

“Season of Wonder”

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I’m amazed, awestruck, astonished, dumbfounded. I wonder. By what means? Through whose doings? What is the evidence for how it happened? And so we descend from a state of wonder into the story that invoked it into a circumscribed notion of what is or isn’t true. After all, we weren’t there. We didn’t witness it. It’s not part of reality news. It’s just hearsay, just myth, just the rumors of legend.

What then is the pull of how a baby was taken in and cared for by a mama bear?

Let’s suspend the habits of our disbelief, the allegiance to a rigid rationality, and inhabit a season of wonder. If you like, do an advance google search with Kayhan (an Iranian newspaper), baby, and bear as your key words. You’ll find an account published in early October 2001, a time when millions of hearts were breaking in grief over the loss of thousands of lives just weeks earlier. Yet a toddler wandering alone in the Lorena province of far-off Iran was reported to have been found in the den of a bear who had taken him into her home, and nursed him as her own cub.

In this story shared by Barbara Kingsolver, the first in a book of essays begun just after the ominous date of 9/11/01, imagine that you are the baby.

“Hmmm, this looks interesting. I think I’ll explore. Just a little farther. Oh, that looks interesting. Just a few more steps. Where am I? Where is Mommy? Where is Daddy? Where is home? But SHE looks friendly, and I’m so tired, so tired. Okay, I’m scooped up by the seat of my pants in a sure grasp of this she, not quite like my mama would scoop me up, but I trust her like I trust my mama. She walks and walks until we’re in a dark place, a bit damp, a little cool. But I’m snuggling and sucking; and it’s good, kind of like the way I slurp from my own mama. Sleepy, so sleepy. Then I’m awake, and I do what I always do when I’m hungry and wet. I cry. And I cry a little more. She feeds me again, and I fall back asleep. Again, I wake up, and I cry some more. Then I see somebody I know coming toward us. My big furry mama is still sound asleep. I barely stir, until I’m picked up and carried out into the bright sunlight.”

Imagine that you are his parents and it’s years later. You’re gathered around a fire after dinner with your grown son and his wife and your grandchildren. Time for family stories. You’ve told this one more times than there are stars. Sometimes you tell it and hold up the fear you knew when you realized your precious child was lost. Sometimes you highlight the hope that kept you going and the hope that took action as your whole village began to search. Sometimes you hold up the elation that surged inside you when your neighbors brought him to you, alive and well. Sometimes you hold up the astonishment when you discovered how he survived. But always, you begin with, “I wonder. I wonder how we got through this.”

In the season upon us, we find ourselves wondering how we will get through a very big this. I hold no assumptions about what the “very big this” is for you. Yet, I can speculate on this season of collective astonishment that our more or less United States is in the state we are in, and I doubt that our salvation will come by a different kind of bear, but I hope and trust that we will get through this by purposeful communal searching and action and discovery in a way that right now transcends our imagination.

The stories of wonder that punctuate the course of our lives almost always carry a narrative that can begin with, “I wonder”. I speak of stories for which we now have the grace of hindsight, but which still stir our hearts and mark a “before and after” in the autobiographies we unwittingly write. On calendars personal and interpersonal these stories become anniversaries flowing alongside and sometimes overlapping with births and deaths and weddings and graduations and Christmas and Thanksgiving. How do specific dates call forth for you events intimate and epic, events that invite you to pause and reflect in “I wonder” mode? What are the full-of-wonder anniversaries in your life course?

This is a year of anniversaries for me. Fifty years ago this past February marks the event of loss that inspires my sabbatical this year—my prospective pilgrimage to Vietnam with others who knew losses during those years, a pilgrimage under the aegis of Soldier’s Heart. It was the focus of our worship service this past February 4, and if you weren’t here, I would be glad to share that message with you for the asking. Yes, in this season of wonder, I continue to ask how did I, how did any of us, get through that time, when too many didn’t.

Another anniversary: Forty years ago this July—July 28, 1978 to be exact: It was a dark and stormy night; it really was! I hurriedly gathered up my young daughters, sleepy and in their pajamas, with enough bags packed for the three of us to last who knew how long. Cozy but bewildered they settled into the back of our Datsun wagon as we headed south on the Jersey Turnpike toward Philadelphia. “Mommy, this is the best day of my life and the worst day of my life,” were the prophetic words voiced by my seven-year-old from the back seat.

We were fleeing too many years of domestic violence. The coast was clear. I had had enough, humbled that I could not change another human being and terrified that my then husband would make good on his threats voiced from a treatment center where he had checked himself in but which he was free to leave at any time. Shana, Sarah, and I arrived to the welcoming arms of my brother and sister-in-law, Jeff and Donna. We awoke the next morning with my young niece and nephew surprised to see their aunt and cousins there and “moving in” for what would stretch into four months. Yes, we were the beneficiaries of sanctuary!

And I became the beneficiary of yet another sanctuary—that of Mainline Unitarian Church, where Jeff and Donna were active members. Off went my little ones to religious ed classes, along with their cousins. With Jeff and Donna, I settled into the sanctuary—my second sanctuary of the week. A string ensemble played a prelude. A lay leader offered a warm and inclusive welcome. There was a chalice lighting, silent meditation, and a prayer. Brad Greeley was the minister then. When Brad rose to speak, I already sensed something stirring inside me. I can’t remember a word that he said. I just remember how I felt as the entire service unfolded. I was home; I was safe and wondrously home.

Yet that chapter had just begun. As I turn the pages of my life narrative, how could I know that this segment would continue for many more chapters, many more years, not even culminating with a court trial in which I was granted sole custody but my children were to be raised with a Jewish religious education leading to a bat mitzvah. I had converted to Judaism as a condition of marrying this man, less than a year after my first husband became a casualty of the Vietnam War. I was not in a place that bore any resemblance to centered. Yet centered I needed to be on behalf of my children over these next many years.

With my brother's "connections", I obtained a first-rate attorney. Yet I became adept at drafting legal certifications. I had maintained extensive documentation on the final phases of this dysfunctional marriage, and who better to narrate what my attorney needed on my behalf?

I wonder even this morning how I made it through those years. I wonder how I maintained sanity as a young mother, how I managed a move from where we had lived in northern New Jersey to an apartment in Montclair, where I found a job, where I burned the candle at both ends to complete my dissertation for my doctorate in psychology, where I made new and lasting friends, and where I became active in the local congregation of my new-found faith.

BUT, I didn't do any of this alone. There are way too many "I's" in what I have just shared. Grace happened through my brother and sister-in-law with their love and support and gift of sanctuary, my Mom (far away in Kansas but immediately present when she knew how I needed her), friends who had made it through their own "dark nights of the soul", neighbors in our Montclair apartment, acquaintances who became lifelong friends in our new community, and the Unitarian Universalist Church in Montclair, whose members and minister embraced my children and me. What gives me cause and pause for wonder was by no means a solo act.

On this anniversary of heart and mind, I am grateful, so grateful, for loving community. While the trauma of that time still resurfaces through challenges personal and those faced by my adult children, I am glad that it is now and not then. Uncertainty is the stuff of life, and what I have shared has not been the only harrowing episode I have known. As your minister, not much that any of you share with me can shock me. Nor does it mean that I'm not vulnerable or that I'm not stirred by any of your trials. And this does not mean that I'm stoic in my identities as Mom, Grandma, wife, friend, and minister.

Yet, like the parents of the baby found in the embrace of a mama bear, like the baby who would now be a young man, like those parents whose children were found in the far reaches of a cave in Thailand, like those children and their coach, I have known the wonder and grace of loving community. My story doesn't hold the drama of theirs, but it is my story.

I wonder. What is your story? What have you survived years ago and perhaps last week for which you can say: I wonder how I, how we, made it through that narrow passage? What still surfaces in your dreams? What still brings you to tears when you relive in memory's heart what happened?

I'm guessing that each of you have been through long and winding tunnels and have known the anxiety that comes with not even realizing it was a tunnel with light at the end. For what can you say, "I wonder how"? Whose hands were extended, whose hearts opened that quickened your resolve to take the next step and the next? Whose hands are extended now? Whose hearts are open now in ways that that lend hope and energy in a struggle that is ongoing?

I invite you to close your eyes and to hold silence and recall. And then...when you are ready, to speak aloud the names of those who made it possible for you to be here this morning and those still present as caring companions in times perilous and promising, as you move on.

[pause]

We wonder. We wonder how it is that we are here, that we are here and now, that we are here and now together. By the grace of whom is this so? We wonder and are humbled. We wonder and are grateful.
Amen.

Sources:

Barbara Kingsolver, "Small Wonder" in *Small Wonder: Essays*, HarperCollins, 2002. 1-21.