

Small Talk – May 19 2021
By Michael Small

I invite you to read the words of the Rev. Cameron Trimble, author of *Piloting Church: Helping Your Congregation Take Flight*. I find her words helpful for beginnings and endings and as we approach Memorial Day.

A Word for the Day...¹

A friend called with the news we would never wish on anyone. "My husband, John, has lung cancer," she said. "They say it's stage four. What are we going to do?"

My mind flashed to the first lines of the Grail Legends:

*"Here is the Book of thy Decent,
Here begins the Book of the Holy Grail,
Here begin the terrors,
Here begin the miracles."*

Here begin the terrors.

Of course, I had no answers. I thought of her two young children, too young to really understand the threat to their beautiful family. I thought of my friend, who had herself just recovered from breast cancer, now facing the harrowing journey of caring for her beloved husband. "I don't know what is going to happen," I said to her, "but you are not alone."

In the story of the Holy Grail, the young prince Parsifal, leaves the comfort of his royal life in search of the Grail, the ultimate prize of enlightenment. Professor Joseph Campbell talked about the Grail myth as "the search for the inexhaustible fountain, the search of one's life, even if that search should take us through the most terrible suffering. In fact, as the Grail teaches, it is the suffering itself that prepares us to receive the miracles."

Here begin the terrors, here begin the miracles.

He was enrolled in a cancer treatment trial and went through many rounds of infusions, tests and scans. Some appointments they received hopeful results only to have them dashed at the next one. It was a roller-coaster of terror and miracles, time gained and time lost.

¹ From *Piloting Faith – An (almost) Daily Devotional from Convergence*.

John and I had the chance to talk about how he was handling the ride: "What I've learned is that life has always included death. I denied that for a long time. But now I understand that it's both life and death, sickness and health, weakness and strength, suffering and peace," he said. "It's both/and, not either/or. Once I accepted that, I stopped suffering. I was freed to fully live, fully love, to find true peace." He went on, "I don't want to die, but I am so glad that I learned how to live. I hope I can teach my kids that in my living and my dying." He passed away two months after that conversation.

Here begin the miracles.

At his funeral those of us who knew and loved John gathered in a sanctuary in Atlanta. We told stories of how he made us laugh, pranks he played, work he created, and how his beautiful life made ours so much better. We missed him to the core of our being. And then in the other room, a band started playing. The music got louder and then suddenly a Mardi Gras band was playing all around us, wildly costumed and blaring their horns in celebration.

We looked at each other confused. But then we remembered: It's both/and. Grief and celebration. Heartbreak and hope.

"Good one, John," I thought. We need that reminder.

We are in this together.

*Holy One,
whose word is truth
whose will is justice
whose wisdom is peace
whose way is love—
indwell us by thy Spirit
sustain us with grace &
send us on to bless this world freer,
neighbor by neighbor, prayer by prayer.*

Amen.

As we move through this day, through the events of life and living, remember – “It's both/and. Grief and celebration. Heartbreak and hope.”

In the spirit and agape love of Jesus, Michael

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