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# Pilgrimage



by Wendy Brown-Báez

Thanksgiving at the  
Monastery of Christ in the Desert  
during a time of grief

Winner of Women's National Book Association  
2016 prize

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It is Thanksgiving and I am at the Christ in the Desert Monastery near Abiquiu, New Mexico. The Monastery was founded in a canyon thirteen miles down a dirt road off the main highway. This is O'Keefe country; majestic canyon walls sculpted by the Chama River rise in layers of terra cotta, Saltillo tile red, pale lemon, and gritty white, topped by green pines. At sunset they flame into a brick color with tinges of mauve. The road winds along the ribbon of the Rio Chama through scrub, sage, juniper, cactus, and piñon trees. This is the land of rattlesnakes and tarantulas, spectacular sunsets and sudden thunderstorms.

I am here to participate in silence and prayers. The monks belong to the Benedictine Order and chant psalms seven times a day but otherwise, maintain a practice of silence. The monastery has been here since the '60s and the monks number about thirty.

I am here for silence in community because I don't think I am ready yet for silence alone. A few months ago I threw my son's ashes into the bend of the river about a mile and a half away from the monastery. The shock of Sam's death severed my spiritual practice. I am mute because I am angry at God. Others have to pray for me, and I am hoping that this ritual of prayer will jump start my own prayers, like jumper cables applied to a stalled engine.

The Chama River is a place of memories. I took Sam's ashes to the Chama because I camped there when I was pregnant with him. But that was twenty-five years ago. I have camped here with my sons when they were teen-agers since then and the beauty of the place re-awakens the urge to transcend my own problems, to ease into timelessness and wildness, every time.

As we drive down the road, memories flood me. I didn't want that pregnancy; my first child was difficult, precocious, hard to please, and rest-

lessly active. With a second pregnancy close to the first, I felt discouraged. The continual fighting with his father that led to our separation did not help.

But the first time I laid eyes on Sam, I loved him instinctually. Even months before, as my body began that incredible metamorphosis of forming new life, flutters that became jolts and kicks, the sensation of life growing inside me, I had begun to love my child. And I never stopped, not even when he threw temper tantrums or pestered me or took risks I thought he had no right to take. One minute he was a teen-ager, falling in love with cars and girls. The next minute he was a father, a home-owner, with a job and responsibilities, and all that it entails. And I wasn't looking—

It will take a whole year of sifting through the information, the corner's report, gossip from friends, to admit that Sam had a drinking problem.

The church can be seen from the road as you arrive, a tall stone wall topped by a cross and windows reaching up to the sky. The guest rooms form an L-shape along a yard filled by small stones that crunch under your feet and large flat rocks to watch the sun set behind the canyon. My room is the next-to-last. When we open the door to my room, we see bare walls but for a cross over the narrow single bed, a desk with a Bible, a closet with extra blankets and a towel, and a gas heater built into the wall. On the cement floor is a narrow blue-and-brown woven rug. There is no electricity, no phone service including cell phones, and no internet. "Wow!" Alejandro, a friend who has driven me here, exclaims. "It's just like in the movies."

In the courtyard he notices the burnt tree stump that had been made into a sculpture. Later I take a closer look. It is St. Francis, wearing the knotted belt of a monk, his arms out-stretched, a bird perched on one hand. In the middle of his chest is a round hole. A hole is exactly what it feels like has been left in the middle of my chest. A hole that will never be filled again. And I wonder about this sculpture. Was this piece of log chosen because of

the hole? Is the interpretation that there is always a hole inside of us that only God can fill? Is it our compassion that creates this hole?

Alejandro hugs me good-bye and I settle in, hang up my extra sweater, put my blank journal on the desk and walk up to the church for vespers. I am enchanted by its simple beauty. Built by a Japanese architect, Zen aesthetics compliment the earthy New Mexican adobe, using the natural elements of the Chama River valley. The heavy wooden doors have a gracefully carved surface. They open to bareness and light, a sense of unobstructed timelessness. The altar is a square stone slab set on a stone pillar. Above, where there would be a second story, windows comprised of small clear panes face each direction. During morning mass, we watch the captivating shades of sunrise flood the sky with color as it climbs the canyon walls. Approaching the church from the guest house in the evening, it is lit up like a magic lantern set amongst a vast dark sky sprinkled with stars.

The monks sing the psalms in Gregorian chant. Strangers and friends have prayed for me; I know that these prayers have sustained me through the first agony of the shock and the memorials and an attempt to return to normal life. And yet, immediately God gets to me. I weep without caring who is next to me, although no one seems to notice.

The next day is celebrated as Feast of the Martyrs. Over their black robes, the monks wear white for the Eucharist and the altar cloth is red. The Abbot reads the first paragraph from the book *The Thorn Birds*: "There is a legend about a bird which sings just once in its life, more sweetly than any other creature on the face of the earth. From the moment it leaves the nest it searches for a thorn tree, and does not rest until it has found one. Then, singing among the savage branches, it impales itself upon the longest, sharpest spine. And, dying, it rises above its own agony to out-carol the lark and the nightingale. One superlative song, existence the price. But the whole

world stills to listen and God in his Heaven smiles. For the best is only bought at the cost of great pain. ...Or so says the legend."

Is this true, that a bird exists that immolates itself to make its song the most beautiful? But I understand that what is meant for me to hear: that even in great pain, even while dying, the bird does what its purpose is to do: to sing.

As a poet who has lost her urgency for words, this is a message that seems hand-picked for me.

I cannot accept communion as I am not a Catholic but I bow before the priest and whisper, "Just the blessing." I am shaking all over when I leave the church for breakfast, taken in silence. A silence I am grateful for as I allow the words and music of the chants to blow through the empty hole in my heart.

The day breaks with a superlative blue sky. I will pilgrimage to where we threw Sam's ashes. My hip joints are inflamed with arthritis, so this journey will not be easy for me. On the way I think about Sam and his life. I think about my life. I think about making my feet move over the dirt road. I think about how beautiful it is here, how silent, how unafraid I feel even though anything could be waiting for me around the bend.

Jutting into the river, you can watch the river rafters glide by in summer from this point. Sam is not here in these waters. And yet, here is where I have come to remember, to speak with him, to weep, to feel the pulse of the river taking us onward to the deeper depths of merging with ocean. In the sand I write, "I love you, Samson" and draw a heart. I have not brought anything to leave, although we had tossed roses into the waters along with his ashes. He knows I love him. It is for my own solace that I write in the sand. "Please forgive me, I am so sorry," has been my mantra. *I*

*should have been looking out for you...*

I know that he chose his death and perhaps there is nothing I could have done to stop him. I have been through the *what ifs* and *if onlys* over and over, enough to drive myself crazy. All there is left is to say good-bye again. If I keep saying good-bye, it will be as though he hasn't quite left.

I hike back through the dead leaves of autumn to the beach where I can sit and listen to the river. I participated in a series of workshops called *Earthwalks for Health* and we learned from the indigenous people how to listen to the river, the rocks, and the drum. I close my eyes and still myself and ask the river if she has any messages for me. I think, *The river wants to give me a gift*, and walk to the water's edge. I wait, expectant, wondering. Was it a special rock, a feather, something I would see in the water? Then I hear a voice saying, "You have all the pieces of the puzzle. Take all the pieces of your life and put them together. You must sing again. You **must** sing."

My hips ache on the way back to the monastery. I ponder the words of the river. I think about prayer. I think about my life as pieces of puzzle that could be fit together...and I feel something I had not felt before. That it makes sense. That it has purpose and meaning.

The next day I rise again at 5:00 am and struggle to get dressed in the small glow of the Coleman lantern and get my things ready for departure after breakfast. I had overheard a couple making arrangements to pay their bill and asked them if they could give me a lift into Santa Fe. The stars are blessedly out, the small sliver of moon bright enough to light my way, the church lit up from within, the low voices chanting. I think to myself that I want to stay. Maybe I could just inhabit the bare room, huddle next to the fire as the snow comes sweeping down from over the mountains, learn to wash dishes in silence and let the prayers of the monks carry me to another level of understanding and acceptance. One without anger. The service ends

and mass begins. A brother hands out the music for the mass and I read on the top "Mass for the Dead." Of all days I have picked to be at the monastery! Can I bear to sit through this mass? I contemplate leaving but decide to go through it, let the tears come, let the prayers wash over me.

This time, I think of Sam not just as my son who died but as one of the dead, showered with light, healed, with the Angels. I have not been able to picture him like this before. I was left with a frozen image of his dead body and it has beaten cruel fists on me. This is another image...to imagine him wherever it is that the dead go. Perhaps it is time to say good-bye and let him go there. Perhaps it is time to let God forgive me and to receive that forgiveness. Perhaps it *is* possible to sing once more.

Before I leave, I say good-bye to the guest master. I had contacted him through email and told him my situation, why I needed to come and how limited I was in funds. "We'll pray you find a way to us," he wrote back. "Thank you so much, this meant a lot to me," I tell him as I hand him the key to my room. For some reason, his calm kindness makes me feel like being honest with him. "It meant so much to me that you are praying since I can't. I am very angry at God."

To my surprise he answers, "I would be, too," and gives me a hug. And for some reason, his acknowledgement of my pain and my fury lightens me. I feel relieved, as if a huge weight has fallen off my back. I realize that what I feel is normal, a natural reaction. Even while living a life of holiness, it is possible to be angry at the way we perceive our fate. His response is more comforting than telling me, "God loves you," something I just can't accept right now. Someday I will no longer be consumed with grief; the pain will be less sharp, will soften. Someday I will understand that not all questions have answers but love remains even after our loved ones leave. For now, I put one foot in front of me, then the other, down the road towards the rest of my life.

Wendy Brown-Báez is an award-winning writer, teacher, performance poet and installation artist.

Wendy is the author of the inspirational writers' guidebook *Heart on the Page: A Portable Writing Workshop*, a novel *Catch a Dream*, and poetry books *Ceremonies of the Spirit* and *transparencies of light*. Her poetry and prose appear widely in literary journals and anthologies, such as *Borderlands*, *The Litchfield Review*, *Lavandería*, *Mizna*, *Wising Up Press*, *The Feminine Collective*, *Poets & Writers*, *Talking Writing*, *Water~Stone Review* and *Peregrine*. Wendy was awarded McKnight and MN State Arts Board grants to teach writing in non-profits.

She teaches creative writing and memoir in community spaces such as schools, libraries, cafes, prisons, healing centers, churches, women's retreats, yoga studios, human service and arts organizations.

Please check out her website for more information about upcoming readings and workshops

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