

*Warp and Weft: Weaving Wholeness*  
*A Noticeable Change*  
II Corinthians 3:17-18

Richard Rohr, the Franciscan theologian who has been my teacher, says: Only two things have the power to transform us: great love and great suffering.

I think he's right. I *know* he's right—in that way you sometimes recognize truth in your gut, as if something inside of you leans toward it and says “Yeah. I know.”

Great love and great suffering. Sometimes they come woven together. But either one alone can also be powerful enough to crack you open, alter the way your insides are arranged. Powerful enough to change the way you understand yourself, and what your life is about.

I can think of a dozen people I have seen this kind of transformation in; probably you can too. I am thinking of my friend Alice Impraim, who stood by her husband through a grueling battle against multiple myeloma. Alice felt, when he died, like her world had come to an end. And in a way it had. Her grief carved out a great emptiness inside of her. Nothing she had done before made sense any more. And so a few years after her husband Chaka's death, when Alice was more than 50 years old, she joined the Peace Corps, and served two years in Namibia.

I'm thinking of a young woman named Rebecca, who I met last week as I was doing training for the Parent Project. Rebecca was born into suffering. Her mother was a drug addict; Rebecca and her brothers and sisters were put into foster care early on. All through her youth and young adulthood, Rebecca did the only thing that came naturally to her; she followed in her mother's footsteps. Rebecca went to prison; her children were taken away from her. And Rebecca felt the full weight of her love for those kids break something hard inside of her. Now she is working hard to turn her life around. She is building a non-profit center where other parents who are struggling to hold on to their kids can find all the resources they need to make the changes they have to make to hold their families together.

I'm thinking about Sahr Moiwa, right here in our congregation, for whom a terrible car accident reshaped his life. His loss, and the long road to healing with his son Abdul, rearranged him. The suffering and love that knocked him to his knees also cracked his heart open wide enough to hold not only his own child but every disabled child in Sierra Leone who needs help with resources for school.

And it is my story too. In my young adulthood I struggled for years to find and hold onto faith, or purpose, or *something* I knew I was missing from my life. Something that would give my work a sense of meaning, something that would make my life seem like it was making a difference. I was practicing law, working for clients who could afford to hire lawyers to protect the rest of their money. I had a good job, a wonderful family, a lovely home. Plenty of money and *stuff*. But I was constantly restless; I'm sure I drove the people around me crazy. I had tried religion, but couldn't stay with it. I took classes and workshops on alternative careers for

lawyers. I read self-help books. But it was like nothing could sink deeply into me; my life was so full, there was no empty space for anything to settle in.

And then Terry died. My husband who was the partner in everything I did—work, home, plans for the future—he was suddenly gone. Grief felt like a big crack inside of me—a crevice really, a fissure so wide and deep that it felt like a truck could drive through it. For two years I felt every day the ache of that crack, splitting my insides. But something happened along the way.

We had joined a church shortly before Terry died—for the first time since we had been married. We didn't do it for ourselves, of course—we didn't think we needed church. It was mostly for our daughter, who we thought ought to have at least a little bit of Sunday School education. Before Terry died, I was happy to go to church on Sundays, but mostly for an hour of quiet, a chance to sit still and digest the week that had just passed. After he was gone, I continued to go—mostly out of habit and lostness. But as I sat huddled up in my own pain, I started to hear something I had not heard before. The stories about Jesus seemed to make meaning out of not only the glorious and triumphant moments in life, but the hardest ones as well. I could hear *my* life in those stories; it was like they were frames that held the screen shots in my head: what I'd had, what I'd lost, what I feared, the great unknown that was the future.

I heard, as if for the first time: The way we come to God is not by skirting around our losses and broken places, but by letting them reshape us. That the path that goes right through the very worst things in life—the moments that break you—is the same path that leads you to new life. That the God whose stories we tell in church could pick up all the broken pieces of my life and make something beautiful, *life-ful*, out of them.

No doubt this is what Christians (including the preacher!) had been saying all along, but it wasn't until that gigantic hole opened up inside of me that I could hear it. In that big empty canyon that had been carved out by a river of grief, faith found a home inside of me.

That's what great love and great suffering do. They open us up—our eyes, our ears, our hearts. They uncover our tender, vulnerable places. They crack through the layers of competence and self-sufficiency and self-regard that we work so hard to build and maintain, to protect ourselves from anything that might break us...or reveal that we have already been broken.

We have some control over what we fill our empty spaces with. It is possible to focus only on yourself—your pain or your drive or your need for other people's attention. I know people who have made a life's work out of taking extraordinarily good care of themselves. The Gospel invites us to focus on something outside ourselves, to let something other than our own troubles, or even our own natural optimism, occupy the center spot in our lives. 'God,' we call this 'something' in our tradition: a Being who *is* compassion and love and goodness, with a voice that calls us out of our self-focus and into connection.

This is why we come to church. This hour is a breathing space, a pause in your week, in your mind, in your soul. This is a place for you take in and reflect on the things that have happened to you; to hold up to the light the things that have entered your life unbidden, the things that have

broken your heart. This is a community where you can talk and be heard as you try to make sense of things.

It's also a place to hear stories of how other people have found and described God—stories for you to re-tell in a way that includes your life. Here you will find a voice constantly urging you to let the suffering and love that life is full of crack you open, to let yourself be re-made.

And here's the amazing thing that happens: when we take our eyes off ourselves and fix them on that God who is love and generosity and kindness, slowly, slowly, little by little, we begin to resemble what we are looking at—not by force of our determination, but in some way that is beyond us. Through all the things that happen to us, we are being transformed, Paul says in that Scripture passage we read this morning. Molded and reshaped—from smooth, wrinkle-free faces into beings that bear the image of God. A God who, just like us, has lived through both great joy and terrible disappointment. Every love, every heartache, every hardship you look up from becomes a line in your face. A beautiful wrinkle that mirrors the life-lines—lines of both wear and laughter—in the face of the God who brings new life, the God who loves you.

Centering Prayer for 18 October 2015:

Adapted from a beginning-of-Sabbath prayer in the Union Prayer Book of the Jewish tradition:

Our noisy week has now descended beyond our sight.

In the silence of our praying place we close the door upon the hectic joys and fears, the accomplishments and anguish of the week we have left behind.

What was but moments ago the substance of our life has become memory; what we did must now be woven into what we are.

On this day we shall not do, but be.

We are to walk the path of our humanity, no longer ride unseeing through a world we do not touch and only vaguely sense.

No longer can we tear the world apart to make our fire.

On this day heat and warmth and light must come from deep inside ourselves.