

Broken Heart - Sacred Heart

by Dolores Leckey

I once heard a holy monk say that when your heart breaks there is room for the light of God to enter. My heart broke early in the morning of June 23, 2003. My husband who had suffered for years from serious cardiac problems had gone to the hospital the day before (our 46th wedding anniversary), not because of a cardiac event, but because he had bronchitis and couldn't stop coughing. He was to remain overnight for observation, not in intensive care, but in an ordinary hospital room. We fully expected he would come home on June 23.

But at 5:30 A.M. my phone rang. A doctor said "I'm sorry to tell you. . . he's not going to make it." This strange doctor then ordered me not to drive and she called my son. I called my pastor.

All this bad news was being conveyed by phone, and with every number dialed I could feel my heart breaking, piece by piece. I remembered a poem about how bad news *always* comes by phone. How did that poet know?

My children who were in town for our anniversary joined me in the hospital room where their father, still warm, remained. My pastor came, bringing experience born of years dealing with losses and lamentations. There was oil for anointing, the prayer of commendation "May the martyrs welcome you", and sacred bread to remind us that we all belonged to one another, and to Christ, and that would never change. Hours passed, and Tom grew cold. It was time to go home.

At home I stared at a woodcut of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (the artist is Robert McGovern) which we had in our home for many years. For so long I had prayed to the Sacred Heart (heal his heart, bring peace to his heart, give me a loving heart) and now I learned that the devotion was rooted in marital love. And so, we buried our beloved with his bruised and battered heart on the Feast of the Sacred Heart.

Home. The place of shared life in all its joys and sorrows was now profoundly silent. I, who have always loved solitude and silence, experienced it in a different way: the silence of absence. At first, it was almost overwhelming. Alone I wept, and groaned, sounds reminiscent of the keening of my Irish ancestors, or so it seemed from my knowledge of J.M. Synge's plays. I struggled to get some balance, some understanding of life in the present. Three old, trustworthy aids came to me. One was writing; the others, ritual and prayer. In actuality they wove in and out of each other.

At the end of the summer with lamentations somewhat muffled, I began a journal. At first I wrote as a way of coping with my broken heartedness. My focus was a particular love—our love—and writing was a way of connecting to him. But in the writing—and the living—of days, weeks, months, a story of different proportions began to emerge. Love stretched. I could see in the writing how rich and full life was, private life and public life, nature's life, human and other.

My prayer changed that year. As I used to talk with Jesus, I now talked with Tom. I felt his guidance and his silent (vibrantly silent) presence. So St. Paul was/is right. Absolutely. Love never ends.

In addition to the ritual of journaling, I embraced other rituals. At evening time I prayed- and pray- vespers. Small gestures shape this ritual: light a candle, hold the Book of Prayer, savor the new quiet. As I entered more deeply into the psalms and canticles there was a clear sense that I was not alone. Not only was Tom with me but so many others. The communion of saints was not an abstract idea. It was palpably real. The experience began to show up in the writing, along with the difference between loneliness and aloneness. On September 11, 2003 I wrote these words: "While the nation mourned I went to Columbia Gardens to visit Tom's grave, and mine someday. I came home and looked at the mural of Breaking Bread, a reproduction of the ancient fresco in Priscilla's catacombs. People gathered in this Roman woman's home, to share a meal and to share the memory of Jesus. And when the time came, they were buried there. This is one of my favorite places in Rome, a peaceful house, in the center of rushing commerce. I ponder Priscilla, a married woman, doing the domestic things women always do: welcoming guests, offering food, making connections. Priscilla is a lifeline. I trust her."

The classic prayer to the Sacred Heart states, "I place my trust in you." I think that's how the light shines through the brokenness.

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