Experiences of the Source: Separation and connection

Anne Whitaker

In 1966, when I was nineteen, my lover was killed in a car crash. Apart from the profound shock of such a bereavement at a young age, what it exposed was my profound alienation from any sense that his life, my life, or anyone else's life had any kind of connection to any spiritual teleology. I found myself bereft, in the deepest possible sense of the word. It took years of painful wrestling before I could see, albeit dimly at first, that I was connected to a greater whole, that my life wasn't a random accident in space and time.

There was a period of especially deep spiritual crisis between 1970 and 1972 — I recall it as feeling like a journey down into the underworld, although my outer life must have seemed reasonable enough to other people. It was a real struggle just to survive these pivotal years: I could have taken my leave, or I could have stayed. I chose to stay — and went on gradually to build a life which now 25 years later feels rich, and deeply connected to the Source.

Recently whilst looking through some old writings of mine, I found two pieces which I had written during that critical period. What I found so striking about them was the archetypal nature of the experiences described. The first was written in July 1970.

My sister and I decided to take the dog and walk from our house, just outside the town, to the Braighe, a beach very exposed to the sea well beyond the harbour. It would be a long walk but it was a beautiful briskly windy sunny day — snatched from the usual bleak incessant rains of a Hebridean July.

We took a curving route through the town, via the district of Sandwick, overlooking the Beacon which had winked reassuringly at the mouth of the harbour for as long as I could remember. We approached Sandwick cemetery; my sister walked on by, but I slowed down. The inevitability of Sandwick had been with me throughout my childhood, constant as the Beacon, but I had never passed through its gates. Only men attend funerals on the Isle of Lewis.

'The sun is shining on the dead today!' I called to my sister. 'Let's go and pay our respects.' She wasn't too keen. 'Have you ever visited Grand-

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dad and Granny's grave?' I asked. 'No,' she said. 'I suppose we could do that.'

We pushed open the heavy creaking gate. The graveyard, beautifully tended, sloped gently down to within a few hundred yards of the sea. I realised that I did not know where my father's parents lay.

'I remember Daddy saying that the grave was down at the bottom end to the left-hand side,' my sister said. 'With our English name, it shouldn't be difficult to find.'

Our paternal grandfather had been posted to Lewis before the First World War, and met our grandmother on his first trip ashore. English gentlemen were a great rarity in these parts, and very desirable 'catches' to aspiring island girls like Granny, who had by all accounts been a strong and wilful young woman. He was well and truly caught; apart from his period of war service he remained in Lewis for the rest of his long life.

My grandmother was devastated when he died; they had been married for 52 years. I remember sitting with her in her bedroom, she who had always turned herself out so elegantly propped up in bed, an old singlet of my grandfather's failing to conceal her droopy, withered breasts from my young eyes. Up to then I had never known the desolation of not being able to console another human being — or that old people ever cried. She wept and wailed and moaned, repeating 'I don't want to live any more. What's the use, what's the use now he's away?'

Live on she did, doggedly, for nine years, lightened only by a late addition to the family. I was 15 when my brother was born. Granny was 82 and half-way senile. The child was called Frederick, after Granddad; as the novelty wore off Granny slipped into senility, a querulous fractious husk, and finally just a husk, and a medical miracle, carried off at 86 with her fourth bout of pneumonia.

I was at university when she died, having become so distant from her by then that I felt nothing but a vague sense of relief . . .

'I've found it!'

I had fallen behind my sister in my reverie. She was standing about twenty yards away; I hurried to the spot.

It was a plain, simple grave. A low railing ran round it. The headstone was in grey granite, with only the facts of their births and deaths etched on it in gold lettering. Noting with satisfaction, which my grandmother would have shared, the absence of 'fancy versification', I stood and looked at the grave.

Without any warning, for I had felt quiet and composed, there was a rush and a roar in a deep silent centre of my being; a torrent of desolation and grief swept through me. I wept and wept and wept, quite uncontrolled.

There they were, half my being. Where had it all gone: the passion of their early love; the conception of their children; her sweat and blood and pain as she thrust my father into the world; their quarrels, silences, love, laughter, loneliness and grief; their shared and separate lives? And this was it. On a hot beautiful day with the sea lapping on the shore and the seabirds wheeling and diving, a few bits of cloth and bone under the earth, an iron railing and a stone above.

I was not weeping just for them. I was overwhelmed by a total awareness of my own mortality and that of all human beings before and after me. I had never felt so stricken, so vulnerable, so alone.

The second piece, however, written in the autumn of 1971, shows that something else was now emerging from the underworld which would offer me inspiration and support. The 'pibroch' referred to is music of lament played on the Scottish bagpipes.

It was a lovely autumn evening. D came round for me after seven; he was going out to practice some pibroch. Would I like to come along? It was a time of perfect balance — in the weather, in the satisfaction of work which was still new enough to be stimulating, in the fact that D and I were beginning to fall in love.

We went out into the clear air; it would soon grow dark. D drove several miles out of town along deserted country roads to a hill above a small village. Taking out the pipes he began to blow them up, and after much tinkering, began to play. It was the first night I had accompanied him on a practice; to avoid distracting him I strolled off down the road. He was standing on a bank of grass at the top of the hill; beside him on one side was a little wood. On the other side of the road there was a ditch with whin bushes growing in it.

Beyond the ditch was a rusty, sagging fence; beyond the fence smooth, mossy moorland dotted with whins, their vivid yellow colour fading into shadows in the gathering dusk. Opposite the moorland, below the wood, there was a field of long reedy grass; beyond the field, the darkening Perthshire hills.

I looked from the skyline right up above me; a myriad of stars, taking their lead from Venus, were growing bright with increasing intensity as the dusk deepened. A mellow harvest moon was rising, casting a glow on the hills. The air held a hint of cold. The clear notes of the pibroch in such a setting, blending with the rare state of harmony which I felt in my own life, created in me an emotional intensity which was impossible to contain; I could feel the melancholy music of the pipes flowing through me like a magical current.

By this time I had reached the foot of the hill. I was overcome with a desire to surrender myself completely to the moment. Lying down in the middle of the road, I spread out my arms, and gazed up at the stars.

I could just feel a gentle breeze blowing over my body; could hear it soughing through the reedy grass. Drifting with the music through the night sky, slipping away from awareness of myself or the present, I was a timeless spirit of the air, travelling the vastness of space on the notes of the pibroch. An unobtrusive rhythm, a pulse, began to beat: growing more and more steady, it became a whispering message in my mind: 'There is nothing to fear,' it said. 'There is nothing to fear.'

An image of my lying dead, under the earth, came to me. Such images, occurring at other times, had filled me with panic and disgust. Now, there was none of that. I could gladly have died at that moment; my flesh would return to the earth and nourish it, my spirit would soar to infinity. The pulse continued, flooding me with its light: 'There is nothing to fear, nothing to fear, nothing to fear . . . '

At that point of spiritual ecstasy I felt the absolute reality of my soul.

Such a moment might have lasted a second, an hour, or a hundred thousand years; but the music ceased, and the chill which was gradually taking over my body drew me back gently into the present . . .

The knowledge, glimpsed during the above experience, that connection was *possible* kept me going through the long struggle to believe that life had an overall meaning, and to find my own way of offering my energy creatively in the years which were to follow.