

MINDING THE LIGHT

Our Collective Journal, Chapter 9

IN FOLLOWING THE LIGHT, WHEN WERE YOU LED TO DO SOMETHING THAT WAS SCARY TO THINK ABOUT?

I have often felt a motion of love to leave some hints in writing of my experience of the Goodness of God.

John Woolman

What Doesn't Bend

*Buildings and bridges
are made to bend in the wind
to withstand the world,
that's what it takes
All that steel and stone
is no match for the air, my friend
what doesn't bend breaks
what doesn't bend breaks
– Ani de Franco*

What doesn't bend breaks. As I contemplated how to tell this story, these lines kept going through my head. I grew up Southern Baptist, with what you could say was a very rigid world view, a very inflexible faith. Our faith was founded on a sense of certainty with very finite definitions and understandings of God, faith, and scripture. There

was no room for error and certainly no room for free thought.

From time to time our church would receive tracts and lesson plans from the powers that be down south explaining in very simple terms – often with pictures or diagrams – various aspects of how we were to believe. The kids learned these lessons in Sunday school, the adults discussed them in limited ways in Bible studies groups, and even the pastors seemed tied to them. To this day I'm still not sure who actually did the Biblical interpreting for us – it was almost like some unseen priesthood was making all the decisions about what we were to believe, and this was passed from the top down.

And no one ever questioned. In fact, we were actually taught not to. Questioning beliefs was questioning authority, and questioning authority was

In this Chapter

- What Doesn't Bend
- Storm Vision
- A Week in Haiti
- I am Tired of Taking Care of Death
- S.W.A.K.
- From Fear to Love
- Intervention
- Interminable
- Experiencing the Great Wave
- Standing for Silence
- Zen Mind Beginner's Mind: Grief, Fear and Awe

tantamount to questioning God, and one does not question God.

Along with this rigid framework came a sense of mistrust of outsiders and outside ideas – including those of other supposedly-Christian denominations. Of course most other fundamentalist denominations were probably okay; those who were charismatic or liturgical, possibly less so; and of course once you got to Catholic, well they weren't really Christians at all, you know – at least that's what I was taught.

But I remember that faith carrying with it a palpable sense of fear anytime it was challenged, and that fear was this: what if they're right? In such a rigid faith structure there's no room for truth, or at least truths that you hadn't already considered. Because if you could be mistaken about one tenant of your faith, then that

MINDING THE LIGHT is a bimonthly collection of stories from the lives of members and attenders of West Hills Friends, a Quaker meeting in Portland, Oregon. Among Quakers, "minding the Light" means noticing, listening for and paying heed to the voice of our Teacher.

Early Quakers kept journals about their relationship with God to share with the community. A well-known example is John Woolman's journal, which has been continually in print for more than 200 years. Quakers believe that the Light of Christ is in everyone and that God speaks to everyone, giving us all stories to tell. We hope to carry on the tradition of sharing stories about minding the Light by publishing them for our community and making them available to others on the web.

Each issue is organized around a query about minding the Light. Our writers speak from their own experience, not going beyond the measure of Light they've been given. We hope these stories will transform our way of seeing God and each other and that they will bring comfort to those who seek news of God's presence in the world.

means you might also be wrong about hundreds or thousands of other things, and that was a terrifying thought. What doesn't bend breaks.

Do you want to know what ultimately undermined the faith of my childhood and brought it tumbling to the ground? Or at least what started that chain reaction? A Bible class at a Christian college – History of the Old Testament at George Fox University to be specific.

Small, simple, earth-shattering truths. Like the fact that Moses probably didn't really write the first five books of the Bible; that that was probably just a tradition. Or that a group of flawed human beings actually decided which scriptures got to be in the Bible and which would be excluded, and that this happened hundreds of years after the last book was written.

My inflexible faith was not equipped to deal with such information, and I had to make a choice: accept these new truths and watch my faith of certainty slowly start to crumble, or put my hands over my ears and reject them to protect the faith of my childhood.

As we Friends know, many people choose the latter, but for me it was too late. To me these new truths did in fact seem a little too true. So I let them in, and over the next few years, piece by piece, I watched the faith of my childhood crumble. Until it was gone.

I've since started re-building my faith from the ground up, this time out of more flexible stuff. Like

listening. Seeking together as a community. Trusting the inward Light. And you know what? I no longer feel that I have to protect my faith. That fear is gone. 

– Adam Sweeney

Storm Vision



"Storm Vision," detail of 2007 painting 
– Margaret Kellermann

A Week in Haiti

In my sophomore year of high school, I joined a medical team to Haiti led by my mother.

Throughout my life, my mother had been on many medical mission trips to third-world countries, but I had never gone with her. My mother is a pediatrician and enjoys providing free medical care to people who live in poverty. I had always wondered whether I would be able to go with her.

The medical team went to Haiti during spring break last year. When we left, I knew very little about Haiti, except that over 3 million people had been affected by a 7.0 magnitude earthquake there in 2010. The earthquake had caused major damage in Port-au-

Prince, the very place our medical team was going.

To be honest, I wasn't ecstatic about traveling outside the country to help people I didn't know. Though I understood the purpose of the journey, it sounded like a lot of boring hours of hard work. Little did I know that in just eight days, my perception of mission trips would drastically change. From the moment I left the airport, I witnessed things that were literally life-changing. Words cannot describe the unbearable poverty I saw in Port-au-Prince. There were many destroyed buildings, homeless citizens and, most importantly, helpless children.

On the first day, our host welcomed us into his guest house and fed us rice, bread, and salad. We worked eight hours a day for six days. I worked in a medical clinic, sorting prescription medicines, handing out donated clothes that we had brought with us, and being a scribe for one of the four doctors in the clinic. The days seemed to go faster as the week went on.

I wouldn't say that I had fun, but I enjoyed the experience of helping others who are genuinely in need. Seeing the grateful smile on a Haitian's face was truly a blessing unlike anything I've ever experienced. 

– Isaiah Smith



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MINDING THE LIGHT
CHAPTER 9:

IN FOLLOWING THE LIGHT, WHEN WERE YOU LED TO DO SOMETHING THAT WAS SCARY TO THINK ABOUT?

I am tired of taking care of Death

In July, my dad was diagnosed with a brain tumor and given six weeks to live. I took leave from my job to care for him and those weeks were both a gift and a weight. Fear often brought me to my knees; bent over in anger, sorrow and disbelief. Clinging to the lifelines of the friends, family and kind strangers kept me from sinking under a sea of sorrow. The

doorbell would ring and we would sit down to feast on laughter, shared memories and tears. These visits would lift us above the cancer, weightless as a cloud in the present moment. This poem came at a dark time when I needed to personify my fear of death in order to breathe again and gain the courage to let go of my dad's hand when he needed to step through that next mysterious threshold.

S.W.A.K.

I send letters. And cards, and postcards, and manila parcels and care packages. This goes way back for me, a fact unearthed by the stack of letters and cards and drawings I have found in the attic that I left for or sent to my parents here and there from about age five.

Sending a letter is a real act of faith for me. I have ripped open a letter and then resealed it after all and sent it anyway. I have ripped open letters ready to be sent and thrown them into the fireplace without a second thought. I have thrown them into flames with much anguish. I have dropped them down the mail chute only to stress for days afterward. I have kissed them and dropped them in with blessing on my lips.

I feel strongly that it's God's charge to send forth Light from within me, and that's why I reach out in such a "vintage way" when it's such a dying art. I am compelled to write. I have never been able to keep a journal for myself, but I have probably written enough cards and letters to fill volumes. It's like a journal that is scattered across the country, and sometimes the world. It's also like a prayer. I will often wake with a name or two on my mind and I can't rest until I have touched pen to paper for that person.

So in my letter writing I have experienced the whole range of emotions about what God has in mind. If you have known me for long, and if I know your address, you have probably received something from me in the mail. If you haven't yet, it's just a matter of time. If I have written you, you may have thought, upon opening

I am tired of taking care of Death,
this unsolicited visitor who throws open the door
and won't wipe His feet.

A grim fog clings to Him, dampening the room,
The chill slaps my face;
such cruel company!

I try everything I can to turn Him out:
heap enticing food on a plate and leave it on the doorstep
or better yet on the porch of the house next door.

But Death lingers like a tired sailor over a pint,
and is not taken in
by my bluffing or sleight of hand.
Heaving His weathered black bag
with a smack on the kitchen table –
slowly He unpacks.

Dirty socks
and soiled underwear
pile up.
And the smell,
the smell!
It permeates even the very walls.

I resort to shoving and pleading,
but Death is a cold, granite slab,
Like a three-year-old, he's focused,
With tunnel vision and a private plan.

Weary from wrestling, I give in:
"You can stay downstairs"
"OK. Upstairs, but out in the hallway"
"Alright. Come in, but stay off the bed!"

How will this end?
Has the clock stopped?
Am I still breathing?
A friend holds my hand.

I am tired of taking care of Death, but I have met Death and lived. 

– Jill Townley

it, "What the...?" Or you may have thought, "That's just what I needed!" But either way, I have been led to affix that stamp for the sake of Light-bearing, and my intentions are good and filled with love.

Only occasionally have I sent a letter that could have been my temporary undoing, but sometimes this has brought great healing to a broken or frayed relationship, and I have been so glad I let go of the fear and followed the Light. Sometimes I have been met with silence. And that's okay. Because I know I didn't write casually, and that if silence is meant to be, then Amen.

I will keep writing when nudged, in every physical inky way as long as I am compelled, or until the postal service is gone for good. And I hope to continue to see blessings ripple back in waves of connection and support and delight, as I have for decades so far. Want to be pen pals? Pal is just another word for Friend, after all. Maybe "Penn Pals"? 

— Anne Mari Bowman Bracco

[See photo at our website:
www.mindingthelight.org]

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From Fear to Love

Twenty years ago after moving back home to the Pacific Northwest to start my pediatric practice, I had to drive through North Portland to see patients at Emanuel Hospital. I found myself locking my doors and feeling fearful as I drove through the neighboring streets. I had just witnessed the LA Riots and Rodney King atrocity in California, and had heard that North Portland was a dangerous area for shootings. Soon afterward, I attended a Yearly Meeting workshop about racism taught by a professor from the North Portland Bible College, which I passed by on my route to Emanuel. He told me that my fears were a form of racism and that the black people who wandered through the streets did so because of cultural differences, not necessarily because they were more dangerous.

I grew up in a mostly white neighborhood with only one black friend, Michelle. My college and graduate schools also had very few people of different ethnicities. I believed the scripture in Gal. 3:28, that said, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,*" yet I had no relationships with anyone who looked different than me. I had always believed I was someone who saw everyone as equal but that YM workshop started me on a spiritual journey to confront racism head on. If I truly wanted to love all people of all backgrounds in the same way that Jesus did, I would need to be more intentional about experiencing other cultures. I felt especially called to infiltrate African American culture right here in Portland.

When I found out that my second pregnancy was to be a boy, I felt a leading to name him "Isaiah." Not only did the name represent a great biblical prophet of justice, it was a name that fit well in black circles. I suspected that my boy would likely be a basketball player like his dad. When Isaiah was 10 years old he was recruited to play for the Inner City Players club basketball team by Pat Strickland, the current coach of Jefferson High School and probably one of the most respected basketball figures in Portland.

Isaiah was the only white kid on the team! We made many African American friends, and one of the mothers became a dear friend, Rochelle. Over the last eight years Isaiah has had 6 different basketball coaches, all of them black and all of them amazing teachers. I learned that African Americans love to give hugs when they see you and use terms of endearment like "sister." I have so much respect for my basketball family. They helped shape my son into the young man he is.

My school friend, Michelle, found me on Facebook, and I have attended her church's beautiful Easter choir. I realized why we don't have black people in the Friends church – way too quiet. The singing moved me spiritually in a way I had never experienced.

My friend Rochelle called me this last year when her daughter was experiencing a medical crisis, and I was overjoyed that she trusted me to help. Now when I drive to Emanuel Hospital my new fear is that I'll hit a cyclist. 
—Mari Kay

Intervention

I don't understand lots of things about God; but this was a God-thing that happened to me. On July 16, 2009, I drove across Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana, on mission for the Christian Peacemaker Teams. By nine o'clock that night in the rain I was rounding the ring freeway around Indianapolis, still headed east, and I was becoming afraid. The last money I'd made had been in Oklahoma painting an outbuilding for Pastor Nagel. There was a quarter of a tank of gas in the truck and twenty-three dollars in my wallet.

The freeway around Indianapolis was under construction, and I was jockeying around a bad spot beside a big truck. The road was bad. It was raining. It was dark. I was tired from driving all day, and just all of a sudden the fear was there. It started to get big, and then like it happens, I started to get afraid of the fear. That's the scariest part for me, when the fear crouches in my mind and growls at me. So I did the only thing I knew: I prayed to Jesus to take the fear. I also told him how I saw things, too: I said, "Look you, you know what's in my wallet. If you want me to keep doing this CPT mission-thing you're going to have to pull a bunny out of your hat." Which made me laugh.

After awhile, I was out of Indianapolis, cruising east on the night freeway. I couldn't see how I was going to get to the EFI-ER Yearly Meeting in Canton in eastern Ohio, let alone to New England YM. Let alone home. I thought, "I'll just get inside the Ohio state line and look for a place to park the truck

and get some sleep." A few miles from Ohio I started seeing signs for Richmond. Richmond, Indiana.

I was getting really tired, eyes grainy. A sign announced an exit for Earlham College coming up. The information was slow to penetrate. "Earlham?" I thought, "Earlham School of Religion or something...? Didn't half the Quakes I know go to Earlham?" There was the exit; I was going to miss it. I crossed two lanes of freeway and got off. The gas gauge was just a smidge above E. I cruised down dark quiet streets. The clerk at the convenience store gave me directions to the college. I parked in the back of the parking lot, made up a bed under the canopy in the back of the truck and fell asleep listening to the rain. In the morning it was clear and pleasant. I made coffee on the propane stove on the tailgate, got out the guitar and worked on one of the songs I was writing that summer, wrote in my journal, read some from the Psalms. I was taking them in order, and that morning it was Psalm 91. I read, "For he will give his angels charge over you, to guard you in all of your ways, on their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone." Ps. 91:11-12.

I thought perhaps I would do some busking while the kids and professors ate their lunch—and gave me money—and fed me lunch. But no. The woman coming in to work that morning said no, school's out, no kids. While I was talking to her I heard a voice call, "Derek?!?! Derek Lamson?!?!" I turned around. It was Derrick Watson. I had sung at

his wedding, a thousand years before. He had invited me to do music at his middle school class. I had sat in a clearness meeting for him.

I asked him if he was real. He laughed and hugged me. He reminded me he'd been on staff at Earlham for years. "No miracle," he said. Then he took me home to meet his wife and baby, and do my laundry, and shower, and eat, and sleep between clean sheets. The next morning he handed me five crisp twenties. "Go with God," he said. 

—Derek Lamson

Tell us Your Story

When has the Light been hidden? For Chapter 10, during this season of Advent, we're asking for stories about a time when you waited for the return of the Light. We want your stories about anticipation, hope, incubation, darkness, seasoning, or other experiences of waiting.

Query: *When has the Light been hidden?*

We welcome stories in words, photos, art, music, video, or. . . ? We publish stories as told to the extent that they fit within our guidelines (see Guidelines).

Story Deadline: 11/25/12

"When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You."

Psalm 56:3

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Interminable

On the threshold of the Universe,
at the cliff-edge
where the impossible becomes
real,

And with it, fear:
why me, at this time,
--and her?

Standing at a crossroads
of galaxies
of light years
of lifetimes
of synchronicity
of coincidence
of circumstance
of attachment
of existence
--and not.

And not.
Still.

Turning slowly against gravity,
heart in throat,
I accompany this one back
to reclaim a home among stars.

Back, through fear:
What was real?
Will I remember?
Will I not remember?
Will I ever be my whole self again?

I go as far as my weary body can.
My heart goes farther
yet,
and still.

Tears pass,
years pass.

And I come to know
this one who is of me
is with me
and I her
--and still.

I smile and tell her:
I love you so.

In the close stillness
of reply
there is God.

And so,
her.
And still. 
--Name Withheld

Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. *"You also were with Jesus of Galilee,"* she said. But he denied it before them all. *"I don't know what you're talking about,"* he said.

Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, *"This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth."* He denied it again, with an oath: *"I don't know the man!"*

After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, *"Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away."* Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, *"I don't know the man!"*

Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: *"Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."* And he went outside and wept bitterly."

Matt. 26:69-75 (Today's NIV)

You Have Stories to Tell!

Everyone has stories, whether or not they are writers. Your stories are important to the community, and we hope that you will share yours.

Please let us know if you have a story but don't consider yourself a writer, don't have time, don't feel well, or any other reason. We would love to send a story catcher to record your story.

If you can't come to us, we will be happy to come to you :)

MINDING THE LIGHT

Publication Guidelines

Your stories can be submitted in any publishable format: narratives, poetry, songs, art, other.

Word stories: must be 500 words or less, and written in the first person by a member or attender of West Hills Friends. Stories should be submitted in text format in the body of an email addressed to: office@westhillsfriends.org.

Original paintings, photos, and other art can be submitted on paper or emailed in JPG format.

Original music and videos should be submitted as links to websites like YouTube or Vimeo.

Experiencing the Great Wave

Whenever I feel led to do something that I'm afraid to try, images come to my mind of being adrift in a flimsy boat in a large ocean. My dad used to say, "It's like being up a creek without a paddle." The feeling is scary and it takes spiritual guidance, faith and a bit of courage to overcome the fear.

Since I was a little girl playing with a stethoscope, I liked the idea of becoming a nurse. When I was in high school, I joined the Nurses Club and became a volunteer in the local hospital. One day, while I was volunteering, I was asked by a nurse to read a children's story to a six-year-old boy who had multiple fractures from being run over by a truck. He was experiencing excruciating pain, but I sat at his bedside and began to read. All of a sudden, he began screaming loudly from the pain. I dropped the book and ran out of the room. After that experience, and receiving C's in chemistry and math, I rejected the idea of becoming a nurse.

It wasn't until I was 27 years old that I revisited the idea of being a nurse. I had matured a bit, with some of life's experiences behind me. I was unhappy being a secretary, and eventually was faced with being a single parent. It became important to me to provide for my then 8-year-old daughter, Ginger.

At age 29, I entered nursing school. It felt like "boot camp." I had to learn to "think on my feet" rather than ponder every step. Once, I fainted briefly during a particularly gruesome surgery.

The surgeon said, "She won't make it through school." I studied and studied and wondered when I would be asked to leave the program while watching many others leave. I lived in fear the entire time. Then, on a special day, I was standing up with my class receiving my RN diploma with tears in my eyes.

It seems that a lack of Faith in God, oneself and others manifests in fear, which eventually leads to inertia. What in the world kept me going during that incredibly tense time in nursing school?

God seemed to have known that I hadn't been ready in high school, so maturity was a factor. But, most of all, I feel it was God's ongoing guidance (whether I was aware of it or not) and my developing faith and trust in this guidance that led me on. I really "leaned on God" during that most stressful time. The support I received from my Meeting was a strong factor as well. Friends encouraged me again and again by saying, "Yes, you can do it." I'm very thankful that I did. 

– Margie Simmons

[See painting at our website www.mindingthelight.org]

Standing for Silence

When I first became a Quaker, I attended a large unprogrammed meeting that some called a "popcorn meeting" because of the high level of vocal ministry and the way people seemed to "pop up" immediately after another person spoke, without leaving time for silence.

In that meeting, it was customary to maintain silence for the first half

hour, but after that, there was little silence. The meeting was so large that someone always seemed to rise as soon as another speaker sat down. It was not unusual for someone to speak for five, ten or even fifteen minutes.

One Sunday, I felt deeply connected to Spirit during the silence, but once vocal ministry began there was so little time to reflect between speakers that I lost my sense of connection to the Divine. It struck me that some worshipper's needs were being met, while other worshippers' needs were not. Those who wished to speak could do so, but those who wished to wait in silence between speakers could not do so. I began to feel a strong impetus to "stand for silence." I wondered if it would be okay to stand and advocate for a few minutes of silence if I felt led to do so?

Though I felt a strong leading, I was afraid to act on it for fear of committing a "Quaker faux pas." I was afraid that I would be chided or judged. I was also afraid that I was misinterpreting the inward prodding. It seemed Quakerly to ask for silence, but I was concerned that I might have turned my own wish for silence into a leading. Five minutes passed, and the feelings did not go away. I felt almost pushed to stand up and speak. I tried to center down and connect with the Light. But still, I felt impelled to act.

I finally accepted that I was being led by something greater than my ego or desires. By something that was of more importance than what people would think or say, that mattered more than exhibiting the

"proper" Quaker behavior. So I stood up and said, "I would like to stand for silence." Standing there, I felt a power, or energy, filling me. I seemed to quiver, or vibrate, with this power, my ears roaring from the pressure within me. I stood for a minute or two, although it seemed an eternity. Standing, I felt the strong connection to Spirit I had been missing. The silence, spoken ministry, and my yearnings for communion with the Divine coalesced into an experience of benediction. I felt loved, affirmed, and validated by a sense of grace. I sat down and the spoken ministry continued.

Nearly twenty years later, I don't remember anyone's reaction to my spoken ministry. What I recall is that acting despite my fears reminded me of why I'm a Quaker. I remember why it's important to be open to leadings, to trust and follow my own integrity, to strive for connection with Spirit, to engage in self-examination, and to allow myself to be led where I'm afraid to go. 

– Mica Coffin

Zen Mind Beginner's Mind: Grief, Fear and Awe

Luke 18:17: *"Verily I say unto you, whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein."*

On a Friday morning in June 2005, about 8 a.m., my life changed completely, without warning. Matthew, my husband of 21 years, was an art teacher at Oregon Episcopal School and also a well-known potter and student of spirituality. That morning, he was

killed instantly on his way to work by a young woman who pulled out from a blind corner, into the path of his motorcycle.

I had gone to my office to begin my day of appointments. At 9:00, the door in the waiting room opened and I heard someone come in. I went into the waiting room and saw two men in police uniforms. I immediately felt myself go into a survival, instinctual state. One of them asked me if I was Pat Timberlake. I remember wondering if there was any way I could not be Pat Timberlake. I heard myself say "Yes", nothing more, nothing less. They asked me to sit down and I refused, defiantly. I said, "Just tell me!" They told me Matthew had been killed and they had gotten my work address from OES.

This survival terror continued until they let me be, giving me more physical space and silence. One of them quietly said, "Would you like to call someone?" Unable to think, I asked them to come into my office so I could sit at my desk, and maybe I could think then. I sat down at my desk near my phone, and they sat down in their uniforms on the floor! I relaxed immediately when I saw their humanity. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, their quiet patience allowed me to cry, think who I could call, and make the call. From that moment on, I could bring my quaking soul to an unimaginable future outside of anything I had ever known. I was a beginner, with no map.

Waiting for my friends to come, I found three calls from OES on my voicemail telling me they were having a spontaneous memorial

service in the Chapel because students and teachers wanted to meet and sit in silence and speak their thoughts and feelings. I went to be with others who were grieving. I was not alone.

Throughout the next week, many beautiful HEARTFULL things happened. Everyone who spoke to me was full of God in their own way. The memorial service was arranged and held in one week. The music was put together by highly trained musicians who came together for the first time. There were 500 people there. It was a miracle. I felt the only thing I could do was show up as fully as possible.

Many miracles emerged from overwhelming disorientation. The week after the Memorial, I was walking down Hawthorne still in shock. Many people were walking past me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a woman who appeared to be in her 80's walking across the sidewalk towards me with her hand outstretched. As she approached, she said, "I found this flower on the sidewalk and you look like the kind of person who would enjoy it." I looked at her and thought, "This is what an angel is!" 

–Patricia Timberlake

"I think about. . . how much we need to hear the truth of one another's lives. The Japanese have a word, aware, which speaks to both the beauty and the pain of our lives, that sorrow is not a grief one forgets or recovers from but is a burning, searing illumination of love for the delicacy and strength of our relations."

Terry Tempest Williams, from
"A 'Downwinder' in Hiroshima Japan"