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Wisdom: The Hidden Face of God

Douglas E. Christie

Loyola Marymount University, DEchristie@lmu.edu

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Attentiveness

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION page 2

CONTRIBUTORS 4

WISDOM: THE HIDDEN FACE OF GOD 6
Douglas Burton-Christie

ATTENTIVENESS 21
Esther de Waal

HOW TO RECOGNIZE GRACE 28
Marilyn Chandler McEntyre

ALIVE TO GOD IN CHRIST JESUS 29
Agnes Cunningham, SSCM

STAYING AWAKE 37
Deborah Smith Douglas

BOOK REVIEWS
A Wakeful Faith: Spiritual Practice in the Real World
by Marshall Jenkins
Reviewed by Jan Johnson 47

Wisdom:

THE HIDDEN FACE OF GOD

by Douglas Burton-Christie



DAVID KLEIN

I WAS SITTING with my mother at the dinner table the night her hair began to fall out. Brushing her hand along her scalp, a large clump came loose. She sat there for a moment looking at it, as though not quite comprehending what she was seeing. Then she got up and left the room. I remained sitting there, with my father, neither of us knowing what to do

or say. Her chemotherapy treatment had begun a few weeks earlier. I knew it was likely that eventually she would begin losing her hair. But up until that moment, this had been an idea, in the same way the cancer had been an idea. Unreal. Suddenly, though, here it was before me, her hair, soft and wispy, resting in her hand. Here was an undeniable and unambiguous sign of her disease. Here was something important. I knew I should pay careful attention to this. Yet I was seized by a perverse impulse to look away, to forget what I had seen. I was like a small child who believes that covering his eyes will make him invisible to the adults in the room. Maybe if I imagined it gone, this terrible thing would simply disappear. What foolishness. Yet, fear has that kind of power. It can make you believe foolish things, or turn away from the truth before you. In that moment, fear had me by the throat. My mother was sick and might very well die from that sickness and there was nothing I could do about it. So: I did not want to look. I did not want to acknowledge the reality of her sickness. It was too painful. But neither did I want to turn my gaze away. In that moment of sudden recognition, when the truth of my mother's disease became palpable, when her fragility and vulnerability became so plain, I found myself wanting to look at her carefully, tenderly, honestly.

Should I look? Or should I look away? These questions have become more acute for me since my mother became ill. But they have been present for a long time at the edge of my conscious awareness, like a dull ache in the muscles. At root, they are questions about death, about a world that visits death and disease upon us with such seeming carelessness, about whether God is anywhere present in all of this. I wonder: is the fact of this disease coursing through my mother's body at all meaningful? Or is it just something that happens—randomly, cruelly, without explanation? Maybe there is no meaning to be found in this experience, for her, for me, for any of us.

I hope this is not true. I hope there is some solace and meaning to be discovered at the center of such apparently random loss. But I am far from certain about it. Rarely in my life have I felt more keenly the power of the suffering Christ—God present to us in the form of a human being broken, forsaken, and abandoned. That image of God participating in and redeeming our own deepest experiences of loss and suffering is immensely compelling to me, a source of genuine hope in the midst of apparently meaningless suffering. But sometimes even

this vision seems inadequate. Sometimes I recoil from answers or solutions of any kind. The sense of loss and abandonment runs too deep. To propose an answer in the face of the unanswerable seems a kind of blasphemy. It feels more honest simply to cry out. Or to remain silent.

*Where
is wisdom to
be found?*

Which is often where I find myself these days—silent, waiting, wondering. Not only wondering about my mother and the meaning of her illness, but also about the world. Is it a trustworthy place? Can God be discovered here, especially in the midst of pain and suffering that comes to us, as far as we can tell, without pattern or meaning? I look at my mom holding that tuft of hair in her hand and think: this alone is real, this disease that means to take her life. And I feel the cruelty of the world. I look again and see the light in her eyes and think: this alone is real, this unexpected beauty and goodness, this life. And I feel hope stirring in me. Both are real of course. But saying that does not really resolve anything. It only helps me to see more clearly the depth of the struggle before me. It also helps me to recognize how much help I need in facing up to this struggle, how much I need the company of others who have felt the stab of these questions. Lately I have found such company—among those sages who sought to give shape and meaning to the idea of wisdom in ancient Jewish and Christian spirituality.

“Where is wisdom to be found?” This is the question to which the sages return again and again. It was for them an urgent and utterly practical question, a way of asking where meaning is to be found, where God is to be discovered in the midst of the relentlessly ambiguous character of our experience. The sages were extraordinarily honest in facing up to their own fears about God’s apparent absence from the world. Yet they were also deeply attentive to those signs all around them speaking of God’s presence. Their willingness and ability to live within this ambiguous reality gives their quest for wisdom a compelling power for us. It seems to me that their attempt to seek the pattern at the heart of existence can help us attend more honestly to the ambiguity of our own experience, perhaps even help us discover traces of wisdom within that experience.

What is wisdom exactly? As it arose within ancient Jewish experience, it referred to two primary realities. First, it was an experiential understanding of *how to live*, happily, deeply, in harmony with God, oneself, others, and the cosmos. Wisdom was

understood as a way or a path or a moral code, which, if followed, could lead one toward happiness and a sense of meaning. Second, wisdom was understood as *the deeper pattern and rhythm in things*, the mystery at the heart of all that is, the truth of life, God present to us in the midst of life. To seek wisdom then was to cultivate a practice, a way of life. It was to live as though moral choices mattered. It was to seek the meaning and pattern in one’s life through living according to the deep truth of wisdom. Yet wisdom was more than a way of life or an ethical code. It was a mystery into which one was invited to dwell ever more deeply—the very mystery of God present to us at the heart of reality, now manifest, now hidden, ever present but elusive, sustaining not only our own individual lives but the entire cosmos.

WISDOM: THE STRUGGLE WITH LOSS AND ABSENCE

NOWHERE IN SCRIPTURE is the question of God’s possible absence from our experience expressed as starkly and honestly as in the book of Job. Yet Job’s terror, his acute sense of God’s absence, is often obscured from view. In part this is due to his longstanding reputation for patience, his ability to endure every kind of calamity and still keep faith in God. It is also due to the literary structure of the book. The prologue provides us with an explanation of his plight that Job himself never receives—God has entered into a contest with the Accuser to see how deep Job’s faithfulness actually runs. Job’s immense and incomprehensible suffering—the loss of all his possessions, the death of his children, the wretched and debilitating illness that comes over him—all of this is accounted for in the prologue as part of an elaborate test. It is given an explanation, a particular meaning. And the Job we meet in the prologue accepts his plight. Without understanding what has befallen him, he accepts that his fortunes have now changed. He actually blesses God.

Yet the serene, accepting Job of the prologue is not the same person we meet in the long, tumultuous body of the book. Here is a person who knows one thing only: he has been stripped of everything and left to die. No explanation has been given nor, one suspects, could any explanation ever suffice. The cosmos has become a dark, tangled place, absent of meaning or

purpose. Job finds himself plunged into a deep, aching silence. Finally, though, he speaks. Or rather he howls:

*God damn the day I was born
And the night that forced me from the womb.
On that day—let there be darkness;
Let it never have been created;
Let it sink back into the void.
Let chaos overpower it;
Let black clouds overwhelm it;
Let the sun be plucked from its sky.
Let oblivion overshadow it;
Let all the other days disown it;
Let the aeons swallow it up.
On that night—let no child be born,
No mother cry out with joy.
Let sorcerers wake the Serpent
To blast it with eternal blight.
Let its last stars be extinguished;
Let it wait in terror for the daylight;
Let its dawn never arrive.
For it did not shut the womb's doors
To shelter me from this sorrow.¹*

HERE WE ENCOUNTER not the patient, long-suffering Job, but a person so lost in grief and sadness at what has befallen him that he wishes his life, the very life of the cosmos, could cease to exist. But this is more than a wish; it is a curse which in ancient Jewish thought was a form of speech charged with power to work for its own fulfillment. Here Job wishes for the unthinkable: that the day of his birth would somehow be undone. If that day remains, if it is allowed to stand and be recreated every year, then his existence will continue until death. But if somehow the memory of that day can be extinguished, if every trace of his ever having existed can be erased, then his present agony will disappear—because he will disappear. Job, suggests one commentator, wants the day of his birth “returned to the primordial chaos.”² He wants to become totally nonexistent. But he seems to want even more than this:

¹ *The Book of Job*, trans. and intro. Stephen Mitchell (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), 13.

² John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 91.

he wants the cosmic order itself to be returned to the primordial chaos. He wants the world never to have existed.

What kind of agony lay beneath such a protest? Philippe Nemo, in his remarkable book *Job and the Excess of Evil*, argues that at its root is a very particular kind of suffering, one that is not reducible to any other kind and is the progenitor of them all: “anxiety.”³ One hears the language of anxiety and dread everywhere in the book of Job. “In the anguish of my spirit I must speak” (7:11), Job says. And: “No longer make me cower from your terror” (13:21). And still later: “I am full of fear before him, and the more I think, the greater grows my dread of him” (23:15). This anxiety, suggests Nemo, arises from a very specific scenario: “the long approach of death.” Initially the whole of humanity is drawn into this scenario; then Job the individual man is drawn in. The human being, says Job, passes away like a plant: “He blossoms, and he withers, like a flower” (14:2). Human life is insubstantial, “a wind-blown leaf” (13:25). It is “fleeting as a shadow, transient” (14:2).

This sense of human existence as something that suffers what Nemo calls “a vegetal evanescence” is pervasive and inescapable in the book of Job. But what gives this universal sense of dismay at the brevity of life its purchase on our imagination is Job’s acute and utterly personal “experience of enfeeblement, aging, deterioration, of pain in the flesh.” At the heart of this experience and at the heart of Job’s anxiety, suggests Nemo, is:

the idea of a “never-again-as-before” that throws light—or perhaps a new shadow—on existence....Because the end is henceforth envisaged, it is already present, even if it is far off in the future. What characterizes the subjective situation here is the impossibility of forgetting a truth that, although it has always been true, emerges only now from a sleep wherein it abides in normal time. From the moment this truth emerges, “normal” time becomes inaccessible time, time of what was before, irreparable and un-restorable time. The impossibility of forgetting the truth is the first characteristic of anxiety.

³ Philippe Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil*, trans. Michael Kigel (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998). The following quotations are taken from pp. 17–23. Scripture references are to The Jerusalem Bible.

Memory, once an aid in calling to mind signs of God's goodness, now becomes an affliction. What one *is* able to remember is life's apparent meaninglessness, its emptiness. These feelings of overwhelming anxiety haunt the questions about wisdom that emerge in the book of Job.

Wisdom is immanent in the very fabric of life

"But where shall wisdom be found? Where then does wisdom come from?" (Job 28:12, 20).⁴ Such questions, part of a wisdom hymn found at the very heart of the book of Job, seem at first glance to be innocent, optimistic, even hopeful. It is almost as though the questioner believed an answer to be forthcoming. Yet they arise directly out of Job's devastating experience of suffering and loss and are suffused with dread and anxiety. They come toward the end of the long, painful struggle between Job and his so called comforters, who have offered every kind of explanation for Job's suffering. But their explanations of his situation fall miserably short, as all explanations must; they cannot account for or provide a sense of the meaning of what has happened to him. The way of wisdom, a moral and spiritual path whose course was once well known to all, has now come to be shrouded in darkness. The virtuous are no longer rewarded; indeed they are punished and made to suffer, apparently without reason. The wicked meanwhile go unpunished. To ask about the locus of wisdom in this context is to express a profound anxiety about the trustworthiness of God and the world. It is to ask not simply where God, or the meaning of one's own experience, are to be found. It is to ask *whether* they can be found. The author of the hymn seems not at all sure that they *can* be discovered: "[Wisdom]," says the writer, "is hidden from the eyes of all living" (28:21).

It is difficult to overstate the terror that lies at the heart of that statement. To say that wisdom is beyond our grasp suggests that the world is for us a place without pattern or meaning. It also carries the suggestion that God—or at least God's design for our lives—is fundamentally elusive, unknowable. Given the climate of crisis—both personal and communal—out of which the book of Job arose, such deep pessimism is hardly surprising. But it is disturbing nonetheless. It seems to undermine the promises expressed throughout the Jewish scriptures concerning God's

⁴All Scripture references, henceforth, are to the New Revised Standard Version Bible unless otherwise indicated.

accessibility and presence within human experience, God's faithfulness. Indeed it *does* undermine these promises, or at the very least calls them into question.

But this is part of what the wisdom tradition does. It is part of its immense value to us—it raises questions about the certitudes upheld elsewhere in the biblical tradition. It probes the dark edges of human experience—those places where God's wisdom, God's very presence, seem most profoundly hidden from us. It allows us to name and struggle with the most difficult and painful places in our lives, to search for God there. Even if God seems mostly to elude us.

SOPHIA: THE MYSTERY OF GOD'S PRESENCE

BUT WISDOM, according to the ancient Jewish sages, comes to us not only in suffering and loss and emptiness. Wisdom touches those charged places where, as Paul Ricoeur says, "the misery and grandeur of human beings confront each other."⁵ If wisdom literature is haunted by the fear that God may have absconded from the universe, leaving us bereft, it is also shot through with a sense that God's radiant presence—wisdom at play in the world since the beginning of time—is accessible to us, indeed beckons to us at every moment of our lives. "Where is wisdom to be found?" The sages reply: In and through the varied expressions of goodness, gift, abundance that course through our lives; in the redemptive work of communities of wisdom; in the cosmos itself. The book of Proverbs declares confidently: "[Wisdom] is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; happy are they who embrace her." Here, in a reversal of our fall from grace in the garden, wisdom—life itself—is restored to us. It remains elusive, shrouded in mystery. "The first [human] did not know wisdom fully, nor will the last fathom her," says the book of Sirach (24:28). But this is not, as it is in the book of Job, an expression of the radical inaccessibility of wisdom. Rather it is an expression of how deeply wisdom participates in the infinite mystery of God. It is a hopeful, enticing statement, an invitation to seek wisdom, God's hidden face, pulsing through our midst as the infinite, creative source of all life. To seek wisdom, then, is not

⁵Paul Ricoeur, *Essays in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 86.

only to seek God in the midst of suffering and abandonment and apparent absence. It is also to seek God in the radiant beauty and grace present everywhere in the world, in creative presence.

The most important expressions of this creative presence come in those places where wisdom is personified as a woman. In the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, she is known as Sophia, God's creative presence at work in the cosmos. In the eighth chapter of the book of Proverbs, she addresses us this way:

*The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts long ago.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginnings of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world's first bits of soil. (Prov. 8:22-26)*

There are two startling and important ideas in this passage. First, wisdom is begotten by God; that is, wisdom's origins are divine. Second, wisdom existed *before* creation, before anything at all came into existence. These two ideas prepare us for what comes next, a clear and powerful statement of wisdom's integral role in creation:

*When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race. (Prov. 8:27-31)*

WISDOM HERE establishes her authority; the reason she is to be trusted by her hearers is her intimate relationship with God. Those who would be her disciples would do well to model their relationship with her on her relationship with the LORD. "I was daily his delight," she says, "rejoicing before him always / rejoicing in his inhabited world, and delighting in the human race" (vv. 30-31). Joy. Delight. Intimacy—with the world, with one another, with God. This is what Sophia promises. This is what she herself embodies. "Whoever finds me finds life," says Sophia (v. 35).

Not life in general, but life in all its delicate particularity. Wisdom is immanent in the very fabric of life, in the details. Which is why the quest for wisdom requires such careful attention to the world as it presents itself. This is the significance of the extensive catalogue of knowledge presented in the book of Wisdom. Speaking for Solomon, the great progenitor of Jewish wisdom, the author claims that attention to wisdom has taught him to notice and feel the wonder in *everything*: "the structure of the world and the activity of the elements; the beginning and end and middle of times, the alternations of the solstices and the changes of the seasons, the cycles of the year and the constellations of the stars, the natures of animals and the tempers of wild animals... the varieties of plants and the virtues of roots; I learned both what is secret and what is manifest, for wisdom, the fashioner of all things, taught me" (Wisd. 7:17-22).

We are used to thinking of history, salvation history in particular, as the primary locus of God's saving presence. By extension, we understand our own personal salvation histories, our own lives, as embedded within this larger story of salvation. But we risk losing something crucial to our understanding of God's mystery in our lives if we do not attend to how central cosmology is to the biblical idea of God. This is reflected clearly in this passage from the book of Wisdom. The seeker after wisdom looks into the things of this world carefully, painstakingly, gives attention to what a recent book on Georgia O'Keeffe's art calls "The Poetry of Things."⁶ This is one of the places we encounter Sophia—God's immanent, tender presence in our midst—by listening, watching, tasting, feeling, and delighting in the gorgeous intricacy and magnificent complexity of the world.

Sophia invites us to consider everything before us as

⁶Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Georgia O'Keeffe: The Poetry of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

charged with infinite significance. This is because, as the book of Wisdom reminds us, “she pervades and penetrates all things” (7:24). Here we see the astonishing culmination of the ancient Jewish reflection on Sophia, God’s feminine creative presence in the world: the “master worker” who was with God at the beginning and who helped bring the world into being, who helps even now to sustain it, has become virtually indistinguishable from God. The description of wisdom presented here—“a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good...overseeing all, and penetrating through all”—could very well be a description of God (7:22–23). A fine distinction is maintained. Wisdom is not God. But she is the most profound expression of God’s presence in the world imaginable. “She is,” says the author, “a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness.... She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well” (Wisd. 7:25–26; 8:1). Here then is the pattern, the mystery at the center of all things: God’s feminine face shining out through the beauty and goodness of the world.

LIVING INTO WISDOM

IT IS NOT EASY to reconcile these distinct and seemingly contradictory visions of wisdom. Nor is it easy to know what it might mean to live into the mystery of wisdom. Honesty in the face of inexplicable suffering and death compels us to acknowledge, with Job, the radical elusiveness of wisdom, the possibility that it might be utterly unknowable. Here wisdom, if it exists at all, seems to ask of us a certain skepticism, a distrust of all “answers,” a willingness to live in a space of anxiety and uncertainty. It invites us to consider abandonment and emptiness and loss as necessary to our search for God. Yet, there is no denying those manifestations of goodness and beauty that wash over us, endlessly. Here wisdom calls us to believe in the possibility of an encounter with the Source of all life. We say to ourselves: “Yes, all of this is true.” But actually holding it all, making sense of it all, especially when one is faced with a particular loss, is difficult almost beyond saying.

Thinking about my mother’s illness has brought this difficulty home to me in a new way. I cannot deny the goodness and beauty of her life, or of the luminous world we share; grace is everywhere. But her disease remains for me a harsh reminder of death’s cruel power, of my own impotence in the face of death’s reign in the world. There is an almost bottomless sadness growing in me. And beneath that, an ocean of dread and fear. I do not know where this cancer came from or why it attacked her. Or why it exists at all. I only know that it has left a deep scar in my life already, one that grows deeper all the time. Two years ago, I lost one of the dearest friends of my life to cancer. Last year another friend, a young woman of thirty-two whom I knew from our parish, died suddenly from a violent and aggressive brain tumor. Another close friend has been struggling with the disease for ten years, having endured over a dozen major surgeries. And now my mother.

This kind of affliction is utterly common I know. So many of us have lost friends, lovers, spouses, children to such diseases. But its commonness does nothing to diminish the power of even a single such loss. The world suddenly and unexpectedly tilts and breaks open and cannot be put back together again. Not as it was. Then we are faced with the challenge of trying to find our footing, trying to find a place to stand in an unimaginably altered landscape. And not simply stand but live—in the midst of death or death’s impending threat. How to do this, how to face reality as it presents itself and not be crushed by it? How are we to look into that thick darkness, own up to its terror and not succumb to the temptation to either turn away or explain it away? It is difficult to say. But wisdom calls us to a fierce attention to reality, to what poet Czeslaw Milosz calls a “passionate pursuit of the Real.”⁷ It is precisely this unflinching pursuit of the real we see in Job. Not patience, but honesty, a crucial dimension of wisdom’s work.

So, I try to stay in the experience with my mother, resist my own impulse to flee to safer ground or to make of her experience something other than what it is. If I am being honest with myself, I must acknowledge that her struggle—physical, emotional, spiritual—is mostly inaccessible to me. But I try to remain

⁷Czeslaw Milosz, “A Passionate Pursuit of the Real,” *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 25.

How deeply wisdom participates in the infinite mystery of God

as present to her as I can. Mostly this means watching and listening. I hear her labored breathing after she has climbed the stairs at her house. I see the fatigue in her eyes. I watch as she adjusts her wig, scratching irritably at her scalp. Here she is before me, signs of her struggle written indelibly on her body. I do not want to admit that my mother is sick. But sitting here with her, seeing the changes that have come over her, I cannot deny it. Gradually, I begin to wonder whether this is what wisdom is asking of me now: to stay in this place with my mom; to honor the reality of her experience; to honestly engage and struggle with the whole of it, even what I fear the most—the prospect of loss and emptiness and absence? Is this where wisdom is to be found?

INCREASINGLY I sense that it is. I noticed this recently in a conversation with a friend. We sat together in my office. He told me of his wife, who he married only three years ago, dying of cancer. I talked to him of my mother. They were there in our midst—his wife, my mother. So was our fear, our sadness, our bewilderment, and our compassion for each other. Compassion: “to suffer with.” That is all we could do that day, suffer with each other, awkwardly, tenderly, amidst halting speech and long silences. In a sense there was nothing either of us could say to the other, nothing that would make any real difference. Then why did it seem to matter so much that we at least try, struggling and stammering, to give voice to the whole painful experience? Why did it seem so important to listen, not only to each other’s words, but to the gestures and the silences? I do not know. But it did matter. Something important happened in that moment. Two human beings, caught in life’s web of sadness and beauty, met and carried each other—if only for a moment. Nothing changed. And everything changed.

In that moment, I began to realize one of the gifts of my mother’s illness, one of its gifts to *me* anyway: a growing capacity for compassion. This is not something I can or wish to measure. But it is real and has changed the way I experience the world. Perhaps this is where wisdom is found: In allowing ourselves to be stripped of the pretense that death and suffering are not real or can somehow be avoided; in owning up to the sense of fear and vulnerability that comes from doing so; and in discovering within ourselves an unexpected capacity to journey with, “suffer with” those in our midst who call to us out of the depth of their own vulnerability. Perhaps this is where wisdom

comes to us, in loss and absence and vulnerability, in the aching center of our lives where we meet and hold one another.

But my mother’s illness has also left me wondering: What of the other ways wisdom comes to us—in rejoicing and delight for example, those remarkable qualities attributed to Sophia in the book of Proverbs? What of Sophia’s creative presence, shining out from within the particular beauty of the world? How and where does one begin to look for *this* in the midst of suffering and loss? Doesn’t Job’s insistent silence, indeed God’s own silence, preclude us from speaking too quickly, too easily of wisdom’s creative presence in our midst? Still, there is a yearning within us, perhaps arising from Sophia herself, to name and honor the depth of beauty that arises in our experience. If Job insists on silence, out of respect for all that can never be fully named or known, Sophia invites speech. She invites us to dwell in those places where our lives shimmer with light, to gaze lovingly and drink deeply from those places, to notice and name and cherish the particular ways this light fills us. Such speech will never fully eclipse the sense of absence and loss we know in our lives. It *cannot*. But honesty requires us to speak of these things, for they too are real.

Not long ago I visited my mother in her home near the Sawtooth Mountains in Idaho. It is a place whose name perfectly describes how the mountains thrust up out of the Wood River Valley, cutting with their jagged teeth into the pale blue sky. On this particular day, my daughter, Julia, was taking a lesson on Dollar Mountain, the beginner’s little hill. We all agreed to meet her there later in the day so she could show us her stuff. It had been warm that day and I decided to leave my jacket in the car across the road. I soon regretted that. The temperature began dropping as the sun sank lower in the sky and a sharp wind started blowing. I was freezing. That is when I saw my mom. She was standing outside the lodge, scanning the hill looking for Julia. We stood there together for a few moments looking for her small, familiar shape. Then we saw her: careening wildly down the hill, barely turning, a fearless downhill racer. She skidded to a stop in front of us, her face beaming. “C’m on Daddy,” she said, motioning toward the mountain. I turned to my mom: “Would you mind getting my jacket? It’s in the car.” She took my keys and started across the road to the car. Almost immediately I wished I had not asked her. I could have taken my skis off and walked over to

*Wisdom
calls us to a
fierce attention
to reality*

get it myself, I thought. She did not need to be walking around in all that slush and ice, dodging cars. But it was too late. She was gone. I watched her as she crossed the street, making her way gingerly around pools of water and clumps of ice. With a sudden jolt I felt again her fragility. "Don't fall, don't fall," I said to myself as she made her way back across the street. She did not fall. I was watching her closely now. As she walked toward me bringing me my jacket I thought: "There is my mother."

What was it about that moment that made me look at my mother so intently, as though I were seeing her, *really* seeing her for the first time in a long time? I am not sure. I think it had something to do with the simplicity and elemental power of the gesture: here was my mother bringing me something I needed. She used to do that for me all the time. I had almost forgotten that. Watching her walk toward me that day, I began to remember. She was my mother again. I was her child.

When I was younger, around Julia's age, my whole family used to go skiing together in the Cascade Mountains in Washington. We would meet in the lodge at lunch time and sit down together at a table near the fire, tired, wet, hungry. My mom always had a large bag out of which she would pull what seemed to me an astonishing array of food: chicken and egg salad sandwiches wrapped in wax paper, apples, bananas, potato chips, thermoses full of hot chocolate, and usually homemade brownies. We would devour that food, laughing, talking, sharing stories of our exploits on the mountain. Then we would plunge back outside into the snow and the cold. My mother was in the middle of all that, of course, not only feeding us, but checking to see whether we were warm enough, producing fresh gloves or mittens or hats if needed, smiling, enjoying her family. Delighting in taking care of us and loving us.

I cherish the memory of that moment, perhaps more now than I did at the time. It is a moment when wisdom drew near: in the wild beauty of the mountain, the snow, the cold, the enjoyment of food, the warmth of family, the sense of the almost endless goodness of the world. There in the sacrament of that moment, wisdom was present, rejoicing with me in the life I had been given. She has been with me from the beginning. She is with me even now. I look at my mother and I see all this. I see the light shining forth out of the center of her life. But I also see the lengthening shadows. I see that tuft of hair in her hand. I think: Is wisdom in this place? Can I find her here?

Attentiveness

by Esther de Waal



COREY WILKINSON

THE MONASTERY WAS SET on a hillside in South Africa, a new Benedictine foundation, uMariya uMama weThemba, dedicated to Mary Mother of Hope. I spent three months there with the small community of brothers, sharing in the daily offices in their beautiful light-filled chapel, with its great window looking out to the changing face of sky and landscape. And whenever I went out from the chapel, my eye would be caught by some words of Thomas Merton, which had been set out in clear italic script by a member of the order and placed near the door: