

McLean CPE Graduation Reflections

By Lisë Stern,

Why?

All the theological questions come down to a word that is also a letter
A letter shaped like a divining rod.

Why!

In the units of a mental hospital filled with people trying to make other people
Better
Lively
Thriving
Creating oneness, together

Souls

Who come here because they want to die and they want to learn how to not want to die.

Stepping out of the hidden

To the bidden

And the unbidden

The souls and minds riddled with so much pain

The tripwired brains that cause thoughts to race

Thither and to

Hither and yon

The Latter Day Sainter who was Jewish once and still might be

Who can tell stories of a father who created metal wings

to fly magically behind a boat on a New Jersey Lake

Who would also chase chase chase you in a kitchen to beat your disrespectful ass
because he is big and you are small

The paternal godly love dream of the Christian who wanted to be a Jew,
who carries a bible full of stories he loves

Bookended with the born Hindu who fell in love with Jesus

Jesus saved him

Stayed him sober

Offered simple stories

Taking the miracles for miracles' sake,

Just accepting that sometimes water can be walked on.

Why --

The pain for no good reason, for the one who has everything, comfort and meals and children
who love her and are there and still happiness eludes and despair conquers

So so so many incomprehensible whys

And what, what is serving God?

This work we do

This work I do

This listening, this carrying
This sharing and caring
This daring and saying
I hear you
And God does
And

God,
Where are you?
They ask.
Why have you forsaken me?
They ask.
You are not here, you do not exist, you sicken my child
You rendered me wild
You broke my brain
My brain is on fire and you, you you dear lord hold me through it
I pray
And I pray
And I pray
Our Father
Hail Mary
Hear me dear compassionate God
Heal me dear compassionate God

Why

I am not alone, you are with me God
But even God yearns for human beings
And that is the precious secret truth: That God, God needs us as much as we need God

Each and every one of us
Believers and conceivers and atheists and pantheists and one and many
And it is up to us to be our best selves
As much as possible with what (we are given)
God gave us
What God gives us
What God lives in us
With us

I call out to God
From the narrow spaces
And I know
I know
I know
God is speaking to me through the patients who sit with me and
Reflect, deflect, concoct, unlock
And share
And dare

And the sacred holy temple that is created
When a patient talks to me

Bares their soul
To fill the hole
Hoping to be whole

Why...
That day a man tried to choke himself to death
Because the voices told him to
And they never had before
So no one was prepared
So they were all unprepared
To find him trying to will the breath away
The soul away
The voices away

And the chaplain who trains walks with him as he paces
Worrying his short grey hair
With tapered pianist's fingers
His lean runner's body in constant motion
Words tumbling
Mumbling
Succumbing to the mania that grips him

And the chaplain who trains
Walks the walk
Step by step into the room
Out of the room
To the left and down the hall,
And down the other hall
Is God in those corners, in those doorways, lying on the bed that tempts with proffered respite
Except that would mean stopping
And thinking
And perhaps hearing those voices once again

You are not alone, she says, keeping pace step by step by pause

As I stand, the chaplain in training
Feeling God in the details
Given to me by the mental health specialist
The one who found him,
The one who says
Her breath catching
If it had been a minute later...

We stand,
By the doorway by the bathroom
Shifting as other patients come and go, slowly
Our inconvenient watchtower
Just doing my job, she says
As she has done for 21 years
Thank God I checked when I checked, she says
A heavy sigh escaping her lips.

Praise God.

And the shift change, and a new watcher stands with me
As we follow with our eyes chaplain and patient
Walking and talking in a conversation that is not a dialogue
But a lifeline that lets everybody breathe.

*She says, my first day on a trauma unit we saved someone hanging
I held her legs while the one training me cut her down.*
Affirming her decision five months ago
To come here instead of cheffing
Instead of being a sponsored karate black belt in her native country
Taking a job to help her understand the former partner of a decade
And the sister back home
Who both wrestled with minds that led them to dangerous places.

How do you know,
She asks me
As the pacing patient pauses in his room
as the training chaplin turns her phone into a concert and gentle music fills the air
How do you know
And the music shifts to Rolling Stones
And he stands still, sits down
Pauses, finally,
Momentarily

*How do you know, the watcher asks me
When is it voices of mental illness you hear, and when is it God?*

*Because, she tells me
I heard God in that room when I held on to that body to keep it living.*

How do we know?
No guarantees
No answer keys
To the pleas for certainties
I think all we know is how much we don't know

Why
God,
I say,
Never tells us to hurt ourselves.
Only to help
Only to heal.

And that, right now, is enough.