

## **Beyond the Veil: a story of Transfiguration**

Back in November of 2015, my Mom, who lives in Vancouver, fell. The fall was the cumulative effect of years and years of ill health, which for all sorts of reasons my Mom was unable to face; ill health that my family has fretted over and worried about. But no matter how hard we tried, it took a fall to get my Mom into the hospital. Many of you know the pain of living thousands and thousands of kilometers away from loved ones. The telephone rings and suddenly your life is turned upside down as you anxiously try to decide if you should book a flight, pack a bag, and rush to the bedside of someone you love. As I was agonizing over whether I should or shouldn't rush out to Vancouver, my brother called and said that I needed to come right away. The sound of my brother's voice cracking in mid-sentence convinced me to move heaven and earth in order to race to Vancouver, in order to sit at what we were now convinced would be my mother's deathbed.

As a pastor, I have had the privilege of being present with all sorts of people as they sit vigils with their loved ones. Over the years, I have learned the value of a quiet, gentle, presence to accompany us in the darkest of journeys. In my head, I knew that whatever my family was about to experience, all that was really necessary was for me to do was to be present. So, I went to Vancouver, not as a pastor, not as someone who has been trained to be a non-anxious presence in the midst of a crisis, not as a professional who has accompanied many people on this kind of journey, not as Pastor Dawn; no on this journey I was simply, as my Mom calls, me when she wants to talk seriously to me, "Dawn Lesley", a little girl, terrified of what lay in front of me.

The flight to Vancouver is about five hours long and during that five hours, I imagined what it would be like when I arrived and I tried to steel myself. My family is not what you would call religious, they don't go to church, they don't much talk about what they believe in, and they view my involvement in the church as a bit of strange; I'm an oddity in my family. They don't really know this persona, Pastor Dawn is a mystery and to them I am simply their daughter Dawn, or their sister, or their Auntie Dawn. To the youngest members of the family Carol and I are lovingly referred to as their far-away aunties. We fly in for a visit every once in a while and the history that I share with my family, reminds us of the love we share for one another, and carries us through our all too brief encounters. The history that we share filled my thoughts as the plane carried me and all my baggage home; home so that I could be present for whatever might happen. The seats on either side of me were empty. Normally, empty seats on a plane, meant more room to stretch out and be more comfortable. But this time those empty seats only served to remind me of my own emptiness.

I wanted Jesus to be in the seat beside me. I wanted God the "Father" to be in the other seat. And I wanted the Holy Spirit to be outside the plane somewhere holding us all up there in the sky, keeping the plane safely above the clouds. I wanted

the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to keep me safe, to comfort me, to take care of my Mother. I wanted the big and powerful, Almighty Sky God, to reach down and interfere in the world, and I wanted it right then and there for me and for mine. I wanted that old-time religion, the kind of religion I signed up for way back when, when life was simpler. The kind of religion where all I need was to have faith and God would answer my prayers. Instead, all I had with me was my iPad full of theological books about the nature of God, the historical Jesus, and progressive Christianity. Cold comfort when your tens of thousands of feet up in the sky, hurtling in a metal tube towards a situation that strikes fear in your heart and could rob you of your Mother. Somehow, the Ground of my Being, the One Who Lies at the very heart of Reality, the God who Is LOVE, was obscured by God the Father, the Almighty Idol who served me so well in the past, was back, and the only problem was that I have long since stopped worshipping idols.

So, who do I pray to now? Who will comfort me now? Who will save me now? Dear God, please don't let her die, please not until I get there. And when I get there, please, give me the strength, the wisdom, to help my Mom, my Dad, my brother, my nieces, please, please, please, God. I prayed like I haven't prayed for a very long time. Heavenly Father, help me. Over the course of the next few days, I sat vigil at my mother's bedside. I remember feeling so very inadequate. I remember wondering why I couldn't do more or be better at this.

The funny thing is that both my Father and my Brother seemed to defer to me, as if my experience as a pastor meant that I knew what I was doing. Even my Mom, looked to me, as if I ought to know what to do. I felt useless and alone; a fraud who didn't even know how to pray. But that didn't stop them from asking me to pray. My family, my non-religious family, kept asking me to pray and I didn't have the heart to tell them that I didn't know how or even what to pray. I spent a lot of time alone by my Mother's bedside. Dad has never been very good at hospitals and he seemed relieved to have me spend hours there. So, while Dad worried at home I sent regular updates. The hours of simply sitting by my Mom's bedside, making small talk and feeling like I should be doing more, saying more, being more where excruciating. Mom was in a ward that housed other patients whose lives had been turned upside down, the pastor in me worried about them and thought I should maybe offer some help. Indeed, helping them would have been infinitely easier than helping my family. And so I'm ashamed to say, I began to resent their intrusions into my own private hell.

One day, I'd been silently sitting alone with my Mom for what seemed like hours and hours, and a little girl arrived to visit her grandmother. The little girl couldn't have been more than about four years old, and I remember thinking what on earth was her mother thinking, bringing such a little girl into such a horrible place. The kid was noisy and disruptive and clearly didn't belong. I was annoyed by her presence. I closed the curtain around my Mom's bed to protect us from the unwelcome presence of this little

girl. I fixated on the noise this kid was making and I began to imagine all the germs that she was being exposed to, and thinking about how psychologically damaging it was for this kid to have to see people in this condition. I resolved that her Mother must be an idiot and I tried my best to focus my attention back on my Mother.

After a while I forgot about the little girl and was consumed by my own feelings of inadequacy as I helplessly tried to think of something to say to my Mom that would make things better for both of us. I was wallowing in my own misery when I realized that the little girl was peering through the space in the curtain. How rude. She was staring at me. She looked confused or bewildered when I responded to her stare with a hostile glare. I was pissed off. On top of everything else, why did I have to put up with a little kid? I decided to ignore her and focus on my Mom.

After a while, I became conscious of a presence. This stupid little kid, had come up behind me and was looking at me and my Mom and her stupid, irresponsible mother didn't even notice that her kid was invading our space. In my head, I cursed a blue streak and gave that little brat the meanest glare I could muster up. She just smiled at me and asked me if I'd like to colour with her.

That's all it took for the damn to break...I wept and I wept, while this beautiful little girl laid out her crayons and colouring book. Her gentle presence transformed me. The walls and the barriers came tumbling down. Everything that I had carefully constructed to shield me from what was actually happening around me, dissolved. I picked up a crayon and together with a little girl, I remembered that I too was a little girl, not a pastor, not an intelligent, well educated, mature woman, who knows what's what, but a little girl who is afraid to lose her Mommy.

My colouring companion wasn't in the least bit disturbed by my tears. She was the epitome of the non-anxious presence that I have been trained to be. She was the embodiment of the LOVE that is God that I longed to experience. It was as if the veil had been lifted as my words and thoughts slipped away and all that mattered was the colours on the page, the kindness of a child and the gentle peaceful breathing of my Mother resting, gaining strength from the IV as it dripped into her body and peace from the presence of her little girl.

Love has the power to transform us. God is LOVE. It is so simple and yet it is so difficult to comprehend. LOVE is the reality that is the source of our being. LOVE is the ONE who lives and breathes in, with, through, and beyond us. LOVE is the Ground of our being, the ONE who nurtures us, sustains us, and holds us in an embrace in which All will be well. LOVE is God, God is LOVE. It is as simple and as complex as that. God comes to us in LOVE, LOVE dressed in a person. On a mountaintop, centuries ago, our ancestors recognized LOVE in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. LOVE dressed up in a person. In a hospital room a few months ago, I recognized God, LOVE dressed up in a little girl. As we coloured together I remembered all the times my Mother tried to teach me to colour inside the lines and I

remembered how often in colouring outside the lines I have seen images that the creators of things like colouring books could never have imagined. My little colouring companion used bold strokes as she violated all the rules of careful colouring. She also talked a lot about tubes and wires and scary things.

At one point, in the midst of colouring, an amazing butterfly, we were talking about caterpillars and how they are magically transformed into beautiful butterflies and she looked up at me, smiled and asked, if people who were sick could become butterflies. I asked her what kind of butterfly did she think her grandmother would like to be. She said a green one would be good if it had red strips. What about my Mom? I thought that yellow with red and green strips would be perfect for my Mom.

Then this beautiful embodiment of the LOVE that is God, selected yellow, red, and green crayons and gave them to me and said that I should keep them so that when my Mom was feeling better we could make a beautiful butterfly. Over the course of the next few days I found myself doodling. I'm not usually a doodler. But I just couldn't help doodling all these little butterflies. My Mom is not exactly a colourful butterfly; although a few weeks after I returned home, she looked so beautiful, recovering and celebrating, in the video my Brother sent me of her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. As Mom's great grandchildren joined in the singing of Happy Birthday, I could see all sorts of colours. The LOVE that is God was clearly visible and tangible and even though my entire family can't carry a tune, their singing was music to my ears.

Sometimes our images of what we want to be, get in the way. The idols we create can function like a veil that hides the light. Sometimes we cling to the veil because we are afraid that without our carefully constructed images, theologies, or idols, the ground will disappear from underneath our feet and we will be helpless to continue. But sometimes all we need to do is to trust the glimpses beyond the veil to give us the courage to let the veil fall away so that we can see what lies beyond the veil, Trusting that the LOVE that we call God will come to us in, with, through, and beyond those who embody the LOVE that is God. Let it be so. Let it be so. Amen.