

Special Feature

Verifying Me: Narrative Snapshots of a Spiritual Life

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The act of spiritual writing is ancient in its roots, and since the earliest days of the various Christian movements in the ancient world, people have attempted to write their spiritual memoirs. People have continued to reflect upon their experiences through writing since that time and for myriad reasons. Augustine wrote his *Confessions* for many reasons, but it is clear that in his writing he was attempting to offer readers a sermon. Moravians have long since had the practice of composing a *lebenslauf*, a reflection of one's life, to be read at one's funeral by the pastor. Today we benefit from contemporary writers such as Sue Monk Kidd and Karen Armstrong, who have actually published their spiritual memoirs to enrich the reading public.

To write about God, about reality, about one's life, is a practice that begs several significant questions and raises many theological issues. A primary question that all writers must ask is "Who is my audience?" Such a work, I began to realize, is for *me*. It is true that I have undergone transformation as I have begun this work, and certainly, this is only a beginning, but there is the very real possibility that in twenty years I will approach this work again. Will I look on these pages and recognize myself in them? Will the stories, the way that I have told them and my reflections upon them, verify me? Or will I come to a crossroad where what I have seen is so foreign to me, that I will need to boldly set my forth in another direction?

Additionally, as I have written, I have considered God as a spiritual reader along the way. This is no mere journal of my experiences. Rather, these stories of mine, even if God is not explicitly mentioned in some of them, are intensely spiritual for me as I interpret my life experiences through a theological lens. As I have written these narrative snapshots, I feel that I have been dancing with the Spirit. I have been a klutz as many times as I have been graceful in this dance, but God has not left me standing alone and awkward. It is a dance I continue even as I continue to reflect and write.

Death Came Slowly

Death came slowly, more slowly than I had expected. I had been sitting with dad for an hour, watching attentively as his breaths became slower and less frequent. A slight inhale; a soundless exhale. Followed by a pause that cradled an eternity.

I held his hand just like they told me. With his fingers and palm resting atop of mine, they said

it would be easier for him to let go when the time came. They said that in this way, he would have the freedom to slide his hand away from mine and slip into death.

I wished he would. The night before I had watched him nearly suffocate as the cancer had grown so large that it pressed up against his lungs. The cancer held him underneath its fluids and his blood and threatened to drown him. Vomiting had become especially problematic for dad. If I or my mom were not there to help raise him up, he would have most likely choked to death. I remember holding his body in my arms as he threw up into the wastebasket. So much weight had been lost in the last two months. Once, his shoulders and chest had been fleshy and strong. Now his body was emaciated. I could feel his bones with my fingers.

A large tube had been painfully inserted through his nose and down into his stomach. Mercifully, it had relieved some of the growing pressure inside of him. The vomiting had lessened, and no longer did dad gasp and thrash upon his bed, never being able to catch his breath. The touch of caring and efficient nurses was worth my life. Mom had cried.

Now there was only stillness. His eyes were open, but they seemed to look past me and over my shoulder. They told me he might see angels or long lost loved ones, but whatever he saw I never knew. I remembered that he told me a week earlier, with sunlight in his eyes and smile, that Heaven was much closer to us than we ever really thought. Now he looked past me to a far horizon whose sun had already set.

It was almost 11:30 at night. His hand remained immobile in mine. I knew the end was near, and some part of me that I felt guilty about was thankful. I blinked my eyes. Was this even real? The night before was a nightmare I could not blink myself awake from. As death drew near, I blinked. He had been silent for a long time now. How long ago had it been since his last breath? The minutes continued to pass.

My mom went to the kitchen to call people. Hospice would send over a doctor, and family members who were not already at the house needed to be informed. I sat alone with my dad, staring into his eyes. He gazed past me, almost drowsily, from behind his thick rimmed glasses. I wondered why he had never taken them off. His mouth was slightly open and relaxed, and his eyes continued to stare past all seeing.

No tears fell. With my face dry, I wondered numbly why there was no explosion of grief. It was like my emotions had fallen asleep, and all that was left was a strange tingling. Still, I could not take my eyes off of him. Intrusive tubes had been forced into his body, and IV lines that had long since become useless had pierced his skin. All for the greater good, I knew. In the movies I had seen the living close the eyes of the dead, and wondered if I should do the same. The thing seemed absurd to me, and so I merely sat and stared in an attempt to wrap my heart around what had just happened.

Inside myself, I felt the faint echo of relief reverberate throughout. I could not name it in that moment, but now I know it. Dad was dead. The suffering was over and had ended like an unfinished symphony. It was over. The questions would come. I would learn fear. I would learn tears. I would learn rage-filled retreat. I would learn to shake God with the hands of my heart — I would shake God out of puzzlement as to why my dad had to die from a cancer that knew nothing about mercy or dignity. All this would come. But later. With the echo of relief gradually becoming more forceful inside of me, I stood up slowly and unceremoniously walked to the kitchen for a glass of water.

What Dreams May Come

I left the party at night. As I was walking to my dad's old Jeep Cherokee I saw him. The warm light from the porch reached him easily as he stood at the front of the red SUV. Something in his casual stillness gripped me. He was waiting for me.

I approached him — my heart pounding deep from within my chest. He had not changed a bit. The thinning, but bright white hair still threatened to rebel against some poor comb's earlier work. His short sleeved dress shirt was white and made of thin fabric. A dark pen might have been clipped to the pocket over his heart — always handy if he needed to note down a thought. The slacks he wore were dull and dark in appearance, as were his shoes. It had been some time since I had seen him. But the sight was familiar. My dad, who had died on the last night in June that last summer, stood there dressed in his standard work clothes.

He smiled. I reached out and took his hand to shake like we used to. In life, we both hugged and shook hands. Shaking his hand always made me feel like I was somehow his equal. The warmth of our handshakes were as intimate as our warmest hugs. His hands were dry. They always needed hand lotion to soften them up. As we shook I felt the familiar grip of his fingers — it was strong, but not painful.

“Hello,” he said. His voice was like a forgotten Christmas morning. There was a smile on his face. It is not enough to say that I was smiling back. Something rolled through me like a salty ocean wave. I felt joy swelling up inside of me. It was a smile.

What was this I was seeing? Dad had died, but he was alive. How had he been able to visit me? I do not remember if I returned his greeting with spoken words. I can only speculate that he might have felt my hello.

We got into the Cherokee. I stepped over to the passenger side. As I slid in, I half-expected dad to vanish before he could assume his position in the driver's seat. I liked sitting in the passenger seat. This was the seat I sat in during our two-day drives to Kansas City, MO to visit relatives. It had been such a long time! I looked at the seat beside me, astonished at what I was seeing. Indeed, how nice it was to sit in this seat, next to my father and friend. The front two seats of the Cherokee had been

the setting for many a conversation between us. Many a mystery had been considered in the front two seats of the Cherokee.

But I did not want to ask him about life. I was interested in something beyond life. Indeed, it continued to strike me that the man sitting beside me was no longer alive. Sitting there, he looked alive. He seemed as alive as he had ever been. He had died almost a year earlier, and yet, against all expectation, he was here again. I was aflame with wonderment. How could such a thing be? And yet, did it matter? I had missed him. He had been gone for too long. Already I had made mistakes — mistakes that his wisdom would have guided me away from. And his friendship. I missed being able to confide in him. I missed being his son. And now he sat before me. I could not understand how or why, but that was a mystery I could live with. What mattered was that he was back.

“What is it like?” I asked him.

“In some ways very different, in some ways, very similar...” The answer was cryptic. Dad’s answers were rarely clear when it came to big questions. This was the case possibly because no reasonable answer could be anything but a little cryptic. I pressed him further. What is it like? What is God like? What do you do there? How does one really get there? I gave him a barrage of questions. I knew that our time was short — that he would have to leave and that I would be left without his voice in my ears. There was so much to ask, and as I asked he responded.

We talked for what seemed like an eternity. The fade to black, a fluttering of eyes — I woke up. When I woke up it seemed like I could still feel the touch of his hand on mine.

Since that time, much of that conversation has been forgotten. All of it, save one thing. As we sat within the Jeep — I could not yet fully grasp that it had been his and was now mine — he told me something striking. Each person, he told me, has been created by God with special gifts unique to them. In the vastness of time and space, each person is of value and is rich with potential. Furthermore, he said, our lives are hopefully spent cultivating these gifts. Life is growth, it is a process. Still, I was told, this personal growth does not end when we die. Instead, when we die and go to God, the rest of eternity is spent in the cultivation of our gifts. Eternity is spent in the cultivation of our very selves out of love to one another and to God. The growth is *never* finished. There is no final arrival at perfection. There is only the eternal becoming.

The Hike at Panther Creek

I pulled into the gravel parking lot, grateful to see the trailhead at its edge. An hour before I had heard the talk in Alumni Dormitory. Excited voices talked of going to Panther Creek State Park. Through the air I had heard the words “great” and “hiking,” and something inside of me sung like a tuning fork. I accosted them and asked for directions to Panther Creek. My freshman year of college would be starting on Monday, and already I suffered from retroactive cabin fever. I stopped only to

grab a bottle of water before rushing out to my red Cherokee. Feverish with wanderlust, I was like Walt Whitman taking to the open road. As I was notoriously bad at following directions, finding the entrance to Panther Creek seemed nothing less than providential.

The trail I chose was a simple dirt path. The patches of grass I saw were worn down from the feet of those who had come before me. Bits of taller grass and shrubbery reached over across the trail, laying its shadows upon the ground. I could feel them brushing against my shins and calves, and I didn't mind. There was purpose in my pace — an inarticulate driving that called for forward moving footsteps. A vision of Daniel Boone blazing trails across lands unknown to white men conjured itself in my mind. The trail I walked on was not new in itself, but it was new to me. I wondered why human beings have always been lured to explore the unknown. As sunlight fell upon my face, I knew that it could not have always been for profit or exploitation. There exists in our universe those mysteries which have more luster than any amount of gold.

It was not long before the trees began to cast their shade over me. The trail began to curve to the left and then back to the right. I crossed a small wooden bridge arched over a dry creek bed. Had the creek any water it would have resembled the waters Ben and I used to fish out of when we were kids. Still, I did not linger over the bridge. The trail was leading upwards into a thicker forest. Tiny flying insects buzzed around my ears. Occasionally I would swat at them, these annoying little creatures whose existence puzzled me. Years ago I had been stung on the lip by a tiny sweat bee. With my lip throbbing, it seemed clear to me that no ecosystem really needed bees of any kind. Still, the bees were necessary and it was unfair for me to demonize them. After all, there would be no bloom without the bee. It seemed like something my dad would have considered, though I never heard him speak of it.

The hike continued. Upwards the trail took me, its curves becoming more sharp as the elevation grew. A pounding began to reverberate within my chest. Each breath came more quickly than the last. An uncomfortable tingling began to spread in my calves. Unused muscles, when woken from their slumber, rebel with fire. The path became more gnarled, I had to watch where I stepped lest I trip on an embedded stone or outstretched tree root.

Another memory rushed through me. There was the time when my youth group traveled to Pippa Passes, KY. The cinema of my mind played clips of those hollers and their people. Up and down mountains they climbed all day, these paradoxically beautiful and ugly miracles living in the hollers of a coal mining community long depressed. Some of us snuck off in the middle of the night to hang out with the girls in their rooms. On the way I mistook a pool of water for a shadow and took an unexpected plunge. I laughed and cursed then. I laughed and cursed up Panther Creek.

My mind inexplicably took me to Florida Sloan of Pippa Passes. Her face was red and dark. She had just gotten her high school diploma at sixty-two. In her spare time she sang songs

into a microphone. A cassette tape had been given to me tenderly. The album was titled “Golden Rocking-Chair” and it was a treasure. She and I were so different, but there was kinship in her eyes as she looked at me. Her love humbled me on her mountain.

The trail had led me far from the parking lot by this point. The sky was mostly hidden by a vast canopy of green. The flesh of the mountain hemmed in my field of vision. Was the mountain not flesh? The dirt underfoot was what remained of a million things once alive and now dead and decayed. Now all of this mountainous flesh existed to offer the plants and trees perpetual sacrament — the bread and drink into life. Sweat poured off of my face. I could taste the saltiness of my body’s water. I stopped to lean on the dark skin of a large unknown tree. In the stillness, my body offered at least one drop of moisture to the dry dirt. Inside of me there was a steady pounding — quick rhythmic thuds like a war drum summoning warriors from their homes. My body was sounding its thunderous gong. It had been too long. It was as if I had been asleep for a year. I pushed off of the tree, my body forming an acute angle with the ground as I leaned forward and pressed upward.

My surroundings were beautiful. But exhaustion and pain blinded me from sensing beauty. The trees that at first seemed peaceful and friendly were now impassive and cold. Were my heart to explode, the trees would take my blood and water dispassionately. The stones would not soften were I to fall upon them. The war was being brought to me by gravity. In the universe gravity is said to be one of the weakest of nature’s forces, but the thing threatened to bring me low. It is hard being nothing more than a speck of dust in the cosmos.

Screw it! I wanted to sound my fury. No time for rest. Step up further! Step up past rock and root. I want to see sky and taste free air again.

Up ahead there appeared a wooden sign. Worn by time and weather, its darkened letters were difficult to make out. I can’t remember the names, but I knew I was on the trail that took me to the top of the mountain. I could turn around — call it quits for the day. The choice was made in the midst of stinging sweat and labored breaths. I set my foot upon the knotty trail. Merely viewing the top of this mountain would not suffice. I wanted to let the place roll over me like a wave.

The rising path began to level gradually, almost imperceptibly. No matter. The muscles of my legs were hot with exhaustion. My breathing would not slow because I would not slow. Shining through the surrounding trees and their leaves I could see ambiguous specks of blue. Such was my disorientation I could not tell if the blue came from sky or water.

At last I came to it. There was an opening in the trees and the ground became level again. Large rocks with a rainbow’s variety of gray beckoned to me. My hand trembled as it brought a bottle of water to my lips. The water was warmer now, but it had never tasted so refreshing. Slowly I lowered my body onto one of the larger rocks. I closed and opened my eyes. From this place I saw Cherokee

Lake seemingly meet the sky. Tiny islands the color of golden brown protruded from the waters. These were bare islands, save their centers, which were populated by rugged trees that had learned to live above constantly eroding soil.

I sat in this place silently. Like Elijah I knew God was near. I said nothing for a time. My heart no longer banged fiercely, and from the center of myself I felt the aching euphoria that occasionally rises out of physical activity. I remained silent, for it seemed that speaking would shatter the delicate moment. I felt God in and around me. The air around me was saturated with God. The air stroked my face. A great journey lay before me. Uncertainties abounded. Invisible arms wrapped themselves around me as I sat on top of the rock staring at the lake before me. It was the first time since dad died that I didn't feel afraid.

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