

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting  
January 17, 2010**

*“I am glad I was here. Now I am clear, I am fully clear ... All is well; the Seed of God reigns over all and over death itself. And though I am weak in body, yet the power of God is over all, and the Seed reigns over all disorderly spirits.”* (George Fox’s dying words, 1691)

**Co-Authoring with the Divine  
by Donne Hayden**

We come from a narrative tradition—both Christianity and Judaism use story to communicate great life truths. The Old Testament is a long narrative of the relationship between a people and their God; as we know, it is not free of conflict. In the New Testament, we meet the consummate storyteller in Jesus. Many of his teachings occur in the form of stories or parables which reverse or confuse our expectations. Those characters we expect to succeed do not; those we expect to be rewarded are not, while the one we expect to suffer does not; and often, one who does wrong goes unpunished.

Tragic stories are on my mind this week; they are inescapable with all the media coverage of the earthquake in Haiti. Hundreds of thousands of tragedies, all occurring at once, overwhelm us. We have trouble grasping numbers like “two hundred thousand,” and the television images of death and destruction look like many other images we’ve seen—those from Iraq, from Palestine, from Indonesia. They blur together and we become numbed. But tell us stories, and we are moved; we understand *individual* tragedy because of our own experience.

How different are the stories *we* would write about our lives if we could determine the narrative, but we only have so much choice in our personal plot line. Don't get me wrong—I don't believe in predestination, that the course of our lives is determined before we're born. No. I prefer to think of our life stories as collaboration with the divine, as great improvisations. Like that television show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*

The host of the show (Drew Carey) gave a group of several comedians (usually male) a specific situation. From a brief description, they improvised—live and on camera—using witty dialogue, and acting out an unfolding course of events. None of them knew precisely what the other characters would say or do; each character controlled only what he said and did, how he responded to the other characters and their actions.

I imagine the Divine working with each of us in similar fashion, off and on throughout our lives, presenting us with circumstances and situations in which we must determine what we will do and how we will react. In this way, I imagine, the Divine collaborates with us in the unfolding of our life story. Some circumstances lead us to tragedy we cannot avoid. Some tragedies seem sure to crush us; and sometimes they do. If we are not completely crushed, however, and in spite of overwhelming pain, our individual stories continue, and we may be stronger than before. As Ernest Hemingway phrased it, "The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places." (*A Farewell to Arms*)

Another great writer, Mark Twain, wrote "Of course truth is stranger than fiction. Fiction, after all, has to make sense."

When I taught creative writing at Fort Collins High School, I had my students write a short story. Through a full semester, they wrote several drafts of their story, working on the

essentials of good fiction: character development, plot development, setting, dialogue, etc. In the early days of my teaching the class, one girl's first draft demonstrated Mark Twain's comment about fiction having to make sense. The first draft of her story went like this.

Her character (I can't remember the name—let's call her "Tiffany") was a junior in high school (like the author). Tiffany was beautiful—many descriptions of her long blond hair with just the right curl, her amazing dark blue eyes, perfect figure, etc. Tiffany was also popular and had lots of friends.

One day she and her friend Sharla were leaving the school to walk home when a good-looking guy pulled up beside them in a sporty black convertible. After some brief small talk, he revealed that he was a professional photographer who specialized in fashion model photography. He thought Tiffany had "it" and he wanted to photograph her. She, of course, was thrilled because being a fashion model was something she'd always wanted to do. The guy—let's call him "Brad"—had some time right now, and his apartment/studio wasn't very far. Could Tiffany come over right now so he could start putting together a portfolio? Could she! Tiffany climbed into the sleek convertible with its leather seat covers and cool sound system. She told Sharla she'd see her tomorrow and off she went with Brad.

When they got to his apartment, it was a penthouse, of course, and the most gorgeous place, perfectly decorated with lots of expensive furniture and the latest photographic equipment. Brad spent several hours photographing her. He told her she had lots of natural talent and beauty. He was going to develop the photos and take them to his boss at the magazine where he worked. He assured her she would soon hear from the magazine. Sure

enough, a couple of days later, the magazine called to say they wanted her to do a fashion shoot for them in Paris. They would pay her way over and all her expenses while she was there.

I won't go on, though the story did. It went on like this for probably ten pages. And *nothing bad ever happened* to Tiffany. Everything Brad told her was true, and she became a famous, wealthy fashion model before she even graduated from high school.

What were you waiting for all the way through her story? Some conflict, right? Our own experience of life tells us something is bound to go wrong somewhere. When the girl read her story to the class, there was stunned silence. Nothing could have made it clearer that *conflict is necessary* for a good story. *Not only* does an obstacle-free existence in fiction make no sense to us, but such long-term, continual happiness is remarkably *boring*. This is true at least in fiction. I wonder if, much as we chafe at the notion, it is not also true in "real life."

Here is a true story; my stepfather is the main character of this one.

My mother and stepfather were both bright and beautiful people from working class families (actually, farmers & ranchers). My stepfather married my mother when I was about eighteen months old, and they raised me to believe he was my real father. They met at college after World War II; he was just out of the Army and she was recently divorced from my birth father. We moved quite a bit while I was little, but by the time I was six, we had settled in Clovis, New Mexico where Mom was the display person at J.C. Penney's department store, and Dad was an accountant. By the time I was thirteen, Mom and Dad had scraped together enough money to buy a little three-room house, which Dad remodeled singlehandedly, building on an addition that included a bedroom, second bath, large kitchen and dining area.

On a personal level, Dad was a difficult person. He was literally “tall, dark and handsome,” a philanderer, arrogant, and often disdainful of others. He could be, and often was, belligerent. For instance, once Tommy Steele swerved the semi-truck he was driving to try to hit my collie who was in the bar ditch<sup>1</sup> in front of our house. Dad saw what happened. He jumped in his car and chased the truck until it pulled into Steele’s warehouse near the edge of town. Dad jumped out of his car, ran up and grabbed Tommy Steele as he climbed down from the truck. Dad claimed he only shook Tommy and told him if he ever did that again, he’d kill him. Tommy complained to the police, who came to talk to Dad, but they were all his friends, and they didn’t like the Steele kid anyway, so nothing came of it. I remember Mom telling him once, “Morgan, if you don’t stop treating people the way you do, someone is going to knock you upside the head some day.” With increased prosperity, Dad switched from drinking beer to drinking “hard liquor.” Things could get pretty unpleasant around our house.

Still, on one level, things were going well for my stepfather. He had opened his own small accounting office; he had been elected Justice of the Peace for two terms and decided to run for County Commissioner in the next election. Then, one night in February, 1964, he and Mom were out with friends at the Aztec Bowling Alley. Dad went to the bathroom and didn’t come back for a long time, so finally Mom sent someone in to check on him. They found him lying in a pool of blood, almost dead. Some guy he had sent to jail for six months had gotten out and, encountering Dad in the bowling alley bathroom (who knows what Dad said to him), the man had beaten him senseless with a lead pipe.

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<sup>1</sup> “Bar ditch” in Texas and eastern New Mexico refers to a ditch beside a dirt road. “The slang term *bar ditch* supposedly comes from ‘barrow ditch’ when hand labor and wheelbarrows were used to haul dirt dug from a ditch and dumped into the roadbed to raise it above the surrounding terrain.” Delbert Trew, *Texas Escapes* website <http://www.texasescapes.com/DelbertTrew/Dirt-moving-methods-improve-through-years.htm>

Telling the entire story would take too long, but my point is this: Dad had severe brain damage and became permanently disabled. He was 37; when his hair grew back after several surgeries, it was solid white. He had to learn to walk and talk again, and his speech was never intelligible to those who didn't know him. He lived to be 74; half his life he was handsome and strong; half his life he was not.

So what good came of this terrible experience and life-long obstacles? Well, for one thing, Dad was on the verge of becoming an alcoholic when he was hurt, but afterward, he stopped drinking completely. He re-made himself in many ways; he read extensively about antiques and began buying and refinishing them in the basement. For as long as he could, he worked around the house, kept the cars running—doing all these things with no fine motor skills and hands that shook. He had always been a man of action, and though he liked to read, he didn't read much. As he got older, less able to keep his balance when he walked, he became a voracious reader and his mind seemed to open the more he read. I don't want to mislead you—Dad was always a difficult person, but his calm perseverance living with his disability was remarkable, and over the years, no one ever heard him complain. I have no idea what Dad believed about God. He never went to church and we never discussed our religious beliefs. I suspect, however, that a great deal of soul-work was going on through the 37 years he lived after the injury.

Dad's story is surely a better one than Tiffany's, more interesting though definitely more tragic. My observation is that, in fact, human beings seem to be *wired* for struggle. Though it may be counter-intuitive, we humans really do seem to *need* obstacles and difficulties in order to live a rich, rewarding life. In the plot line of our real life (as we say) getting or having those

things we think will make us happy often does not satisfy us at all, while those things that make us sad or that complicate our lives lead us to grow and learn, and to develop strengths we didn't know we had. Good times often bring out the *worst* in us, while bad times often bring out the *best* in us.

For examples, we need look no farther than some people who "have it all"—everything we imagine a person needs to be happy. Take Tiger Woods, who certainly has all the talent, fame, money, and looks a person could ask for, as well as a loving spouse. Is he happy? Or Brittany Spears—also with fame, talent, money and beauty. Is she happy? Consider people you know who seem to have it all, minus the fame—are they happy? It seems to me that if our outward situation doesn't confront us with difficulties and obstacles, we go looking for them, perhaps even create them ourselves. People who classify themselves as "happy," are content, I think, not because their lives are conflict-free and run perfectly smooth, but because they are "well-adjusted," which means they can roll with the punches life delivers us all.

It seems to me that we humans thrive on struggle, and we are often at our best in crisis. Why we should be made this way, I do not know. It is a great mystery, along with the *purpose* of our suffering, a purpose I am convinced does exist, though we cannot imagine why God would write the story so.

My thoughts have turned in this direction this week because of the tragedy in Haiti. Please understand that I am *not* saying the suffering of these people is "character building" or that it gives their lives meaning, or is somehow "good for them." I am *not* saying that the events of 9-11, or the tsunami of 2005, or Hurricane Katrina were "good" for the people who experienced them; nor that the drought, famine, and violence pervading the lives of people in

Darfur or the Sudan is good for them. I am *not* saying that, in invading Iraq and occupying Afghanistan, the U.S. actually did their people a favor by providing opportunities for spiritual growth.

I *am* saying that tragedy opens doorways through which good may come, though it may take years before we understand it.

A larger soul than mine expressed this better. During a period of much persecution, when Quakers were being beaten, thrown in jail, and their property confiscated, George Fox wrote a letter addressed to early Friends:

*Sing and rejoice, ye children of the Day and of the Light, for the Lord is at work in this thick night of Darkness that may be felt; and Truth doth flourish as the rose, and the lilies do grow among the thorns, and the plants atop the hills, and upon them the lambs do skip and play. And never heed the tempests nor the storms, floods nor rains, for the Seed Christ is over all and doth reign.”* (Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends, #413, London Yearly Meeting, 1960)

For George Fox, “seed” was a metaphor for the Divine that was *planted* on earth. In being born in this earthly setting, Christ was the “seed” of Divine Love and Presence among us. This “seed,” watered with our tears in times of great distress may grow, bloom and produce soul-nourishing fruit. This seed survives tempests, storms, floods, rains and earthquakes, sprouting when the narrative comes back round to spring again.