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Listen, so that you may live (Isaiah 55.1-3, 6-9)

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The image of a waterhole is a resonant one for me. Long before I became a meditator, I was a swimmer. For the past twelve years I have been part of a community who swim year round in a lake in Hyde Park, in the centre of London. I wouldn't drink the water, but it's become a place of healing and renewal for me; a place I go to return to myself. As with meditation, cold water swimming is an individual practice sustained by community. Nobody else can step off dry land for you, but others can inspire and guide you, draw you in, or help you out when you've gone too far. As with meditation, the practice requires entrusting yourself to an experience you can't control. As with meditation, I often find myself hesitating on the shoreline, poised between resolve and reluctance, between faith and fear. And as with church-going, at least in my generation, other people often think it's a bit odd.

I live in London, but I was born in Paris to a French father and an American mother. We moved to England when I was one but I retained a sense of not-quite-belonging, perhaps the root of a tendency to hover at the edge of things and observe. My mother's parents were Jewish refugees from Vienna, but from a very secular, assimilated world where music was the only religion really. My father was raised Catholic but firmly rejected that before converting, long before meeting my mother, to Judaism. I think of myself as half-Jewish - though it's sometimes hard to say which half. I think my father would have liked Jewish observance to be a part of our family life, but my mum wasn't having this and so the upshot was that religion – and really any engagement with spiritual life – didn't feature. I have found it a long and perhaps unfinished journey to accept my own spiritual searching as anything other than slightly embarrassing.

My school was nominally Anglican and so I was steeped from an early age in the rhythms of the New English Hymnal. I have an oddly vivid memory of kneeling on the bathroom floor aged 7 or so and asking God if He (and it was definitely He, then) could make me a scientist. But by secondary school I was clear I was an atheist – I continued to enjoy hymns, but I sat in resolute silence in assembly while others recited the Lord’s Prayer. I did have a deep love of nature and as an older teen was lucky to spend time in wild places and experience an overwhelming sense of sacred presence, of awe and delight; but I saw no connection between those experiences and what I would then have named as God. Later, at university, I fell in love with the sacred choral music of the Renaissance, as well as the poetry of the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, and I would often go to evensong and compline. But while other peoples’ faith became a source of curiosity, it didn’t always look particularly liberating, and besides, it seemed to rest on premises I could not accept.

I mostly flourished at school but I found the English system, which funnels you aged 15 into “arts or sciences”, quite confining. I liked both, but decided I wanted to become a doctor, so science it had to be. Before starting medical school I spent a year at university in the United States. I became intensely interested in the social, political and cultural forces which shape health to a much greater degree than healthcare does; I poured my energy into an AIDS advocacy campaign. I wanted to stay in the US but my parents persuaded me to come back to England and so I started studying medicine at Cambridge, which I found stuffy and parochial. I missed the sense of purpose I’d briefly found in advocacy and I was too preoccupied by politics and economics to concentrate on biochemistry and anatomy.

Shortly after the end of that first year, my father became suddenly and critically ill from a undiagnosed infection. I spent 10 days sitting with him in Intensive Care, before his life support was turned off. I still struggle to make sense of this experience but it was one of life’s inflection points. Something in those times of sitting at the threshold of life and death and later of grieving opened up a different set of questions for me to the ones my peers were asking then.

There followed some very “lost” years – I dropped out of medical school and bounced between work and not very successful study before finally graduating with another degree in my late 20s, after some long years of struggle and shame. I wanted to go back to medical school but I no longer had the grades and so I fell into a string of unsatisfying jobs, not sure what to do with myself. I also had some very happy experiences working with young adults in the outdoors, but I couldn't quite break free of expectations that I should be doing something more 'serious', though I couldn't really see what that was or how to get there. The doors to the life I had thought I wanted were closed, and I lacked the vision to see others, or the confidence to walk through them.

Alongside, or maybe underneath, this vocational searching was a spiritual search, which grew out of the disorientation of loss and failure, the unravelling of the person I'd thought I was. I started going to a Quaker meeting and then about 10 years ago a friend invited me to her church, a progressive Anglican community in central London. Something drew me in - seeing others visibly rooted in something beyond material and social anxieties, the preaching, the music, the liturgy, the way I felt both profoundly accepted and challenged. But much as this was attractive, I couldn't really connect my experiences of the sacred in myself, in relationship and in nature, with the language of Christianity. I recognised a more generous way of living with others and with oneself than I had yet found, but I struggled to see a way into this. And I remained quite clear I didn't believe in God, who then still had a beard and a cloud. And so though I found myself returning again and again, for years I felt a bit like one of Charles Dickens' street urchins, with my face pressed against a metaphorical window, looking at something I could glimpse but couldn't reach.

I left London and spent two years in Wales as a youth worker in a boarding school, a 1960s peace project bringing together young people from around the world. It was an enormous privilege to live in community and to be trusted in deep – and sometimes terrifying – ways with some of the complexity and struggle of late adolescence, to be a witness to courage and dignity and hope. When I left I decided

to train as a psychotherapist, and alongside this I started working as a civil servant in health policy.

Slowly, over the past 3 years, I've become aware of a change in my relationship to Christian faith. There has been no dramatic moment, more an unfolding and surprising realisation that I'd come to view life differently, to be able to trust in a larger story. I had started to read more and more intensely, discovering the contemplative tradition and a more spacious theology. I began to see possibilities for connecting this theology to my own experience in ways that felt authentic. I'm particularly indebted to the American theologian Marcus Borg, who first offered me a sense of faith not as intellectual assent but as a way of seeing, as an entrustment of self and as a fidelity to an inner knowing, to the Dutch Jewish mystic, Etty Hillesum, who offered me new ways of articulating experiences of God. I had some formative experiences of silence and solitude, on walking and cycling trips and on an 8-day Ignatian silent retreat. Though even then, as I found myself drawn so deeply into the silence that I tried to negotiate staying on for a 30-day retreat, I remember a slightly humourless administrator asking me if I was "religious". I fumbled for so long in answering that she looked at me as if I was unhinged. I realised that her question had been more simply "are you a nun?"

Then the pandemic came. My job as a civil servant became suddenly intensely busy – I was living alone and working 70 hour weeks from my small flat on a vaccine programme. Working from home soon became living at work, I stopped being able to swim and gradually I found myself unravelling. I was caught in compulsive activity, floundering anxiously amid overwhelming questions - "how should we allocate vaccines?" - and losing sight of what or who I was serving. I turned in desperation to what I knew of monastic rhythms of prayer and rest, looking for a way to anchor myself amid the chaos. I started a not very disciplined meditation practice. Then in January last year, down an internet rabbit hole, I read one of Sarah's reflections and discovered Benedictus. Still exhausted, I nevertheless found myself getting up every single morning at 6 to sit in silence, on Zoom, with strangers on the other side of the

world. I wasn't really sure why, but it was completely clear to me that this was what I needed to do.

Gradually these little Zoom boxes began to be filled with friends. I'm grateful for relationships which have grown out of Heather Olley's afterparties, and for the Home Group I was welcomed into - but I have also come to feel a profound sense of communion with those of you I've never spoken to and will probably never meet. I came to Benedictus weary and empty handed, in need of refreshment and renewal - and I drank deeply from its waters. I knew from the beginning that here were things I'd searched for for a long time - companionship on what has been a solitary journey; an open and searching faith community, rooted in practice. But in receiving these gifts I've been surprised to find I also had things to offer. This time last year, I saw an invitation to join the liturgy group and despite having no experience and little time, I felt one of those gentle but insistent interior nudges - more of a shove, really - that this was something I had to do. Thanks to a generous welcome from Heather Thomson, I've discovered I love writing liturgy. In doing so I have found language for intuitions which were previously wordless; have realised that I have things to say. I felt a similarly persistent impulse to lead evening meditation, despite a longstanding fear of speaking in groups. Thanks to warm encouragement from Frank and others, I have found this a wonderful experience, and have been surprised by the emergence of a surer and clearer voice than I knew was in me. Occasionally, I now hear this voice emerging in other contexts too. Following the promptings of my own heart and risking these new ways of participating in our shared ecology, I have found myself not just hovering at the edge, but drawn in - sustained and encouraged by others, by Love. Thank you.