

Healing Presence

by Anne Bonnefin

*'It's in these valleys where the flowers grow.'*¹ Johnathan Ogden

It's morning and I take in another glorious Sydney winter's dawn. A chorus starts and I listen intently to the variety of birds that join me in greeting the day. Some birds are close, others are off in the distance – it is a symphony. Soon I will go for a walk, then mindfully make a breakfast of blueberries and chia seeds. Maybe my one-year old grandson will come knocking at my kitchen door and will cheekily decide to eat a second breakfast after eyeing off mine. I will enjoy watching his tiny fingers pick up the blueberries and pop them into his mouth one by one. He will sit on my lap and we will enjoy a mindful moment together.

Each moment carries with it the potential for healing and wholeness if we are 'awake'. Everyday connections can be sacred interactions and each of us a healing presence for one-another.

When I was about seven I was given a little card by my Sunday school teacher. On one side was the 23rd Psalm and on the other side were pressed wildflowers picked by children in Israel. The card had a sleeve of thick plastic protecting the flowers. I so loved that card and felt a strange connection to those children in Jerusalem – I memorised that scripture and it became a favourite - It was a comfort - God would be with me through the valley. Looking back to that time, my family had just arrived in the USA, and I was coping with a new culture, a new way of talking, new friends, new school. I was a foreigner in a foreign land. Even at seven I knew what it meant to walk in an unfamiliar valley and feel afraid. - *'Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.'* (Psalm 23:4).... Fast forward to a few weeks ago - I was trolling through some contemporary Christian music and I came upon the music of Johnathan Ogden. As I listened one morning to his beautiful song 'Something Real' a phrase jumped out at me*'It's in these valleys where the flowers grow.'*¹ I thought back over all the valleys that had been in my life - and in a strange sort of way I felt thankful for what they had taught me.

It's not in the perfect life... *'it's in these valleys'*, the realness of life where we learn a depth of living and loving and being. Within disappointment and even grief and loss there is always a message of love... *'where the flowers grow.'*where insights come,

connection, love, awareness. It is here we discover a deeper meaning for our life and relationships while at the same time learn to expand and take in more and more of the Universal Spirit. When we trust, when we ask, when we learn to understand our own needs and at the same time broaden our senses to open up to love and compassion around us we can find God's ever-present love. This is living as art – it is in the present moment, in interactions and in relationships, life becomes real and sacred at the same time – it is here we can find we are loved and we are enough.

There is always a message of love and there can be revival. We just need to follow the crumbs. To follow them means undertaking a journey to that deeper place of empathy, patience, understanding, wisdom, sacredness, shadow and awakening. Yes this path can sometimes be illusive and we may experience valleys and darkness and loss on the way. But keep going and you will also find love there.

Four years ago when my husband Peter was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer I was in the USA and he was in Australia. It was hard being apart. I don't think I slept for two weeks as I processed the news. Surrounded by family I grieved for Peter, myself, and my children. I've always been a forward-looking person – always running ahead thinking about possibilities...the next project or adventure to undertake ... but I remember that day, time stopped and started going backwards. It was like closing a book you were writing without finishing the ending. Well, whatever the ending I had imagined – it wasn't this. There were years and years ahead of us – until there were not.

I remember finally surrendering "I'll have to look closer to home now."

*'Seeing is a form of pure being, unlike watching or looking at. Seeing is why we're here.'*² Says Annie Lamott. The process of grieving, of loss, of being pressed down to the core comes with the eternal invitation to reach out and see with spiritual eyes. To do that means you have to slow down.

There is a beautifully illustrated book called *'The Lost Soul'* by Olga Tokarczuk and Joanna Concejo. In it Olga writes - *'If someone could look down on us from above, they'd see the world is full of people running about in a hurry, sweating and very tired and*

their lost souls, always left behind, unable to keep up with their owners....! In the book a man goes in search of his lost soul and finds a doctor who shares with him *'Our souls move much slower than our bodies. ... you must find a place of your own, sit there quietly and wait for your soul.'*³

I wish I could share with you the beautiful illustrations in this book of the man sitting and waiting for his soul... meanings are conveyed in images, they reach deep into the psyche.... all sorts of memories and experiences arise and finally one day *'tired, dirty and scratched'* the lost soul knocks on the man's door and they are together again.

Just like that I waited for my soul when as friends and family surrounded me in those two weeks before I came home to Australia. I was able to prepare, I had time to grieve deeply for myself on my own and was able to resolve on coming home I would put aside my needs and be a support for Peter – for wherever the journey would take him.

Our deepest needs surface in sorrow. It is a tender place as Ken Robinson says in his article - a 'thin place' (ref.pg.15) and inexplicable things happen, people come to us as healing presence there as we call out in our need.

On the journey home I had a chance conversation with a man while in transit at Dallas Airport. I talked about Peter's diagnosis and what I was to face on arrival back in Sydney and he shared about his journey with cancer. Our deep conversation was cut short by the call for our flight and reluctantly we said goodbye. Yet just a few moments later we were reunited as we boarded the plane - our allocated seats in business class were next to each other on the flight home! (I was flying on a staff ticket and at the last minute had been upgraded.) I can't explain it, yet God felt close-by. The man was able to share more about his life and gave me some much-needed advice. Now, four years later I remember less about his advice than I do his presence and the care shown to me. It was as if God knew my need more than I did myself and met it in the heart of a stranger. *'Trust me on this.'* says Annie Lamott again *'We are loved out of all sense of proportion.'*²

Nothing prepared me for the quantity of love and compassion I felt back in Sydney. In small ways and big ways people's prayers and compassion carried me through Peter's illness. Love became tangible in a form I had never understood before. Family and friends supported us. Prayers surrounded us – I could touch them. They were a living force that connected us with the Divine and to the outside world. Though Peter's illness had shut us away, these prayers and love opened up for me connection and hope. My children offered love and wisdom way beyond their years, my sister Jane, David, mum and dad were a

continual support and healing presence. Helen and Graham Granleese showered us with kindness when ever they could. Rick Sarre dropped in on a trip from South Australia and so many other family and friends took time to come and share with Peter and myself or offered their gifts and talents. One time Lara Stewart shared with us a song she had written for Peter – it was a precious gift that reminded us how much Peter was loved and would be missed.

Peter is still missed and maybe recounting here I've made my grief sound easy. Perhaps I've forgotten to mention a harder time when a grey fog unexpectedly descended and wanted to colour everything. Like a black hole it simply wanted me to turn my back on life and friendships and drift away. It was here, even within this grey fog I looked about for the healing presence in my life. "What is missing?" love asked. "What brings you joy?" love whispered. "Ring your mum." love said.

Annie Lamott shares...*'Hope springs from realizing we are loved.'* She goes on to say *'love is not a concept'... 'It is alive and true, a generative and nutritious flickering force that is marbled through life.'*² I know this to be true. Someone walking beside us as a healing presence in the valleys can help us see the flowers even when we are too distracted to notice them. When the shadows in the valley may overwhelm us, someone being a healing presence can lead us consciously and compassionately to sit on a rock in the sunlight; their presence can give us courage to confront the shadows in order to heal. They can wait with us until our soul has the time to catch up.

¹ *Something Real.* © lyrics and music by Johnathan Ogden

² *Dusk Night Dawn: On Revival and Courage.* Anne Lamott
Published 2021 by Riverhead Books

³ *The Lost Soul.* Olga Tokarczuk & Joanna Concejo
Published 1921 by Seven Stories Press

Anne Bonnefin is Communications Coordinator at Community of Christ, Australia Mission Centre.

She has a Diploma of Fine Art and Diploma of Counselling and is currently studying Transpersonal Art Therapy.

Anne is an Elder in Community of Christ and lives in Sydney, NSW.

'To my mind, empathy is in itself a healing agent.' Carl Rogers

Something Real - Jonathan Ogden

I'm done with impersonation, imitation
I want something real
I don't want the next best thing they're offering 'cause
I want something real
I'm done with the endless noise of a thousand voices
I want something real

I'm getting tired of this same routine
I need to break out of this new machine
So take me back to feel the love we had
In the garden where it all began

Through that window I can see a light
I still see it when I close my eyes
I can feel the wind against my skin
I can almost hear You beckoning

I think we were made for something more than this
Not for just existence, but to truly live, oh

I'm done with impersonation, imitation
I want something real
I don't want the next best thing they're offering 'cause
I want something real
I don't want to hide behind a "perfect life" 'cause
I want something real

Lead me out into the open space
Let me hear Your voice and see Your face
Sometimes life is found in moving slow
It's in these valleys where the flowers grow

Take me to the place where mercy never ends
I don't want success, I want to be Your friend, oh

I'm done with impersonation, imitation
I want something real
I don't want the next best thing they're offering 'cause
I want something real
I'm done with the endless noise of a thousand voices
I want something real

I want something real
I want something real
I want something real (I wanna hear Your voice, I want to know You more)
I want something real
I want something real

© Johnathan Ogden - used by permission - <https://www.jonathanogden.co.uk>

Listen here: <https://spoti.fi/2SCGvB3> or <https://apple.co/2I3dTNi> or <https://youtu.be/stfomGVv1mw>