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## IMAGES FROM THE DAWN AND DUSK OF LIFE

Meredith Jordan

### MAKE SOME THINGS RIGHT AGAIN

When I was a child growing up in a family where things were often dreadfully wrong and no one knew how to make them right, my siblings and I had to carry some pretty adult-sized burdens at far too young an age. In little ways, large parts of our childhood were stolen in order to help my mother keep my father's impulsive decisions from capsizing our wobbly family boat in rough seas. He didn't mean to create such chaos, but he had the nature of one who grabbed for what he wanted when he wanted it, and the pieces were left for my mother and the children to pick up or put back together. One example of this phenomenon – a relatively small blip on an already chaotic family radar screen – is an era I have always spoken of, heavily punctuated with sighs, as "The Horses!"

To make amends for actions that wounded my mother deeply, my father decided to buy a farm and move his city family to the country. We were children used to roaming the streets of our very safe neighborhood every summer or weekend day in bands of friends. We wandered from one home to another from breakfast until day's end, inventing games or creative play. There were always adult eyes on us wherever we were. Often, we rode our bikes for miles, from the near end of the neighborhood to its far reaches. It was a rare day when there wasn't a friend eager to play. Without consulting any of us, we were suddenly living on a country road, miles from our friends and our familiar places to ride, play, and explore. The nearest neighbors were a long walk through a hayfield. Their children were older and younger than we were, so we were not a fast or easy match as friends. Days that had been full of laughter and play were abruptly long and lonely times. We grieved most of the summer and looked to the new school year with dread. Friends, familiar from kindergarten on, would no longer be at school to greet us on the first day. For the first time, we would ride a bus rather than walk to school with our best buddies, sharing the excited first-day chatter of young children.

The summer days passed slowly. I was bored, lonely, sad, and convinced nothing could compound my state of unhappiness. Then my father decided to board horses from a children's camp that was closing for the season. Because he traveled extensively in his work, it was part of his plan that my sister and I, then ages 12 and 10, would learn to care for the horses ourselves. I don't know whether he thought this would keep us busy, or make some

money from the farm, or whether he didn't think at all, but the horses arrived – and suddenly two city children were put in charge of their care. My sister and I had never been near a horse, never touched one, never mucked out a stall, never groomed, fed or watered a horse. Of the two horses that came with the deal, the mare stood at sixteen hands, and the pinto pony was the living incarnation of the word *mean*. He had probably been abused, perhaps for years, but then I only knew that he bit, kicked and battered his stall, scaring both my sister and me nearly to death. Still, we had no choice. Most mornings of my 12th year and her 10th year, we rose at dawn, dressed for the bitter cold of the old barn, scurried down the rickety stairs that connected the barn and the house, and learned to dodge the pony's mean temper and unpredictable kicks to care for him. We hauled manure out of the horses' stalls by pitchfork and wheelbarrow, tossed fresh bales of hay from the mow overhead, struggled with our terror every morning, and learned, of course, to fear horses.

One warm day, my father – having failed miserably in his attempts to teach me to ride – thought it was time for my six year old brother to learn. He saddled up the pony, slipped his little boy onto the pony's back, and slapped the pony on its hindquarters to get it started at a gentle walk in the large, enclosed paddock. Instead, the pony bucked and bolted with my little brother clinging to the saddle, screaming for his daddy to help him. His cries further frightened the pony, who galloped out of control as my father chased him around the paddock and my mother ran to call for help from a more experienced neighbor, screaming all the way into the house. My sister and I sobbed as we watched this horrible scene unfold until the pony finally tired, and slowed down so my father could reach my brother and lift his terrified boy from the skittish horse's back.

Some time after this incident –although not immediately, which would have been my preference – the horses were gone, and the potential for a positive human-animal connection was lost with them.

The story of *The Horses* is one that testifies to a childhood taken hostage by circumstances we children could not change or control. My father's job took him 'on the road' much of the time. Traveling the state, he left his children to cope with shoveling out from snowstorms, with household responsibilities far beyond our years, and with a vague and generalized burden of providing comfort and companionship to my unhappy mother, who truly hated living on the farm. I have many memories like this. They stand alongside happy memories, yet create an overriding image of a mother bearing heavy burdens and children forced by circumstance to grow up before their time. Because I know we were not the only children made to rise quickly to the occasion when things happened in their families that they didn't choose and couldn't stop from happening, I carry an especially tender spot in my heart for parents struggling with adversity, and children who grow up with it as a constant companion.

This brings me to Alex. Alex is a charming, bright, creative nine year old boy who loves to build things but hates to play outdoors. Alex's father died a year ago – and Alex, his Mom, and brother are slowly, tediously rebuilding a life without much of an underpinning. His father left behind a burden of debt, a trail of outraged creditors, a legacy of lies and betrayals, and an aging mother with Alzheimer's disease, who has no family to look out for her needs other than Alex, his Mom and brother. Although they were divorced when Alex's father died, his mother assumed these responsibilities and is carrying them out to the best

of her exhausted ability. In the midst of this already critical time, her rented home was sold. She and her children were prematurely and hurriedly pushed into buying an old house that needs many repairs she cannot afford to make.

I wasn't thinking of my mother at the time. Perhaps my father's impulsive nature lives in me too. I offered to see if I could gather some members of my extended family –brother, sisters, spouses, children –for a day to help with the most immediate need: to paint her house. Maybe we had learned compassion in the fires of hardship, or maybe it was just that we became responsible so young, but my siblings and I are all good folks who respond to genuine need when it's presented to us. I put out the call to help Alex's family. As various family members responded, I thought to suggest that as a family project, we take a day every year to gather somewhere to help another family lift out of their burdens long enough to gain a better foothold in life. We can paint, we can repair broken doors, and we are all handy in lots of ways that single moms can use. We also know other handy people who can be coaxed into coming along.

Next weekend – along with Alex, his mom and brother, and six members of my family – we plan to paint Alex's house, fix the broken doors, and reach the high spots his mother can't paint indoors herself. In the course of planning this, it occurred to me that I have moaned through much of my life about my father's impulsive or unwise actions, and how they burdened my mother and worried us beyond our years. In Alex, perhaps I'd seen my own face – a child made old by adversity too soon. If the house had to be painted (as the stalls had to be mucked out), I hoped the job could be fun for Alex, a burden shared lightly with his family rather than one that was too heavy for his mother to bear alone.

My mother didn't tell anyone how heavy her burden was. She kept her secrets, and probably her embarrassment, to herself. And we all paid a price for her decisions, as well as my father's. There were times when many hands would have made light work in our family, and people who loved us and would have gathered happily to help, if only my father's self-centeredness and my mother's pride hadn't interfered with them telling the truth of our need. It was difficult for Alex's mom to admit she could not carry the burdens alone that were handed off to her and that she needed help – but in finally admitting her humanity, she gave me a perfect opportunity to make some things right that had gone wrong for my own family. I could call for help on her behalf and help would come.

It's my hope, of course, that our combined efforts will ease her heart a bit, and allow her to feel companioned in this life rather than alone. But I can't make that happen. I can only make some things right for a nine year old that were not right when my sister was nine, and I was not much older. I can rally the troops for one day and they promise to come prepared to work. I have only two rules: "Whoever can come comes," and "Everyone helps." That means Alex will participate in building something he and his family might remember forever: the day they were not on their own to make everything right again.

Small things, small choices, small actions. Nothing earth-shaking, or worth shouting about. This is a quiet step taken to honor my own family's struggles, to recognize the toll that worry took on my mother and all of us, and to lighten the load in just one other family for just one day. It may not seem like much, making some things right after so many wrongs, but this registers somewhere in the great book of accounts. We learned lessons from not having

help, and I don't minimize the value of those lessons, but under like circumstances, I am pleased that Alex will have a chance for another kind of lesson. He'll see the cars roll into the yard, the people pile out, the laughter we put into sharing a job, and the purely felt satisfaction of being one part of that accomplishment.

**I urge you to look around for where your friends, family or neighbors need help. Think about giving "just one day" and notice what a difference that makes to lift another's burdens, brighten another's perspective on life, or make right some of what has gone wrong for just one family. It is just a day for you, spent on someone else, and yet so much more for those on whom you spend it.**

## THE HEROIC JOURNEY

### Meredith Jordan

Ruth, a very dear Quaker friend of many years, is slowly entering the last stage of her heroine's journey home. Now in her mid-seventies, Ruth was diagnosed six years ago with Primary Progressive Aphasia. The first signal that her brain was changing its course was that she could not retrieve some common words she had always used with ease. Working with healers in various traditions, including indigenous healers, she was able to stand her ground against these progressive losses for five years, but more recently, the changes are coming quickly, and she has been losing balance, words, and memory with advancing speed.

I think of Ruth as a beacon of warmth and light on this earth, one of the "wayshowers" for me and others. Ordained in her fifties in an ecumenical ceremony, Ruth finally settled in as a Quaker. No high religious ceremony for her, just a quiet place to be in the presence of the Sacred and reflect among her sisters and brothers of the human family. Ruth has always spoken with great deliberation. She would first consider her thoughts carefully, then allow the words to form, and finally, would speak with such meticulous intention that she held the respectful and loving attention of all who knew her. Ruth embodies the archetype of the Wise Woman, the Oracle, who waits first to be approached, and only after careful thought dispenses her wisdom.

It is with both sorrow and joy in my heart that I go next week to visit with her for what might be the last time she will remember me and our long history together as seeker-friends. When I was last with her and her beloved partner, Sarah, some months ago, she tried to explain to me how she has intentionally developed music and movement as new avenues of communication with others. Words failing, she looked to other means to express that which she could no longer count on herself to articulate verbally. However, even those forms of expression are fading from her now. At some near point in the future, all that will be left of Ruth's presence among us is pure *essence*. There will be nothing to think, to say, to remember, and absolutely nothing to do but... *be* Ruth.

Some, I know, perceive people who endure Ruth's means of passage from this life as becoming a 'shell' of their former selves. If that's the case, then let me become a shell: emptied of everything I once thought was important, hollowed of all that once filled me, nothing but the original light emerging from me now, which emanated at the time of my birth, pouring from me again as I approach the end of life. Contrary to our current understanding of dementias, perhaps it would be a high purpose to fulfill, that of holding the essence of oneself while others scramble to find a sense of worth from their activities, possessions, relationships. Nothing left but to be one's essence, which is, of course, what also results from a lifetime of developing an inner life. If we neglect to develop ourselves spiritually, much that remains as *essence* is vapid, and of not much use. But the essence of one who has developed a deep inner well like Ruth did... well, what's left when everything else falls away from her, I expect, might be pure gold: love radiating in all directions with no conditions attached, no limits on giving, and only the light of her dear spirit pouring forth.

Several years ago, at an Omega Conference I attended in New York, Ram Dass was a presenter at one of his first public appearances in the three years since a massive stroke had left him unable to speak with his usual clarity. He needed assistance with everything he did, and this was clearly a challenge for him. Listening in on one of his presentations, I felt anguish at his struggle to retrieve words and use them appropriately, yet I was happy to note that his humor remained undiminished. However, the moment I most cherished in being near him again was a simple, fleeting encounter that provided a brief glimpse into his inner world. As he was being wheeled out of the hotel by his personal assistant, he passed by me, close enough for his wheelchair to brush my clothing and push me slightly aside. In that moment, I looked into his face and he looked into mine; he smiled warmly and said, "Hello!" I smiled back and answered with another "Hello!" But as his assistant continued to move the wheelchair rapidly through the hotel lobby and out to a waiting car, I just stood watching, marveling at the light still radiating from his presence. Robbed of articulate speech and spontaneous movement, he was still pouring out *translucence* or *essence*, far brighter than anything I had known from him prior to the stroke. He was a lamp, lit from within.

Ruth would have been the first to remind me and others that she's simply another seeker on the arduous journey home. She would hardly call herself the hero or her path a heroic one. Yet she is, exactly as Joseph Campbell repeatedly warned us would happen, entering the dark wood at a point where no one else has entered, and she must find a way from this point of entry back to her original nature. There will be a time, most likely under other circumstances, when I too will be guided to the dark wood, and so will you. If I watch Ruth lead the way, and she holds the light for me to follow, I hope to learn something about how one drops the many layers of small self—roles, masks, myths, responsibilities—for the higher Self to emerge at last, and simply shine.

And because it is Ruth's Quaker nature to practice discernment in all matters, including her own departure from this earth, I will tell you that her story doesn't end with my soon-to-be last visit with her. Despite broad changes in her brain's ability to string words together into whole sentences, Ruth remains uncommonly aware of the bittersweet truth that this cruel disease is stealing from her loved ones the very person she herself is ready to leave behind when she drops the body and moves on to whatever waits beyond this life.

Alone in their cottage one recent winter day, Ruth happened upon a television broadcast of a program on various forms of dementia called "The Forgetting." She watched, deep in solemn thought, and when the program was over, sat down to consider her course of action. When Sarah arrived home that evening, Ruth, hesitating over her words while clear and strong in her resolution, presented her plan. She decided she'd gather, one at a time, each of her four children, her three grandchildren, and finally, many of her close friends. She wanted to explain to each of us, personally, that she had made the decision to consciously step out to meet death on her own terms rather than let this illness steal her ability to live consciously. She was willing to concede the disease everything but that. Dear-hearted, clear-thinking Ruth believed she would know when the time was right, and when that 'knowing' became evident, she would begin a fast to hasten her death. I, and others who love her, will be notified when the fast has begun, so we might pray for a gentle and kind departure for a woman who has always been gentle and kind with the use of her life.

So it is that I will go to Ruth this week, wrap my arms around her in a last, warm embrace, be with her in her gardens for what is likely to be the final time she can name the plants—or even my name – and bow in gracious acknowledgment of this lovely woman who has been my friend for so long... and is now slipping into the beyond to find her way home.

In participating so consciously in her own death, Ruth continues to teach us, and show us the way.

I wish you a brave journey, my good and true friend. I will sing for your spirit as you travel from this world to whatever lies beyond. May you be companioned on your way by the hosts of angels.

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