

## The Courage that Compassion Requires

This is a talk I never gave to the Beloved Community, Old St. Pat's, Chicago, because the Cubs had fought their way back to force another playoff game, and what sort of Irish Catholic is it now that doesn't stay home to watch and cheer and pray for the Cubbies rather than going to church for some talk? Have I said recently I love Chicago? © Catherine M. Wallace, October 30, 2016

In the Beloved Community, I don't have to pretend that I'm perfect and my life is in perfect order at all times. That's a huge relief. I mean, it's one thing to know I'm beloved by God. That's not really the tough part. Loving me is sort of in God's job description, y'know? The tough part, the harder reality, is feeling loved by one another. And not only that. Feeling that we *deserve* somehow to be loved by other people.

Which is my point this evening. The Beloved mission to be loving presence to one another can be difficult. It can be *dangerous*, because suffering and depression and exhaustion can be contagious. If you are really down, my being compassionately *present* to you can pull me under too. It can pull me under.

That's what I most admire about the Beloved community. You—collectively—radiate the courage that compassion requires. Two years ago I felt the embrace of that courage. It changed my heart, and so of course it changed my mind. It changed my mind about the Catholic church and what it might mean for me to reclaim my own Catholicism something like 45 years after leaving the church.

And because I'm a writer, it changed my writing—there's a flyer about my books on your table. I'll have more to say about that later on. First I want to share a poem that I wrote in 1992.

I wrote it because I was having flashbacks to something that had happened more than 20 years earlier. It happened when I was a college student heading into my junior year. I was going to be a resident advisor in the women's dorm that year, so I was at a picnic for incoming resident advisors. This was the days before sunscreen, so I'd spent the whole afternoon sitting in long sleeves and long pants in the deepest shade I could find. But at one point, as the sun was dipping toward the horizon, I decided it was safe to come out from under that tree. I wandered out onto the pier. Alone.

At the end of the pier, I saw a body in the water. So I climbed down the ladder and reached out to him. And here's what happened. I call the poem "Air."

I saved a man from drowning, once. He stared  
At me, eyes wide and mouth open, hands spread  
To grasp the air and the summer light  
That held themselves aloof, just out of reach.  
I reached him but he pulled me under too,  
Out into the depths, out over my head,  
Tearing me free from the ladder I held.  
Above, the surface shimmered blue and white  
In shifting silver hills and fractured plains;  
The ladder rippled out of reach and then  
Out of sight as well. I lunged and leapt  
And leapt again, the darkness folded in,  
The socket of my shoulder screamed, and  
I had to bite my lips to hold them closed.  
The darkness seared my chest, swept up  
My neck, the back of my head,  
Black dancing leaden flames  
That pulled me back and down, until  
I knew that I no longer knew  
Where the light or the ladder awaited.  
But I leapt one more time,

In deliberate futility, merely determined  
Not to die captive, motionless, as if  
I had surrendered to this most obvious consequence  
Of reaching out to one about to drown.  
Wood reached my right hand and held me:  
I rose from the waters and screamed.  
After that, I don't remember much.  
I did not hear the sirens, I did not  
See the people run, I do not remember  
How the planks of the pier felt against my back, nor  
How I was moved to the grit of the beach,  
Nor how nor when it was  
That he let go of my hand or  
Came out of the water himself.  
On campus later he bowed, in slight and  
Stiff and elegant formality, to  
Offer his most proper thanks. It was  
A most unlikely gesture for those days,  
But it had an almost liturgical grace.  
I met his propriety with mine,  
Also distant and untouching. And yet  
Our eyes held for one slow gripping fraction of a glance.  
He never spoke again to me, nor I  
To him, nor can I now recall his name.

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After the Beloved retreat, after all of you, collectively, had messed with my head in such incredible ways, I remembered this poem. I pulled it from my files. For the first time in many years, I re-read what I had written.

And I was struck by the baptismal imagery and the resurrection imagery. I was struck by the Eucharistic imagery in the moment where he bows to me in a way that evoked the liturgical bows exchanged between priest and acolyte. He bowed to *me*. In the poem, I'm the priest figure.

But mostly I was struck by something else, something I'd never noticed before. In the poem as in my physical memory, the people who rescued me that day are entirely invisible.

On the Beloved retreat, I felt that I'd seen you face to face.

I didn't know this, not exactly, but I needed you desperately at that point. I needed you because for the previous ten years I had been writing books confronting Christian fundamentalism. The goal of my books was reaching out to those who have rejected Christianity because they object to fundamentalism. And what began as outreach to the unchurched had left me on the brink of drowning myself. That's why I remembered this old poem at that point.

As you know, 25% of all adults are religiously unaffiliated. 39% of adults under 30 want nothing whatsoever to do with any religion. But 98% of all these people grew up in Christian households. They say that Christianity is cruel, not compassionate. They say that Christianity is anti-gay and anti-science, anti-science whether in denying Darwin or in denying the epidemiological fact that easily-available birth control is the best way to prevent abortions. They say that Christianity is hate-mongering and implicitly violent; it's judgmental and bullying; it's absolutist and intellectually totalitarian. And as my research documented, there are devastating historical facts that support each these objections. If that's "Christianity," then it's perfectly reasonable for morally sensitive people to walk out.

These people literally cannot imagine God as God is known in the Beloved community. We have got to reach out to them—not because they need to come to church, but because they need to know *they're not alone. We're with them. We're lonely too.* And if we can come together around shared values, we can make a difference in American society. We can make a difference *not* because we all go to church but because we all share a set of values that are under siege at the moment. We share a set of values that we *all* want to defend. Compassion. Moral responsibility. Critical thinking based on solid research and honest facts. Respect for civil rights and human rights and the image of God in everyone.

That outreach will be hard. It will feel dangerous. It will *be* dangerous. It will be dangerous because it will force us first of all to face all of our own chronic doubts and complaints about what "the Church" really stands for and what "the Church" has done in God's name over two thousand years. Facing those facts squarely stopped me cold over and over again. Over and over again I found myself lost in my own spiritual crisis. But my research continued. I kept reading. I kept thinking. And point by point I found my way to some terrific insight from *real* Christianity. Each of my books lays out some essential moral insight, an insight that you don't have to become Christian to find thought-provoking and worth consideration, just as you don't have to become Buddhist to recognize the value of Buddhist insights.

There was only one problem with what I had done. Here's my problem: all I had was the intellectual piece. That's a big piece heaven knows. But it's not enough. Human beings need community. Human beings need embodied practices of radical hospitality and . . . really . . . dangerous . . . outreach . . . to one another's suffering.

Did that exist anywhere? I'd never found it in a congregation, that's for sure. Over 45 years, I had wandered from one church to another, from one denomination to another, over and over again. A few years here, a few years there. I met some good people; but time and again I'd seen toxic congregational politics that failed to support these good people in their quiet moral heroism. They were faithful *despite* the quality of life in their congregations, not because of it. And so, of course, most of these congregations were steadily losing members. And I never really found friends, the kinds of friends who show

up with casseroles when your mother dies--except once, briefly, in the late 80s in an Episcopal church. And that ended when a new pastor came, a guy who admitted he had trouble with women who looked as if they might question him. I left, the people I thought were my friends stayed, and that was the end of that.

And so, in one last and I thought completely pointless effort at research, I came to the Beloved retreat. As a scholar, I'd been trained to check every reasonable source, no matter how pointless it looked. So I came. I didn't expect to stay. When I arrived, I didn't even unpack. I left my suitcase zipped up, right inside the door of my room.

But I stayed. And then I spent the next nine months systematically reviewing and revising seven book manuscripts totaling more than three-quarters of a million words. That's a lot of revising.

And so I want to challenge you. *Do it again.* You know people who don't go to church. You probably know more than one smart, thoughtful, morally-sensitive person who wouldn't be caught dead in a church because they think the fundamentalist Religious Right really does represent Christian tradition. Listen to their complaints without argument and without defensiveness. Just listen. Hear what they cherish. Hear the loneliness of their moral courage. Hear the courage of their sticking to their moral values even though they are threatened with eternal damnation by people who use God as a weapon to attack others.

And so, tonight, please go around the table. One at a time, describe somebody you know who think religion is all nonsense. And as you listen to these descriptions, try to recognize what that angry person is really affirming that you can affirm too. What values do you share? My books can help you reach out on the basis of these shared values.

I want to conclude here with a poem I wrote in 2004, just as I was getting into actively writing my new books. It's a very lonely poem. It's a very true poem, a true poem about what happens to us when we give away more than we think we can afford, when we risk, we really risk, being pulled under by somebody else's suffering. Their physical suffering, their spiritual suffering.

It's a poem, I suggest, about the miraculous Eucharistic reality that is the Beloved community. I call it "What Multiplies the Loaves.

I'd rather be sent forth

Than leave alone from an empty place.

It's hard to bring stolen bread to the starving

When I'm hungry here myself.

But only in giving it all away

Does the last loaf double in my hand.

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The amazing thing about the Beloved community is that here the bread we share is not stolen at all. By the grace of God, we know that we *deserve* the love and the compassion that we try to offer one another.

And that, I submit, is the bread of eternal life.