had not expected that divorce would feel so much like death. Every common chore from driving to grocery shopping now loomed like a high-jump crossbar set at Olympic heights. Insomnia had her groaning with the psalmist, “I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop” (Psalm 102:7). Her prayer was angry, accompanied by pounding on the wall: “Where are you when I need you the most? I don’t see you wiping every tear from my eye!”

The One she addressed answered her in ways she did not expect and at times not of her own dictation.

SCRIPTURAL VOICES

Jesus never endured the heartbreak of divorce. But he willingly accepted the loss of a potential wife and children in order to give himself completely as an urgent witness to the reign of God. He accepted in advance the loss of a helpmate, a Mary, a Martha, or a Magdalene to share his sleeping mat, to hold him in the night when he cried out against the enemies who were hemming him in.

He says to all of us who have lost a husband or wife, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it” (Luke 9:23–24).

To those who have lost the homes we lived in and made our own for many years, Jesus says quietly, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). We can choose to hear this as a reminder that whether we wind up

in a condo or a mobile home, we will still have more than he claimed for himself. When it comes down to it, he is the home that no one can take from us.

Jesus' words of comfort are sharp-edged. They are the "pebble in our shoe." If we accept them, we have no choice but to see beyond the present loss, believe in what lies ahead. He reaches out a hand to us and says, "Take heart, it is I" (Matthew 14:27). Although we are convinced that we do not know how, we step out of the boat, in which we had placed our entire security, and tread gingerly on the water, trying not to look down, trying not to be cowed by the wind on the open sea.

We have lost the life we thought we would always have. Unless we let it go, our arms cannot embrace whatever life God has in store for us. Only by relaxing our grip on the steering wheel can we find our way.

Adapting what E.L. Doctorow had to say about writing a novel, we can remember that "Getting through a [divorce] is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way."

SPIRITUAL KIN

Whether or not we have spiritual kin among our own families and friends, there is always an entire communion of saints waiting to be summoned to our aid. Some of them are separation or divorce survivors, like Rose Hawthorne Lathrop (1851–1926), foundress of the Servants of Relief for Incurable Cancer, and Baroness Catherine de Hueck Doherty (1896–1985), foundress of Madonna House and author of *Poustinia*. Their witness is one of God's manifold ways of being here to comfort us.

Consider inviting Dorothy Day (1897–1980) over for a cup of coffee. Ask her about her young adult years before she co-founded the Catholic Worker with Peter Maurin. Find out how she survived not only a legal divorce from her first short-term husband, but how she lived with the chronic

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—Rama IV

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—G.K.
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pain of separation from Forster Batterham, her common-law husband and father of their child, Tamar.

Listen as Dorothy tells you about the days and nights of yearning for Forster, whom she had deeply loved. When both Dorothy and Tamar were baptized into the Catholic Church, Forster, an atheist, could no longer be a part of their lives. Faced with a choice between God and man, Dorothy chose God. She later wrote:

I had known enough of love to know that a good healthy family life was as near to heaven as one could get in this life. There was another sample of heaven, of the enjoyment of God. The very sexual act itself was used again and again in Scripture as a figure of the beatific vision. It was not because I was tired of sex, satiated, disillusioned, that I turned to God. Radical friends used to insinuate this. It was because through a whole love, both physical and spiritual, I came to know God.¹

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"FLEE TO GOD
AND WE SHALL BE
COMFORTED."
—Julian of
Norwich
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Dorothy Day learned how to live without the husband who had been her daily companion. She let Forster go, wrapping her life around Jesus and his least ones. She prayed, received Communion daily, made retreats, read great books, lived with those who came in off the streets, served the soup, led peace vigils, joined anti-war demonstrations, went to prison and lived to enjoy her great-grandchildren.

During the many years of her long loneliness, Dorothy became a powerful witness to her belief that every person is to be welcomed into our lives as Christ. Especially when those we welcome are strangers or unlike us, we can admit them "Not because it might be Christ who stays with us...Not because these people remind us of Christ...but because they *are* Christ."²

In comforting the homeless, the hungry, the mentally adrift, Dorothy Day received God's daily consolation. She was raised from the death of a torturous divorce.

CREATIVE WORKS

In the summer of 2003, book reviews of *The New Work of Dogs: Tending to Life, Love, and Family* by Jon Katz appeared everywhere. The author had studied the increasing dependence of dog owners on their pets to satisfy emotional needs. Katz discovered in his interviews that many owners were relying on their pets to take up the emotional slack left by failed relationships or other losses. He pointed out that increasing divorce rates were among the societal factors raising our reliance on a dog's faithful companionship.

Katz's book led me to share the following story which is partially factual, and completely true.

One night when he came home from work, his daughter was waiting for him. She was holding what appeared to be a baby fox. "What do you think?" Annie asked.

"That depends," he said. "What is it?"

"It's a Pomeranian," she laughed, handing him the long-haired, fox-colored, weasel-faced puppy. He held him out at arm's length and felt him shaking with excitement or fear. Annie assured him that the puppy was already housebroken. "You can drop him off on your way to work and he can spend the day with me and the kids," she assured him. "Then you can pick him up on the way home."

He had never owned a dog. But if he had, he was sure it would have been of a manlier breed. An Irish wolfhound, perhaps, or a black lab. Certainly not the kind of dog associated with rich widows or retired librarians. He wanted to say how impractical and inappropriate the whole thing was. But as he held the creature closer to calm him, he felt a tiny heart beating wildly. "Don't worry, fella," he heard himself saying. "I'll take good care of you."

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Grinning at the dog's pointed features and feral black eyes, he observed, "Actually you look more like a weasel than a fox. So that's what I'll call you. None of those fluffy or effeminate names for you, buddy."

Having named the creature, the man was owned. Feeding, walking, brushing and transporting Weasel became daily chores. At least the man called these activities chores. He knew they were much more.

A few weeks later, on a Sunday morning, the man found himself standing in the kitchen, staring at the tiled floor. He ached for his wife, for the familiar routine of blueberry pancakes after church, for the shared reading of the *New York Times* that could take all day if nothing else demanded their attention. A sob startled him. He straightened up, took control of himself.

Weasel bobbed his front paws in a begging gesture. "What do you want, boy? I know you're not hungry and you've already been out," said the man, picking up his mute companion. He sunk his lonely fingers deep into the Pomeranian's pleasurable coat and stroked his tufted ears. The dog laid his head on the man's shoulder. He left it right there while the man wept.

Whatever the source of our loss, a dog or a cat (if it is not terminally independent) can be God's gift of daily consolation. Just as trained therapy dogs draw the sick and elderly out of isolation, warm-bodied Weasels can keep us in practice at loving, providing for, tending and delighting in another.

As *The New Work of Dogs* reveals, the only serious problem presented by our emotional investment in our canine friends arises when we forget that they are loving us in return. We cannot be like the widow who lavished love on her dog after her husband's death. When she remarried, her loyalty to her "best friend" foundered. The dog was no longer taken for daily walks or provided with attentive care. Good stewardship of God's creation requires us to continue loving and pro-

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"ALL SPIRITUAL
INTERESTS ARE
SUPPORTED BY
ANIMAL LIFE."
—George
Santayana

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viding for the pets who have remained at our sides throughout the dark days when our need for them was greatest.

For an appreciation of mutually loving relationships between people and the animals who live with them, I look to *Celtic Prayers* collected by Robert Van der Weyer. In my own loss, I gain solace by reading aloud "The Hermit and His Blackbird" or "The Scholar and His Cat." I am reminded by "The Hunter and the Hunted" that I should "treat God's creatures / As I want others to treat me."³ I am reminded not to give the dear dog who comforts me any less love should someone come along who gives me more.

CONTEMPORARY WISDOM

In the comic film *Parenthood*, one of the characters is a middle-aged mother of two who is divorced. She is a loving, if sometimes addled, parent who remains close to her extended family. During one family gathering, a humorous incident reveals to her brother how much she misses the sexual intimacy of her married life.

Many divorced Catholics who have not remarried will instantly empathize with this character's predicament. The absence of a sexual partner can be a deep suffering—especially for those whose church has yet to widely teach a positive and life-giving spirituality of sexual maturity.

However, there is solid comfort to be found in Ronald Rolheiser's *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*. Rolheiser, an Oblate of Mary Immaculate, is a priest-theologian and a specialist in spirituality. He is a gifted integrator of Church teaching with an authentic awareness of contemporary life as most of us experience it.

Consider inviting Ronald Rolheiser, through his book or his lectures, to share with you his reassuringly human understanding of how sexuality "is the engine that drives everything else, body and spirit."⁴ Hear his conviction that "Having sex is admittedly not the whole reality of sex, but it is perhaps God's greatest gift to the planet and it offers

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—Francis of
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—Meister
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Be Comforted

humans the opportunity for genuine intimacy available this side of eternity.”⁵

Rolheiser presents a detailed Christian definition of sexuality, with its multiple dimensions of parenting, doing creative work, savoring life, offering service, sharing table companionship, connecting with others in ways that lessen the pain of our separateness.

This expanded awareness of the scope of sexuality leads Rolheiser to an intriguing interpretation of Jesus’ response to the oft-married woman who wondered which of her many husbands she would belong to after the resurrection. Jesus informed her “those who are deemed worthy to attain to the coming age and to the resurrection neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Luke 20:35).

Does this remark mean that obligatory celibacy will be practiced in heaven, or that resurrected bodies have no need for sexual expression?

Rolheiser proclaims the good news that “in heaven, all will be married to all.”⁶ He explains that our surprisingly wide and deep sexual hungers will all be met because our desire to be one with “the universe and everything in it” will finally be satisfied. There will be no more separateness, loneliness, disunity. We will realize ourselves as members of the one Body of Christ.

Therefore, we can take comfort in a spirituality that neither denies nor buries our sexual nature. We can pray for the courage to be one with our God in consistent times of solitude. And we can learn that, as John Powell put it, “happiness is an inside job.”

Even if the ideal partner does appear on our now-vacant horizon, he or she cannot bear the burden of our happiness. “Happy are those who love you,” Tobit says to the Lord (13:14), and “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy” says the Lord to us (Matthew 5:7).

Our happiness, whether we are divorced, married, single or celibate, comes from loving God and others. “We

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—Hildegard of
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—Mark Twain

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love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). And in loving as he does, we are made whole, healed, happy.

HOLY LAUGHTER/LEISURE

When we are learning to live with the reality of a divorce, leisure might seem to be the last thing in which to seek comfort. Most of us bury ourselves neck-deep in work, turning our jobs into Linus's blanket. We ache less when absorbed in the secure routines and demands of what we call "making a living."

Should we begin to suspect that our workaholism might not qualify as a virtue, tradition appears to assure us. Who does not know the Benedictine motto, "To pray is to work, to work is to pray"? Saint Camillus de Lellis had no qualms about claiming that "The true apostolic life consists in giving oneself no rest or repose." Neither Benedict nor Camillus, however, would advise that habitual overwork as a hedge against reality is prayerful or virtuous. Work's primary purpose is to give glory to God by cooperating with him in creation. It is not to hide from the psychic pain of that which must be felt before it can be healed.

Particularly in times of loss, our maternal Creator wants to comfort us in labor's counterpart of holy leisure. The psalmist gives us a simple image:

But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is
with me.

(Psalm 131:2)

When we picture ourselves as that contented child on its mother's lap, we get a glimpse of the Sabbath rest God intends us to enjoy—not just on the seventh day, but whenever we need divine comforting. Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper reminds us that leisure and contemplation are playmates, and that the divine wisdom, Sophia herself, continues to play before the Lord.

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"WE ARE HEALED
OF A SUFFERING
ONLY BY
EXPERIENCING IT
TO THE FULL."
—Marcel Proust

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