

JOANIE

(who shared a cabin with me to Ireland, 1984)

She entered my life
to share a cabin with me
on the voyage to Ireland,
waking me, with her hair
tousled to her ankles;
I just tried to sleep,
but she-
“I’m going home to die,”
she said.

In the icebox of experience
I rummaged for words
that I could not find.

Mumbled of her courage
in the face of life’s end.
“No, it’s only God,” she said,
“coming to fetch me.”

A long night’s voyage
with the woman beneath me
suffering, fighting for breath:
“Hope I don’t die in the night.”
I shared that prayer at least.

I controlled my irritability,
cursing to myself
that such a cancerous dough
had to come next to me.
Her phlegm uglified my dark
as the foam folds on the sea.

“Hope you have a nice holiday,”
her last words to me:
“I’m Joanie, dearie.”

But then later, when I told others
of my night companion

They were amazed and grinned at me-

that a virtuoso of words
should be stumped like this!

A contemporary Jeanne d'Arc
on her way to the coffin
who shared frail sleeplessness with me

in a vigil that, for her, held no grief.

Menna Elfyn

Translated from the Welsh by Tony Conran

The title of this poem is its key and an indication of the conversion experience undergone by the poet in both. There are two voyages recounted: the night passage across the Irish Sea, and the poet's voyage of self-appraisal and appreciation of her fellow traveller.

The second, metaphorical, voyage is more complex. We move from the first reference to her companion merely by pronoun- "she" and the dismissive generic "woman", to the pejorative "cancerous dough", the shift to the claim of "companion" and the final gift of the name "Joanie". These words trace the poet's growth in understanding and acceptance, her growth from "irritability" to the beginnings of empathy. The move from stranger to companion is a realisation of shared humanity. The blessing of the gift of the woman's name is a glimmer of light. The name renders the woman a unique and differentiated individual.

Contemporary Welsh poet Menna Elfyn recalls in this poem one of those random, unplanned and uncontrollable encounters we all have that somehow impinge on us and leave their mark. "She entered my life"- the poet perceives herself as passive subject of an unwarranted invasion, a reluctant captive audience in the confined space of a cabin of the overnight ferry from Wales to Ireland. This is a meeting that disturbs and confronts, unsettling the youthful poet. The carefree holidaymaker comes inescapably face to face with the repulsiveness of sickness, the imminence of death and another's calm world view.

In our professional occupations where so much store is set on appropriate "boundaries" and in a world where death and disease can mostly be kept at arm's length, this poem reminds us that crude honest encounter can happen in the least likely places, and that sometimes we need the jolt of such honesty to enable us to reassess our own values and capacities. We

need to be attuned to the opportunities for merciful encounter in our resentments and those inconvenient times when, to paraphrase the poet, another's "phlegm uglifies our dark".

The poet's capacity is sorely tested in this encounter. Sharing the space with someone so inelegantly ill is confronting and irksome. There is absolutely nothing she can do to relieve or change the woman's suffering. There is absolutely nothing she can say to make a shred of difference to her companion's state. The "virtuoso of words" is rendered impotent in the face of such starkness. Sometimes the only response possible is to be a helpless companion rather than a solver or an ameliorator or benefactor. How do we do that?

Recently a friend of mine, who lives in a supported aged care home, came upon one of her companions, a ninety year old, who had fallen on the floor and could not get herself up. Although she appeared unhurt, she was unable to manoeuvre herself up off the floor. My friend, a retired nurse and social worker in her eighties, found her own frail age meant she could not hoist or physically help her companion in any way. They were both unable. My friend, who is still fairly nimble, simply sat on the floor and kept the ninety year old company until the ambulance arrived a considerable time later. It was an experience of the grace of unable, to use Marianne Hieb's term, where my friend could not mend or solve a situation. It was an experience where companionship, of sitting on the ground in solidarity is all one can do. To be helpless, to sit on the ground in powerlessness is an act of solidarity, but also an act that makes one vulnerable and humble. It is painful to be unable.

With the best of intentions and the worst of intentions we all know the pain of the unable. Jesus knew it and was also victim of it- think of the thankless lepers, the rich young man who turned away, the sleeping disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane. Catherine McAuley knew it- unable to attend the blessing of her own chapel at Baggot St because she felt so hurt and distressed by the circumstances surrounding it.

This poem though is not only about the poet's inability. It is pre-eminently about the other woman's dignity, the beautiful simplicity of her faith and that final blessing "I'm Joanie, dearie." Bestowing her name bestows memory that bears fruit in the poem.

Where is the Mercy in this poem? Surely in the words the older, dying woman leaves, which are all conveyed in the first person by the poet. Surely in the self-deprecating tone of the poet who learns from the

experience and writes about it with wry fondness years later And surely in the very exchange, the meeting- the blessing of encounter, the blessing of recognition of shared humanity and shared frailty, even if for the poet it is recognition in hindsight.

I acknowledge that this poem was written in Welsh, the preferred language of the poet, who is a long time advocate and social activist for the Welsh language and culture.

For reflection:

- Consider an “intrusion” that was a blessing in disguise for you.
- Reflect on the grace of unable in your life.
- When was the last time you sat as a companion on the metaphorical floor?
- See Marianne Hiebrum, *The Grace of the Unable*, in MAST Journal, Vol 4, No.1, 1993
- Menna Elfyn is a social activist and champion of the Welsh language, who describes herself as a “Christian anarchist”. Check out her website.

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