

Finding Springtime in Our Souls March 20/2011

If Life is a Bowl of Cherries, What am I Doing Here in the Pits? Some of you of my vintage will remember this book by humorous author Erma Bombeck. She did have a lot of “pits” in her life. Her father died when she was nine, leaving the family in poverty. At 20, Erma was diagnosed with polycystic kidney disease and told that she would eventually succumb to kidney failure.

Yet she was determined to be a journalist and pursued further studies only to be told by her professors that she would never succeed in writing. But of course she did. And there were many bowls of “cherries.” She took the risk of getting married, even though she quipped: “People shop for a bathing suit with more care than they do for a husband or a wife. The rules are the same. Look for something you’ll feel comfortable in, and allow room to grow.” And “Marriage has no guarantees. If that’s what you’re looking for, go live with a car battery.”

She had a family, calling Motherhood the Oldest Profession and titled another one of her books, I Lost Everything in the Post-Natal Depression. Her home life would provide the material for 30 years of over 4,000 newspaper columns. At first she was paid \$3.00 each. Much later her pieces were syndicated in over 900 newspapers.

There were more “pits” in her cherry bowl. She was treated for breast cancer, then her kidneys began to fail. She carried on with her work, having dialysis four times a day and waited three years for a transplant. She needed to be brave, but she could still see the lighter side. She said: “All of us have moments that test our courage. Taking children into a house with a white carpet is one of them.” And my favourite: “Seize the moment. Think of all the women on the Titanic who waved off the desert cart.”

Even as she faced death she could joke about it, saying: “There is nothing more miserable in life than to arrive in paradise and look like your passport photo.” Erma Bombeck died of complications of the transplant in 1996 when she was just 69 years old. To me, she is an brave example of someone given many wintry conditions in her life, without denying them, chose to see the springtime in them. She wrote: “If you can’t make it better, laugh at it.” And she did, big time, to the delight of her thousands of readers.

Back in the 1980’s around this time of the year, my mother was preparing a family dinner to celebrate my father’s birthday. She felt tired and her back hurt,

so she rested on the couch. She got quite pale and clammy and we realized she needed to get to the hospital. She was having a massive heart attack.

There was a crowd in the emergency ward and my mother was left on a gurney for quite a while. There were lots of yelled instructions and staff scurrying around. Code this and code that. Somehow I was calm. In spite of the situation seeming ominous, I had a the rock solid certainty that she would be fine.

I waited with my Dad, until she was settled in a ward, hooked up to many machines. We heard that her heart had stopped beating on its own power for twenty minutes. She was being kept alive with oxygen, electric shock, manual pressure. The prognosis was “wait and see.”

Hours later, back at the house, I saw my Dad cry for the first time. I felt like a privilege to be able to hold and comfort him, the way he had for me, all of my life. However, proper British gentleman that he was, he quickly took out his clean white handkerchief, blew his nose and pulled himself together. From then on, for several weeks, we waited and prayed by my mother’s bed.

At their Ancaster home, Dad had recently had the driveway surfaced with asphalt. The wintry weather was still lingering with bitter winds. One day I noticed a purple crocus had pushed its way through the black tar and was opening to the pale sun. What a revelation! A sign of hope. It seemed like a promise, Spring will come, regardless. Mother recovered against all odds. We were blessed to have her with us for another decade.

I am reminded of a song called Winter’s Dream, sung by Susan Osborne. Here are some of the words: “Winter’s a changing time I’ve found, turning our broken lives around. New life beginning in everyone, new hope returns with the brighter sun. Something lightens life, brightens life.”

Erma Bombeck also wrote serious words, like this: “When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left, and I could say ‘I used every bit of talent you gave me.’ “

My mother would have echoed this wish. She had been challenged by macular degeneration and was declared legally blind. The worst fate for an avid reader and prolific writer. Though she was severely challenged, her faith never wavered. When she was in her final days my Dad offered to put her latest manuscript into a book. As he was dying the following year he handed me the computer disk containing the book. I was to publish it and distribute it, which I did.

Both my parents had used their talent to the full. After a sixty plus years of happy marriage they were both gone, leaving a legacy of creativity, faith and joy - bringing Spring blossoms out of wintry illness and grief.

This had been a long hard cold season. When I step outside and face another snow storm I feel like exclaiming with Shakespeare's Richard the Third: "Now is the winter of our discontent!" But I know my favourite season, spring, will come. We need the patience of daffodil bulbs.

Priest and writer Thomas Merton wrote: "Love winter when the plant says nothing." Outside nothing seems to be happening, but we know that a lot is at work underground, in the dark. Spring can't be forced, in our gardens, or in our souls. It's about trust and waiting.

Matthew Fox, no, not the star of the hit TV show Lost, but the renegade priest and writer, revived the ancient theology of Creation Spirituality. He rejected the punishing, unbiblical concept of original sin. I attended a life-changing workshop with him when he was introducing his book Original Blessing. He expounds on the four- fold spiritual paths of the mystics and how their insights can inspire contemporary humanity.

He says that after the Via Positiva, the Positive Way, there will be the the Via Negativa or Negative Way. Only then can the third and fourth paths of Transformation and Creativity happen. Of course this is a continuing spiral journey. The Via Negativa is the way of darkness, emptying, letting go, sinking into nothingness. This path is vital to our spiritual growth, just as winter is necessary before spring begins.

Fox was silenced by the Pope, so I knew he was doing something right! At least his year of quiet gave him lots of time to write and extra notoriety. The next time I heard him speak, he started his talk, "As I was saying..." Apparently one of the reasons for the Pope's censure was that on the staff of the University of Creation Spirituality, there was self-proclaimed witch, Starhawk , whose beautiful poems are included in our hymnary, one of which will conclude our service. And Fox wouldn't fire her to please the Pope.

Fox quotes Starhawk on the Via Negativa: She writes: "We can know the dark, and dream it into a new image." Years before poet T. S. Eliot had penned these words: "I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you which shall be the darkness of God."

And one more from poet Susan Griffin: "If we allow night, if we allow what she is in the darkness to be, this knowledge, this that we have not yet named: what we are. Oh, this knowledge of what we are is becoming clear." So we must learn to honour even our wintry experiences, trusting that they will pass and eventually produce abundant new life and growth.

Viktor Frank was an Austrian psychiatrist and holocaust survivor. He wrote a book called From Death Camp to Existentialism which later became a best seller under the title Man's Search for Meaning.

In it he chronicles his experiences and a way of finding meaning for himself and his fellow prisoners. His hallmark philosophy was that even in the most painful situations, life has potential meaning, and that even suffering has meaning.

He set up a suicide watch to counsel those who felt they couldn't go on. He found that these men were able to find mental and spiritual strength which the S.S. could not take away.

He wrote the following about a forced march: "We stumbled on in the darkness, over big stones and large puddles, slipping on icy spots...I looked up at the sky where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds.

My mind clung to my wife's image. I saw her smile and her frank, encouraging look. Real or not, her smile was more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise."

A thought transfixed him, that love is our only salvation. He wrote: "Those who have a 'why' to live, can bear almost any 'how' ". Another famous quote of his: "The one thing you can't take from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one's freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance." How's that for finding luminous springtime out the severest wintry conditions of both body and soul?

Spring came early for me a few weeks ago. I was in a low mood, and the night was frigid and blustery, but we had tickets for a concert of the Niagara Chorus. The theme of the evening was all about light. It featured a piece that I had heard on the radio that made me pull over to write name down. It was called "Lux Aeterna", "Eternal Light".

The event was held in a cathedral which was at first in semi darkness. The choir of over ninety singers processed in with tiny book lights clipped to their music folders. As they sang the exquisite, ethereal music, magnificent images were projected in front of us - golden sunsets, sunrises, sunflowers.

The evening closed with a rendition of “Donna Nobis Pacem”, “Give Us Peace”. We were reminded that of course, all is not sweetness and light. There were photos of children in a bombed out city, rows of military graves, yet there was also a touching image of a child handing a flower to a smiling soldier. And finally there was a purple crocus. My mind returned to my mother’s life. My soul was lifted into springtime.

Yet I realized the next day, with a brand new snowfall that winter takes its time to leave. My longing for new season will not bring it. There had already been a record breaking time of rain and what looked like icebergs on the lake, when seen with binoculars were a flock of snow geese.

Now the lake was again frosted with white again and the birds had left. I had even spotted the first shoots of tulips emerging. Now they were covered once with snow again, made to wait some more before blooming. Similarly, our pain gets covered, held close, until it’s ready to be healed.

What is the winter in your soul? Is your life the pits? You or a loved one could be going through illness, death, divorce, addiction, depression, abuse, poverty, loneliness, sadness - there is so much misery. But is that all there is? If we have faith, any kind of faith, whether it’s in God, the universe, our spouse, our dog - we must see that there is life even after all these huge challenges.

When we’re in the midst of our darkness, we see no way out. We think that nothing will ever change, we will never feel better. But something does lighten ours lives eventually. Spring has been arriving to drive away winter for as long as the planet has existed. Remember the stories I’ve told you of faith and courage and humour.

Think of the optimism, resilience and sacrifices of the Japanese people in their horrendous situation. Many of them are choosing to risk their lives daily to help their neighbours, instead of fleeing the country. Reports say there is no pushing and shoving in the line ups for food and water. The people wait patiently for supplies, and for spring. In spite of eathquake, tsunami and nuclear melt downs, soon they will have pink cherry blossoms, just like those we sang about in our first hymn.

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If you decide, even your pits can be treasured, then transformed into an orchard of trees adorned with blossoms. I wish for you a big bowl of delicious cherries, gardens spilling over with magical colours to delight the eye, and a joyous Springtime growing in your soul.

Amen. May it be so.