

Journey of a Wounded Healer

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30. Dawn or Twilight?

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A Long Night

Darkness crouches in corners,
shadows creep down the wall.
The candle grows dim,
gutters, and goes out.

Dawn's faint promise,
a hope a long way off;
then a brightening streak
until all is light.

Today I am discouraged and dispirited. The visiting occupational therapist who did an evaluation this morning determined that I am doing well and need only keep up with the exercises and activities I have been taught in order to make further progress. Why am I not so confident? Why does my body still do so little of what I want it to do? This is also my first full day with no one else around. I miss Anthony. I miss the body-mind-spirit I used to be. My spirit has grown larger, my body smaller.

Today I also fell for the first time since the stroke. I walked down the long, rough gravel driveway onto the town road, trying to go just a little further each day. I spied a large stone at the edge of the ditch and realized it might be perilous for the lawn tractor once the grass grew up around it and concealed it. I bent over and yanked it with all my strength. When it suddenly came loose, I toppled backward into the gravel road. I was not seriously hurt, but the gravel stung, and I'd gotten a few scrapes on my back and left forearm. It was a beautiful sunny day and I was shirtless. Using the methods I had learned from my physical therapist Jean, I rolled onto my stomach, assumed a crouching position, and picked myself up in under two minutes. Then I continued my walk down the road. I had time to ponder how much worse my fall could have been. And I again failed to carry my cell phone. It's simply not a habit I ever acquired.

Everywhere I turn I see what needs doing to keep the place up: the pruning, mowing, planting, gathering, and transplanting I would have already done if I could. As things get more overgrown and in disrepair, the more I despair of ever doing them again. I wonder if this is the best I will ever be from now on.

I lost a dispute with my New York City apartment management company over a large tax increase that nearly doubled my maintenance fee for the month of August. It felt like life's troubles were closing in on me. I saw a quick impression of my downing all my medications at once: checking out and leaving a note, "I've had enough." I knew that when I started down that path I needed to do a detour.

When I got back to the house, I washed off my scrapes and made a cup of ginger tea. I watched the play of setting sunlight on the clouds and mountains to the east. Somehow, now in a better frame of mind, none of the day's discouragements had any bearing any longer on my happiness. The meadow was ablaze with the bright yellow goldenrod. The moon rose. The smell of wildflowers wafted on a cool evening breeze.

I lectured myself in a Jewish accent, "So what's not to like?" That snapped me out of my dark mood. Nothing can impinge on my happiness but my own attitude. I decided that the pale sky could herald dawn as well as twilight, and it was only my thinking that made it one or the other, and with a breath I blew the clouds away.