

Newsletter- Spring 2006

I am on sabbatical. Last September, after the blessings and challenges of a busy six years of writing and being on the road, I sat down. Then, assisted by a deep weariness and a series of illnesses, I lay down. A recent infection landed me in bed for twelve weeks when I wasn't visiting the hospital for re-hydrating IV's. For the first time in my life I was too sick to read. It was not fun.

However, being sick did accomplish one thing: it slowed me down. In fact, it stopped me cold, interrupting the perpetual doing that is not conducive to a sabbatical dedicated to rest, renewal and deep contemplation. It is only in the last few weeks that I have been able to eat solid food and move around with ease, and I am doing so very slowly. As I regain my health and stamina I have a sense of being not just unable but truly unwilling to go back to old ways of doing, not because they were all "bad" ways, but simply because they are, for me, done. I don't know what this means. I don't know if I will be writing something new, or teaching in a new way. It could mean I'll be opening a bakery, running an animal shelter or hosting a radio show. I don't know when this impulse to move will come from the stillness and I don't know where it will take me.

What I do know is that I am committed to staying with the not-knowing. And although this gives me a strange and sometimes uncomfortable feeling of being suspended, many things in my life help me stay with this commitment. It helps that I am fifty-one and so entering a new phase of my life. My sons are grown, my body is changing and menopause, while wrecking havoc with my memory, eyesight, waistline and sleep, is shifting my perspective, is helping me to accept that I will probably always like a neat house, country music and a lot of time alone so I may as well enjoy all three. It helps that I am well loved and cared for by my family and a few close friends. It helps that my decision to stop was instigated in part by dreams of the women I call the Grandmothers who told me I needed to take at least a year to slow down, (because you really can't slow down quickly) a year to be still and a year to dream of what will be created next.

Although I find myself reading far less than I ever have, I did pick up a book that has also helped: *The Dark Night Of The Soul* by Gerald May. It explores the writings of Christian mystics John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. While the phrase "dark night of the soul" is often associated with difficult times brought about by misfortune or tragedy, the original phrase, *noche oscura*, implies only that what is to come next cannot be seen. This time of not-knowing, this dark night, brings the possibility of transformation, of liberation from the attachment to having things "my way." It holds, as May writes, the gift of knowing that we are not as much in control of life as we'd like to be.

As the busyness in my life falls away so too does my attachment to the identities I have had in the world. In this too I have been given assistance. Although I didn't plan to use my medicine name Mountain Dreamer outside of ceremony, because the poem "The Invitation" was originally sent to former students that was the name it bore. Ironically, having gotten used to the raised eyebrows and skeptical questions of those who understandably wonder if a "Mountain Dreamer" might be a bit flakey, Harper San Francisco recently asked me if I would be willing to have the new paperback editions of *The Invitation*, *The Dance* and *The Call* coming out in April of 2006, released simply under the name Oriah. They are interested in making the stories and meditations

in the books available to a wider audience. While I share this hope, I agreed to the request mostly because it seems to be consistent with changes that are encouraging me to be less attached to old ways of seeing and being seen.

So I rest in the *noche oscura*. Most days my prayer is, "I am listening." And I do. I listen as I make breakfast, wash the kitchen floor or sit in front of the woodstove. I am curious and sometimes a little nervous about how things will unfold. But my predominant feeling is one of surprise at my growing conviction, despite the opinion of some that what I am doing (or not-doing) is "crazy" and despite the lack of any "objective" proof, that I am held and guided in this process by the Sacred Mystery. I guess you could call this faith.

Borrowing the phrase, "ray of darkness," that Gerald May credits to the sixth century mystic known as Dionysius, I recently wrote:

*A ray of darkness has entered my life.
Not knowing has finally brought the perpetual motion
of reaching for what comes next
to a standstill.*

*Is this how a tree lives?
No planning for possible floods or fires that may or may not come
next week or next month or next year.
No preoccupation with the past.
No contemplation of the hidden meaning or higher purpose
in one small pine cone coming to rest and germinate
in this particular place and time.*

*Just this:
The sound of wind rushing
through the uppermost branches,
like a long sigh.
The sound of one branch
rubbing against the rough bark of a nearby trunk,
a rhythmic creaking like the un-oiled hinge of a door
opening and opening and opening.
The silence of moisture rising from the earth,
fine hairs of new roots pushing through a yielding darkness
searching for sustenance.
The smell of sap softening in the warmth of the mid-day sun,
and beneath this sweetness the sharp damp scent
of beetles' bodies and broken branches, leaves and lichen
letting go of what they have been to be soil once again
on the forest floor.*

*I am living like a tree.
Everything happening within and around me*

*just weather sweeping across the landscape
coloring the shape of all that is living and dying in this moment.
Letting go I become soil for the seed of faith.*

Oriah