

The Departure

By

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The golden rule of preaching is to share your message through story. People will listen to a story that embodies the most complex and difficult teaching and leave the church with a workable understanding of the message taught that day. Yet, if the same message is simply presented as if it were a lesson to be learned, the eyes of the congregation glass over. The Bible is not a text book but a collection of stories. Yet, in those stories people have discovered the deepest truths for thousands of years.

While I try to balance Along the Way with both reflections on current events from a spiritual perspective and faith stories, I am always drawn to the stories. Over the years I've tried to do several things with my stories. Repeatedly I try to go back to the beginning of our faith and give the reader an experience of what it was like to encounter Christ and to be drawn to him, as were the first disciples. This type of story is represented by the series I did on Peter, Paul and John. The other type of story is a tale of everyman, a contemporary who is searching for a deeper relationship with God. In these stories the hero is just like us. As he learns and grows, so do we. The Pilgrimage and the Journey stories are examples of this approach.

Theo Douglas, the main character of these stories, which were published earlier in the North Star, is a fictional character. In a similar manner Barti DelCalle and Dr. Tabitha Glowaki are no more real than Theo. These characters are products of my imagination.

When I write about Theo, Barti or Tabitha I enter a place in my imagination where they are real and alive. In that magical place I seem to enter into the experience of the character and am able to describe the events that shape their lives. Having written about Theo and his mentors in detail throughout the earlier stories, I have come to think of them as friends, even if they exist only in my imagination.

While I draw upon my life experience in detailing Theo's adventures, a practice common to most authors, I am not Theo. However, often real people have served as models for the characters in these stories. Barti is a combination of traits from several people who have been influential in my life, as is Tabitha.

It is amazing how one can be caught up in a fictional world. Yet, in many respects the fictional world of these stories is as real as any world we might experience. The characters draw their truth from the same sources of faith, imagination and knowledge as do I. So, if the adventures of these imaginary friends strike a chord, perhaps it is because they help us tap a deeper truth in ourselves.

This begins the third story in the on-going adventures of Theo Douglas. We rejoin Theo in May 1981, about five years after the end of The Journey.

Chapter One: Five Years Later

I was a staff planner for the Oncology Department at the University of Rochester Medical Center. I got the job three years earlier after returning from the Caroline Islands, where I put in two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer. The program director had a soft spot in her heart for idealistic Peace Corps volunteers and when it came to select a planner, I was chosen. My job was to write the annual grant application to keep the community treatment and cancer prevention program in operation. This required a lot of data gathering, nurturing community planning committees throughout a nine county region, and conducting program evaluations. We were in our third year of the planning cycle and I was busy working on the application for our fourth year. This was a trying time, as the grants only ran for three year cycles. If we were going to keep the program going and I was going to keep my job, I needed to come up with spectacular new programs that might justify an new three year grant cycle.

I was usually bent over my desk in the office I shared with Sam, a programmer who was setting up a tumor registry for the department. He had a direct connection to the mainframe computer in the basement of the university hospital, three wings away from our little cubbyhole. Neither of us talked much; he was usually mumbling over the computer code he was trying to get to work and I was busy wading through reports, trying to extract useful data. However, twice a day we emerged from our silent world and noticed each other's presence.

The first time was around 11:30 in the morning when we would get up and walk through the maze of corridors to the hospital cafeteria for lunch. I usually had a yogurt. He usually had a Tupperware filled with salad. We would exchange departmental or university gossip for a few minutes and then wander off to relax or do whatever chores needed to be take care of. I usually wandered off to the university library or the bookstore.

The second time each day was around 3:30pm. That was when Sam and I wandered off to the hospital chapel for meditation. Early in my employment with the department I discovered that Sam was a regular practitioner of Transcendental Meditation. I was not particularly attracted to what seemed to me to be a hyped up fad, but Sam found it helpful. I didn't reject the value of meditation but preferred the contemplative mindfulness practice taught to me by Barti DelCalle back in the early 70's. In fact, whatever we called what we did, our meditative practice was very similar. We spent twenty minutes every work day focusing our attention on the experience of the moment, whether it was breathing or staring at the flame of a candle. Some of our workmates thought we were crazy but the meditative practice left me energized and my mind sharper than ever.

In the evenings I went to class. I was only two courses and a thesis away from a Masters of Public Health. One of the benefits of working for the university was that each semester I was entitled to two free courses. Taking advantage of my employment benefit every semester helped me move toward the Master's degree quickly and at no cost. I was working on the degree in public health, as that was my area of employment. I thought that the degree would provide some security and flexibility in choosing a career. So, when I wasn't working or meditating, I was usually at the medical library reading journals and trying to finish up what ever assignment was due next.

I was 31 years old and still single. I dated occasionally but was usually too busy with work or studies to put much effort into my social life. The last girl I dated wanted to get serious after several months. I enjoyed her company but had no interest in any lasting relationship with her. We were just too different.

After Barti was killed by a drunk driver near Reno, on our trip across country I ended up in the hospital for three months and then spent the next six months at my sister's home in Portland, Oregon recovering from injuries I sustained in the accident. Eventually I moved down to San Jose at the invitation of friends. I had a great time visiting with them but my efforts at finding work were fruitless. I was about to give up and return to Rochester when I received an invitation to spend two years in the Truk Lagoon as a Peace Corps Volunteer. The application I filed almost a year earlier had finally made it off a bureaucrat's desk! I hadn't the slightest notion where Truk was; but I figured that it would be an adventure, so I accepted the invitation. Three months later I was on Pan Am 747 heading to Guam and Saipan for training. Two months later I went on to Truk to go through final orientation and begin my period of service.

The next two years were both spectacular and depressing. They were spectacular in that I was living an adventure that seemed the material of story books. I was living on a tropical island that was beautiful beyond anything I could have imagined previously. Even the air was sweet with perfume. Every night the sunset over the lagoon was aflame with orange, red, and violet. The air was so clear that on many days it seemed that I could almost count individual leaves on coconut trees over a mile away! I left the States in the middle of winter and found myself in the middle of a perpetual summer. There were few western conveniences in Truk but that was an easy adjustment, as I was looking for a less distracted lifestyle than what I was used to in the States. I stayed with a very kind and patient local family who made my stay a great experience and helped cushion the impact of culture shock through their care of me.

It was also a very difficult time for me. While I wanted to get away from the hectic and shallow lifestyle common in the States, I was not prepared for the profound disorientation of being dropped down into a community whose culture and language were profoundly different from my own. The situation improved somewhat as I grew more proficient in the language, though I never became fluent. I had been brought to Truk to work with the prisoners, setting up a basic corrections program. This was based on my experience with the Probation Office in Rochester. By the time they brought me to Truk the Director of Public Safety had changed and he had no interest in a young outsider telling him how to deal with his prisoners. So, instead of settling into a job like most of the other volunteers, I had to spend the first month or two trying to find something to do. Eventually I got into youth work and from that into health planning. It was depressing trying to struggle with culture shock and then to have the one area of anticipated stability, my job, pulled out from under me.

While this adventure started out badly by the end of my two year tour of duty as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I didn't want to leave. I had grown to love the islands and the people who became my friends and companions. I visited for several months on Ponape, another island group a few hundred miles East of Truk, after I completed my Peace Corps assignment. A friend invited me to check out the place, so I took him up on the invitation. A few weeks turned into another six months before I finally got on a plane for Rochester.

I found life back home almost as disorienting as the islands were for me at first. Most people seemed to have their priorities on backward; running after the latest toys or trying to see how many girls they could score. I had gotten used to a more relaxed island pace and a greater value for family and friendship than was common in my homeland. People never seemed to pay much attention to you, even if they were talking with you. They seemed to be caught up in what they were going to say next, rather than listening to what you were saying. It was also frustrating that after the greatest adventure in my life no one really seemed interested. They were polite and would chit-chat with me about my impressions of the islands but there was no real connection. Again, the lack of work was an added burden as I struggled with reverse culture shock. I had been back home for three months and at least half of the time was seriously looking for a job. It wasn't a good time for hiring and I had no success. I even went back to the Probation Office to see if I could get back in there but they weren't hiring either.

One evening I was visiting the home of some friends I knew from my Probation Officer days and as an aside someone mentioned that the University was hiring a planner in their oncology unit. This seemed worth applying for, as the last year of my Peace Corps assignment was spent working out of the planning unit in the Trust Territory Department of Public Health. At least I had some experience that might be applicable. I applied and was pleased to be invited for an interview. The program director thought well of the Peace Corps, so having just returned from the Peace Corps was a big plus in the interview. The planning work I did in Peace Corps was sufficient to justify hiring me, so within a week of the interview I got a phone call telling me to come in for orientation.

I enjoyed working for the University hospital, as it gave me university staff status and all of the benefits that came with it. The campus was beautiful and I enjoyed wandering through the various gardens and walkways during lunch. There were often famous visiting lecturers on campus. I never missed the opportunity to listen to these brilliant minds. One of my favorites was Margaret Mead, the famous anthropologist. I found that being in the midst of such brilliance and being forced to use my mind beyond normal, through my classes and the demands of my job, my thought processes began to sharpen. Perhaps this was aided by a clarity that arose from daily meditation. In any case, the job fit me perfectly and I was happy. Before I knew it, one year turned into two and then three.

I was a frequent visitor at the Abbey of the Genesee. During the summer months I would drive down there after work for vespers or compline. I made occasional weekend retreats as well, becoming a regular at Bethlehem House and well known to the retreat house staff. My favorite place at the monastery was the monastery chapel, which I completed while I was in the island. I could spend hours in silent, mindful prayer without realizing how much time was going by. The place seemed to resonate with prayer and to draw you into it. If I wasn't in the chapel, I was sitting near Barti's grave, often in animated one way conversation with my old friend and mentor. I missed him very much.

Part of the reason I spent so much time at the Abbey was that I felt my life was on hold and I was trying to pray and meditate my way through to a clearer sense of what God wanted of me. I was 31. I had a number of girlfriends over the years, a few somewhat serious, but so far no relationship that pointed toward a permanent commitment. My job was comfortable, even enjoyable, but I wasn't sure if this was what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I often thought of the islands and going back

there. While the adjustment was difficult at first by the time I left I had felt more fulfilled and at home than I had ever felt anyplace else. I toyed with the idea of joining Peace Corps for another hitch or looking for work in the islands. I even did a few school presentations as a returned Peace Corps Volunteer to help them drum up support for the program and possible recruits. Yet, I never could get to the point of actually putting pen to paper and applying. I just wasn't sure that was the right option for me. At least hanging around the Abbey I felt close to Barti once more. Maybe deep down I had the feeling that in some mysterious way he would help me sort things out.

Barti was gone but the monks were still around and after a while the guest master, Fr. Timothy, and I developed a friendship. He had known Barti when he was a monk at the abbey and knowing that Barti had been my friend and mentor, Fr. Timothy took me under his wings. His style was quite different from Barti, more formal and theological, but he listened to me and offered solid advice. He helped me to develop some basic discernment skills, which was just what I needed at that point. He also helped me develop a more regular practice of prayer and contemplative awareness. He was more of a teacher than a mentor, but at that time in my life it seemed that a teacher was just what I needed. Barti had been my mentor. He took me by the hand and spoon fed me the basics of Christian spirituality and kindled a passion in me for Christ. Fr. Timothy helped me put into perspective what Barti taught me as part of a way of life.

I remember one weekend toward the beginning of my visits to the Abbey. We were sitting in the small offices that were used for Confession and spiritual direction--depending on the needs of the visitor. I was explaining my frustration to him. I told him about the time that Barti told me that I needed to trust in the Holy Spirit, as ultimately the Holy Spirit is the only true spiritual director we have. I didn't understand how this was the case or how I could make sense of the spiritual direction the Holy Spirit was offering to me.

Fr. Timothy cleared his throat, a habit that signaled his intention to speak, and began to explain in his professorial style.

"An older brother of mine worked in the cryptography bureau of the Office of Special Services during World War II. His job, along with many other young men and women, was to break the codes that the Germans and Japanese used to communicate. They used their skills in mathematics and every bit of their intelligence to break the codes.

"We tend to think of finding God's will as a project similar to breaking some divine code. That is not the way it works. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God. Each of us lives and has our being in God. Apart from the love and mercy of God holding us in existence, we are nothing. The Holy Spirit is in constant and continuous communication with us. We are temples of the Holy Spirit; that is, the Holy Spirit is never apart from us. We need not learn to break any divine code to discern God's will for us. All we need do is learn to pay attention to what God is saying to us.

"The problem is that we don't want to pay attention! Why don't we want to pay attention? If we pay attention we will learn God's will and the thought frightens us. It frightens us because we will need to let go of the illusion of being in control of our lives. It requires that we trust in God. We say that God is love but when it is time to let go of the illusion of control and actually trust in the God who we say loves us, we hesitate. What if God desires that I let go of the comfort and security I now enjoy and take an

entirely different path of service? What if God asks something of me that I am unwilling or unable to give? The thought frightens us, so instead of listening to the Holy Spirit we invest a great deal of energy in avoiding the voice of the Holy Spirit.

“As I learn to trust in God I discover that, I am giving up nothing except the illusion that I have control over what happens to my dreams, my successes, my job, my friendships, even what may happen to my family and me. The only control that I really have is the decision to cooperate with God’s grace. To trust in God is to be open to God. To trust in God is to find the willingness to face the unknown and uncertain, knowing that somewhere in the darkness and confusion God’s grace is at work. To trust in God is to believe, not just intellectually but in every cell of my body, that God loves me. To trust in God is to believe that God’s vision of what I am to become is more blessed and love filled than any dream that has yet stirred in my soul.

“We can know the will of God by listening to God. God speaks to us through our hearts and minds and circumstances. For example, it is a simple matter to consider our actions and to discern any patterns of behavior that are morally questionable. It is reasonable to presume that such behavior is not part of God’s will for us. God’s will confronts those who are doing wrong and encourages those who do what is right. Thus, if our inclinations tend toward sexual immorality, alcohol abuse, ruthless business practices and selfishness, we can be certain that these inclinations find their source in Satan and not God. We have Scripture and common sense to tell us that much.

“When I am living a moral life and pray frequently, so that conversation with God is natural, my inclinations will tend toward God’s will. The process begins when I pray for guidance. In the course of events, options will come to mind. I must be open to every option and consider each as it arises. Some options may have a natural attraction for me. Other options may frighten me or seem improbable. The way I discern among the options which one is consistent with God’s will for me is to find the one that leaves me with the deepest sense of peace. This may not be the easiest option or the most logical. The option may even be frightening in its demands on me. However, when I meditate on that option my heart is at peace.

“I can pursue that option and run into opposition and obstacles. Sometimes such circumstances are meant to tell me that I need to consider the options more carefully. However, opposition and obstacles will be encountered on the path of God’s will as well. The key question is whether my heart is at peace as I pursue this path?”

I wasn’t sure where I was headed but at least I was learning to be open to God’s will in my life and to actively discern what God was asking of me.

Chapter Two: Letter and Conversation

May was my favorite month. The bitter chill of March and the dampness of April were gone. The withering heat of July and August were still in the future. May was cool but still warm enough to walk around campus comfortably in a sweater or light jacket. The flowers were in bloom, so the campus was alight with color. Everyone seemed to have caught spring fever by that time, so there was a sense of excitement and joy in simply being alive that filled everyone on campus.

I was caught up in the excitement of spring as well. Classes ended the first week of May, so one source of pressure was gone for a few months. We were in the final stages of preparing the grant application to the US Department of Public Health for the next project and funding cycle of our community based cancer prevention program, so I was looking forward to a relatively easy summer. My workload would be minimal, as even the community advisory groups would not be in the mood for meetings.

A few months earlier I spoke with Fr. James, the vocation director at the Abbey, about the possibility of me having a vocation as a monk. I had been spending so much time at the Abbey the past couple years that it seemed a reasonable possibility to me. Fr. James felt it was worth exploring as well. So, I was scheduled to spend the month of July on an extended retreat at the Abbey. I would live in the cloister and take part in the daily life of the monks as a participant-observer. I was excited about the time I would spend living as a monk and exploring whether this was what God wanted of me. I hadn't felt this excited or positive about anything since the weeks just before I left for my Peace Corps assignment almost seven years earlier.

Since the weather had settled into the perfection of May, it was my daily practice to take a brisk walk around campus during lunch break. This was time for my practice of mindfulness, as well as an opportunity to take off a few pounds that clung to my waist after the confinement of winter. I headed out of the university hospital and toward the River Campus. The first quadrangle I passed was dedicated to the liberal arts. The next was where all of the major fraternity houses were located. I passed the library, which was an impressive building with a high dome. A new student center had been completed the year before. It was here that I usually made a quick stop, as the university post office was located in the



basement of the building. I kept a post office box here for my personal mail. I figured that it was safer than having mail delivered to the room I rented in a boarding house several blocks from campus. The box was filled with correspondence, most of which wanted me to buy things I didn't need or couldn't afford. The remainder were bills, except for one envelope that was smaller and lighter than the others. My heart skipped a beat when I saw the return address and familiar Israeli postmark. It was a letter from Tabitha! It had been at least four months since I wrote to her and this was the longest it had ever taken her to respond.

A letter from Tabitha meant that my walk was canceled for that day. I bought a cup of coffee and some yogurt and sat down in the cafeteria of the student center. The cafeteria was impressive. It was an open section of the building that was at least seven stories tall in the shape of a diamond and encased in glass. Hanging gardens graced two sections of the diamond and dozens of potted trees and shrubbery gave the cafeteria the ambiance of a garden. Once I was settled into my favorite table near a small fountain, I carefully opened the letter and began to read.

Dear Theo,

I apologize for not responding sooner. My age seems to be catching up with me. Everything I attempt to do runs slower than normal, even correspondence with a favorite young man. My ability to be of much help to the new patriarch is minimal, yet he kindly keeps me informed of developments among the Palestinian Christian community. He has also arranged for a young lady to help me with the simple things that I used to do with little thought. She is the one who typed this letter and she is the one who fixes my meals and helps me to get to the Abbey chapel for daily Mass. Though now, instead of a brisk walk, she pushes me in a wheel chair. Her name is Fatima Marie Sabah. She is a distant cousin of the patriarch.

I am pleased for you and the excitement with which you anticipate spending the month of July at the Abbey, testing a possible vocation with the Cistercians. For those who are called, it is a wonderful life. Though it has its share of burdens, as does any path to which we are called. Listen to your heart carefully while you are at the Abbey. Whether you feel elated or desolate by the experience make no quick decisions but test the experience by the peace of God. If our inclinations and desires are properly ordered, then they will be consistent with God's will. If our inclinations and desires are consistent with God's will, we will experience God's peace in our hearts.

Momentary highs or lows of the emotions are to be noted but not taken seriously in the long run. They are too dependent upon what we eat, our immediate circumstances, whether a particular person reminds us of an old friend or nemesis. One moment we might be moved by great surges of love and the next feel lost and desolate. We must respect our emotions but not allow them to be the controlling principle of our life. True discernment takes them into account but also examines every aspect of one's life in the light of reason and faith.

We must pay special attention to how we are living and acting. Are we faithful to the moral teachings of the Church? Does our life give witness to the Gospel? If we are desolate and find that we are living a life of immorality, our desolation is a gift from God letting us know that we are on the wrong path. If we are living the lives of saints and still experience desolation, perhaps it is the work of God to strengthen our faith. I have known several people who are living saints. They incarnate the Gospel and their presence is an experience of pure love. Yet, as I have come to know them, each has told me of feeling alone and experiencing God more in his absence than in a sense of presence. They seem to be empty of attraction to God for what they can gain from it, for they are unable to gain even the simple joys of God's consoling presence. Yet, they radiate God's love to everyone around them. In their emptiness they are able to be filled with God, not for themselves but for others. One must examine each situation in the light of the person's particular circumstances. Though always look to the peace of God, the sense that no

matter what difficulties you experience on your chosen path you feel in your bones that this is where you should be.

It seems that I have gone on preaching as usual. Poor Fatíma must have numb fingers by now, typing away as I have spoken. I will be kind to her and bring this letter to an end. Please remember that my prayers are with you. Also, when you next see Fr. Timothy, please convey my best wishes. I knew him many years ago when Barti was still a Trappist. They were good friends. I found him to be a delightful person.

May you always experience Christ's peace,

Tabitha

Every letter that I receive from Tabitha is an experience of grace. She always seems to go to the heart of my concerns, even when I am not clear on them myself. I reread the letter twice and then ate my lunch silently. I was distracted as I ate. The letter was like a splash of cold water. It wasn't that Tabitha said anything against my plans to be an observer at the Abbey during July. She took my plans at face value and with great earnestness. My family and friends said little about it, hoping that I would get the idea out of my system and get on with life. Aside from Fr. Timothy and Fr. James, Tabitha was the first person who realized the seriousness of my decision to observe at the Abbey as a possible prelude to joining the monastery. Her seriousness jolted me. It reminded me of the seriousness of what I was undertaking and I was nervous. As always her advice was practical and directed to the discernment process that lay before me.

I was concerned though that the signs of her age were becoming more obvious. I never thought of her as being particularly old. Yet, she was 83 when I was in Israel on Pilgrimage and spry beyond her age. It was over five years later now. What could I expect for a woman that was 89 years old? It was a miracle that she had kept her health and strength for so many years. If she needed help getting around now, it was to be expected for a woman her age. Though, it still hurt to think of her as weak and suffering from the aches and pains that were part of old age.

That evening I went to the movies with my younger brother, Charlie. He was a college student at the time, a senior at Rochester Institute of Technology majoring in computer science. We both needed a break from the pressures of job and studies. *Chariots of Fire* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* were both playing. While the first movie was probably more morally uplifting, neither of us was interested in doing anything more than be entertained that evening, so we saw the Indiana Jones movie. We enjoyed the movie and went for coffee afterward. It was our practice after watching a film to dissect all of the philosophical and technical aspects of the film, the coffee shop provided a perfect venue for our analysis.

While the concept of the Ark of the Covenant as some supernatural death ray was a little difficult to deal with, we soon settled on the appeal of the movie being its simple plot and non-stop adventure. Not much philosophy but a lot of fun.

The real reason for the get together came out over the second cup of coffee. Charlie became silent for a moment, a rare event to be sure, and then asked me why I was entering the monastery? I was his brother and he didn't want to lose me to some cloister. Couldn't I follow my spiritual calling outside of the monastery?

His questions caught me short but they were not new. I had been wrestling with them for many months. So, I tried to draw on my meditations on the topic and give him an honest and open answer, even if I was not very clear.

“Charlie, I’m just visiting the monastery. I’ll just be an observer. I’ll be there on an extended retreat. I’m trying to figure out if I even want to join the monastery. It has an attraction to me but I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be doing. I’m going to focus my attention while I’m there on getting a sense of what God wants of me. I’m not making any commitment.

“Even if I do join the monks, you are not losing a brother. I’ll always be your brother. I may not be able to hang around with you as much as we do now but when I was in Peace Corps we didn’t hang around much either. At some point everyone has to make some life commitment and move in that direction. I’m just trying to figure out what God wants me to do, where and how I’m to live out my commitment.”

“Theo, part of the problem is that being a monk just doesn’t make any sense to me. I understand the importance of prayer, reflection, and contemplation. I understand that there is a place for theology and people devoted to ministry. Being a monk seems so self-centered. They live off by themselves and their lives seem such a waste in the long run.” Charlie offered as an after thought, almost as if he was finally confessing what was really on his mind.

Having known Barti, Fr. Timothy and other monks over the years I understood the value of the monastery almost instinctively. Charlie’s challenge was to translate that instinctive understanding into something that he would understand. It was not an easy challenge!

“Charlie, is life is more than just feeding our faces? Are there values more important than self-interest? Is meaning defined only by our material nature or is there something more? About all that most of us can do is to throw ourselves in the direction of materialism or spirituality and hope that we made the right choice.

“Monks are men that devote themselves to confronting these questions every moment of their lives. They have chosen the path of spirituality and find life’s meaning there. If we judge their choice and its consequences by the criteria of wealth and self-interest, then their choice is foolish. Few experience fame. None can claim any material benefit beyond what they share with the others in their community. When they die, they are laid in the ground and there is no family or children to carry on their name or memory. They are failures in the eyes of society.

“Yet, among the monks that I have known, I have found men of compassion, willing to listen to me. They haven’t offered advice most times but have always been willing to listen and to question me, until some insight emerged from my confusion. I have found men who struggle to find new ways to serve God. I have found men who are not ashamed of their love affair with God and keep it alive through prayer. I have found men who have explored their lives in detail, discovering the lines written there by God. I have found men I like and respect much more often among monks than among any gathering of successful businessmen, celebrities, or politicians. It seems to me that on these simple criteria alone the monks have a better handle on finding meaning in life than much of society. I’m attracted to that and want to find out if there is anything more to the attraction than admiration for people like Barti Del Calle or Fr. Timothy.”

Charlie sat drinking his coffee silently for a couple of minutes, apparently thinking about what I told him. Then he turned to me and said, “Theo, do what you feel is necessary. I trust you to do what is best. Just remember that you are my brother and I love you. My prayers will be with you.”

The rest of May went by quickly. I was busy at work with the grant application that would be submitted to the US Department of Public Health the first week of June. The forms were endless and required information that had to be obtained from dozens of agencies throughout the region. The basic plan for the application had been known for several months but now, with the permission of the grant advisory board, we translated it into the bureaucratic language of grant applications. We frequently worked late that month and more than a few meditation sessions were missed. However, on the day it had to be mailed, we brought it to the post office, had it certified, and sent it on its way to Washington, DC.

June was the opposite of May. The grant application having been sent the first week of June, the rest of the month was quite relaxed. I attended a workshop in Chicago and made evaluation visits to several of our grant sponsored programs in the southern counties of the region. The slower pace allowed me to catch up on my meditation practice. I also did some letter writing, finally getting a response off to Tabitha. The month went by quickly and then it was July and time to head to the Abbey of the Genesee.

Chapter Three: School is in session

Piffard is so small that if you blink driving along route 63 you might miss it. The only sign of a village is a group of houses clustered around an intersection on route 63, about three miles before you enter the town of Geneseo. There is a state college in Geneseo, so the town is more substantial. At one of the intersections is a sign that says, “Abbey of the Genesee”, with an arrow pointing to the right. Having made the turn, you discover a vast farm with the road running through the center of it. About a third of a mile down the road, you make a left turn and find yourself in the parking lot next to the monastery proper. As you walk in the front door there is a reception room to the right, where one can purchase books, tapes, Monk’s bread and other treats made by the monks; or simply gather and share conversation. If one turns left at the front door, a short walk along the hallway leads one into the monastery chapel.

At 4:30pm on Friday, June 27, 1981 I found myself in the reception room waiting for Fr. James. I had been instructed to meet him there at the exact time and date. The traffic between Rochester and Piffard was light coming down, so I was there about ten minutes ahead of time. After glancing at the bookshelves to see if there was anything I hadn’t already read, I sat down in one of the chairs near the window that opened on the parking lot and a beautiful view of the Abbey grounds. Fr. James was a few minutes late, apologizing and mentioning something about a problem in the bakery. He went on to explain that for the time being I would be sleeping in Bethlehem House. The monastery was full at the time with the resident monks and a few monastic visitors from Nigeria.



Bethlehem House was the original building used as a monastery on the site of the Abbey, when the monks first arrived in 1951. As they were able to complete the main monastery and move in, Bethlehem House was converted to a guest house for retreatants. It was within walking distance of the main monastery and was very pleasant. It seemed a bit more homey than the larger and more formal main facility. I was given room 4 off the main hallway of Bethlehem House. I had easy access to the chapel, library, refectory and front door.

Fr. James explained that I was invited to take part in each of the gatherings for the Liturgy of the Hours in the monastery Chapel. Vigils was at 2:30am each morning. Morning prayer was at 6:00am. There would be the mid-day prayer at noon. Sext and None (9:00am and 2:00pm) I could pray on my own. Vespers was at 4:45pm each day. Night prayer was at 7:00pm. Between Vigils and morning prayer, it was common practice to devote time to *lectio divina*; that is, meditation on Scripture or other inspirational writing. From 7:00am until noon there would be time for working in the Abbey bakery or on the farm and for private prayer. The work time in the afternoon was shorter and more time was given to private prayer. I was expected to be in the Abbey for the Liturgy of the Hours and to do my work assignment. Other times I could remain at the abbey, wander around the grounds or return to Bethlehem House at my discretion. I was

expected to take meals with the monks. Though, if I was hungry at night, I was welcome to raid the Bethlehem House refectory for coffee or a snack. Mass was usually celebrated either along with the noon Liturgy of the Hours or at Vespers. I was to check the posted schedule to be sure what day Mass was at noon and what day it was at vespers. Beginning on the following Monday, I was to meet with Fr. James each Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 3:00pm for a conference. As used in the monastic setting, a conference usually referred to a meeting with a spiritual director for instruction and conversation on the topic of your spiritual health. Having informed me of all this, Fr. James suggested that we go into vespers, as the bell calling everyone to evening prayer began ringing.

That weekend was strange. I was already used to the schedule and rhythm of life at the abbey, as I spent many a weekend there the two years prior to this. What was strange was having access to the cloister. I was assigned a stall in the monks section of the Abbey church for the Liturgy of the Hours. I worked and ate with the monks. I was a bit self-conscious. I was unsure of myself, as I didn't know all of the little routines that the monks fell into simply by living and praying with each other for many years. I sometimes felt as if I was stumbling over myself in the Church. I felt incompetent in the bakery and more of a hinderance to the monks than a help.

Fr. James had an office deep within the cloister. It took me a couple of tries before I could figure out all the twists and turns to get there but Monday afternoon precisely at 3:00pm I knocked on his door. He opened it and invited me in. Pushing aside some papers on the table he used as a desk, he invited me to have a seat. He began by asking me about the weekend and how it went for me. I admitted to my self-consciousness at stumbling over myself and not knowing what to do. He explained that such feelings were quite normal. I have been dropped into the middle of a community with a long history and ways of doing things that need to be learned. I would catch on quickly. After several minutes of chit-chat about my efforts to settle in at the monastery, he proceed on to discuss the main topic of our meeting that day—the history of monasticism and the Trappists in particular.

“The Gospels describe the disciples leaving all in order to follow Jesus. These men and women encountered Jesus and were changed. Their happiness was to be found in being with Jesus and doing what he asked of them. After Christ's death, resurrection and ascension into heaven, his disciples found their happiness in leading others to discover Jesus.

“This required great courage and commitment. Not only would family and friends reject them for turning away from the traditions with which they were familiar; following Christ became a crime punishable by death. A believer did not take his or her faith lightly, as there was a very good chance he they would be called upon to die because of it.

“After Christianity became an accepted religion under Constantine, it was no longer dangerous to profess faith in Christ. In fact, being a Christian was a good way to gain favor with the Emperor. It was wonderful that Christians could now openly practice their faith and that many people were now accepting Jesus Christ. Yet, some believers were frustrated. They still wanted to give their lives to Jesus, leaving behind everything to follow him, as did the first Christians.

“Throughout history there have been those who live at the edge of society, seeking to gain experience of the divine through ascetical practices. They fast and

undertake great deprivations. They dedicate their lives to prayer and meditation, all in the hope that they might experience enlightenment. While we most often associate ascetics with India, the middle east has always had its share of ascetics as well. The Esceenes were a Jewish ascetic community that existed at the time of Christ. Stoic hermits had long been established throughout the Hellenic and Roman Empires. Roman neo-Platonic ascetics sought to contemplate the unitive nature of reality. Before them Greek Pathagoreans sought to experience the music of the spheres in their contemplative practice.

“Today we think of ascetics as grim-faced fanatics who undertake extreme deprivation for some religious purpose. That is not what the word meant to the people of the third and fourth centuries. Asceticism simply meant someone who is in training, as an athlete would submit to physical discipline in order to prepare himself for a competition. For the Christian, being an ascetic simply meant someone who is committed was dedicated to his calling as a Christian. In this sense, every Christian should be an ascetic.

“The ascetic tradition became an attractive, if controversial alternative to martyrdom. With peace throughout the Empire and the Emperor a defender of Christians, martyrdom was no longer an option. Christian ascetics began to appear; some living their commitment in the midst of towns and villages, while others sought out of the way places. Those who sought solitude in the deserts and mountains became known as “monks”, which means solitary dweller. The greatest concentration of monks was in the Sinai desert and the Arabian Peninsula. Some, like Anthony, were hermits. Others formed communities of ascetics.

“Before long these ascetics became known for their wisdom and their total commitment to Christ. Books were written about them and young men from Rome, Gaul and Britain headed to the Eastern desert in order to experience this form of Christian asceticism. Eventually, some of these young men, like Cassian, returned to their native lands and established the experiment of Christian asceticism in Europe.

“The results were mixed. The difficulty was in finding a realistic balance between focusing exclusively upon the transcendent and the mundane reality of living in this world. Founders of communities wrote sets of rules to structure their communities and allow everyone to live together while also seeking God.

“The most effective of the rules, and the most reasonably balanced, was that developed by Benedict of Nursia. He was the son of a Roman nobleman. This young man was in love with Christ and desired to give his whole life to the Lord. He was influenced by Cassian’s writings and became involved in the monastic movement in Italy. He developed a rule of life that was both spiritual and realistic. His rule caught on and many monasteries adopted it. By the year 1,000 most European monasteries were organized under the rule of St. Benedict.

“During the Dark Ages the European monasteries were a bastion of learning and were one of the primary resources for the Church in ministering to its people. Rather than being out of the way places, monasteries became focal points for the life of the Church. With this came wealth and power, which was inconsistent with the basic charism of monks. It was also during this time that secular political power became particularly influential in the Church. In some regions, the local nobility appointed their sons as abbots of the monasteries, even if their sons had no vocation to the monastic life and refused to let go of the pomp and pleasure of the palace.

“The eleventh century brought a broad disgust with the corruption rampant in the monasteries, where few seemed to pay any attention to the rule of Benedict or even to the Bible. Several reform movement arose at this time. The three most influential were the Camaldolese, the Carthusians and the Cistercians. Each sought to return to the purity and ascetic rigor of the early days of Christian monasticism. Our concern is with the Cistercians.

“In the Burgundy region of France, in the Diocese of Langres, was a Benedictine monastery known as Molesmes. The abbot of this monastery was called Dom Robert. He initiated a number of reforms in this monastery, trying to promote a way of life that was more faithful to the rule of Benedict and the Gospels. He was frustrated by the resistance he encountered and the slowness with which the reforms were being implemented. So, in 1098, Dom Robert led a group of 21 monks, who felt as he did about the need for reform, out of Molesmes. Their goal was to found a reformed monastery where the rule of Benedict would be honored faithfully. They were given land in the neighboring Diocese of Chalons. The land was in Citeaux, a rugged, out of the way place that could serve as a desert for the monks.

“It was not easy at first. The monks back at Molesmes complained that they had been abandoned by their abbot and obtained a decree from the Pope ordering Robert to return to Molesmes after only one year at Citeaux. He was succeeded at Citeaux by Dom Alberic. The community did not grow and continued in a precarious condition. When Dom Alberic died he was succeeded by Dom Stephen Harding, an English member of their community. Stephen protected the monastery from the attempts of secular rulers to exert control over the lives of the monks. Enough time had passed as well, so that the spiritual richness of Citeaux were apparent to anyone who wished to look. The number of vocations increased under Stephen and the wisdom of the reform begun by Dom Robert was proven.

“A young nobleman of southern France came to Citeaux bringing a group of his like-minded friends, all wishing to become monks. The youth was named Bernard. He was gifted with a brilliant mind and a great soul. Under the guidance of Stephen, Bernard developed into a very gifted monk. Several years later when there were so many monks at Citeaux that it was decided to start another monastery at Clairvaux, Bernard was selected as abbot of the new monastery. Given the boost by St. Stephen Harding and St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the Cistercian reform prospered. Within a century Cistercian monasteries were considered a bastion of fidelity to the Gospels. During the 12th and 13th century they were influential beyond their numbers in the reform the papacy and the Church. The greatest spiritual writers and theologians of the era were found among the Cistercians. Even in our own day, the influence of the Cistercian, Thomas Merton, on Catholic spirituality in America and Europe is tremendous. Younger Cistercian writers, like Basil Pennington and Thomas Keating, promise that the influence of Cistercian writers will continue.

“Success tends to breed laxity, as one becomes comfortable with one’s accomplishments. Success also attracts the multitudes and before long the Cistercian communities were being drawn into ministeries that, while necessary, were not consistent with the Cistercian charism. By the 17th century there was a growing desire among many monks for a reform of the Cistercian order and a return to the strict adherence to the rule of Benedict. This reform was centered in the Abbey La Trappe and began under the

influence of Armand Jean le Bouthillier, known as the Abbe de Rance. Initially a political appointee, he discovered he had a monastic vocation. Like Bernard, he was gifted and took a leading role in the reform movement of his time. The La Trappe monastery became a center for reform within the Cistercian order. Eventually the name of the monastery became associated with the reform; hence the name Trappist.”

I was not a stranger to Fr. James review of the history of monasticism. Barti and I had talked of it. As a preparation for this period as an observer at the abbey, I read everything on the Trappists that I could get my hands on; much of it giving a summary of the history of the order.

Reminded of the importance of asceticism to the life of a monk, I threw myself into prayer, work and fasting with extra vigor. I was determined to be a good monk; totally committed to Christ.



Though I could also appreciate the pull of spiritual inertia causing me to desire more food or to grow bored with my prayers. There were also times when I wondered how cleaning raisins for monks’ raisin bread was any more spiritual than working on a grant application or evaluating the success of programs the cancer center funded in the region.

The days passed quickly and before long I was again seated in the office of Fr. James. Today he was going to speak to me on the purpose of monastic life.

“In his Rule, St. Benedict describes the monastery as a ‘school of love’. This may seem strange at first but there is no better description of what a monastery is meant to be. Our spiritual life is rooted in God’s love for us and our loving response to the God who first loved us. Everything that we do as Christians and as monks is an expression of this love relationship between God and us. A school is a place to learn. It is where we draw on the experience of others and practice our lessons, so that they become part of who we are. As a school of love, the monastery is a place where we can come to understand God’s love for us and to discover ways to respond in love to God’s love. This comes not just from instruction but from the daily experience of the monk. One learns of love in the give and take of community life. One learns of love in discovering God’s grace in the insignificant and ordinary aspects of life.

“Finding the sacred in the ordinary is particularly a Cistercian charism. We consciously seek to stay rooted in a natural, simple and unsophisticated way of life. There are few Cistercian scholars. Most Cistercians are quite happy working on the monastery farm or in the bakery. Such simple work is not perceived as degrading but as an opportunity to experience God’s presence most directly. Benedict insisted that no moment is too small for closeness to God. Everything in life matters. Holiness is not off in the future but is experienced here and now.

“I am sure that you have noticed in the Rule of St. Benedict that there is relatively little discussion on ‘holy’ topics. Rather, Benedict is concerned over who will do the dishes and who will read at meals. He is concerned with how to admonish a brother

gently or how to balance prayer and labor. He teaches us that each of these very ordinary aspects of monastic life are important. Love is to be found in how we treat one another, encourage one another, build up one another and work together. As monks we encounter God in the ordinary events and duties of daily life. We do not seek extraordinary visions or special consolations. They are relatively meaningless experiences unless they are joined with and serve a genuinely loving life.”

Fr. James kept our conferences brief but meaty introductions to the monastic life. I looked forward to the conferences with Fr. James every other day, as they reminded me of conversations I used to have with Barti over similar topics. A few days later he discussed *lectio divina*. At first I thought this was going to be dry but very quickly I got a sense of the passion he found in the topic.

“Modern people are so inundated with words that we have lost a sense of their true value. Our libraries are filled with books and magazines. We always have something to read within reach. The average high school student reads more books than most scholars and doctors of philosophy ever read up until only a few hundred years ago. To the modern mind, words are little more than a mechanism for communication, like a telephone or a television. They serve a function and have little importance other than that function.

“Words were held in greater respect in the days prior to the printing press and the proliferation of reading material. They were not just cyphers on paper but were experienced more often as spoken. Even written works, such as Scripture, were proclaimed to the public orally. At a time when most people were incapable of reading, their only exposure to Scripture came through the spoken word.

“We may have a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of Scripture today than in years past but it still retains the character of sacred ground, a place where we encounter the divine Mystery. The words of Scripture are like signs, pointing to the deep mystery that lies beyond our comprehension. As we reflect on these words, they echo in our hearts and minds, slowly revealing their hidden reality to us in the way they transform us. Gradually we come to embody the truths hidden in the Mystery to which the words of Scripture point.

“*Lectio divina* is the practice of sacred reading. It is reading but a style of reading quite different from what we usually practice. When we read a text book our goal is to identify the key information and absorb it. When we read a novel our goal is to allow the words to become transparent, so that the scene described becomes a temporary reality for us. The goal of *lectio divina* is to see ourselves and the world around us through God’s eyes.

“We read slowly to savor the words. We allow the words of scripture to roll around in our mind, echoing and jarring loose half formed thoughts. Important thoughts rise to the surface of our consciousness. Occasionally many different thoughts will come together in a moment of deep insight and the meaning of Scripture opens to us, even if only for a brief few minutes.

“*Lectio divina* moves below the surface of our consciousness and the surface of what we are reading. We allow the words of Scripture to connect with our lives so that they are no longer are just words on a page. Rather the words give expression to the deepest meanings and yearnings of our soul.”

I told Fr. James of a time when I was in the islands and spent the greater part of a day trying to read through one chapter in the First letter of Peter. Each phrase touched my soul; resonated within me on so many different levels. It seemed as if many different unrelated parts of my life came together as I read the words. He agreed that the experience is a powerful example of *lectio divina*. He encouraged me to make *lectio divina* a daily practice. I may not experience such a dramatic example of it as often as I want but even the routine and ordinary practice of *lectio divina* is important.

Beginnings are always difficult for me. I throw myself into something but very quickly I am unsure of what I've done. It was just like this in the islands. I was gung-ho about going to the islands but two months into my stay in the islands the prospect of another 22 months of the same was horrendous! I guess it is just part of the adjustment process. By the end of the 22 months the islands were more home to me than Rochester.

I was starting to feel uncertain of the wisdom of a Trappist vocation, at least for me. With each passing day it was becoming more and more difficult for me to get up for Vigils at 2:30am each morning. Packing bread and shoveling manure out of the barns had lost its romance only a week into my stay at the Abbey. I had a terrible singing voice and was afraid to raise it above a mumble in choir for fear that everyone would stare at the one who was ruining their beautiful chant. About the only monk-like quality I brought to the Abbey was my meditative practice. Even that was souring, as I was having a difficult time focusing.

By the end of the month Fr. James extended a standing invitation to return to the Abbey as a postulant. He didn't say that I had a vocation as a monk but he said that it would be worth exploring. He considered many of my difficulties a normal part of adjusting to the monastic life, as it was very different from life on the outside.

There was much of the Trappist life that I found attractive; the fellowship and community life, the rich spirituality of the monks, and the simplicity of their lifestyle all appealed to me. Yet, by the end of the month I didn't feel as if this was what God wanted of me. I didn't feel anything in particular. I left the Abbey at the end of the month thanking Fr. James for the invitation but without making any commitments on when or if I would accept the invitation.

Heading back to my apartment that evening, I stopped at my brother's place to pick up my key. He dropped by my apartment every few days while I was at the Abbey to pick up the mail and check on things. So when he gave me the key, he also gave me a shopping bag filled with mail. Instead of going to bed right away, I spent an hour or so sorting the mail into bills, advertisements, and correspondence; then I worked my way through the bills and correspondence. I signed checks to pay the bills. I tossed the advertisements unopened in the trash and read through the correspondence.

Among the correspondence I noticed a letter from Israel. Upon closer inspection I saw the return address to be Tabitha's apartment complex. However, the sender was F.M. Sabah. It took me a moment to make the connection, then I realized that the letter was from Tabitha's companion Fatima.

I was concerned. While Fatima was the one to put pen to paper in recent months, all of the recent letters from Tabitha were sent under Tabitha's name. The change was disconcerting. Upon opening the letter I realized that it was from Fatima, not Tabitha.

Dear Mr. Douglas,

During the past few months, since I have been a companion to Tabitha, I have come to consider her not only a close friend and teacher but also something of a grandmother to me. That is, I have come to love her and to cherish her, as I might my own grandmother. I want only what is best for her. Over the few months that I have been with her I have seen a steady deterioration of her strength and health. Her mind is as sharp as ever but her body steadily becomes weaker.

Tabitha speaks of you often. I believe that she wanted to visit with you and spoke of previous plans to make a visit to the States. Those plans were scrapped when her health deteriorated to the point that travel was impossible. From our conversations, I know that she would be very pleased to see you again.

I am writing this letter to inform you of her condition and her desires. I am doing this on my own, as she would be angry if she knew that I was sending this to you. However, I do not think that she will be alive many months longer. I assume that you also consider Tabitha to be a close friend and teacher. If you want to visit with her while there is still time, now is a good time to come to Joffa. Should you wait much longer, you may not see her again on this side of death.

Sincerely,

Fatima M. Sabah

The letter had been sent only a week earlier, so it must have just arrived. That was good. I looked through my book of phone numbers for several minutes until I found the number for Tabitha's apartment. I was going to call but realized that it was the middle of the night in Israel. It would be best if I called early in the morning our time, which would be late afternoon in Israel. So, I spent the next few minutes calling the airlines and arranging a flight for Israel. The soonest open flight was for the day after tomorrow, out of JFK airport in New York.

I would speak with my boss in the morning and make arrangements for another month. It was a slack time in our grant cycle so I didn't expect any problems, though my vacation time was exhausted. Any time off at this point was at my own expense. I had enough money saved over the past three years to pay for the trip and cover my expenses for a while.

Chapter Four: An Old Friend

The EL/AL flight to Israel was uneventful, except for a bit of turbulence over the Atlantic. I was more relaxed on this trip to Israel than I was six years earlier when Barti and I came on pilgrimage. I knew what to expect from the flight, so that helped. Also, I was just back from a month at the Abbey and that helped to quiet much of the inner noise.

Yet, my spirit was not entirely at rest, as I realized that this visit would be the last time I would see Tabitha alive. In the last six years this frail woman had become a tower of strength and guidance for me. Her care helped me to get through the shock of Barti's death and my own injuries. Her correspondence while I was in the islands as a Peace Corps Volunteer helped keep me going when everything else seemed to be falling apart. Even after returning to Rochester her letters and my occasional phone calls to her helped me to adjust to my changing life circumstances and to keep growing. I would miss her terribly.

I was pulled from my thoughts by the sound of excited applause and cheers. I looked out the window next to me, as applause could mean only one thing. We were flying relatively low over the sea headed toward the beach. As we passed the shore line shouts of joy were heard and the applause became intense. We were in the Holy Land.

The plane banked to the left and lined up with the runway. We were close enough to the ground already that we landed only minutes later. The plane taxied a good distance to the spot where it parked and then a tram came out to pick up the passengers and bring us to the baggage terminal. After a long delay, our baggage was finally removed from the plane and deposited on the belt where we removed it and placed it in our baggage carts. There was little change from the last time I went through customs at Lod Airport. The lines were still long and the inspection was slow and thorough. I was on the ground for over an hour and a half by the time I got through customs and entered the main terminal.

Security seemed stepped up a notch from my last visit but this was understandable. Back in June the Israelis bombed a nuclear reactor in Bagdad, claiming that it would soon be capable of generating radiocative materials for nuclear bombs. The Israelis feared for their continued existence, if any Moslem nation in the area gained nuclear capability. They were not about to allow that to happen, at least before they had atomic bombs. Everyone expected some reprisal, either from Iraqi agents or from a Palestinian group acting in solidarity with the Iraqis. Israeli security was ready to deal with any such threat.

Perhaps I was naive but I was not particularly concerned with an attack. The Iraqis and Iranians were still at

war with each other and the Israeli intervention against the Iraqis could be viewed by the Iranians as a friendly act. It was just as likely that they would be the target of an Iraqi atom bomb as any Israeli city. The Syrians seemed to be focused on Lebanon and the



troubles there. The Egyptians, under Anwar Sadat, worked out a peace agreement with Menachem Begin and that seemed to be working just fine.

Lod Airport is the main commercial airport for Israel and is located on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. It is about a half hour drive from the airport to downtown Tel Aviv. I made reservations to stay at the Dizengoff Hotel. It was the same hotel we stayed in when Barti and I came on pilgrimage six years before. It is in downtown Tel Aviv but in an area that caters to the growing tourist industry. The hotel was across the street from the beach and afforded a wonderful view of the Mediterranean. I didn't have much luggage, only one suitcase and a flight bag. I was tempted to take the bus into town and save some money. However, I figured that would be penny-wise and pound-foolish, since I could afford the taxi fare and would be more comfortable.

I was standing in the taxi line, awaiting my turn to be assigned to a taxi when I heard my name being called. "Mr. Douglas, Are you Mr. Theo Douglas?" I turned to see who called and found a woman in her late twenties walking toward me. She wore a summer dress, since it is hot there during summer and it was the first week of August. Yet, she impressed me as a very business-like woman. She appeared to be of Palestinian or Arab ancestry, with almond eyes and a light olive complexion. She was about 5' 6" tall and attractive.

"Yes, I'm Theo Douglas. I assume that you're Ms. Fatima Sabah." I responded. Her voice was familiar, as I spoke with her over the phone after I received her letter. We hadn't arranged for her to pick me up but she was the only one, aside from the hotel booking clerk, who knew that I was arriving. So, she seemed the most logical choice for the person calling my name.

"Correct. I have a car over in the parking area. I can bring you to your hotel and then take you to see Tabitha, if you wish."

"Thank you very much. I look forward to seeing Tabitha as soon as possible."

We made a brief stop at the hotel, so I could check in and change my clothes after the long flight. I arrived in Israel around nine in the morning, with the long delays in baggage claims and customs, it was close to noon by the time we reached the Dizengoff



Hotel. Ms. Sabah suggested that food was available at Tabitha's apartment, if I could restrain my hunger until we reached there. I was hungry but not so hungry that I couldn't wait another few minutes. About twenty minutes later, showered and in fresh clothing, I joined her in the hotel lobby and we headed off to see Tabitha.

As we drove she explained that Tabitha had a stroke six months ago. It didn't effect her higher functions but it did take away her ability to walk. She had been getting weak before the stroke. It was as if her time had come and her body was beginning to shut down. She was having problems with her kidneys. Her bones were weak with osteoporosis and she had little appetite. She had been a slight woman for as long as I knew her but now, according to Fatima, she was barely there.

As we turned the corner I caught site of Tabitha's apartment and had a rush of excitement. The last time I was there was at the end of our pilgrimage, the night before leaving Israel. The next day I went on to England and then back to America. She was a spry early eighties at the time. The next time I saw her was in the Las Vegas hospital after the accident and then when she visited me at my sister's place in Oregon. She seemed more tired these times but the travel and Barti's death could account for that.

Fatima pulled the car into the parking spot next to the door of the apartment. She got out and lead the way into the building calling out to Tabitha as she opened the door, letting her know that we had arrived. I followed her through the living room and kitchen onto the little patio behind the apartment where Tabitha first told me the story of her life and adventures. She sat in her wheel chair, her legs wrapped in a blanket and with a shawl around her shoulders. Her eyes were still those of a young woman, filled with life and spirit; but the rest of her had aged. She was visibly thinner and weaker than the last time I saw her. There was a slight tremble in her hands and head, possibly the onset of Parkinson's disease or some other form of neural degeneration.

I leaned down and gave her a big hug.

"It's good to see you, Tabitha! Too many years have passed since I saw you last." I said to Tabitha, holding her hands as I dropped into the chair next to her.

"My dear Theo, you are always welcome in my home. Though if too many years have passed since last we met, it is only because you have not come to visit this old woman. I excuse you for the two and a half years you spent in the Pacific Islands but what of the other years?" Tabitha scolded me with a smile.

"Well, I am here now and ready to do penance for my past failures. *Mea culpa! Mea culpa! Mea maxima culpa!*"

"You are forgiven, Theo." She leaned closer and gave me a maternal little kiss on my forehead. The give and take of our playful greeting over, I attempted to broach the subject that burdened my heart.

"Tabitha, how are you feeling?" I asked rather sheepishly, fearing this was a subject that may not be welcome.

"Considering that my body is falling apart with old age, I feel quite good. Though I am sure that my physician or even Fatima would tell you a different story. Honestly, this is a particularly good day for me. Not only has a dear friend come to visit but my usual aches and pains have decided to take a rest in celebration."

Fatima left Tabitha and I to talk while she went into the kitchen to prepare a late lunch for us. Once she was out of earshot, Tabitha leaned toward me and said in little above a whisper.

"She is a very nice young lady. Fatima has become my guardian angel. I couldn't survive without her. She asks nothing for her services, except for food and lodging here with me. She is actually a lawyer, a recent graduate, who represents the poor at little or no cost to them. Staying with me takes care of her immediate needs. Expenses are covered by the Patriarch. She has such energy and such a good heart!"

I had no idea that Fatima was a lawyer. I knew that she was the daughter of some branch of the patriarch's family but I didn't expect a professional. Though the arrangement was ingenious. Fatima provided the home care that Tabitha needed and Tabitha provided food and shelter that made Fatima's *pro bono* legal work possible.

In a more natural speaking voice, Tabitha continued the conversation. Her voice was slower and weaker than usual.

“Smell the sea air! It is wonderful! I have always loved the scent of the sea here in Joffa. It reminds me of far away places where I once lived, as well as my friends spread throughout the world. It connects me to them.

It is the little things, like the smell of the air, that I have come to cherish. When Fatima pushes me around the neighborhood in my wheel chair I am surprised at how beautiful it is. There is music in the air, along with the scent of the sea and the oranges waiting for shipment. I hear the voices of the men working at the docks. There are voices coming from the cafes and the shops; such different voices, like a symphony. Oh and the light! There is bright, golden light everywhere. Everything seems alive; playing with the light, casting shadows, blowing in the breeze. There is such wonder and beauty. I try to take in everything, be aware of everything around me. One good thing about my condition is that I treat every day like it could be my last; as it could well be my last day. Yet, in the time remaining I still pray that God will make use of me, will make me a more perfect image of my creator.”

I honestly tried to imagine how she might be any better than she already was but I could not. If I ever knew anyone who lived a more mindful and spiritually rich life than Tabitha, I could not think of the person. Number one on my list of things to do was to be more like Tabitha from that moment onward.

Fatima rolled a little cart on to the patio and began placing plates of cheese, bread, vegetables and fruits before us. After just completing a month at a Trappist abbey, I no longer had an instinctive expectation of meat at the noonday and evening meal. The food was delicious. I had forgotten how good the fresh oranges and vegetables of Israel taste. On pilgrimage, the wonderful taste of the food was a high point of my time in Israel. Fatima served humus and pita bread, another favorite of mine. I was hungry and I ate with gusto. Tabitha smiled at the obvious pleasure I brought to eating what was placed before me. She suggested that I was acting on her advice to enjoy the wonder and beauty around us. Though I noticed that she ate very little. After we ate I cleared away the dishes, while Fatima gave Tabitha her medicine.

Once we were all seated with Tabitha, I mentioned that sitting on the patio reminded me of the time on pilgrimage when she told Barti and I the story of her life. It was a favorite memory and I told her so. I particularly admired the courage and idealism of her husband. I asked her if she still thought of Ladi much after all these years. There was a far away look in her eyes. After a few moments she answered.

“There has never been a day since I married him in 1912 that I have not thought of Ladi. He is still the love of my life, even though we have been separated by death for almost forty years. Even little Matteus, our son, is often in my thoughts. Time doesn't heal the pain of losing someone you have loved deeply, it only fills your life with distractions. Perhaps he will come for me soon. We can be together again. There are times that I feel his presence so strongly. It is as if he is in the room with me; silent, but keeping me company, waiting for me. If death means reunion with Ladi, then I look forward to it.”

I realized that I had placed my foot firmly in my mouth with the question about Ladi, so I wasn't sure of what to say next without making the situation more painful for Tabitha than it already was. However, neither she nor Fatima seemed particularly

discomforted by the question. Perhaps, I was reacting from my American fear of death. As I thought about it, I envied Tabitha such a deep love that decades after Ladi's death their love was still so strong. Honestly, at that point, I was beginning to doubt that I would ever meet the love of my life.

Forging ahead, I asked Tabitha a question that had been bothering me.

"How do you know that someone is the love of your life? How did you know that Ladi was your great love?"

"Ah, dear Theo, you ask such questions!" She smiled and patted me on the arm. "When I first met Ladi, I was not particularly impressed. He seemed to take himself a bit too seriously, as if he alone was going to change the world. He was so intense.

"My father was an engineer and my mother a teacher, at least before my brothers and I were born. My older brother, Karol, became a surgeon and my younger brother, Anton, a priest. So you can see that education was highly valued in the Czarkowski household. Czarkowski was my maiden name. I was 18 when I first met Ladi and in the last year of my secondary education. I was very well read for a girl of that era and quite proud of my accomplishments. Anton had Ladi as his instructor in ethics and had fallen under his spell. He spoke to our parents and before I realized what was happening an invitation had been given to Ladi to come to dinner at our house. I believe that the reason behind the invitation was that my mother was beginning to worry that at 18 I was becoming an old maid and would never marry. She probably had cause to worry, as most girls my age were already engaged and I did not even have a regular gentleman caller.

"Ladi was polite when we met but much more focused on making a good impression with my parents than with sweeping me off my feet. He was a young man and it never hurt to have the support of a person with connections in the government. Since my father was an engineer for the Krakow water works, he did have contacts. Ladi became a regular visitor at our home in the months that followed, usually at my mothers urging.

"We began to converse and get to know each other a bit but I had no special interest in him. At that point I was hoping to go to university myself, or at least to the teachers college as my mother had done. I wanted to be free to pursue my education and not be burdened by marriage and a husband. So, I entertained Ladi when he visited more to keep peace with my mother than because of any interest on my part.

"Invariably our conversations would turn to matters of philosophy, theology or politics. That was all he ever thought about. He drew me into these conversations seeking my opinions and the reasoning behind them. I challenged him to justify the reasoning behind his opinions as well. He accepted my challenges with grace and always answered them as best he could. He respected my abilities and encouraged me in my dreams of university. While his initial intensity put me off, as I got to know him I came to admire the depth of his passion when it came to the future of Poland. Our mutual admiration grew until much to my parent's delight, Ladi asked for my hand in marriage.

"Ladi was my best friend by the time we married. Marriage brought a depth and intimacy to our relationship that enriched it so much more. I was happy. I had committed myself to him, as he did to me, and we were ready and willing to live the rest of our lives in fidelity as husband and wife.

"There were difficult times in our marriage. Certainly it was difficult when Ladi and I were living in Warsaw after the First World War. He was so busy with his work at

the Ministry of State that we grew apart. He loved his work, at times I felt that he loved his work more than he loved me or the children. When Matteus died I was devastated not only because my little sweetheart was gone but because I felt so alone.

“No offense, Theo, but men are slow to realize what is going on around them, even the best and the brightest of them. Matteus’ death was hard on Ladi as well. However, it forced him to pay attention to me and his children. When faced with the glitter and power of the Ministry of State or the needs of his family, he chose his family.

“Having fulfilled his dream of helping to build a free Poland, he turned to another dream he had long nurtured—teaching philosophy at university. In order to do this, he had to take a doctorate. So, upon returning to Krakow he began graduate studies at the Jagiellonian. That year in Krakow was wonderful. Our marriage flourished and our love deepened. The following year, when Ladi went to Munich to pursue his studies, the darkness that encompassed me after Mateus’ death returned. I didn’t deny him his studies. He was gifted and his future obviously involved university teaching and research. I wanted to support his dream but I needed him as well and he was in Munich.

“As you may remember, good came from this dark period in my life, as this was the time that I began studies with Fr. Zaetawa. With his spiritual guidance and encouragement, I began to deal with the death of my son and the strain in my marriage.

“I can not say that there was any one time that I experienced an epiphany and knew without a doubt that Ladi was the love of my life. That insight emerged slowly over the years of our marriage, as we shared common joys and sorrows. This insight emerged as we moved beyond the difficult times, learning and growing from them. Philosophy and the university were always a focus of Ladi’s interest and energy. However, rather than be jealous of them, I pursued my interests, as Ladi had done. As I grew intellectually and spiritually, I found that Ladi and I had even more to share than before. Our marriage took on a new depth and brilliance. Neither of us was dependent upon the other, yet we shared our lives, supporting and building each other up. That he was the love of my life and I the love of his was simply a fact that anyone could see. But it was a fact that emerged over many years of marriage.

“So, it seems that I can not really answer your question. There is no way that you can tell before hand that someone is the love of your life. By the time you marry you should at least be able to commit yourself to this person in fidelity for the rest of your life. This is a big enough commitment for anyone and should be considered with utmost seriousness. After that, it is a matter of living your life with this person, helping your mate to grow and being willing to grow as a person yourself. It is a matter of letting go of your expectations and learning to love and communicate with the person you married. It is a matter of building a life together and weathering all of the storms that intrude on that life together.

“Perhaps one of the reasons there are so many divorces nowadays is because couples focus on finding the love of their life. If the person to whom they are married doesn’t meet their expectations, then they divorce and try again with someone else. They will never find the love of their lives. They are seeking a fantasy of their own making. They would be better off finding someone with whom they could build a marriage and then in the work of building a marriage they might discover that their spouse is their true love.”

Chapter Five: Another story

By the time Tabitha finished answering my question, she was visibly tired. Fatima suggested that Tabitha take a nap. Once Tabitha was sleeping, Fatima took me back to my hotel. I hadn't rested since my arrival that morning and hadn't slept the night before because I was enroute from New York. I was tired. The thought of an early dinner and a good night's sleep was attractive.

The drive back to the hotel was uneventful. I was too tired to be much of a conversationalist. However, I did manage to thank Fatima for letting me know of Tabitha's precarious state of health, so that I could visit with her. I also thanked her for driving me around and for the delicious lunch we enjoyed. She acknowledged my appreciation but made it clear that her primary concern was for Tabitha. She knew her well enough to conclude that a visit from me would be good medicine for Tabitha. I was a little surprised that I held such a special place in Tabitha's heart, after all I had only known her for little more than six years. Fatima explained.

"After Tabitha retired to Joffa she found the adjustment difficult at first. With her husband and both sons dead, one to influenza as a child and the other in combat during World War II, she had few contacts left. Her younger brother was a priest in America and her daughter was a grandmother herself by that time. They had their own lives. There were occasional visits but Tabitha was pretty much on her own. She kept busy in retirement with voluntary relief work for the Patriarch but there was an emptiness in her life.

"You know how important to Barti was his relationship with Tabitha, well it was important to her as well. She saw Barti as a son, since he was only a few years younger than Matteus. She doted on Barti. His death was difficult for her, as if her own child had died. She sees Barti as your spiritual father. Thus, you are something of a grandson to her. The correspondence between the two of you, especially during your years in Peace Corps, deepened that friendship and her sense of being a spiritual grandmother to you."

I brushed a tear from my eye and responded. "I always thought of Tabitha as a special friend and mentor, especially after Barti's death. She has always been important to me. I never realized that she considers me anything more than a young friend that she was helping along his journey."

As she pulled up to the front of the hotel, Fatima said, "Theo, to be a young friend that Tabitha is helping along his journey is no small thing."

The next morning I slept in until around 9:00am. I ate a nice breakfast at the hotel and then met Fatima and Tabitha at 11:30am. Tabitha had an appointment with her physician that morning, so once that was completed they stopped by the hotel and had me join them for the ride to Tabitha's apartment. We got Tabitha comfortably settled in a favorite chair near the window and then I prepared soup for lunch, at Fatima's instruction. She had a case in court that afternoon. I was drafted to take care of Tabitha while Fatima was busy practicing the legal profession.

There wasn't too much I could do to ruin the soup, so once it was prepared I served a bowl to Tabitha and sat down to lunch with her. She did well with the soup, though a couple of times I needed to help her with a napkin. I would have willingly spoon fed her if it was needed but Tabitha is a strong-willed and independent woman. If she was

capable of feeding herself, she was determined to do so. What she wanted was my company and that I gladly gave to her.

After we ate, I cleared the dishes and washed them. I was not about to leave dirty dishes for Fatima to clean. I was there to help, not be an added burden. Tabitha loved tea and there was a generous selection of herbal teas in the kitchen. The kitchen was stocked with herbal tea so she could continue to enjoy tea while avoiding the caffeine that wrecked havoc with her blood pressure. I fixed two cups of herbal tea and brought them into the living room where she sat in the overstuffed reclining chair that had become her special place in recent months. I moved the end table forward a little and put her cup of tea on it and then sat down to enjoy my tea.

When I looked at her, I noticed a few tears rolling down her cheek. I was concerned that she might be in pain and asked her if anything was wrong. She didn't answer me at first and I didn't push it. I wasn't going to badger her into saying anything. Eventually, she spoke in a quiet voice, almost as if she was unsure of herself.

"I'm afraid. I don't want to die. Here I am, the theologian and the spiritual mentor of many wonderful people, including yourself, and I am afraid to die. It's embarrassing but that is how I feel."

Working at an oncology center I came into contact with hundreds of people who were struggling with cancer. Such fear and concern is common. It is nothing of which to be ashamed. I told her this in a feeble attempt to comfort her. She gave me a wan smile and continued to talk.

"You are kind, Theo. When one comes face to face with death, faith becomes real. It loses its certitude and truly becomes a leap into mystery. When I take that leap it will either be into the arms of my beloved or into oblivion. I guess I am like everyone else, I want certitude. Faith is too scary, too much of a gamble."

When she paused, I tried to give voice to the thoughts and feelings that were gathering within me.

"Ever since I've known you, I could count on you for wisdom and a rock solid faith. Now is the time to call on that faith and trust in the wisdom that has been of such help to me and many others."

"Theo, I have freely shared with you and others what wisdom I gained over many years. I have relied on faith and it has seen me through many difficulties. Yet...when I was young I was often blessed with the joy that marks the presence of the Holy Spirit as I prayed. It seemed as if I was caught up into heaven and filled with the joy experienced by the angels and saints. Even when I was older and Fr. Zaetawa was my spiritual director, I could still experience such joy in prayer. That divine joy disappeared after Hitler's war. It seemed as if my heart became too hard for such grace or God abandoned me.

"As a theologian, I know better than to give in to such thoughts. St. John of the Cross speaks of the Dark Night of the soul. It is a time when one feels abandoned by God because the consolations of earlier years disappear and one seems to be struggling across an endless desert. All one can do is put one foot in front of the other and keep walking. While the experience may feel like the desert, in reality it is a greater immersion in the divine mystery. We reach the point where our concepts no longer have much meaning and we are face to face with mystery. This is a time of great progress because God is doing the work in our souls, hidden from view and without our interference. Even so, we experience it as a time of trial. I am tired of trials."

I wanted to say more to her, to make everything better, but I did not. Nothing I say could take away her pain and exhaustion. So, I simply put my hand on her arm and sat with her in silence and sipped my tea. After a while I noticed she was sleeping.

Fatima was home by 4:00pm. She was tired but happy, having obtained an amicable settlement between her client and the respondent just before the hearing. Apparently the respondent came to his senses and realized that a trial would go against him.

I had an early dinner of cheese, bread, fruits, rice and lamb prepared by the time she arrived. Since Tabitha slept most of the afternoon, I had plenty of time to cook. Tabitha seemed in better spirits after her nap and was able to eat some of the fruit and rice, with bits of lamb. Fatima told us a bit about her case and how she was able to resolve it for her clients as we ate. After dinner I served everyone wedges of Jaffa oranges with a big helping of orange sherbet. It was delicious!

Relaxing on Tabitha's overstuffed chairs, which were the main pieces of furniture in her living room of Tabitha's apartment, we got ready for a round of pleasant conversation. I had been quiet much of the day, so I was the obvious candidate to carry the conversation for a while.

Fatima asked Tabitha, "Didn't you tell me of some great adventure that our friend here enjoyed while he was in the islands? Do you think he would share that story with me?"

Tabitha smiled and responded. "Oh, it is a great adventure indeed! Theo, please, tell us of your great sea adventure in the islands. You know the one I'm talking about. You wrote me a letter about it afterwards."

I knew very well what story they wanted to hear. So, I cleared my throat and began to speak.

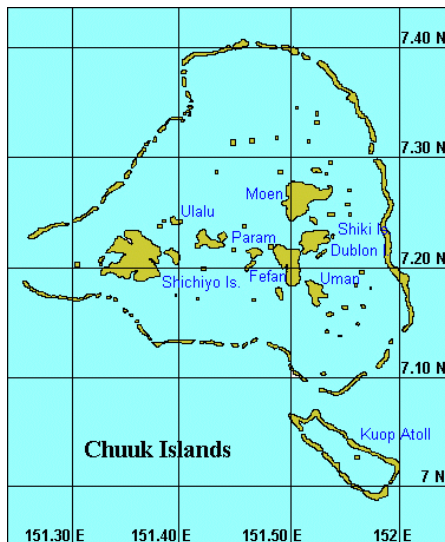
"When I joined Peace Corps I was sent to the district of Micronesia known as Truk. A few years later they changed the name to *Chuuk*, which reflects the local pronunciation of the name of the district. Any way, I spent most of my time in Truk putting one foot in front of the other and slowly plodding ahead. However, there were a few adventures that brought some excitement to life.

"On occasion wealthy tourists or professionals on contract in Truk, the physicians and lawyers primarily, would befriend Peace Corps Volunteers and invite them on weekend holidays. One time five of us were invited to go scuba diving and snorkeling with a group of tourists on the large catamaran that the hotel used for tourist charters. Most of what I remember from that outing was the wonder of being suspended in liquid space thirty or forty feet down with the ship floating above us. Coral and a graveyard of sunken Japanese ships from World War II spread out below. It was a magical feeling, like I was an angel hovering over the landscape; a two dimensional creature suddenly thrust into three dimensions.

"Another time we were invited for a holiday on one of the reef islands. The island was little more than an outcropping of coral and sand on the lagoon outer reef. It was owned by one of the Trukese clans and leased out to an American businessman who lived in Truk and used the island as a personal retreat. He built a small cottage from wood and thatch and had outfitted the island simply but comfortably. Every now and then he would

invite friends or some of the Peace Corps Volunteers out to the island for the weekend. It was a change of scenery and an opportunity to live the fantasy of an island paradise, after months of dealing with the reality.

“The island was at the opposite end of the lagoon from Mwan. It was about a two hour motor boat ride from Mwan to the reef island. Four of us were scheduled to leave at 9:00am Saturday morning, though it was almost 10:00am before we got started. The others left for the island just after work Friday afternoon but we stragglers had commitments Friday evening and couldn’t leave until Saturday.



“Our boat was substantial compared to most motor boats in the lagoon. The most common boat in the lagoon was of home made design knocked together with marine plywood and a 2x4 keel, covered in gray and red marine paint. It didn’t look like much but these home made boats usually got the job done and didn’t cost any more than a few hundred dollars in supplies, plus the price of an outboard engine..

“Our host arranged to have us brought over on his boat early Saturday morning. The first hour or so was quite pleasant, as we bounced over the choppy waves of the lagoon on our way to the reef island. The sun was shining but there was sufficient cloud cover to protect us from a bad sunburn. The clouds even allowed the sun’s rays to provide us with

a brilliant show of light and shadow. The color of the lagoon kept switching from deep blue, though the spectrum to light green depending on the depth of the water below. The radio played island tunes and our conversation was light.

“A little over an hour into the trip the sky began to cloud up and before long we were riding in a fine mist that quickly turned into a driving rain. It wasn’t the first time any of us had bounced across the lagoon in the driving rain, so we continued on unfazed. About fifteen minutes short of our goal the engine began to sputter and die. This wasn’t anything worrisome either, as it was quite common to have a mid-trip change of gas tanks on lagoon excursions, especially one of this distance. The driver pulled the gas line from the spent gas tank and attached it to the extra red tank he yanked from the boat’s storage compartment. He added part of a container of marine oil to the gas and tried to restart the engine. No luck. He pulled the gas line again and tried to clean it. After replacing it, the engine still wouldn’t start. He checked the spark plugs and ran through every troubleshooting procedure he could think of with no success.

“Truk lagoon is a bowl of tranquil water set in the deeper, more turbulent and open waters of the Pacific Ocean. Having engine problems in the lagoon was a relatively minor worry as you weren’t going any place and a quick radio call would get you all the help you needed. Even without a radio, you would eventually hit the reef or one of the lagoon islands and be able to arrange your transportation back to Mwan. The only real problem you could run into was if your engine stalled near one of the channels which allow shipping in and out of the lagoon. The danger near the channels was being swept through the channel and into the open sea.. You could end up drifting as far west as the

Philippines. Being adrift on the open sea without supplies and drinkable water meant a gruesome death. It was a cross between dehydration and sun exposure.

Lagoon boats almost never had a radio on board and our boat was like most lagoon boats. So, there was no way we could radio for help. We had water, soft drinks and beer for the party, along with some food, so we could get along for a few days if that became necessary. Such thoughts skittered around in the back of our minds as the driver fiddled with the gas line in the driving rain, attempting to get the engine started.

“As we floated in the lagoon waiting for the driver to work his magic, each of us began to sense that the flow of the waves was changing. The gentle up and down motion of the boat began to shift into rising and lowering swells of greater magnitude. One could hear the roar of the ocean as it flung itself against the reef. This told us that we were near the reef, which was our goal. However, it also told us that we could be dangerously close to the channel. The intensity of the downpour lessened but there was a gray mist surrounding us, which made it very difficult to get our bearings. With no control over the boat and no way to get help, there was little we could do. We sat quietly watching the driver work on the engine, as well as keeping an eye on any more changes in the waves

The swell in the waves picked up intensity again. The rise and fall in the waves was significant. It didn't present an immediate threat to the integrity of the boat but it announced clearly that we were dangerously close to the channel. The gray mist broke for a while as the wind picked up and the clouds began to move away from us. We could see the reef clearly now. We were not far from it. However, we were in the turbulence caused by the channel currents and in danger of being washed out to sea. Without the engine our only hope was to get the boat to go aground on the reef. With some luck, we could walk along the reef until we hit an inhabited island. No one lived on the reef islands but the locals used them as fishing camps. With luck we could find some fishermen and get help.

“This wasn't the first time I had faced the serious possibility of death. I had almost died in the accident that killed Barti a couple years earlier. However, the accident happened so fast that I didn't realize how close a call I had until long after the accident. Floating helplessly in the Truk Lagoon, I had plenty of opportunity to assess the closeness of death and to react. I was surprised by my calmness. If we could find a way to get the boat grounded that was our first priority and only concern at this point. If we were washed out to sea then we would be facing a different situation. I prayed a sincere and confident prayer. *Thy will be done!*

“The driver had been able to get the engine to fire a couple of times but it always died out within moments of firing. Each time our hopes were sparked, only to be dashed moments later. Each firing however gave us brief control over the boat and allowed us to move closer to the reef and out of the channel turbulence. The problem here was that we were no longer near the center of the channel. We were still under its influence but close enough to the reef that if we weren't able to bring the boat to ground safely on the reef, the turbulent channel currents might smash the boat against the reef as we were swept through the channel opening and out to sea. If the boat got through the channel opening without being destroyed, it would certainly suffer significant damage and decrease significantly the likelihood of our survival at sea.

As we sat contemplating our possible fate, a faint but familiar sound was heard in the distance...a motor boat! A short time later a plywood motor boat pulled up near us

and threw us a line, which the driver attached to the front of the boat. A group of Trukese fishermen were on their way to their reef camp when they thought they saw us floating near the channel during a short break in the mist. Understanding the danger of the ocean, they set off to make sure that we were ok. If we were not ok, then they would help us. Within minutes we were out of the channel area and one of the fishermen was working with the driver to get us going. They determined that there was water in the gas, as well as the line. The fishermen were kind enough to loan us an extra gas tank and line they had on their boat and get us going again. If the fishermen hadn't come along when they did we would have ended up on the open sea. About twenty minutes later we pulled into the small dock at our friend's reef island, quite happy to be alive.

“So, that is pretty much what happened on my little adventure in the Truk Lagoon. God must have been listening to our prayers and sent His angels to help us. The probability of the fishermen being near the channel at the exact time we needed them is so remote!”

“That was a good story,” Fatima said as she took a drink of iced tea. “I have some relatives who are fishermen on the Sea of Galilee and they are always worried about bad weather and failed equipment, even on that small lake.

Tabitha had been listening with her eyes closed. I thought she had fallen asleep and was directing the story to Fatima, trying to impress her with my adventures at sea. However, after Fatima's comments she opened her eyes and asked me. “Theo, If I remember correctly, you sent me a letter shortly after that brush with death. You seemed upset by the experience.”

“You're right, Tabitha. I was very upset by the experience. At first I couldn't figure out why. I had been close to death in the Nevada car accident. When we were here on Pilgrimage a few years ago I witnessed that bombing that killed several people on a Jerusalem bus. Both experiences were encounters with death that effected me. I think the Truk Lagoon experience spooked me so much because I realized that I wasn't ready to die. It's not that I was too young and wanted to taste more of life. Though, certainly, I was too young and wanted to taste more of life.

“In large part my concern arose from a feeling that I hadn't discovered my life's mission yet, let alone done much to achieve it. If I was here for a purpose, I wanted to know what that purpose was and have an opportunity to make progress toward its fulfillment. My big frustration at the time was trying to figure out if I even had a purpose? Most of the time it felt like I was just moving off in some direction until I hit a wall, then like a toy I'd bounce off and head in another direction. It felt like I was in motion but not making any progress.

“I didn't feel like my life was necessarily a failure but it didn't seem to be much of a success either. I just felt lukewarm. I remember someplace in Scripture where Christ admonishes people to be either hot or cold but not lukewarm. Being lukewarm induces nausea, even in Christ.”

“Have things changed in the past four years? Do you still feel adrift? Lukewarm?” asked Tabitha.

“In many respects the situation has changed little. I'm over thirty and unmarried, with no prospects. My job has no real security and is more a job than a vocation for me. Even my fantasy of a possible Trappist vocation was shot down rather effectively just

before I came to visit.

“The funny thing is that I don’t worry about it as much. I’m beginning to realize that my purpose is what God reveals in and through my life. I’m not going to get a written mandate from God telling me to achieve a list of goals.

“It is more like I am making a journey and as I choose to follow certain paths on this journey I can see good coming from the choice. I can see God working through me and through those whom I encounter on the journey. I probably could have taken different forks in the road and God would still be there working through me and everyone else. The circumstances might be different, more or less favorable to certain lessons or accomplishments, but God would be there no matter what. The conviction that God loves me and that it is possible to draw grace from whatever situation I face has taken away some of the anxiety I used to feel back then.”

“Very good, Theo. You have grown spiritually. You are learning to trust God, a very important lesson.”

Tabitha’s response made me feel really good. It was high praise from someone who I considered a living saint and an expert on spirituality. After a moment, like a good spiritual director, she asked me. “What do you think brought about this change?”

I hadn’t thought much about it before, as I really didn’t realize that any change had occurred until just a few moments earlier. So, I struggled with this second question.

“I remember that you gave me some advice about discerning God’s will in response to my letter telling you of my adventure and my reaction to the experience. I remember that you reminded me that we are not left in the dark about what God wants for us. You explained that my intense desire to know God’s will for me was itself a sign of God’s call and grace. However, while God may have appeared in the burning bush to Moses or knocked St. Paul from his horse, God doesn’t work that way very often. Most of us have to use the skills of discernment.

“I remember that you explained there is no particular magic in discernment. Mostly, it requires commonsense, prayer and living as a disciple. If our highest value is to do God’s will and we are prayerful persons, after a while our most appropriate choices become evident as those most consistent with our deepest sense of right. I guess that is what has happened over the past few years.

“St. Ignatius Loyola suggests that a person seeking God’s will first pray for God’s guidance. Second, he should assess the data. This involves a careful analysis of the situation. Since this can be difficult for an individual, it is common to seek the advice of another trusted person to help you make sure that your reasoning doesn’t go off on any serious illogical tangents. The third factor in discernment is a sense of peace in the decision. If you have serious doubts about the wisdom of your decision, don’t commit to it. There are times when one must make a decision quickly and live with it. In such situations you do the best you can. However, if you are not under a great deal of pressure to decide immediately, then wait until you are at peace with a decision. This is especially important with major life decisions, such as marriage or vocational commitment. I found a copy of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius in the local Peace Corps reading library not long after receiving your letter. I read through it several times and tried to apply all of his advice on discernment to my life. I guess some seeds were planted back then and have begun to sprout.”

Tabitha smiled.

“I’m happy that God was able to make use of that letter to give you needed instruction. My guess is that another factor in your growth has been the development of more of a contemplative attitude. You told me that you have been meditating regularly for the past three years. It may seem like a waste of time but it promotes the ability to be both open and focused. It is only when we are truly open to those whom we encounter and to the world around us that we can experience their truth.

“Buddhists use the term “mindfulness” to signify a state of consciousness in which a person is open to everything in his or her environment. It is openness to oneself and others. It is the state of seeing beyond appearances to the heart of reality. It is seeing the mountain beyond the mountain. When the average person encounters such mindfulness, it seems to be a heightened experience of awareness. The Buddhists consider this to be the natural state of a human who hasn’t lulled himself into a life of sleepwalking. Christian mystical tradition refers to this as unitive experience and understands it as an experience of a greater openness to the divine reality expressed in all creation. In both traditions such mindfulness or unitive experiences are cultivated by the practice of contemplative prayer. The cultivation of mindfulness is very helpful in the process of discernment. I am sure that it has served you well.”

As she spoke I knew that she was right. The more I had been faithful to my little mindfulness exercises the past three years, the more the issue of my purpose in life receded into the background. Rather than worry about it, I was simply open to it and let God take the lead in bringing it to fulfillment. Another thought struck me as I considered the letter of encouragement she sent me after my Lagoon experience.

“Tabitha, I remember that you spoke of the angel of death in that letter. You described him as an old friend, as someone with a special lesson for each of us.”

“Ah! You have a good memory. I believe that I told you he is a most important angel for he teaches us to cherish the gift of life. We will lose that gift one day, at least in the form in which we presently experience it. Knowing this, we can treat that gift with more respect. At the time I wrote that letter I was a mere youth in my early-eighties and could still get around. Yet, even then I appreciated life. I wrote that even if I could never write another article for the journals or help the Patriarch with another crisis, the simple joy of breathing the sweet air of my beloved Israel or walking the streets of Joffa or praying at the Benedictine Abbey nearby is sufficient to make me cherish this gift of life. If I live until I am 100 or even older, I will do so joyfully. You know what? Even though I can’t walk the streets of Joffa any more and a trip to the Abbey is now a major project and quite rare, I still cherish life. What a great and beautiful gift is every moment of life!”

Fatima was staring at Tabitha as she listened to these words. They struck a chord in her. Since Tabitha seemed to have reached the end of her response, Fatima inquired of her.

“It seems easier to accept the eventuality of your own death and gain wisdom from it than to face the death of those you love. There are always questions and doubts when facing the death of others.”

Tabitha gave Fatima a sad and gentle smile before speaking. “Dear child, death has been my companion for much of my adult life. There were so many times when I was sure that he had come to bring me to the next world. The disease and the carnage of war took so many of those around me. So many times I would sense death nearby, yet each time he would whisper “No, not yet. Your time has not run out. Carry on!” I would bury

my children, my relatives, my friends. My husband was gone and yet it was not my time! The refugees whom I tried to protect would be killed. Each time I wept. Each time the loss hurt so bitterly.

“Over time I came to realize that death was my friend. He would be my escort into God’s Kingdom. My pain at the death of someone close to me was the pain of separation not of despair. My friend, death, would be the one to unite me with those whom I love but are separated from me for the time being.

“I do not yearn to die for life is too rich and filled with grace to wish to leave it. As long as God keeps giving me another day...another moment, I will cherish and be thankful for what I am given. But when the angel of death finally comes for me I will go peacefully, even joyfully.”

It was getting late. Our conversation had carried us into the evening and Tabitha needed to sleep. I was tired myself, probably due to jet lag. We decided that Fatima would get Tabitha settled into bed and then take me back to the hotel. I helped move Tabitha out of the recliner in which she had been sitting and got her into bed. She was relatively light and easy to carry. Once I got Tabitha settled in her bed, I went to the kitchen and finished washing what dishes remained from our super. By the time I was done, Fatima had Tabitha tucked in and asleep.

Chapter Six: A Promise of Hope

It was Wednesday. I had a low grade tension headache, which I easily diagnosed as stress related. Yet, I couldn't figure out exactly what the cause of the tension was. There was always an element of danger in any Israeli city, but usually not any more than one would encounter in large city anywhere. I was more relaxed in Joffa or Haifa than I was in New York, Los Angeles or Chicago.

Tabitha had an appointment with her physician this morning. It was primarily to report on the test she had the previous day. In addition, Fatima was concerned that Tabitha was having trouble holding down her food and wanted the doctor to be aware of that development. However, Fatima couldn't take Tabitha to the clinic, as she had a settlement meeting this morning as a result of her success in court yesterday. Rather than cancel Tabitha's appointment, I volunteered to take her.

So, early in the morning Fatima called my hotel room to let me know that she was in the lobby and ready to go. Having slept late, I quickly pulled on my clothes and ran some cold water over my face. After combing my hair and splashing on cologne, I was out the door. Within forty minutes we were pulling up to the Sourasky Medical Center in downtown TelAviv. Fatima and I were able to get Tabitha into her wheel chair with relative ease and then Fatima was on her way to the courthouse.

After checking with the receptionist, we were directed to the out-patient clinic and a large waiting room. Tabitha's physician was Dr. Abbas Josef, a Palestinian and a highly respected internist. He also taught a few classes at Bethlehem University. We weren't sure how long of a wait it would be, as the waiting room served several physicians who worked out of the clinic that day of the week. So, we settled in for what we expected to be a long wait, yet hoped to be called quickly.

The excitement of getting out of her apartment and into the community, even if it was only a trip to the clinic, enlivened Tabitha. She seemed stronger and more engaged than I had seen her since arriving in Israel. I wanted to encourage her lively mood, so I asked her about Dr. Josef.

Tabitha smiled and explained. "He is a good man and, from what I can tell, a good physician. He is Catholic and the personal physician of the patriarch. It was the patriarch who recommended him to me. In addition to his paid work as a physician and a teacher, he volunteers one day a week at a Palestinian refugee camp north of here."

Leaning close to me, attempting to whisper, she added, "Besides, there is something about him—his eyes or the way he holds his lips—that reminds me of my Ladi."

"Well," I responded, "I'll have to take a very close look at this man, if he reminds you of your husband." After a few moments of silence, I continued. "I would very much like to have met your husband. He must have been quite a person to have been the husband of such a wonderful woman as yourself."

"He was a wonderful person and a good husband. I am sure that he would have enjoyed meeting you as well. You are a fine young man. You also have many characteristics in common with Ladi. Your inquisitiveness and sincerity both remind me of him when he was your age. I think of him often. Even after all of these years, I still miss him so very much. One of the blessings with my failing health is that I know I will be with Ladi soon. That knowledge gives me hope to keep moving forward. I will be

strong in spirit when I meet my beloved. I will not give up but will cherish the last bit of life left in me until the Lord chooses to bless me with the grace of seeing Him face to face. Ladi would want that of me.”

Tabitha glowed as she spoke of her husband. The love sparkled in her eyes and she seemed to become a younger woman. She was lost in her memories for a moment or two, then I asked her about Ladi.

“Tabitha, has the pain ever gone away? Is it difficult to remember the details about Ladi after all these years?”

“After what years? It seems like only yesterday, even if the war ended almost forty years ago. We had our share of problems, just like any other couple. Yet, even when we were apart we understood each other and could sense the other’s presence. I remember after Ladi was taken to the labor camp. There was little news of his condition or how he was being treated. Yet, I knew when he was having a particularly difficult day. I felt it deep within me. There was a restlessness and a sadness that I could not shake. Often I would sit in my room and think of him. I would imagine his face and talk with him. I would tell him everything that was going on in my life. I would tell him of my love for him and I could almost hear his words of love for me. It was these visits with him in my heart that got me through the war.

“I know when he died. Instead of the restlessness and sadness, there was a deep joy and serenity. His death did not change the character of our visits with one another. We still shared our love for one another. I continued to tell him the events of my day and felt his loving presence.”

I was curious after her last statement and asked. “When did the sense of his presence go away? I imagine the passing of time helped to heal the pain of his loss.”

Tabitha patted my hand, as a loving aunt might do to a beloved but quite dense nephew. “Dear, dear Theo, his presence has only grown stronger over the years. Certainly the pain of his loss was bitter. However, the love we shared endures and continues to sustain me. Love is not bound by space and time. It brings us out beyond the normal boundaries and into the realm of the divine. He is present to me in our times of sharing. He is present to me very often in my dreams. During those particularly difficult time of suffering in recent years, I have sense his hand on my shoulder or his arms around me. Occasionally, I would smell his cologne. Perhaps, I am a foolish old woman who will not let go of the love of her life but those times I have sensed his presence have been more of a help than a hindrance to me.”

I was about to ask her more regarding these experiences of Ladi’s presence, when the nurse called out Tabitha’s name and I got up to wheel her into the physician’s office. I brought her down the hall a few doors and then wheeled her into a surprisingly large examination room. As instructed by Fatima, I reported Tabitha’s problem with holding down food to the nurse and then took my leave. I returned to the waiting room and flipped open a magazine that was on the corner table. It was about two years old and dealt with the romances of European movie personalities; certainly not a topic I was very interested in. However, I had little choice, as it was the only English language reading material available.

Almost two hours passed before the nurse wheeled Tabitha back into the waiting room. I was getting worried, as I imagined that the visit would only take fifteen minutes to a half an hour at most. Several times I asked the receptionist to check on the delay. She

was polite but of no help. Eventually, one of the nurses from the back of the clinic brought Tabitha into the waiting room. Once she was settled, the nurse asked me to come with her. I was lead to the nurses station a little further down the hall from the examination room into which I had taken Tabitha and asked to have a seat.

The nurse explained that the doctor was concerned with the general state of Tabitha's health. He had a number of tests run on her during that long wait I just experienced. Her liver tests were not good and her kidney's were not much better. He would prefer to have her in the hospital for observation and even more tests but Tabitha refused. Unless her pain was severe or she was suffering from some acute condition, she wanted to stay home. Her physician went along with Tabitha because the tests didn't reveal anything new. They simply documented a continual decline in her vital functions. Her body was preparing for death. Hospitalization might slow down the process a bit but at Tabitha's age and given her general condition, death was inevitable. She might last as long as a few more months but it could be much quicker as well. Tabitha could stay at home but there were a number of medications that were to be administered to her daily. A visiting nurse would stop by daily to check on her and to run a few tests.

I had sensed that this was the situation from the moment I first arrived and saw Tabitha. However, to hear it confirmed by a medical professional was a jolt. My heart skipped a beat and I felt tears forming in the corner of my eyes as the nurse spoke. I struggled to pay attention, so that I could pass correct information on to Fatima. However, my thoughts kept returning to the words that "Tabitha could die any time, from a few weeks to a few months." The nurse gave me an appointment card for Tabitha, asked if there were any questions, and then sent me out to Tabitha.

She sat serenely in her wheel chair waiting for me. I felt like the one who had been informed that he had only a short time to live, I was in such emotional turmoil. Yet, there she sat quietly, with a gentle smile on her face. Fatima sat next to her, in the chair I had occupied until called by the nurse. She had finished her meeting and came to pick us up. I pulled myself together and went over to join them.

"Well, Tabitha, they certainly have given us detailed instructions on how to take proper care of you. I think I have everything, so why don't we head home?"

She just patted my hand and smiled. I took the wheel chair and pushed her out of the clinic waiting room. Fatima walked ahead and opened the car door for her. Eventually we got her into the car, through the streets of TelAviv and back to her apartment. She was tired, so Fatima put her to bed. We would let her sleep for a couple of hours and then wake her for a late lunch.

After Tabitha was asleep, I informed Fatima of what I had been told by the nurse. She was grim-faced, with only a few tears escaping from her eyes. She expected such news would be given us before long, as Tabitha's health had been deteriorating rapidly, but it hurt to finally hear the words.

I asked if Fatima knew how to contact Tabitha's brother and daughter. She knew their phone numbers but felt that we should ask for permission from Tabitha before calling people to her deathbed. She was right. I asked her if she knew either of them.

This question finally brought a smile to her lips.

"Actually, both have been to visit within the past three months. Her daughter is an art teacher and illustrator of children's books who lives just outside of Philadelphia. She is a very pleasant woman, in her early sixties, with three children and five grandchildren.

She came in May and spent almost a month here. They had such a wonderful visit. Though I think that Tabitha put on a bit of a front. She was sicker at the time than she let her daughter believe. She didn't want any sign of approaching death to darken the spirit of the visit.

“Her brother was here back in March. He is retired from being a pastor but helps out at his old parish. The arrangement keeps him in the parish and allows him be of help without placing any great demands on his time and strength. He came during Lent with the promise that he would be back to the parish by Holy Week. He kept his word and left the day before Palm Sunday. He was a nice man, loves to drink coffee—plenty of coffee—and he is always joking! If he isn't joking then he is telling stories. He stayed for three weeks and in that time I heard more stories about parish life, their childhood and the war years than I have heard in my entire life!

We spoke with Tabitha that evening about the visit to the clinic. She confirmed that she had been informed by her physician of the same information that the nurse passed on to me. She didn't seem terribly upset by it. There was almost a sense of relief that the end was in sight. She was insistent however that we not bother her daughter or her brother. They could be informed when it was time for the funeral to give them the opportunity to attend if they wanted. She did not want to bother them with every bit of news from the doctor.

She may have been taking the news of her declining health with a “stiff upper lip” but her body was more honest in its response. Tabitha was not in the best shape the next few days, spending much of the time in bed. The visiting nurse felt she could handle the situation but both Fatima and I felt that a trip to the hospital was appropriate. Tabitha insisted that she not be sent to the hospital. The nurse was willing to go along with the patient, unless any serious turn for the worse occurred. None occurred and three days later Tabitha was back to sitting on the recliner in the living room of her apartment and holding court with her visitors.

I now enjoyed the status of an honorary member of the household. That meant that I saw to her needs as she received visitors. Fluffing the pillow, helping her with a drink of water and answering the phone were my usual duties. There were many visitors who dropped by now.

The abbot and two monks from the Benedictine monastery where she attended Mass regularly, at least until recently, spent the better part of a morning visiting with her. They were in their glory, telling stories of her adventures when she first came to Israel and became a regular at the monastery. She seems to have been a goad to perfection for the abbot and the two other monks. They were eternally grateful. They spoke of spiritual theology and divine mysteries that were beyond my poor understanding. Though I could see the glow of pleasure and excitement that Tabitha gave off as she listened or spoke, as called for by their animated conversation. When the monks departed, it was with a gentle sadness which seemed to acknowledge that the next time they met would be in the Kingdom of God.

Professors from the University of Bethlehem were among her visitors, as well as priests, students, shop keepers, craftsmen, rabbis and mullahs. Everyone seemed to know that Tabitha was getting ready to move on and they wanted one last opportunity to be with her.

She was delightful no matter who visited but especially gentle and loving when students dropped by. They were usually the children of refugee families she helped in the past. They looked up to her as almost a mythical figure. She had given their families hope when despair seemed the only option. She had been the medium of God's grace in their lives. They loved her. Tabitha loved these young people as well and wanted to make sure that they continued to hope. Hope is the only thing that could pull them out of the cycle of despair and terrorism that plagued their homeland.

Fatima and I usually had Tabitha to ourselves each evening, as the visitors stopped knocking on the door in late afternoon. This gave Tabitha time for a brief nap while we fixed supper. After we ate, Tabitha would spend time with us, her surrogate family, inquiring after us, sharing stories, or allowing us to ask her questions. We cherished the time we had with her those evenings, though also being careful to get her to bed at a reasonable hour.

A few days after the abbot's visit Tabitha asked me about my job. I had been in Israel for over three weeks at that point. She doubted that I had much more leave time available.

"Tabitha," I began. "You are much more important to me than any job. Even before I left for the Abbey of the Genesee, I was certain that I was not going back to my job at the university. I am tired of working on those grants year after year. At this point they don't even need my services, at least for a few more months. By then they can find someone else. If the Abbey had worked out, it was my intention to begin postulancy immediately after my period as an observer. However, the experience as an observer made it clear to me that my vocation is not that of a Trappist monk. I am certain that it is time for me to move on, if not to the monastery, then on some other path.

"Right now, it is important for me to be here with you. Afterwards we shall see where the Holy Spirit leads me but right now I need to be right here!

"I've been able to bank a healthy part of my university income. At this point, I have enough savings to keep me comfortable for the better part of a year. Also, believe it or not, there is still some of the insurance settlement from the car accident left in my bank account. I can afford to be here with you. I want to be here with you. I need to be here with you."

She smiled and said, "So be it!" The issue was never raised again. Though Tabitha did convince me to let go of the hotel room and move into the spare bedroom in her apartment. I was concerned that my presence might cause problems for Fatima. She assured me that as long as she was present to chaperone the two of us all would be well. So, the next morning I checked out of the hotel.

It was my turn to provide the evening's entertainment with some tale of my adventures in the islands. She particularly enjoyed those stories because she was intrigued by the south sea setting but also because she had been a lifeline for me when times were particularly difficult. Every time I was struggling a letter would be sent to her and within weeks I received an encouraging letter in return. Those letters kept me going through the worst times. So, she knew of my struggles and used the evening's storytelling as an opportunity to reflect a bit more on my experiences.

"Theo," she began. "What was the worst experience you had in the islands?"

"Where do I begin? Was it the time my mother was almost killed in an accident back in the States and I had to spend 24 hours in the air and at airports trying to fly back

home, not sure if she would be dead when I arrived? Or, was it the time I showed up to begin my Peace Corps Volunteer assignment only to discover that the job I was sent to do no longer existed, never really existed?

“No, the worst part of it was the depression into which I sank about six months after arriving. There wasn’t any significant disaster that brought me down. It was just an endless series of disappointments that built up and finally wore me away.

“After learning that the job I was brought to Truk to do didn’t exist I, was assigned to the Community Development office to help with youth programs. Before long I was assigned to help organize the Boy Scout program, as well as run a summer day camp sponsored by the Honolulu YMCA. My mother’s accident threw a wrench into the works for about a month but she was alive and I returned to Truk to pick up where I left off. By mid-August the day camp project with the YMCA was over and considered by all involved to have been a success.

“My primary work related activity at this point was an attempt to obtain some grant funds to support a community based youth counseling program. This project developed out of my concern for the high rate of youth suicides occurring in Truk. In addition, I was also preparing materials for the counseling course I would teach in September. These efforts did not require large amounts of time. This left me with more time on my hands than I knew what to do with and a Stateside addiction to doing things. For all the guidance and instruction in contemplative prayer Barti gave me, I just didn’t know how to slow down and relax.

“I was probably going through culture shock. Up until that time I was busy getting settled, setting up the day camp, working with the Scout leaders, learning the language and keeping busy. By the middle of the summer everything began to settle down.

I discovered that what I did was relatively irrelevant to the lives of the people around me. I discovered that the assumptions and values by which I structured my life up until then were not



the assumptions and values by which everyone around me ran their lives. I realized that my language ability was poor at best and that I would never be fluent enough to really get involved in the community life. I felt useless, alone and confused.

“Even worse, the faith that had been nurtured so well by Barti and had sustained me through the accident and recovery seemed to be slipping away. No one attacked it. It just began to seem irrelevant and God seemed more absent than ever. Your letters, Tabitha, were islands of hope in an otherwise barren and deadly sea.

“During the summer months all the contract teachers and Peace Corps Volunteer teachers in the outer islands were brought into Mwan for training activities. It was also a time for making arrangements for supplies during the upcoming school year. If any time was left, they could enjoy a bit of rest and relaxation.

“The outer islands were beautiful in many respects, even if they were small. High islands tended to be larger and have a variety of sights and environments. Atolls were usually little more than spits of sand and coral sticking up out of the ocean. The

Mortlocks were large enough to support coconut groves and a residential area that was covered with a rich lawn of well kept grass and flowers. Yet, these islands were still very small for anyone raised on a continent.

“Don Riley was an Iowa boy, born and raised. He was used to great, flat plains that stretched endlessly toward the horizon in any direction. Life on an atoll was a new and disquieting experience for Don. He was a quiet guy and tended to stay to himself. His primary assignment was as a teacher in the Mortlocks, an atoll about 80 miles Southeast of the Truk Lagoon.

“At the beginning of the summer, like many of the other outer island Volunteers, Don spent a fair amount of time partying and celebrating his return to “civilization”. He settled into the routine of attending workshops and meeting with the Department of Education staff, as logistical arrangements were made for the coming school year.

“The downstairs lounge at the Peace Corps office was home away from home for Peace Corps Volunteers. There were soft drinks and a coffee pot. A sizable library of paperback books was available for loan to the volunteers. A shower and toilet were available, as were a desk and typewriter. Volunteers had mailboxes assigned at the Peace Corps office and received their mail there. At least once a day volunteers within walking distance showed up at the lounge to check their mail, enjoy a cup of coffee, find a book to read and socialize with the other volunteers.

“Toward the end of July Don began spending a lot of time at the Peace Corps lounge. Instead of preparing to return to the Mortlocks for the second leg of his two year tour of duty, he just hung around the Peace Corps office. We all had days when a lot of time was spent at the office socializing, working on some project, or just relaxing with a book. The problem was that hanging around the lounge was getting to be all day, everyday for Don. Some of the volunteers began to comment that Don was turning into a basket case. I didn’t want to support the gossip but I was concerned that he was beginning to act very strange.

I stopped by the lounge to check on my mail one morning about a week before the teachers were supposed to go back to the outer islands. Don was there, just sitting, lost in thought. I was worried for him. After getting my mail and finding something to drink, I sat down near Don and asked him how he was doing. He didn’t say much. I persisted. I was going to find out what was bothering him or at least give my best shot at finding out what it was.

Eventually, Don explained that it was difficult to adjust to life on an atoll. There was no privacy. You were surrounded by people all the time. There was no place to go. If you walked a few hundred feet in one direction you covered the entire atoll. If you walked a few hundred feet in another direction, you did the same. While some people could adjust to such circumstances with relative ease, he could not. The previous year had been a worsening torture for him, as each day he felt more and more oppressed by a feeling of confinement. The only thing that kept him going was knowledge that the school year would soon end and he could get back to a high island and the other volunteers. He wanted to fulfill his commitment to Peace Corps, to the Mortlockese people and to himself. He intended to return to the Mortlocks next week with the others. Yet, when he attempted to get ready for the trip back, he couldn’t do it! Every time he tried to pack or arrange for supplies he felt sick. He couldn’t even walk in the front door of the Department of Education offices without gasping for air and feeling faint.

I encouraged him to talk with Sam about his feelings and difficulties. He said that he would but I doubted it. He seemed too committed to honoring his duty, even if it resulted in a nervous breakdown.

Later that afternoon, while Don was off at the Maramar with some other volunteers, I knocked on Sam's door. I told him about my conversation with Don and my concerns over his mental health. He admitted to his own concerns, thanked me for my observations, and said that he would speak with Don.

Three days later Don was on the Continental flight headed toward Honolulu and the US mainland. He was being released from his Peace Corps commitment early for medical reasons. Don appeared more relaxed and happier than I had ever seen him.

"The experience left me with mixed feelings. While we were not military, all of the volunteers had a strong sense of commitment to their assignment and to the people they were sent to serve. No one wanted to leave early. Don wanted to honor his commitment, even though it was destroying him in the process. I worried that I was the instrument of his failure to honor his commitment. I didn't worry too much though, as his sense of relief upon boarding the Continental flight was palpable.

"Don's difficulties were an encouragement for me. I was reminded that I was not alone in my struggles. The other volunteers were all struggling as best they could to survive and to adapt to the situation. I also saw the intensity these struggles could reach and that they could push one perilously close to the edge.

"Not long after Don Riley arrived on Mwan from the outer islands, Tim Donahue showed up. He was a short, thin Irishman with close-cropped red hair. He looked to be thirty-five years old or there about. I met him through Peace Corps language training. A new group of volunteers arrived on island a month or two earlier and were going through training. Since formal language classes were being held, volunteers already on assignment were allowed to take part in the language classes to help improve their language skills. Tim was a contract teacher who would be heading for the outer islands in mid-August. He spoke very little Trukese and wanted to learn enough to be able to get by in the outer islands where almost no English was spoken. So, most mornings in July we were both in language classes.

"There were a fair number of new contract teachers on island at the time, so I didn't pay much attention to Tim. Eventually they would sort themselves out. Once the teachers headed for the outer islands left, you could invest a little energy in getting to know the ones that stayed.

"The Friday after Don Riley went home I walked into the Maramar snack bar for lunch. Language classes had been over for a week or so and I spent the morning working on a report for the District Administrator about our summer youth programs. I was in the mood for a relaxing lunch and some conversation with the usual crowd who did lunch at the Maramar. When I got there I was dismayed to find that all the tables were taken. While the Maramar was my favorite lunch spot there were other places to eat further down the street. I turned to leave when I noticed Tim waving for me to come over. Since I was already at the Maramar and now I had a place to sit, I walked over to Tim. When I got there he invited me to pull up a chair and join him for lunch. I thanked him and sat down. At least, I wouldn't have to go searching for another place to eat.

I ordered a sandwich and Fanta red cream soda, my regular lunch, and made polite chit-chat with Tim while I waited for my order. Our conversation turned to the

topic of Tim's departure for the Mortlocks two days later and I told him about the episode with Don Riley. He admitted that he had some trepidation about spending the next ten months on an atoll but that the decision was his and he would live with it. Somehow the conversation got around to the feelings of unease with which I had been struggling, especially since the weekend. Once started I was like a burst dam and poured out all of my frustrations with Truk and my experience there over the prior seven months. Before long I was telling Tim about Barti and you, Tabitha, and the pilgrimage. It was way past the lunch hour rush. We were the only customers left in the restaurant and were on our second or third soft drinks. Once my tale was just about told, Tim began sharing his tale of woe with with me.

"Tim was a priest. Originally, he was from the Chicago area. His parents were very devout Catholics. Their spirituality involved social action, service activities, a respect for Scripture and plenty of prayer. His father was an M.D. and his mother was a high school history teacher, So, Tim grew up in a hot house of intellectual ferment, challenge and respect. His university training was at Stanford, with graduate studies at Harvard. Somewhere along the way he joined the Jesuits, finished his doctorate in philosophy, and was ordained a priest.

"Even though he looked younger, Tim was now 45 years old. He questioned his vocation to the priesthood, as well as his commitment to the Jesuits. The way Tim explained it, his philosophical studies undermined aspects of his faith but they were manageable. The real issue was more emotional. He met a woman the previous year to whom he was attracted. She was equally attracted to him. The relationship might have developed into a serious romance but he quickly and painfully put an end to the relationship by letting her know that he was a priest. The experience of that passionate attraction for the woman threw his safe little world into turmoil. He began to doubt the reality of his own calling. He realized that his prayer life was nothing great and that failing might be a significant factor in the equation at that point. So, he got permission to come to Micronesia—a Jesuit mission area—and dedicate some serious time to prayer and reflection. Teaching at the Mortlock elementary school paid for his expenses and gave him plenty of time away from life in the States. In June, when school was out and the contract teachers returned from the outer islands, he would return to his provincial with the fruit of his reflection.

"There was so much that we talked about that day and night, as our conversation continued on through diner and into the evening hours. I can remember only a few of the details. I do remember one comment later in the evening, only because he was linked to a story. Tim began.

"You know, a big part of our problem is that we are too impatient for grace. We want grace on our terms, not God's. We want things to make sense and make sense right now. We receive a peach pit and instead of anticipating the delicious fruit that the peach tree will bring forth some day, we just complain about the hard pit. Perhaps we both need to focus more on finding God's grace in the situation we are given and being less critical of the way God is handling things.

"Let me tell you a story that might illustrate this point. The story isn't mine. It is attributed to Rabbi Nachman of Bratislava, a famous Hasidic rabbi of the 18th century.

"There was once was a small Russian town with its usual collection of characters. It was small enough and far enough away from Moscow that no one every paid it much

attention. Now this had its benefits and its drawbacks. A real benefit of its isolation was that the Russian Army rarely paid a visit to the town to conscript young Christian men into the military or to have a pogrom (government sponsored persecution) against the Jewish community. The drawback was that there was little supervision from Moscow over the local power brokers and they had a free hand for the most part. Now, the most demanding of all the power brokers in the town was Ivan Ivanovich. He was both the Chief of Police and the tax collector. He was well respected throughout the community and didn't bother the Jewish community any more than was reasonable.

"Ivan was married to a beautiful woman, Petroka, who was a good wife...except that she had ambitions beyond her station in life. She wanted to be grand matron of the town, the center of its social life. This meant that she was always throwing parties, buying expensive gowns, and putting on airs. Ivan didn't mind it that much, if it kept his wife happy. However, her spending habits were a considerable burden on the man. Even with two jobs he found it difficult to make ends meet.

"One day when creditors were giving him a hard time over some debt his wife incurred, he took some of the tax money he recently collected and gave it to the creditor. No one paid much attention to his tax reports and collections. He figured that he would not get into trouble if he skimmed just a little bit from the tax revenues. So, Ivan began to supplement his salary by dipping into the tax revenues.

"This wasn't the only way he made a little extra money on the side. Since he was Chief of Police, when his debts were particularly pressing he would go to the Jewish ghetto and arrest the son of one of the merchants or another well off family for disorderly conduct. The young man would sit in jail until his family came up with three or four hundred rubles to pay as bail. Of course, Ivan would pocket the bail money and drop the charges. He always went to the Jewish ghetto to pull off this scam because the Jewish families always bailed out their children. Also, no one in the Jewish ghetto would complain to the judge or higher authorities, since they knew the rules of the game. They cut Ivan some slack on the bail money and he kept off their backs the rest of the time.

"It happened that a bright young man fresh from University was assigned to the tax office in Moscow. He went in there like a whirlwind, dedicated to modernizing the tax office and collecting every ruble that was owed. As a result of the young man's zeal it was discovered that Ivan Ivanovich's tax records and his revenues submitted did not add up. The young man sent Ivan a courteous letter informing him of the discrepancy. Ivan was to submit 5,000 rubles to Moscow within one month or to explain how the tax office was in error in figuring the extent of his debt.

"Poor, Ivan! He knew that the tax official was correct. The young man was being kind in letting him make good the missing funds instead of sending soldiers to take him into custody. Yet, how was he going to make up the 5,000 rubles needed? The only option he could think of was to fall back on his old scam. So, that evening Ivan headed for the Jewish ghetto.

"As he walked in the shadows, Ivan heard the sound of laughter and singing coming from a well to do home. He smiled, figuring that all he needed to do was lie in wait and before long he would have his victim. So, he slunk deeper into the shadows and waited.

"Before long the door opened and two young men came out laughing and singing, as they headed off into the night. As they turned the corner, Ivan jumped out and grabbed

the one closest to him. The other was able to escape while Ivan struggled with his chosen victim. The next day it was announced that the bail for the young man would be 5,000 rubles!

“The Jewish community was in shock. Normally, they could come up with the three or four hundred rubles Ivan wanted with little effort. This time Ivan wanted 5,000 rubles! No one in the ghetto had that kind of money! Certainly, the young man didn’t have access to that kind of money. He was an orphan who had lived on the kindness of the Jewish community since his parents died from influenza many years earlier. The community was particularly upset over the arrest, as the boy was leaving a party hosted by the family of the girl he was engaged to marry very soon. They were celebrating the impending marriage when he was arrested. All the villagers contributed what they could, even to the point of real sacrifice. Yet, they were able to collect only 2,500 rubles.

“The leaders took this problem to Rabbi Nachman pleading for his help. The rabbi listened, thought quietly for a few moments and then explained.

“I may be able to help you. Come with me. We are going to the next town. There is a wealthy man who lives there and he may be able to help us. However, when we visit this man say nothing, let me do the talking.’

“They all agreed and set off with the rabbi to the next town. When they reached their goal they saw a well constructed, once beautiful home that was not very well maintained. The rabbi knocked on the door and after a few minutes the door opened and an old man asked them why they were knocking on his door. The rabbi explained about the young man needing help and the difficult situation they were in, so far short of the amount needed to bail him out of jail. The old man was visibly moved by the Rabbi’s story and exclaimed that he wanted to help the young man. He reached into his pocket and took out a coin which he put into Rabbi Nachman’s hand. The rabbi looked at the coin. It was worth only one ruble! Even worse, it was a filthy old coin. Several of the men accompanying the rabbi were about to express their anger at the old miser, when the rabbi gave them withering looks to remind them of their promise to say nothing.

“The rabbi then began to pray to God for a multitude of blessings on the old man for his gift of the one ruble coin. After offering dozens of blessings for the old man, the rabbi thanked him once more and turned to leave. As the rabbi was walking away, the old man called out to the rabbi and asked him to return.

“I have not given enough. Please accept this also.” The old man placed another coin in the rabbi’s hand. It was another ruble coin. Again, the rabbi rejoiced at the kindness of the man and began to pray blessing after blessing for the old man. Again, the rabbi turned and walked away, when the old man cried out. “No, do not leave yet. There is still more that I can give. This time the old man gave two coins. And so it went for the rest of the day. Each time the rabbi was about to leave the old man invited him back and offered more money. By the final offering the old man was giving hundreds of rubles.



“The rabbi took the money to the Chief of Police and got the young man released from jail. The community leaders decided to have the wedding that night before anything

else happened to prevent it. The Chief of Police was invited to the wedding in respect for his official position and he came in his best clothes with the money bag containing the 5,000 rubles tied to this belt.

“While the young man and his bride were celebrating with their neighbors, Ivan decided that since he had the 5,000 rubles he would be better off if he simply took the money and left town. The money would last him a long time. The government officials would probably forget about everything after a minor search for him. He could start all over again. He might even send for his wife...someday. So, he left the party early, got on his horse and rode away. However, he did not get far.

“Ivan liked to drink. He especially liked to drink vodka. There was an ample supply of vodka at the wedding celebration and by the time Ivan left the party he was roaring drunk. Indeed, the abundance of alcohol in his bloodstream was probably a significant factor in his decision to take the money and run. As we all know, you should not drink and drive. That is the case today and it was no different in the time of Rabbi Nachman. Ivan only got a few yards before he fell from his horse, struck his head on the paving stones and died.

“The community leader who had asked for Rabbi Nachman’s assistance walked over to the dead man, unfastened the money bag from his belt and gave it to the wealthy donor who had also been invited to attend the wedding feast. The old man fingered the money bag for a few moments and then returned it to the elder. He gave instructions that the money should be given to the young man he ransomed from jail and his new bride. They would need it to begin their little family.

“The elder was awe struck by what he witnessed and visited Rabbi Nachman the next day with his questions.

“Rabbi, I know the old man you visited. He is notorious as a terrible miser. When I saw the one dirty old ruble that he gave you yesterday, I knew that we would get little help from him. When you prayed blessing after blessing for that miser I felt that you were going way overboard. One ruble does not justify all of the blessings you heaped on that man. Yet, by the end of our visit he had given all that was required. Then last night, when he could have justly pocketed the money, he did not. Instead, he gave it as a gift to the young couple! How could that happen?”

“When I saw the dirty old ruble that he placed in my hand I knew that he was making a real sacrifice. That ruble was so dirty because it had been in his pocket for so many years and been handled by him time and again. It was never far from him. Then in response to our need he made a true sacrifice and gave us his ruble. Perhaps others had come asking for help and then left insulted when he offered his ruble. If he could only offer a ruble in his miserliness then I would accept that offering and ask for blessing after blessing upon him to strengthen him.

“God did strengthen him. He was able to offer another ruble. So, I prayed again that he would be strengthened and so he was. With each coin that he gave, he took another step away from the prison of his own miserliness. As he gave each coin, the generous hearted man that God created grew stronger.

“When I think about that story, it seems that there is a little bit of me reflected in all the characters. I am the elder who refuses to look for God’s grace and thus misses the opportunity to be a channel for that grace. I am the miser in need of God’s life changing grace in order to reveal my truly generous heart. I am Ivan trying to take advantage of the

system and in the process thoughtlessly hurting others, as well as coming to harm in the end. Hopefully, I am also the rabbi, able to see the hint of grace in someone and nurtures it until it becomes a flowing torrent.

“What does the story tell us? Perhaps, we can be more like the rabbi and less like the elder or Ivan?”

I enjoyed the story and realized half-way through that it had implications for me. I put the question to Tim.

“So, what possibilities of grace am I overlooking in my present circumstances?”

Tim put the responsibility for figuring that out right back on me.

“Only you can figure that out but let me get you started. What is the most oppressive and depressing aspect of your circumstances here in Truk?”

I thought for a moment and then responded. “I feel like I’m wasting my time. I’m accomplishing so little. I’m so isolated from resources and friends. Much of the time I’m incredibly bored!”

“Ok, that’s a good start. Now, what is traditionally described as the ideal setting for spiritual growth?”

I was stumped for a moment by that question but tried to think of examples of saints known for their holiness and then figure out what they had in common. Finally, I answered.

“Well, a lot of the early saints went off into the desert to learn holiness. In later years they joined monasteries or went off to become missionaries.”

Tim was pleased with my response.

“Now, it seems to me that the very things you are complaining about as the most oppressive part of your present experience are the very things that the saints went into the desert seeking. They wanted large amounts of time that could be dedicated to seeking holiness. They didn’t have any particular goals to accomplish, except to do God’s will. They sought to be away from resources and friends because such could be a distraction to growth in holiness. The very things you are complaining about are exactly what I have come seeking. So, the question is how can we change oppression into grace?”

“The early monks developed various practices that helped them make best use of their isolation for the purpose of spiritual growth. The practices revolved around prayer, sacred reading, work and silence. So, what have you been reading?”

“I’ve been reading mostly what is available in the Peace Corps lounge...novels, travel books, and comedy.”

“How much time have you put in on Scripture or other inspirational works?”

“Very little. I used to get out to Xavier High School and borrow from their library but it has been a couple of months since I was out there.”

“The Xavier library has some excellent books. I encourage you to borrow something by Thomas Merton. He is a personal favorite of mine. He is knowledgeable in the traditional spirituality of monasticism but speaks to the heart of the contemporary person. There are also classics by St. Therese of Lisieux, St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. In addition, St. Catherine of Sienna and Julian of Norwich are also excellent. While not Scripture, any of these authors provide excellent material for sacred reading.

“As to the reading itself, the goal is not to cover ground but to immerse yourself in the words that God is speaking to you through the author. Listen as you read and allow

the meaning to resonate inside you, striking as many chords as it can. This isn't just a mental exercise. It isn't a matter of critical literary or theological analysis of the words you read. Rather, focus on the feelings that the words evoke in you? What memories do they evoke? What do they say to you about your present situation?

"What about your prayer life? When do you pray? What is your discipline of prayer?"

I was ashamed of my lack of a serious prayer life but offered the little that was reasonably consistent.

"I pray briefly when I get up and when I go to sleep. I try to take a few minutes every now and then to marvel at the raw physical beauty of this place and to thank God for such beauty."

"That sounds like a good start but only a start. You have a tremendous opportunity for serious prayer. You should make use of this opportunity. It's a real grace. Add some discipline to your prayer. Every morning and evening when you pray, take time to read two or three of the psalms as well. Read them carefully, as an act of worship. Set aside fifteen or twenty minutes each day to simply enjoy God's creation in silent appreciation and afterward to present your thoughts and feelings to God. These suggestions only build on what you are already doing. Their value to you is in doing it regularly.

"The discipline is important because you need to build a habit of prayer and spiritual reading in your life. Such a habit will be important later in life. It will also transform your spiritual life from a *catch as catch can* approach to one of disciplined substance. Also, you don't have to renounce novels or comedies but make time each day for sacred reading. Fifteen or twenty minutes are sufficient to start.

"Your work is important. Try to find ways to make it more meaningful and productive. Perhaps if you are more attuned to God in prayer, you will find God's guidance more accessible to you when you are trying to make decisions about the direction of your work. Work is an important part of everyone's life; but also remember that the achievement sought by the work of a saint is not necessarily the achievement sought by someone caught up in the rat race. It isn't a matter of what you are trying to achieve, so much as it is a matter of what God is trying to achieve in and through you.

"As to the silence, that doesn't seem to be a real problem. The value of silence is limiting distractions in your life. Too many distractions keeps you from listening to God speaking in and through you, as well as through all the circumstances of your life."

He was right. Everything Tim said was accurate and what I needed to hear.

Tim continued. "Didn't you say earlier that you've read St. John of the Cross? A related possibility is that you are beginning to get a taste of the *Dark Night of purgation*. At the conscious level there is a sense of frustration and disorientation, a loss of attachment to old habits or pleasures. This can be frightening and interpreted as a form of depression. It is not depression. It is not even an experience, so much as it is a perception of spiritual movement.

"If we are riding around the lagoon in a little sail boat we enjoy the gentle breeze, as it blows through our hair and the sensation of speed as we move through the water. We have a sense of security created by the reef wall. Now, as we move past the safety of the reef the waves begin to surge. The wind is not so gentle. Our sense of security diminishes, as we realize that our ability to control the boat is significantly less than what

it was while we were still in the lagoon. We are moved along by the wind but also by hidden currents in the ocean. We are at the mercy of powers that are greater than ourselves and it is frightening.

“In like manner, the spiritual journey is movement into the unknown. It is movement away from the comfortable lagoon of human expectations and into the blinding light of the divine. All of our landmarks disappear as we move into deeper waters. What gave us joy in the past seems flat. What once seemed self-evident is much less clear. This is not a problem to be solved but a sign of growth. We are putting away childish toys and habits and becoming adults. We are beginning to learn to navigate in deeper waters.

“My guess is that you are dealing with both an adjustment reaction to your difficult situation, in which a certain degree of disorientation and frustration is reasonable, as well as the initial perception of some spiritual growth going on in your life. If you can learn to deal with your psychological challenge, it will strengthen you. As to any positive spiritual movement in your life, focus on prayerfully surrender to it and let it take you where it will.”

“Our conversation continued on past closing time around midnight, when we adjourned to his room at the Maramar. We continued talking a few more hours. We enjoyed the conversation so much that neither of us wanted it to end. In a matter of hours we achieved a degree of openness and honesty with one another that was rare. However, by three in the morning we were both so tired that it was difficult to think. It was time to bring the conversation to an end. We wished each other well, as it was unlikely that we would see each other again. Then, I headed back to my room a few blocks away. As I walked, a simple prayer came to mind.

“Thank you Lord for the grace you have given me. Also, if you are listening—**HELP!**”

“That conversation and the prayer for help as I walked home became a turning point for me.

“You know,” I said to Tabitha. “You asked me for the worst experience I had in the islands. Now that I think of it, it was also the best experience. That conversation with Tim helped me to see through the confusion and self-pity that had blinded me and turned what was an experience of hell for me into one of heaven. It was never easy for me but my time in the islands became a much richer experience for me.”

Chapter Seven: Memories shared

Less than a week later Tabitha had trouble holding down any food. She lost weight, almost ten pounds; something that she could not afford to do. Even though she protested, this time the nurse agreed with Fatima and I. Together we convinced Tabitha to go to the hospital. We simply couldn't provide her with adequate care at home.

This was a turning point to which none of us looked forward. We were torn because we wanted to have Tabitha stay at home, which is what she wanted to do. However, we realized that we were in over our heads and just could not provide the quality of care she needed. We feared that if she stayed home any longer she would die sooner than if she had proper medical care.

Her physician was in full agreement with Tabitha's hospitalization. She was admitted immediately upon arrival at the hospital and given a private fifth floor room at Ichilov General Hospital. The hospital was a tall structure of concrete and glass, quite modern in style with many sharp angles, but filled with light and possessing a great view of the sea. As soon as she was admitted they hooked her up to an IV feed that was supplemented with antibiotics. Within a day she looked and felt a great deal better. Dr. Abbas informed Tabitha that they wanted to keep her in the hospital for a while so they could run a long list of tests. Depending on the results of the tests, he might be able to speak to her about the likelihood of returning home some time in the near future.

I continued to stay at Tabitha's apartment while she was in the hospital. Simply answering her phone and taking messages kept me busy. However, it was also near to the Benedictine Abbey and I began attending Mass each morning, something that was not possible when I had to help Fatima care for Tabitha. I enjoyed the time at the Abbey. It was an opportunity to continue my meditative practice and to converse with God.

Once Tabitha was admitted to the hospital, Fatima returned to her parent's home. It would not have been appropriate for her to stay in the apartment with a man, even if the relationship was perfectly innocent. She would stay with her parents until it was clear whether she needed to return for Tabitha.

Fatima and I worked out a schedule so that one of us was at the hospital for much of the day. She attended to Tabitha from around eight in the morning until about one in the afternoon. I came around one and stayed until six or seven each evening. If she felt poor or there were problems Fatima and I were there almost constantly. About the only time Tabitha was alone was when she was sleeping at night.

At the beginning of her second week in the hospital, Tabitha was feeling better than she had for months and was itching to get out. Dr. Abbas was happy that she felt better but was not about to let her go home until he was satisfied that she was stable and would stay that way for awhile. She had been feeling pretty good the past few days, so she was using this time to listen to me and to share a few of her thoughts about life as well.

One evening our conversation drifted back to my time in Truk. She asked, "Didn't you mention a school that became something of a refuge for you?" I admitted that I did, so she asked me to tell her about it.

"I went to Truk with big hopes. This was to be my great adventure. I would call upon my skills and do something useful for other people. Finally, I was living the social justice teachings that Barti and I had discussed so often. Then within the first few days of

arriving I learned that everything had been a lie—or a misunderstanding, at best. The bottom line was that I had nothing to do; no job, no purpose, no way to achieve the dream that propelled me out to the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

“The evening that everything came crashing down, I was back at the house where I was staying. I remember looking out the window at the road below for a long time. I was tired. It wasn’t just exhaustion from traveling. It was in my bones and in my soul. I remember thinking that I still had twenty months to go of a 24 month commitment. How was I going to make it?

“Actually, the situation began to improve almost immediately.

“One of my first needs was to find more permanent housing. With a little help from the Volunteer grapevine, I was able to find a family in Iras Village, near the airport, who were willing to have a Peace Corps Volunteer board with them. The family compound was centrally located and only a short walk from the Community Development Office where I worked. The Maramar Snack Bar, a favorite hang out, was only down the road and around the corner. The family was nice and had boarded Peace Corps Volunteers in the past, so they had a working understanding of how to deal with young haoles. The simple fact of having a permanent place to stay, some place where I could unpack and settle in a bit went a long way toward improving my outlook.

“I finished the youth program assessment prior to my sudden departure for the States following Mom’s accident. In the report I suggested a variety of ways in which youth programs could be improved and several new ones added at minimal expense. When I got back to Truk there was a meeting with the District Administrator and the director of Community Development regarding the report and its recommendations. The District Administrator was complementary about the report. After talking about feasibility and budgets for awhile, it was decided that I would teach an introductory course in counseling for teachers and nurses. I would also be the government liaison with the Hawaiian YMCA and Boy Scout programs, both of which were trying to develop a better level of services in Truk. The YMCA representative from Hawaii would be in Truk the following week and I could work with him to get a program going for the summer months. In August I would start teaching an introduction to counseling course, so I began preparing materials and outlines for that course when there was time. So, not only did I have a place to stay but I also had enough work to keep me busy.

“I was beginning to make friends. Admittedly, most of my friends were other Peace Corps Volunteers but at least I had some social ties. About a half dozen of us worked within walking distance of the Maramar, so we ran into each other at lunch time and shared the latest news. On weekends we would head to the tourist hotel at the Southeast point of the island to indulge in their Sunday brunch. The brunch was a gourmet feast meant for the tourists and only cost a few dollars. However, it was also a regular feature of the social life of any American expatriates living and working on the island, as well as the Peace Corps Volunteers. The Volunteers would show up around 10:00am on Sunday and slowly work their way through the feast until around 3:00pm.

“Occasionally tourists would show up at the Maramar and it wasn’t that difficult to engage them in conversation. Since Truk was out of the way as a tourist destination, the type of tourist who showed up there was usually quite interesting. You got everything from anthropologists, photographers for the National Geographic, to divers on their dive-of-a-lifetime, and occasional authors researching a book. Once or twice an entertainer of

note would show up for a quiet holiday.

“Even though I seemed to be making progress at settling into life in Truk, my spiritual life felt like it was dropping out from under me. Without the conversations with Barti or the parish life I enjoyed back in Rochester, I felt like I was alone. There were several Catholic parishes on Mwan but even there I felt like a stranger in a strange land. Mass was in Trukese and the spirituality was quite local in its flavor as well. I couldn’t follow the Mass beyond what I had memorized. It felt so different from what I knew. After awhile I stopped making the effort to stay involved with the parish community or attend Mass at Nepukos, the closest church. Even though my active participation was dropping off, I was reading more. I was reading my way through the Bible and making good progress.

“Xavier Preparatory School was located at the northwest tip of Mwan Island in the Truk Lagoon. It was operated by the Jesuits and provided the best education available in Micronesia. It was opened in the sixties with the idea of providing quality educational within Micronesia for the future leadership of the region. The youngsters who attended Xavier were the best and the brightest. They were on the university track and Xavier was the place to give them the skills and basic knowledge to pursue that goal. It also attempted to instill in them a love and appreciation of the islands and their indigenous culture, as well as a solid moral sensitivity. It achieved its goal, as a large number of Micronesian leaders from the mid-seventies forward were Xavier graduates and a credit to their alma mater.

“The Jesuits who operated Xavier were from the New York Province, which included Rochester. They were a mix of men from New York City, Rochester, Buffalo and several other upstate New York towns. Visiting Xavier almost felt like a trip home, with the accents and friendly conversation.

“It took me a while to discover Xavier. The school was in Sapuk Village, which was a distance from Iras Village. It was only a few miles as the crow flies but the road to Sapuk was terribly rutted and winding. It took almost an hour to drive from Iras to Sapuk, as one moved very slowly trying to navigate the ruts. The distance was too great for a casual walk, especially in the tropical heat. So, I didn’t visit the place until we decided have a field trip to Xavier during the YMCA day camp I was coordinating. This required that I make a trip out to the school to set things up. The trip was a revelation for me.

“The school’s physical plant is the remains of a World War II Japanese communications center. The main building of the school and the dormitory are located in the communication center, with its thick reinforced concrete. The building is built like a bunker in case the Allies invaded Truk instead of bombing and going around it, as they eventually did. These buildings plus an old warehouse converted into a chapel, serve as school and home for about 150 students and ten Jesuits. The view from the school is spectacular, with the neighboring island of Dublon visible across the channel, as well as a large swath of the Truk Lagoon. On a bright sunny day the richness and diversity of the color is breathtaking. There is also a steady, cool breeze that is a relief from the heat of town.

The Head Master was an intelligent and friendly man who was quite willing to have seventy kids from town running around campus during the middle of the summer vacation. He showed me around the campus and talked happily about the school. When he asked me where I was from, my accent giving me away, we had another point of

conversation. His home town was Buffalo, the next city west of Rochester. I even had a chance to see the faculty library and realize the excellent quality of reading that was available. The principal was kind enough to allow me library privileges and invited me to come by when ever I wanted. My trips to Xavier were limited by transportation but a few months later when I was able to purchase a used motor scooter trips to Xavier became a frequent source of refreshment for me.”

As I spoke Tabitha seemed to visualize my frustration, the beauty of Truk and the great relief that I felt when I discovered Xavier. She asked, “What was it about Xavier that was such a relief for you?”

I thought about the question for a moment and then tried to answer.

“Most of the clergy were from upstate New York, my old stomping grounds. So it was a touch of home in an otherwise alien environment. Remember that I had just come to the islands a few months earlier and was in the midst of a bad case of culture shock. That touch of home was important to me.

“I had time on my hands and thought a lot about Barti. I really missed him. Many of the Jesuits were a lot like Barti; men of strong faith, practical, possessing a sense of humor and quite intelligent. Time spent visiting and talking with them filled a real need.

“That the campus was located on a breathtakingly beautiful part of the island helped as well. As I said, once I had the motor scooter, I would get up there on weekends. There was an old Japanese light house in the jungle not far from the campus that offered a great view. I’d climb up to the top of that and sit there for hours enjoying the beauty and the silence.”

“Last, but not least, the library was a Godsend! Many of the books and authors that Barti had recommended to me could be found in that library; Thomas Merton, St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis de Sales and so many others. There was even a healthy collection of the classics; Cicero, Marcus Aurelius, and Augustine to name a few. I was reading a lot of Mitchner that year. His stories were great adventures and had enough accurate history in them to be interesting. However, I needed something with more substance than historical adventures. The Xavier library provided that substance.”

Tabitha was quiet for a moment. I wasn’t sure if she was waiting for me to say anything else but I had reached the end of my brief tale. Eventually, she responded.

“I am glad for you, Theo. Everyone needs a place of retreat, whether it is a lighthouse, a school, a park, a beach, a room, a quiet church or even a retreat house. The distractions and tensions in a person’s life make it difficult to keep your focus on God and his call. Having some quiet place to go, where you can be free of distractions and tensions for a while and focus only on God is necessary for your spiritual health.

“Was it the first time that you had read the classics; St. Teresa or St. John?”

This was a question at least that I could answer without gathering my thoughts.

“No, I read Augustine, Teresa and John of the Cross in college. My first reading was for a course I was taking and my focus was on what related directly to the professor’s lectures. My first impression was that they were difficult to read. It was more the flowery style than anything else. They didn’t say anything straight out but worked around and around. They were tedious, especially Augustine.

“When I read through them again in Truk I was astonished at how much their style had improved. What they spoke of made much more sense than on my first read.”

“That is always the way it is with the great works.” Tabitha said with a wry grin. “The next time you read them I am sure that you will discover that they are brilliant!”

Our afternoon conversations were a joy to me. We covered many deep topics yet never in the abstract. If we spoke of a spiritual truth it was in the context of someone’s life. I would tell tales from my island adventures or experiences Barti and I shared. She would draw from her many life experiences. I got to know her much better as a result of those afternoons together.

She was very much my mentor during those weeks she was in the hospital. She was quite different from Barti however, in the way she guided me. Barti was very much my teacher. I was a neophyte and he introduced me to the heart of Christian spirituality. He taught me what it meant to be a disciple; both the joys and the costs. He was the teacher and I was the student.

Tabitha didn’t relate to me as if I was a neophyte. Rather, she helped me mine the wealth of my experience. She helped me to examine the contours of my life and to discover God at work leading, calling, shaping. She helped me to recognize the signs of God’s work in my life and to examine my thoughts and feelings to discern God’s will for me in the present. With Tabitha I was not a student but a journeyman who already knew a great deal. She respected what I brought to our conversations and helped me to respect it as well.

A conversation of ours I remember with particular relish was when I asked her about Fr. Casmir Zaetawa. All I knew about him was that he was a Jesuit and taught a few courses in spirituality at Tabitha’s school, Jagiellonian University. Of course, he was also Tabitha’s spiritual director for many years. She was most willing to speak of her mentor.

“Let me see, Ladi began his doctoral studies in 1926 at Jagiellonian. He transferred to Munich in 1928, if I remember correctly, leaving me back in Krakow with the children. Matteus, our youngest, died in 1924. Even though it was four years later, I still grieved for him. It didn’t help much that Ladi was in Munich. We stayed with my parents, who were fairly well off; so I had much free time and others who could help with caring for the children.

“I had a teaching certificate from the normal school in Krakow but wasn’t sure if I was up to teaching a classroom full of children every day. There were no financial constraints requiring that I work, so I decided to take courses at the Jagiellonian instead.

“By the way, a normal school is an institution of higher education dedicated to training people to be school teachers. You took only the courses that had direct relevance to teaching. Certification from a normal school got you a job with the government school system if you wanted it. However, normal school certification was a bit less well thought of than a university degree. With my teaching certification, all I needed to do was take the equivalent of one year of university and I would have a Bachelor of Arts degree.

“So, with Ladi off to Munich I spent much of 1928 earning an undergraduate degree from Jagiellonian University. During that year I discovered that I had a talent for theology, which was good because I enjoyed studying it as well. After earning a bachelors degree I was ready to take on the world, or at least another degree. So, I enrolled in the theology department of the university as a graduate student. My plan was to take as many courses as I could while Ladi was away. Then when he returned, we

would see what the future brought. I wanted to go all the way with my graduate studies and complete the doctorate but I realized that I had children and a husband. All of those realities would have to work themselves out some how.

“I took a course on the Spanish Mystics from Fr. Zaetawa. For him that meant it was primarily a course on St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. There were others but they seemed irrelevant next to the towering figures of these two mystical saints. I had seen other instructors treat both of these saints in a mechanical and technical way that turned out to be boring. I discovered an entirely different approach with Fr. Zaetawa. He was a man in love and it radiated from him. His words were the words of a lover. When he spoke of God he did so with such passion that only a heartless wretch could be unmoved.

“The key to understanding St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross was to know that like Fr. Zaetawa, they were passionately in love with God. Their faith was not simply intellectual assent, which is no small feat in itself, but it was a total, self-surrender in love to the Beloved. Thus, when you read the Dark Night of the Soul, you must understand that the actual work is only the poem that is found on the first few pages of most editions. The greatest spiritual book of this doctor of the Church is a love poem. All the rest of the book, the dry and less interesting part, is a commentary; John’s attempt to explain what he meant by the poem. We find the same passion in St. Teresa, though perhaps with less overpowering intensity. Her spirituality is about union with the living flame of love.

“Fr. Zaetawa helped us to see through the words and to feel the passion of these saints. After a semester of that priest, your own relationship with the Lord had to be more alive, more meaningful.

“The following semester I needed to find a faculty advisor to assist me in choosing courses and help guide me through the graduate program. I was taking another course from him that semester and was convinced that he would be the perfect advisor. So, I hung back after class one morning and asked to speak with him. I explained my situation, my interest in the field of ascetic theology, what is called spirituality today, and asked if he would serve as my faculty advisor.

“He admitted some discomfort at the possibility of being an advisor to a lay woman. I reminded him that St. John and St. Teresa had a similar relationship. I pointed out that he was the most appropriate person to serve as advisor, given my interests, and I explained that I was a middle age married woman, well in my late 30 anyway, with children. He was about ten years older than me. He would be fairly safe from any threat I might pose. He smiled at my response to his concerns and agreed.

“By the time Ladi was back with his brand new degree as doctor of philosophy, I had completed all of the requirements for a master’s degree. Ladi accepted a position as lecturer in the philosophy department of at the Jagiellonian. His income and my inheritance, as my parents died the year before from injuries sustained in an automobile accident, were more than enough to allow me to continue my studies. Our children were old enough now and involved in their own studies at grammar school and gymnasium, that my constant presence in the home was not necessary. Since I was studying for a doctorate in a different department from his, there should be no conflict of interest. So, he agreed that I should complete my studies. Just between you and me, Theo, I think he also fancied the idea of being married to a doctor.

“Casmir Zaetawa was born in Warsaw in 1879. His father was a lawyer and his mother devoted herself to the family and home for most of his childhood. He was a bright boy, top in his class at grammar school and equally brilliant in gymnasium. As he completed his course of studies at gymnasium he felt a calling to the priesthood. This pleased his mother and somewhat frustrated his father, who wanted Casmir to follow him in the practice of law. Instead of seeking admittance into the archdiocesan seminary in Warsaw, Casmir applied to the Jesuit House of Formation. He was accepted and began a long journey toward ordination. He was ordained in 1907, at the age of 28 and then sent to the Gregorian University in Rome to complete his graduate studies in ascetic theology.

“After completing his doctoral studies, Fr. Zaetawa was sent to Japan to teach at Holy Sophia, the Jesuit University there... I think this was around 1913. You have to



forgive me, as my memory is not what it used to be... The Jesuits were in the process of establishing the school and he was one of the team of bright young men sent to undertake this mission. He taught at the university for around ten years. He always spoke of his time in Japan as special. Not only did he enjoy teaching but he had the opportunity to learn both Japanese language and culture, as well as study Zen. While he could not accept Buddhist teaching, he found Zen a prayer

method that was not significantly different in its practice from Western contemplative discipline.

“Around 1922 or 1923 he was sent to China where he taught at a Jesuit House of Formation. That is, he taught theology at a Jesuit seminary. Fluent Japanese was not much of a help in an area where the dominant language was Mandarin. So, he set to learning Mandarin, as best he could. He was never fluent but learned enough to get along with his students. His lack of fluency was not too much of an issue, as Latin was the language of study in all Seminaries back then. By the time his Chinese students got to take his class, they had a working knowledge of Latin. He enjoyed his time in China as well. It was different teaching in a seminary than in an open university. It was more of a homelike atmosphere. You weren't just a professor to your students but also a mentor, friend and pastor.

“He struck up a friendship with another Jesuit who was only two years younger than him. He was a geologist who was also involved in archaeological work. They became good friends. Fr. Casmir remarked several times that his friend had an unusually perceptive understanding of spirituality. It was his opinion that his friend missed his calling and should have pursued ascetic theology instead of geology. I was pleased to see that his friend did achieve some fame both for his scientific and spiritual writings. I believe that his friend's name was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

“In 1928 Fr. Casmir was called back to Poland. He was in his early fifties at the time. While still a strong and vital man, his superiors preferred to have him back home. He ended up teaching part time at Jagiellonian University and part time at the Jesuit House of Formation. He was still serving in those roles when I met as a graduate student.

Almost a year after I began work on my doctorate, Fr. Casmir was assigned to return to Japan. He was to teach at the university again, as well as help with the newly opened Jesuit House of Formation. With his experience, they must have figured he was the best person to help with the new formation house.

We corresponded as circumstances allowed over the next decade or so. I kept him informed of my academic success and the fact that I was working for the Krakow Archdiocese. He gave me updates on life in Japan.

“We felt the impact of the Second World War much earlier than Fr. Zaetawa did. The Germans invaded Poland in 1939 and from then on we were in a war-time environment. The Japanese were in an expansion phase throughout the 1930’s, so there was a great deal of military activity but life on the Japanese mainland was relatively peaceful. It wasn’t until the end of 1942, when Japan’s attack of Hawaii brought America into the war, that Japanese security was tightened. Americans in Japan were arrested and placed in concentration camps. This included the few American Jesuits who didn’t leave before the bombing of Pearl harbor and a couple of students with American passports. For the most part, Sophia University was well established and respected by that time. So, they were able to continue operation without too many problems.

“The war only became an immediate problem for the University faculty and students when the Americans started bombing mainland Japan. When that happened the University stopped classes, as it was too dangerous to have students come to school. Even with these precautions, some faculty and students were killed in the bombing. Several buildings on campus were destroyed from the bombing as well.

“He told me that the worst of it was Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Fr. Arupe went there to observe the damage, so that he could organize some aid through the Jesuits. When he returned, Fr. Arupe was speechless. He was shocked beyond belief. There was a pain and terror in his eyes that seemed to say that he had seen the depths of hell. He got all the medical supplies, digging tools, food and water that he could gather and lead a team of Jesuits and volunteers back to Hiroshima to help dig out those who were buried and to treat the survivors. Not long after they arrived in Hiroshima word came that Nagasaki had been hit with a nuclear weapon as well. The team was split and Fr. Casmir went with the new team to Nagasaki.

“The sight in Nagasaki was heart breaking. A large part of the city had been vaporized and the survivors were little more than walking corpses, as the radiation sickness quickly cut through their flesh. Most were dead within days. An added sorrow for Fr. Casmir is that the city has strong ties to the Jesuits. It is here that the ministry of St. Francis Xavier SJ had its greatest effect, bringing about the establishment of a large and faithful Christian community. That community survived the persecutions which began almost four hundred years ago and left tens of thousands Christian Japanese dead, martyred for their Faith. That ancient Christian community had been destroyed, for the most part, in one day by the terrible, devil bomb.

“A few days later the war was over. The Jesuits were now able to retrieve their members and other clergy from the concentration camps. The concentration camp inmates had a very different experience of the war from their brothers who were able to stay at the university. Many were near starvation. Many were injured. It was possible to work through the American chaplains and get those who were in worst shape evacuated but even that took time as wounded military personnel took priority.

“Surprisingly, the American occupation of Japan was much less oppressive than feared and progress was quickly made in rebuilding Japan and its economy. Fr. Casimir decided to stay in Japan and contribute to the reconstruction, as well as to the building up of the Christian community. He spent the last few years of his life as a parish priest in Nagasaki. He died in his parish rectory in 1955 at age 76, only weeks after the passing of his good friend Teilhard.

“I have always considered Fr. Zaetawa to be my spiritual director, though others may have helped fill the gaps when he was not around. It was Fr. Zaetawa that had the most profound influence on me, sharing with me a vision of God’s love that gave me new eyes with which to see the world. He saw God’s love filling the universe; holding it together from one moment to the next. He helped me to understand that the flesh, that material creation gives expression to the spiritual and is sacred because of this. God’s love encompasses all creation, spiritual and material, and all creation speaks of His glory, reveals His beauty, and makes His presence known. As we are caught up in this grace, in this wonderful torrent of God’s love, we manifest that love in the material world. We give it shape and time through our actions and so take part in God’s creative work.

“Always I have kept in the back of my mind, like a koan, the words “love made flesh”. They speak to me of Christ, who is love made flesh. Yet, they also speak to me of the possibility to which God calls me, that I might be love made flesh. They also speak to me of how I might realize this possibility, by making love tangible through all that I do and say. This is what Fr. Zaetawa taught me.”

Chapter Eight: Visitation of Spirits

The following morning I woke from a sound sleep to the sound of a ringing phone. It was Fatima. Tabitha had a rough night and was not doing well. Apparently the doctors found internal bleeding. It was slow enough that they felt it could be controlled through medication but if they didn't see significant improvement within the next few hours they would have to repair it via surgery. They were reluctant to operate on Tabitha because of her age and generally weakened condition, so their real hope was that the medication would work.

I listened to Fatima's words and the obvious concern in her voice. I told her that I would be there as soon as I could get dressed. Instead of immediately showering and getting dressed however, I sat in a chair near the bed. I felt drained of energy. There was a sense of being closed in, as if disaster was just ahead and all I could do was close my eyes and wait for the impact. It was as if I was in the car back in Nevada, with the headlights of a drunken driver hurtling toward us and a deadly impact only moments away.

Death was coming close. I could sense the presence of that insistent spirit and I recoiled in fear, not for me but for the loss of the woman who was my mentor and spiritual mother. I knew that her time was short now and I didn't want to deal with it. I wanted to put up a brave front and pretend that she was going to live for ever—the same wise and loving woman that I had come to know and love. Despite my denial, tears came to my eyes and began to fall, as a sob escaped from my chest. I sat in the chair and began to pray for Tabitha. Though I wanted her healed, my prayer was for God's will to be done in her now, as she approached death, just as it had been done in her for the many long years of her life.

I was at the hospital within an hour of receiving Fatima's phone call. Tabitha was showing some signs of responding to the medication but it was still too early to know if it would be enough. She was weak and asleep much of the time. She didn't look good. Only yesterday she seemed much more vital, especially as she spoke of Fr. Zaetawa. How her skin was pale and her cheeks sunken. Her breathing was steady, so at least that offered some evidence that she was not ready to leave us.

The Patriarch came by later in the morning. He had been phoned by his cousin, Fatima, and was concerned over the latest development. He spoke with us briefly and then administered the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick to Tabitha. He stayed the better part of an hour just sitting in a chair near her bed. He held her hand and was alone with Tabitha and his thoughts much of the time. Had Tabitha been a spiritual friend, or even mentor to the patriarch as well? I didn't ask but I could see that we struggled with many of the same emotions.

Around two o'clock Tabitha's physician came into her room and examined her. He explained to us that there was every indication that the medication was working and that she was stabilizing. However, he was convinced that any attempt to operate on Tabitha would kill her, as she was not strong enough. She was in the last stages of a terminal illness and no matter what happened, short of a miracle, Tabitha would be dead soon. She may well survive this episode but the next episode or the one after that would take her.

After the talk with her physician, Fatima went home to call Tabitha's daughter and brother. Whether Tabitha didn't want to bother them or not, it was time to notify them—if only out of justice to them.

I stayed with Tabitha the rest of the afternoon. She seemed to stabilize, as her vital signs were up. Her face even looked healthy once more, as if her spirit decided to take up residence again in her flesh—if only for a bit longer. She was conscious by early evening, at first, finding me in the same chair I was the evening before. She thought that she had drifted off to sleep during her tale of Fr. Zaetawa. I explained that it was the next evening and that she had not been well for much of the day. She was a bit disoriented at first, surprised at the length of time she had been unconscious. Then sensing my confusion over her reaction, she tried to explain herself.

“My dear Theo, I am not entirely crazy. I smile because your explanation makes sense of the strange dream I had while unconscious. I dreamt that Ladi came to me. He told me that we would be together soon, that I would soon be with my Beloved!”

While such a dream might frighten some people this intuition of her approaching death brought peace and quiet joy to Tabitha. She seemed almost to look forward to the embrace of the angel of death, as if he were an old friend.

Later that evening Fatima returned to the hospital looking somewhat rested, as well as satisfied that she had done right by Tabitha's daughter and brother. She insisted that I return to the apartment and get some sleep. If anything came up she would give me a call.

The evening TelAviv traffic was much less daunting than the insane road race that passes for traffic during the day. The evening was cool and a gentle breeze blew in from the Mediterranean heavy with salt. As I drove back to the apartment my mind wandered. I thought of another time someone close to me was dying.

I was back in Truk. It was Saturday morning the first weekend in May. There was a loud knocking on the door of my room. I could hear Sam Costa, our in-country Peace Corps director, calling out that he needed to see me. I was sleeping late that morning. I looked forward to the extra sleep much of the week. I wanted to relish the sheer pleasure of it. Sam's voice jolted me awake. I got out of bed, dressed and went out to see what was going on. Sam was waiting for me with the Peace Corps pickup. The radio announced that I had a telegram waiting and should get up to the communications office as soon as possible. Sam didn't think that was a good omen. So, he got the Peace Corps office pickup and came over to give me a ride up to the communications office.

I jumped in the back and held on as we bounced along the dirt road at a much faster rate than we should have been going. We were up the hill to the administrative center in five minutes and coming to a rest in front of the communications office in seven. I was out of the truck as soon as we were no longer in motion and in the office where I introduced myself. The clerk reached into a tray with several telegrams, found my name and gave me the message. It was from Alexander Stanford, the Micronesian Region Director who worked out of Saipan. We met while I was in Saipan for the first part of my training. He wrote...

“Theo, just received call from your father. Your mother in traffic accident. In coma. Unsure of outcome. Three weeks leave authorized and travel home at Peace Corps expense. Alex.”

I was numb. Mom was in a traffic accident? She was in a coma? She might die?

Sam took a look at the telegram, as I held it out for him to read. Moments later we pulled up in front of the Peace Corps office. He told me to get my things together and get back to the Peace Corps Office as soon as possible. Tony, another Peace Corps volunteer, drove me back to the house to get my things, while Sam got on the phone with the Continental Airlines station manager. By the time I returned to the Peace Corps Office with a backpack of clothing, Sam had arranged for me to be on the Continental flight that was landing two hours later. I don't know what strings he pulled to get me on the plane but it seemed like worked a miracle.

Even though Sam was able to get me on the plane out of Truk almost immediately, it was much more difficult making the right connections elsewhere. I ended up having an eight hour layover in Honolulu and one of a similar length in San Francisco. By the time I reached Rochester I was exhausted.

The emotional impact of what happened hit me during the layover in Honolulu. I realized that my mother may be dying...or was already dead for all I knew. The thought shook me. I wiped away the tears but they kept coming.

I prayed. I prayed a great deal on the trip back to Rochester. My prayers were more inarticulate cries of pain than well thought out words. The cries of pain were what I could manage at that point and they expressed the truth of my soul, so I prayed as best I could.

At each layover I tried calling home with little luck. Finally, before I boarded the plane in San Francisco I was able to connect with my father and let him know I was on the way. I also gave him my anticipated arrival time, so someone could be at the airport to pick me up. Dad told me that mom was in stable condition but still in a coma. That was good news of sorts, as it looked like mom would survive the accident. The question is whether she would be mom or a vegetable.

I slept most of the trip across the States. I had a middle seat, which is normally a form of torture. However, I was so tired that I simply didn't care. Once I was off my feet for five minutes I was unconscious and remained that way until we reached Chicago. I gathered my energy enough to change planes and was on my way to Rochester within an hour. An hour later I was in Rochester and Dad was driving me to the hospital. I would stop at the hospital for a few minutes to check on Mom and then head for the house and some real sleep. I was exhausted and my biological clock totally confused.

Mom looked terrible. She was bruised and bandaged all over. Tubes were running into her from every angle. It was little consolation that the doctors said she was in stable condition. She looked terrible.

Dad tried to tell me the story as best he could piece it together. Mom was on her way to work. She worked second shift at St. Mary's Hospital on the kitchen staff. We lived only a few blocks from the hospital, so she usually walked to work. She was crossing main street when a drunken driver came speeding by and hit her. According to the police report she flew some twenty feet before hitting the ground. Dad and my kid brother, Charlie, heard the noise and went to check on it, to their horror they found that it was Mom who had been hit. Since the accident happened so close to the hospital, they were able to get her inside and stabilized quickly. It was probably a factor in saving her life.

By the time I caught up on much needed sleep and got back to the hospital the next day, Mom was out of the coma. However, she didn't have much memory. Her

memories seemed to stop with her childhood. She wanted her mother and couldn't remember anything past the time she was about 12 years old. She didn't recognize Dad or any of her children. The doctor was pleased that she was out of the coma and considered that significant progress. They explained that some memory loss was normal in such an injury. Most of her memory would probably return over the next few days, according to the physicians.

It did. Gradually she recognized all of us. Given the possible complications from her injuries, the extent of her recovery was almost a miracle. Some brain damage occurred. It made it difficult for Mom to speak and caused her to forget words and to slur words when she spoke. She also had to learn to walk all over again. A year later she was recovered, for the most part, except for a slight speech impediment that she would carry with her for the rest of her life.

Inside though, she was different after the accident. She worked at the hospital for almost ten years and enjoyed it tremendously. She had good friends among her coworkers. She liked the opportunity to be productive and to contribute to the family finances. Her income gave her a sense of independence, to the extent that if she saw a dress she liked or some gadget for the house that caught her attention she could get it without the need to discuss the matter with Dad. It was her money and her decision. All this was gone with the accident.

There was an anger and bitterness in her after the accident. This was understandable. The problem was that she wouldn't let go of it but let it stew and build. This part of it was unhealthy. Much of that anger she turned inward, viewing herself as useless. She became depressed. It was a long and difficult climb out of the dark valley into which she fell with the accident. Dad was with her throughout that dark journey. By the time Mom died of cancer 15 years later, her spirit seemed recovered from the accident. That spiritual recovery was the great and most difficult work of her life.

As I drove back to the apartment it would be many years yet before my mother recovered spiritually from the accident. She still battled with depression. Yet, I was happy that she was alive. Even if the accident cost her dearly, she still had the gift of life. What seemed to be a terrible and tragic situation in the beginning worked out fairly well in the end. Yet with Tabitha, what had once seemed to be a good situation was rapidly deteriorating. My physical mother had come back from the brink of death, my spiritual mother was rapidly approaching that rendezvous and would not survive it..

Back at the apartment I fixed some iced tea and a plate of cheese and vegetables, as a late night supper. I ate and drank quietly. Before long I settled into bed. I was tired, having very little sleep the night before and being emotionally exhausted by the events of the day. Sleep came quickly and with it a dream.

I was in a little cafe in Acco, the ancient fortress city near Haifa I had visited on pilgrimage almost seven years earlier. I was with Barti, who looked as he did on our earlier visit to Acco. We sat quietly watching a beautiful sunset. The sunlight broke through the clouds in a prism of red's violets, blues, oranges and greens. The water shimmered in the setting sunlight, as if it were on fire. It was a spectacular sunset. My thoughts were pulled from the sunset, as the cafe lights came on to do battle with the encroaching dusk.

Barti spoke first. "You know that she will be gone soon?"

Reluctantly, I responded. “Yes, I may be a bit slow witted but I’m not that thick! In the next few days she will be with you. I love her and I’ll miss her terribly. I want to keep her with me always. However, no matter how much I resist the idea, I know that it’s her time to move on.”

“Theo,” Barti said a minute or two later, “you have grown a good deal since the last time we were together here in Acco. You will continue to struggle and to grow in the years ahead. Where one door closes, another opens. When you need guidance or a mentor, you will have what you need. Right now you need more life experience. In good time you will be a mentor to others, so be patient. Seek God’s will in all things and be of service whenever you find the opportunity.”

“What is it like Barti? What is it like on the other side?” I asked.

“What can I say, Theo, that you would understand? You ask me to speak of light and vision to one who is blind from birth. What words can I use to convey experience which you have no way of comprehending?”

Insistent, I asked him to make the effort.

“Remember the joy and peace you felt at Ramleh before we left pilgrimage to return home? Remember the unspeakable joy you experienced in this borderland between death and life the evening of the accident that took me from the world? Those memories hint of this world of light and joy. Here every day is Easter morn. The light of Easter morn is breaking through to Tabitha and she is being drawn here, to her Beloved. Don’t focus on your loss but on her joy.”

Barti began to fade into the wisps of light that still clung to the horizon, smiling his usual knowing grin as he disappeared. I sat alone in the cafe, watching the Mediterranean and thinking of what Barti told me for a while longer. The cafe slowly disappeared and I woke to find myself in bed at the apartment. It was still dark. I closed my eyes, whispered a brief “thank you” to Barti for the visit, and was asleep within moments. I remember no other dreams that night.

Chapter Nine: Beloved

Anna Glowaki Rabawicz, Tabitha's daughter arrived late the next evening. She was accompanied by her uncle Msgr. Anton Czarkowski, Tabitha's younger brother. Her daughter, Paula, and her son, Karol were with their mother. Tabitha's grandchildren both appeared to be in their mid-thirties with children of their own.

Karol was the youngest of the travelers, only a year or two older than me. Paulina had a strong resemblance to Tabitha, almost being a younger version of her grandmother. Tabitha once told me that her grandson Karol was the spitting image of Ladi. Karol was a handsome man and honored his grandfather.

Anna was pretty much as Fatima had described her; a middle age woman who possessed charm, dignity and a sharp intelligence that radiated from her as she spoke. She seemed to be a woman who liked to take charge, for which both Fatima and I were grateful. She quickly became the coordinator of all of our efforts to ease Tabitha's passing.

Msgr. Czarkowski's facial features had a striking resemblance to his sister, especially his smile. He was in his late seventies but looked like a man at least ten years younger. Even though he was retired, I was willing to bet that his bishop kept him busy covering scheduled masses when the local pastor was ill or otherwise occupied. He exhibited the same vitality that I witnessed in Tabitha when Barti and I were on pilgrimage.

The apartment was getting a bit crowded with all of us there. We rearranged the room assignments, so that Karol and I camped out in the living room. Anna and Paulina shared the bedroom Fatima had been using. Since Tabitha went to the hospital, Fatima had moved back home with her parents. She checked in daily with Anna or I to keep abreast of developments, if she wasn't at the hospital. Msgr. Anton moved into the bedroom that I had been using. No one wanted to use Tabitha's bedroom. We all felt that it would be too much of an infringement on her privacy, even if she would have wanted us to make use of it.

Tabitha was remarkably strong the next morning when we all marched in to her hospital room. Her medication was working, she was taking nourishment and seemed relatively animated in her conversation. Everyone was welcomed with a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. She listened carefully to the adventures of each of her visitors, asked pertinent questions, and offered words of encouragement to each. Stories were retold of favorite memories; of how Anton and Tabitha used to get into trouble with their parents for their neighborhood misadventures while growing up; of what it was like having a mother and father who were both well known leaders in the community; of the great times that Paulina and Karol had when they would visit their grandmother in Poland or later in Israel—and how they so much looked forward to her visits to Philadelphia.

While they were talking, Tabitha mentioned that her greatest frustration with being in the hospital was her inability to get to Mass. She longed to celebrate the Eucharist but her physician absolutely forbade anyone to take her down to the chapel. She may seem strong but the physician appreciated her frailty and wanted to take no chances with a ride to the other side of the hospital and exposure to needless germs. Msgr. Anton left the room and came back twenty minutes later with a Mass kit and a stole, apparently borrowed from the chaplain's office.

He cleared off her bed table and set it up for Mass. I was assigned the readings. Fatima, Ann, Pauline and Karol were the choir. Fatima let the nurse know what was going on and got the go-ahead. So closing the door we began Mass.

The choir began with “Morning has broken”, a beautiful and haunting hymn of praise to God for the sheer joy and gift of life. The first reading was from Zechariah (9:9-10) and spoke of the Lord coming in triumph, riding the foal of an ass. There was a play of seemingly opposite images; the military commander, the triumphant king riding into view not proudly on a war horse but meekly on a common donkey. In the Gospel reading that day Jesus invited us to “take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”

We sat in silence for a few moments after the Gospel reading, lost in our thoughts, then Msgr. Anton began to speak.

“I was already in the United States when World War II began. Not a day went by that I did not fear for Tabitha and her family. I was pleased when a letter from Tabitha arrived at my little rectory in Kansas. I later learned that the letter came from Poland via an archbishop postman and several Vatican diplomatic pouches. My joy was short-lived as I read of the hardship everyone endured back in Krakow. Your letter, dear sister, spoke mostly of the needs of the suffering—Poles, Jews, everyone...It was only in passing I realized that Ladi had been taken to a concentration camp. What could I do? I did what I could and prayed. I enlisted everyone in my parish to pray for you and Ladi daily. Then, in the end you were alive and my prayers were answered! But were they? Ladi had been killed. What a terrible burden! Yet, you pushed on. You continued to save the lives of refugees, of the persecuted. You continued to see to their physical needs. Afterward, when the war was over and reconstruction was underway you continued to serve the people and to bear witness to everyone that you were on fire with divine love. First in our homeland, then when most people retire, you took up the mantle of service here in Israel.

“I listen to the words of the Gospel this morning. ‘my yoke is easy and my burden light’. Just speaking of the responsibility that has been on your shoulders over the years and thinking of the pain that you have had to endure tires me! How can such a yoke be easy or such a burden light?

“I remember when Anna was young, as well as Matteus and the other children. I never realized how much work went into raising children. It is constant, especially if there are several young ones at the same time. Yet, I never remember you acting as if the care of your children was a burden. Rather, I remember the joy with which you fed them, read to them, comforted them, sang to them, or bathed them. What you did came not from a sense of responsibility, even though you are a most responsible person and always have been. Rather, what you did came from the depths of your love for those children. To you they were pure gift. You became pure gift to them in your loving care for them.

“What can be a burden if it is done from love? A burden is when I think of myself and feel put upon by the demands of others. Love is when the well-being and joy of another is the cause my joy.

“I look at Christ nailed to the cross and think how can such a yoke be easy? How can such a burden be light? Yet, I know also that Christ was on that cross out of love for me...for each of us. Then it dawns on me that Jesus is not promising us an easy life, free of difficulty or suffering. Jesus is promising that if we take upon our shoulders the yoke

of love and all that it demands of us, he will be with us. His strength will be our strength. We will not see the yoke of love as a burden, even when it demands all our strength, all our dreams, all our possessions. We will give all freely, joyfully.

“In a few moments Jesus will be with us in a unique way. This bread and wine will become his living flesh and blood in every sense except appearance. We will share in his passion and death, his great act of ultimate love for us through our participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice. Through this miracle of the Eucharist Christ continues to feed, heal, comfort and strengthen us with and because of his divine love for us. Our sharing in the Eucharist makes it possible for us to be filled with divine love. Our sharing in the Eucharist also places the yoke of love upon our shoulders and draws us out of self-centered concern and orients us toward the service of others.

“My dear Tabitha. When I see you, I see Christ. You have become love. You have become what you celebrate in the Eucharist. May we all become love. May the face of Christ be as visible in us, as he is in you.”

There was a long period of silence following the homily. We were all so caught up in the truth of what Msgr. Anton had proclaimed, as well as the emotion, that it took some time to gather our thoughts and prepare for the rest of Mass.

Msgr. Anton was an excellent presider at Mass. The prayers came from his heart, even if they were memorized. There was a deliberateness and reverence which drew each of us into the mystery of the sacrament we were celebrating. The offertory hymn was “Breathe on Me, Breath of God”. I wasn’t familiar with it but I later learned that it was a favorite of Tabitha.

Breathe on me, breath of God,
fill me with life anew,
That I may love the things you love,
and do what you would do.

Breathe on me, breath of God,
Until my heart is pure,
Until with you I have one will,
To live and to endure.

Breathe on me, breath of God,
My soul with grace refine,
Until this earthly part of me
Glows with your fire divine.

Breathe on me, breath of God,
So I shall never die,
But live with you the perfect life
In your eternity.

She was able to consume the host and Msgr. Anton gave her a sip of the wine. This was pure joy for her. Again, there was a long silence as we each communed with the Lord. After communion Msgr Anton stood next to Tabitha and placed his hands in

blessing upon her head. It was a long prayer, in Polish, but obviously very heart-felt. He then invited each of us to place our hands in silent prayer on Tabitha's head. Over the next few minutes, each of us in turn placed our hands on Tabitha's head in blessing and prayed. As I held her, I remembered the many times that she had comforted me, gave me sound advice, chided me and guided me. I remembered her cookies and lemonade the first day I met her. I thanked God for allowing her into my life; asked God's rich blessings upon her and prayed that I might some day become as clear an icon of Christ for others, as she had become for me. The closing hymn was in Polish, which limited it to Tabitha's family, but was beautiful even without understanding the words.

I was surprised by what happened next. Immediately after the recessional hymn, Fr. Anton took off his stole and again went to the side of Tabitha's bed. He knelt on the floor next to the bed and lifted Tabitha's hand, placing it on the top of his head. He then asked for her blessing.

She spoke of him as a wonderful man of God and a beloved brother. She spoke of the joy he brought to her heart over the years. She asked forgiveness for any offenses she may have committed against him and offered her own forgiveness to him for any he may have committed against her. She spoke of those to whom he would still minister and of the lives that he would still touch. She spoke of the light and love of God that she saw in his face and prayed that he might be consumed by the divine fire of love.

Following her brother's example, each of us in turn knelt beside Tabitha and asked for her blessing which she freely gave. I was the last. She spoke of me as grandson in her heart. She spoke of my passion for the Lord and of the gifts that I had been given by the Lord, most of which I wasn't even aware. She spoke of how proud she was of me. She spoke of a quest that I had undertaken, to know and to do God's will in my life. She asked for God's blessing upon me as I continued on that quest. She also assured me that I would never be alone on my quest. Christ was there sustaining and guiding me; I would always have her prayers as well, whether she was in this world or the next.

After I stood up, Tabitha looked at each of us with a smile that was so loving that it brought tears to my eyes. She said to us in a soft voice, "Thank you. This is a good day. I'm happy."

We could see that Tabitha was tired so we gathered our belongings and prepared to leave her to a much needed nap. As we were going, she motioned to Msgr. Anton and asked if he could arrange for the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in her room, perhaps later that evening. She wanted some time with the Lord in prayer and it would be such a blessing. He took a card from his pocket, apparently belonging to the hospital chaplain. Needless to say, arrangements were made. Msgr. Anton promised that her request would be granted that evening.

Tabitha's family needed to rest. They were still exhausted from the flight and their biological clocks were disoriented from moving through the time zones. So, I drove them to the apartment. They planned to eat a late lunch and then get a few hours sleep to take the edge off their exhaustion. Fatima would pick them up early in the evening and bring them back to the hospital.

I ate with the others and then took a quick shower to refresh myself before leaving for the hospital. Just before I left Karol decided to return to the hospital with me. I drove through the crowded rush hour streets of TelAviv trying to carry on a conversation with Karol, keep us alive in the homicidal traffic and ignore the ache in the pit of my stomach.

The ache was my body's way of dealing with the emotional pain I felt, knowing that Tabitha was close to death.

Karol and I checked on Tabitha as soon as we arrived at the hospital. She was still sleeping, so we went down to the cafeteria and ate a light evening meal. We kept it light, as we had eaten a late lunch only a few hours earlier. Karol seemed to deal with anxiety the same way as me, so his stomach was no more ready for a heavy meal than was mine.

We got to know each other a little better over that meal. He was an attorney in private practice. While he was a Philadelphia lawyer, he did his legal work for the poor of the city. He practiced family law; custody, child support, divorce, adoptions. Though he might take on an occasional civil suit and an even less frequent misdemeanor criminal defense. Felony criminal defense he left to the public defender or a private lawyer who might be willing to handle the case *pro bono*. He had a grant from Legal Services to help cover some of his costs. He took legal fees when the client could afford it. Most of the time however, he lived simply and got by with relatively little. I could see Tabitha's positive influence on his character.

After a few stories from my days as a probation officer, to establish some sort of professional common ground, I told him of how I met Tabitha and our adventures since then. I was surprised to learn that he knew Barti. I shouldn't have been, as Barti and Tabitha go back a few years and it is reasonable to presume that he and Barti would have met at some point. Karol explained that Tabitha would visit the States for several months at a time when he was younger, to help make up for her extended absence for much of his childhood. Barti would take advantage of these opportunities to visit with his mentor regularly. Rochester was not all that far from Philadelphia; only a short flight. He liked Barti and had been sad to hear news of his death a few years earlier.

When we got back up to the room about an hour later Tabitha was awake. Her Spartan evening meal was on the moveable bed table near her; untouched. We tried to get her to eat a few bites but she had no appetite. The IV provided some nutrition, so I didn't worry too much. She lacked the strength for any major conversations but seemed pleased by our presence.

A few minutes before seven that evening, there was a knock on the door. A young Catholic priest in a Roman collar stood there with a small case in his hand. Karol answered the door and invited the priest in to the room. He explained that he was the Catholic chaplain for the hospital. Msgr. Czarkowski had spoken with him earlier in the day about the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament for Dr. Glowaki. He was happy to respond to her request and had the Blessed Sacrament with him. I cleared Tabitha's table while the priest greeted her and explained why he was there. She perked up immediately and did her best to convey her pleasure at his presence and mission, even if it was a serious effort for her to get the words out.

A few moments later the young priest lead us in prayer. Neither Karol nor I were the greatest singers but we did our best to sing a not too off-key version of that old classic *O Solutaris Hostia*, as the priest opened the case and removed a very small and simple monstrance that seemed designed for private or small group Eucharistic



adoration. Tabitha quickly settled into a contemplative focus on the Blessed Sacrament. We left the room with the priest to allow Tabitha some privacy for her prayer. He promised to be back in about an hour or so to bring the prayer time to a close and retrieve the Blessed Sacrament.

There was a waiting room not too far down the hall near the elevators. We found seats there but this time we said little. Each was lost in his own thoughts; his own prayers. It was around 7:40pm when the rest of our little group arrived. They saw us in the waiting room as they got off the elevator and joined us. We explained Tabitha was praying and that the chaplain would be back in another fifteen or twenty minutes. We could all visit with her then. Since Anna, Paulina and Msgr. Anton had better singing voices than Karol or I, they could sing the *Tantum Ergo* and bring the prayer time to a more fitting end.

As we were talking, there was an insistent buzzing sound that began to assault us from the nurse station, which was not far from the waiting room. Paulina seemed concerned by this and went on alert. She was a nurse at Villa Saint Martha, a Catholic nursing facility for the elderly near Philadelphia. That buzzing was not a good sign. A duty nurse was nearby. She pressed a button at the nurse station to shut off the buzzing and headed down the hall at a rapid pace. Paulina got up to see in what direction the nurse was headed. A moment later she was out of the waiting room and rapidly catching up to the duty nurse. They were headed for Tabitha's room. Anna kept the rest of us from following, explaining that Paulina was a nurse and might be of some help. The rest of us would only get in the way. No more than five minutes later, a solemn faced Paulina returned to the waiting room. Wiping away tears, she told us to follow her. We went to Tabitha's room. The vital signs monitors were turned off and her eyes were closed. I half expected to see a vacant expression which I associated with death on Tabitha face. Yet, the expression on her face was one of ecstasy. She was united with her Beloved. Her joy had been so great that flesh could no longer contain it. She had not died to this world, so much as transcended it.

Chapter Ten: Remembrance

The funeral was held two days after her passing. It was held at St. Peter Cathedral in Jaffa, not far from the apartment. The cathedral is at the side of Kedumim Square. In addition to being the cathedral for the Jaffa/TelAviv Diocese it is also a Franciscan Monastery. It was almost a hundred years old and built over the ruins of a Crusader citadel. While Tabitha may have been more at home at the chapel of the Benedictine monastery, which was only a few blocks away, St. Peter's was considerably larger; an important practical consideration.

We quickly realized that this was not going to be a private family funeral. The Patriarch of Jerusalem wanted to preside at the funeral and the clergy alone who wanted to attend could have filled the Benedictine chapel. Within hours of Tabitha's death calls were coming in from clergy all over Israel, Poland, the United States, Great Britain, Italy and the Holy See. A representative of the Israeli government called, asking to be allowed to honor Tabitha at the funeral, since she was a Righteous Gentile and an Israeli citizen. Of course, there were many rabbis, Imams and mullas who called as well expressing their condolences and inquiring about the funeral arrangements.

It was decided that a large wake service would be held in Kedumim Square. The wake service would be hosted by the government and provide an opportunity for the greater community to mourn her passing. This would be followed by a funeral service in the Cathedral directed more to the family and close friends of Tabitha. She would be buried in the small Catholic cemetery near the Cathedral.

It is difficult for me to remember the details of the next few days. I was numb, as was Fatima, Anna and the rest of us. My thoughts were with Tabitha. I cherished in my thoughts each moment that I shared with Tabitha over the years of our friendship. The image of her face in ecstasy haunted me. If that is the death of the righteous, I thought, then by God's grace may I be among the righteous!

The morning of the funeral we gathered at Kedumim Square at 9:00am, which is when the funeral director and his assistants brought the casket and placed it on display near the front of the canopies that covered much of the Square. The tent like structures ensured protection from the heat of the sun or from possible rain, whichever the weather brought that day. They also lent a magical quality to the experience, transporting us in my imagination back hundreds of years. The people in the park seemed to be a gathering of many tribes come together at a desert oasis. There were almost a thousand people at the wake service, even though there were only seats for several hundred. The others stood at the back or the side of the arranged chairs or found shade among the trees that dotted Kedumim Square.

Government officials spoke of Tabitha and her life saving work during World War II. They spoke of her work with the Palestinian refugees in recent years and her constant advocacy for the needs of the poor and suffering. Similar speeches were given by Rabbis, Islamic clergy, and representatives of the Holy See. It seemed strange to hear so many people speak of the great Dr. Glowaki, whom I had known her as Tabitha—my friend. She was certainly great. It was nice to hear others affirm her greatness in ringing tones. Though, I thought that she would have been embarrassed by this outpouring of praise had she been alive. She was such a humble and unassuming person. Yet, what

everyone said was true and needed to be shouted from the rooftops. Tabitha's life should be celebrated.

I was particularly touched by a middle-aged woman who referred to her as Tabitha, rather than Dr. Glowaki. She spoke of how her family was among those to be sent to the death camps. Tabitha had somehow gotten her parents, her siblings, herself and several neighbors from their home in the middle of the night and into a safe house. That wasn't the end. She made sure that they had food and arranged for them to be gotten out of the country. They would be refugees for another few years, until they were able to settle in the Holy Land, but they were alive. They would not have survived the Shoah, except for Tabitha.



The wake service went on for more than four hours, with a seemingly endless stream of people of all ages, ethnic groups and religions who spoke of how Tabitha had touched their lives in important ways. Each expressed their debt of gratitude to Tabitha and how she had made their lives better because they had known her. Light refreshments were served, so that no one would get too hungry. It was still early in the day and more was to come.

Around 1:00pm an honor guard moved Tabitha's casket into the Cathedral, where the Patriarch began the funeral at the door of the church; greeting, blessing the casket and covering it in a pall. Msgr. Czarkowski vested and concelebrated the funeral Mass along with the Patriarch of Jerusalem, the bishop of the Jaffa/TelAviv diocese, a representative of the Holy See, and a priest of the Archdiocese of Krakow. The Patriarch gave a beautiful homily. Though to be honest, I don't remember much of it,

aside from being impressed by its beauty. My thoughts kept wandering back to Tabitha. It was difficult to concentrate on anything.

After communion one of the family members or close friends of Tabitha was given a few minutes to speak. I had been assigned that duty by Anna and Msgr. Czarkowski. I argued that either of them was a better public speaker than me. Certainly, Karol was a good speaker, he was a lawyer! However, they were insistent that I give the comments. Apparently, Tabitha had given them instructions that when the need arose, I was the one she wanted to speak at her funeral. I wished that she had let me in on the secret, as I was totally unprepared. When the time came I got up from the pew and moved to the pulpit, my heart was pounding so rapidly that I thought I would join Tabitha and Barti any moment. Taking a deep breath I began.

"Barti Del Calle was my mentor and my best friend. He died five year ago in an auto accident, killed by a drunk driver. He had a profound impact on my life and faith. He taught me how to pray. He taught me something of what it means to live the Gospels. He was a good man and a holy man. I speak of Barti because the most profound influence in his life, with its many important influences, was his mentor and spiritual director, Dr. Tabitha Glowaki.

"I met Tabitha back in 1976 when Barti and I came to Israel on pilgrimage. We had a few days scheduled to spend in the TelAviv area. We visited the Benedictine

monastery here in Jaffa and encountered Tabitha at Mass. Well, Barti gently insisted that we spend the rest of the time in TelAviv with Tabitha. He promised that the experience would be well worth it; it was! We dropped by her apartment and I was swept up in the warmth and hospitality of this wonderful woman. Most of that first day I was treated to wonderful stories of Tabitha's life and particularly to a story of how Barti and Tabitha met. I would like to share that story with you.

"You must understand that Barti had been a Cistercian monk at the time. He was a student at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Jerusalem. His official residence was the Cistercian monastery of Latroun near Ramleh, though he spent much of his time at the Benedictine monastery in Jerusalem, as it was closer to the Institute.

"He explained that after studying Hebrew for over a year the Abbot at Latroun wanted to make a bit more use of him than just as a house guest. So he asked Barti to be part of the team that gave conferences to retreatants at the Abbey guesthouse. Since he had passable Hebrew by that time, he was given responsibility for English and Hebrew language groups. As a result, he gave one or two conferences each week.

"After he had been giving conferences for about six months, they were becoming a bit rote. He developed a set of about ten conferences that were informative and well written, which he drew upon as appropriate.

"Tabitha made an annual retreat at the Latroun Abbey ever since she moved to Israel. One Tuesday afternoon she was sitting in the Abbey chapel listening to the conference Barti was giving on the centrality of love in Christianity. It was his best conference, well written and filled with insight from Scripture and the Church Fathers. She sat respectfully through the entire conference. Then when it was over and the others had silently filed out of the chapel, she called out to him from the pew where she still sat.

"Young man, are you sure you're in the right line of work?"

"He was shocked by her question, especially as he was struggling with doubts about his vocation as a Trappist monk.

"She continued with her remarks. 'Your little talk was an excellent piece of scholarship but it was all from your head. There was no passion. How can you speak of love without being caught up in it?' She then began to recite a familiar passage from St. Bernard's reflection on love.

*I love because I love, I love that I may love.
Love is sufficient of itself, it gives pleasure by itself and because of itself.
It is its own merit, its own reward.
Love looks for no cause outside itself, no effect beyond itself. Its profit lies in its practice.*

*I love because I love, I love that I may love.
Love is a great thing so long as it continually returns to its fountainhead,
flows back to its source, always drawing from there the water which constantly replenishes it.*

*Of all the movements, sensations and feelings of the soul,
love is the only one in which the creature can respond to the Creator
and make some sort of similar return*

*however unequal though it be.
For when God loves, all he desires is to be loved in return;
the sole purpose of his love is to be loved,
in the knowledge that those who love him are made happy by their love of him.*

*The Bridegroom's love,
or rather the love which is the Bridegroom,
asks in return nothing but faithful love.
Let the beloved, then, love in return.
Should not a bride love, and above all, Love's bride?
Could it be that Love not be loved?
Rightly then does she give up all other feelings and give herself wholly to love
alone;
in giving love back, all she can do is to respond to love.*

*And when she has poured out her whole being in love,
what is that in comparison with the unceasing torrent of that original source?
Clearly, lover and Love,
soul and Word,
bride and Bridegroom,
creature and Creator do not flow with the same volume;
one might as well equate a thirsty man with the fountain.*

*What then of the bride's hope,
her aching desire,
her passionate love,
her confident assurance?
Is all this to wilt
just because she cannot match stride for stride with her giant,
any more than she can vie with honey for sweetness,
rival the lamb for gentleness,
show herself as white as the lily,
burn as bright as the sun,
be equal in love with him who is Love?*

*No.
It is true that the creature loves less because she is less.
But if she loves with her whole being,
nothing is lacking where everything is given.
To love so ardently then is to share the marriage bond;
she cannot love so much and not be totally loved,
and it is in the perfect union of two hearts that complete and total marriage
consists.
Or are we to doubt that the soul is loved by the Word first and with a greater
love?*

"Tabitha went to her death not fearful or filled with regrets. For her, no matter what challenges and burdens the day brought she counted it as a good day. Every day for her was a good day. She went to her death in the embrace of her Beloved, glowing with the joy of love given and received. If I have learned anything from Tabitha, it is the lesson of love."

A few moments later the Patriarch intoned *In Paradisio*, which was picked up by the choir. It is a beautiful verse. There were blessings given and more prayers said before we left the Cathedral and headed for the cemetery. My memories of the cemetery were vague. Perhaps the idea of putting Tabitha's earthly remains in the ground was too final for me, so I blocked it out. I simply remember going through the motions of the burial and getting it over. The only other memory is of a sea gull that hovered about forty feet over the grave for the longest time, simply riding the current without actually moving.

Chapter Eleven: Pilgrim's Progress

The next few days were strange. We were all going through the motions of life, trying to keep organized and deal with the practical issues of Tabitha's death. The reality was that each of us was numb with pain and not ready to deal with it.

Tabitha's will listed Fatima as her executor, as she was a practicing attorney in Israel. Fatima read the will Friday morning, so that everyone present knew of their inheritance and would be able to claim and pack any objects left to them by Tabitha. We were all surprised to learn that Tabitha was much better off financially than any of us realized. Gifts she had received or honoraria earned for lectures over the years were usually invested, rather than spent. She was a popular lecturer so her investments were substantial. This was helped by a wise choice of investments. Her daughter and grandchildren were well provided for in her will. She left about ten thousand dollars worth of stocks and bonds to me. Fatima later explained that the stocks and bonds had originally been intended for Barti but with his passing she named me as the beneficiary in his place. I also received a number of books from Tabitha's personal library; all were books of theology. The real treasure were several books by Fr. Zaetawa. They were all in Polish but that didn't matter. What was important to me was the physical link with her mentor, from whose influence we had all benefited through Tabitha.

By Saturday Tabitha's family members began to head back to the States. Msgr. Czarkowski, Paulina and Karol flew back on the same plane. Both Paulina and Karol had young families and responsibilities at home. Msgr. Czarkowski was feeling the strain of the previous week and decided to head home as well. Anna remained behind to help with the gathering of Tabitha's possessions, their distribution to the heirs, and with the closing of the apartment.

Fatima was in and out of the apartment to visit and to handle matters related to her duties as executor of the will. However, she was around much less than I had been accustomed to while Tabitha was alive. I realized that she had a career, parents and a life of her own. It was time to move on and she did just that. However, I missed her. There was a time not too many weeks earlier when I had hoped that a spark of romance might ignite between us. We enjoyed each other's company and were good friends as a result of our experience over the past month or so but that is as far as it went.

Of the group, I was the last to leave. Tabitha died on September 15th, the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows. The apartment was to be closed and the key returned to the apartment complex manager by September 30th. I volunteered to stay and help Anna with getting everything organized and the apartment cleaned. Everything was done by September 25th. Anna left the next day, as she also had family and responsibilities back home as well. I agreed to stay until the 30th and turn in the key.

Fatima could have turned in the key but I needed time alone to think. I resigned from my university job as a planner when it looked like Tabitha's illness was going to linger and help was needed. There was no place that I needed to go at the moment. I had no responsibilities back home. I had some savings from three years with the University and my inheritance from Tabitha took any immediate pressure from me to find work in order to survive. A few days by myself would give me time to think and figure out my next step.

The first evening that I was alone in the apartment I sat on the patio watching the Mediterranean and enjoying the evening breeze. I thought of the first time I sat on that patio years earlier, when I was there with Barti on pilgrimage. Looking back, it seemed to be such a magical time. I thought of the adventures I enjoyed with Barti and Tabitha on that pilgrimage. Both were dead now. I felt terribly alone. Over the past few weeks I struggled to be strong for the others. I mourned but kept it inside. It helped that I was so numb from Tabitha's death that my emotions were anesthetized. Now that I was alone and awash in wonderful memories, the impact of Tabitha's death struck me. From deep within me a sob emerged, almost like a bubble rising from far below the Mediterranean to break the surface of the water. That sob reminded me that I was in pain at the loss of one of the dearest people I had ever known. At another level, I felt abandoned; the last of my mentors gone. Another sob broke the surface. Before long I gave vent to the sorrow, pain and loss that I felt; giving myself over to the sobs that came unbidden from deep within me.

I felt much better after giving vent to my pain and acknowledging the extent of my personal loss with the passing of Tabitha. I was even able to notice the crystal clarity of the cool night air and the sharpness of my thoughts. It seemed that I had wrapped my senses in psychological bandages for much of my time in Israel and now the bandages had finally come off. Acknowledging my pain made it possible for me to acknowledge every other emotion and sensation as well; some of which were both refreshing and healing.

As I drank in the cool night air, the thought struck me that now was a perfect time to go on pilgrimage. After all, I was already in Israel and had time on my hands. It had been a life changing experience the first time. Perhaps I might experience something of the same magic. The next morning I called a TelAviv travel service which was able to make all of the bookings I needed.

Bright and early the morning of September 30th, I left the apartment key with the manager of the apartment complex and took a taxi to the travel office where I was able to catch an inter-city limo to Haifa. I planned to spend a few days in the Haifa-Acco area and then head to Jerusalem. I would finish up with a few days at the Latroun Abbey in Ramleh.

This time I decided to visit Haifa in relative comfort and booked a room at the Dan Carmel Hotel on Hanassi Avenue at the top of Mount Carmel. This was a luxury hotel with the best of everything, yet the cost involved was no more than I would have spent for an average hotel room in any large American city. The view was the main draw of the hotel. I had a panoramic view of Haifa Bay and the picturesque city below. Only 50 meters below the hotel property the famous Baha'i Gardens were spread out, adding color and the sweet scent of thousands of blooming flowers to the beauty spread out before me.



The morning after my arrival in Haifa, I sat in the coffee shop enjoying a light breakfast and taking in the view of the city and bay. The coffee shop was busy that morning and there were few tables available. I had no desire to rush through breakfast, nor did I have any desire to give up the wonderful view, so when I saw a young woman looking for a free table I

signaled her and invited her to join me. She seemed unsure at first but then must have concluded that I was harmless enough and joined me.

I would lie if I didn't add that I found her attractive and very much wanted her to sit with me. She was a well proportioned young woman of about 5' 5" I guessed. With the most beautiful, long, Chestnut-brown hair I ever saw. Her skin was a light olive, suggesting Mediterranean ancestry, perhaps Greek or Italian. I guessed that she was in her mid or late twenties. I took a quick glance and noticed that there were no wedding rings on her fingers.

We introduced ourselves. I learned that her name was Therese DeSantis, though most people called her Terry. She was in Israel as a tourist-pilgrim herself. She taught in a parochial school for five years, ever since graduating from college. Recently she decided that her real goal in life was the ministry. Being Catholic, her ministerial options were limited but there were a fair number of options open to her. She was beginning work on a master's degree in theology at Catholic University of America with the spring semester but first wanted to take an extended break from study and work for a few months. She was beginning her sabbatical with pilgrimage in Israel and then spend some time in Europe, primarily Italy and France, before heading home. Home for her was Silver Spring, Maryland—just outside of Washington, DC. Her dad was a Washington lawyer and her mom was a grant manager with the Department of Interior.

She was a very pleasant person to talk with and within minutes I brought her up to date on some of my adventures, including my current unemployed status after three years with a university staff position. By the time we finished with breakfast, the coffee shop was closing in order to set up for lunch. Most of the morning had slipped by unnoticed by us. Rather than go our separate ways, we decided to see the sights of Haifa together.

Since we stayed at the top of Mount Carmel, we decided not to go over to the traditional site of the battle between the Prophet Elijah and the priests of Baal. There was a monument over at the traditional site, a little less than a kilometer down the road, but we figured that the coffee shop was just as likely a site for the great battle as the one designated by the government tourist agency, so we reflected on the historic battle from our seats while sipping hot coffee and eating toasted bagels.

Our first stop during what remained of the morning were the Baha'i Gardens. The gardens were carefully manicured and maintained. They were a classic example of landscaping as a fine art. The flowers were points of color that contributed to an overall picture of sweeping beauty. It wasn't that they painted anything in particular but their symmetry and the blending of colors created a symphony for the eyes. Walking around the gardens was like a stroll through paradise, as the trees added shadow and contrast to the flowers, as well as providing a cool vantage point for gazing at flower beds further below the top most level of the gardens.

As we walked among the trees and gardens I spoke to Terry of Tabitha and Barti and my reason for being in Israel. She was sympathetic over my recent loss of Tabitha and listened quietly to my tale. I wasn't wallowing in self-pity but as I spoke I honored Tabitha and the place she has in my life and in my heart. It seemed strange that speaking to Terry of Tabitha's death made me feel better. I felt as if I was sharing an important part of myself with Terry and that she respected that gift of self. She didn't try to compete with me, telling me of a mentor she may have had or a close friend that she lost to death.

She simply listened, giving me her full attention. Just having someone to listen to me is what I needed at that point.

Upon reaching the bottom of the Gardens, we found a taxi and went to the traditional site for the cave of Elijah. Our driver enjoyed taking tourists around to the city's sites and had a running commentary that provided color for each spot visited.

Regarding Elijah's cave, he explained that after slaughtering four hundred priests of Baal with a sword, Elijah got a sudden fit of fear and ran from Mount Carmel worried that King Ahab or Queen Jezebel would seek revenge upon him. This was a reasonable conclusion, as they attempted to do so. He must have been a good athlete as his first stop was Jezreel, a small town in the southern tip of what would eventually come to be known as Galilee. Jezreel was more than a few kilometers from Mount Carmel. When he heard that King Ahab was sending men to capture him, he fled further south to Beersheba, a town in the southern most part of Judah.

Arriving at this town on the edge of the desert, he threw himself to the ground wishing that he was dead. What kind of prophet was he? God worked wonders through him and then he turned-tail and ran! He had a vision of an angel who fed him and then sent him walking further into the desert—to Mount Horeb.

Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai, which is the Lord's mountain, the setting for God's covenant through Moses with the Hebrew people. It was to this mountain that the escaped Hebrew slaves fled after crossing the Red Sea and it was to this mountain that Elijah fled, now at the behest of an angel of God.

Eventually, he fell exhausted near the entrance of a cave at the foot of Mount Horeb. The angel had promised that he would experience God face to face on the holy mountain.

The next morning he left the cave and climbed the mountain to encounter the Lord. At the mountain top there was a great wind that blew so strongly that it tore at the mountain and shattered rocks. Yet, God was not in the wind. Next the mountain shook like a bowl of soup, with the most terrifying earthquake that Elijah ever experienced. Yet, God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, the mountain was aflame with a terrible fire that engulfed everything in its wild flames, yet God was not in the flames. Finally, the wind, fire and noise of the earthquakes all settled down. There was silence. In the silence Elijah felt a gentle breeze. It was then that Elijah knew that God was present and threw himself to the ground, covering his face.

Scripture puts the cave of Elijah at the foot of Mount Horeb which is many miles south of Mount Carmel. So, that leaves two options as to the nature of this cave. It can be that the local traditions are grossly in error. This might be due to local pride at being the site of a great Biblical adventure and wanting to locate every aspect of that adventure in town. The other option is that the cave represents Elijah's more mundane hangout when he was in the Mount Carmel area and it is not meant to be taken as the cave of the "gentle breeze".

In any case, we enjoyed the tour of the cave, tipped our driver generously for his commentary and then returned to Dan Carmel hotel, as it was a bit late in the day to undertake visiting another tourist spot. It was tea time. So we relaxed in the cafe over cups of steaming tea. This gave me an opportunity to teach Terry the trick of drinking tea through a sugar cube, as Barti taught it to me on our trip to Israel years earlier.

I asked Terry about her plans for after she finished the degree in theology. She was a bit vague on what she would pursue at that point. She felt that a clearer picture would emerge over the next few years as she pursued her studies. She thought that working in religious education or even exploring a position as parish director might be workable options, as both were increasingly open to qualified lay persons. She was much stronger and clearer in her opinion that she had reached the end of her career as a grammar school teacher. She wanted more. She had a dream of ministry for many years, yet no desire for the convent. She felt that it was possible to be an active, useful disciple of Jesus Christ in ministry without being a cleric or a religious, even while being a married woman with children—if such a situation ever developed.

I told Terry of my pilgrimage years earlier and how I was confused and frustrated, trying to discern the direction in which Christ wanted me to go. I explained how the day before I left I sat in the inner garden of the Latroun Abbey praying and letting a jumble of thoughts course through my mind, unable to do much to sort through them. I hadn't been in the garden for more than fifteen minutes when Tabitha strolled into the garden and joined me on the wooden bench where I sat. I described to Terry how we sat in silence for about five minutes before she spoke.

“You look upset for so blessed a pilgrim. My dear young man, may I inquire as to the source of your concern?”

I tried to explain about the confusion I was feeling and the frustration that for all the blessings I enjoyed on the pilgrimage I was no closer to my goal than the day I first considered the possibility of pilgrimage. She listened quietly and with great attention as I spoke. Again, she was silent for several minutes after I finished speaking. I thought her mind had wandered to something else, when she began to speak.

“Snow is a rare occurrence in Israel. It is one of the few things that I truly miss from Poland. It is magical how the tiny crystalline flakes form in the clouds and gently float to the earth. Each is different. Each is beautiful. As a child I would run and catch the flakes, so that I could admire the different shapes and patterns. No sooner had I grasped the flakes in my hand, than they began to melt and disappear. It would frustrate me so much. Laughing at my frustration, my older brother taught me not to catch the flakes in my hand but to use gloves or some other object that insulated the flake from my body heat. It worked.

“God is a mystery. We also are mysteries for we are the image and likeness of a Mystery. You can not grasp a mystery to examine it or to say it is this or that. When we attempt to grasp it, the mystery disappears and our fingers are empty. Perhaps it is the heat of our longing that makes the mystery melt away? Perhaps it is that we are attached to certain ideas of what the mystery should look like and when the mystery is truly a mystery we look at it and fail to see it? Who knows?

It has been my experience that God leads us according to His will for us. He doesn't hand out detailed road maps with all the turns and twists clearly marked, along with rest stops and the best hotels. God opens doors for us and calls us to enter. If we listen carefully enough we will hear the call. However, the call may not be what we expect or given to us in the manner we anticipate. If we grasp our expectations or desires too strongly, we will miss the call and fail to follow Christ through the door.

“Often I am left with only my intuition and a bit of reasoning to mark the path. I follow the path and eventually it becomes apparent that this is where God was leading

me. A strong attachment to one path or another would have blinded me to the call. Expectations that the call will take a particular form or expression would have caused me to look in vain for something that would never come. I would have missed the true call.

“Christ comes as a “Thief in the night”. If we have expectations that he will come through a particular door or at a particular hour, he will not show up. Christ comes to us when we least expect it. We can not will the Lord to respond to our demands and our timetable. We can only wait upon the Lord willingly, open to His grace.

“Often we encounter Christ in the most mundane circumstances. Remember the story of the disciples who spoke with Christ on the road to Emmaus and did not recognize him. It was not until the stranger blessed and broke the bread at supper that the disciples realized that the stranger was Christ. Their failure to recognize Christ earlier did not change the fact that Christ taught and guided them along the road to Emmaus.

“Their ultimate recognition of the stranger as Christ was a special blessing for them, though it also brought about the loss of Christ’s visible presence in their midst. It is not required that we perceive Christ instructing us. It is only required that we be responsive to His instruction, as were the disciples. If we are given the grace of recognizing the Lord in His instruction, good for us! If we fail to recognize Christ but are responsive to His instruction, we have done what is required of us.

“Be patient. This pilgrimage has planted the seeds of transformation in you. Christ has answered your prayers and continues to do so. You already have the answers you seek but time may be required before you are able to perceive the answers. Be patient. Be attentive. Do not grasp at the answers. If you do, your expectations and desires may be what you find in your hand rather than the Lord’s will for you.”

I thanked Tabitha for her advice and spent the next half-hour in silence considering what she explained to me. Tabitha sat in silence with me for a good part of the time. I don’t remember when she got up and continued on her walk through the garden. However, when I heard the bell calling everyone to vespers and Mass, Tabitha was gone.

Terry nodded her head as I spoke, encouraging me in the story and suggesting that Tabitha’s advice was helpful. I probably could have stopped with the conversation between Tabitha and I but continued on. I thought it might be helpful to Terry. I also realized that it was a precious experience that I wanted to share with her.

I went on to explain that I was distracted during vespers and wasn’t doing much better during the Mass readings. The homily was in French, as was the entire Mass, so I got very little from it other than another opportunity to chew over what Tabitha shared with me. The singing however, was most beautiful—rich and deep with the voices of the monks joined in praise.

As we moved into the Eucharistic Prayer, I turned my attention to the altar and the priest who was presiding at the celebration. He was an older man, at least seventy years of age. He was well built for a man his age, though his skin was wrinkled by many years of toil in the sun and wind. His eyes though were young and alive. He had the same spiritual presence about him, as did Tabitha.

He bent forward slightly and spoke the words of consecration slowly, as if he were savoring each word. The chapel was silent as he genuflected before the Sacred Host. Then he took the large off-white Host in his hand and raised it for the assembly to contemplate in mute adoration.

I was unable to explain exactly what happened next. Words failed me. The experience, which is still crystal clear in my memory, can't be captured in words.

As I looked at the Sacred Host the boundaries that separated me from it and from everything else seemed to melt away. The Host was bright with light, yet the light didn't hurt my eyes. The light filled my vision. It was one, yet in the light it was three. I didn't try to understand what was happening or even observe that anything special was happening. I simply knelt in mute adoration experiencing such intense joy and peace that there is nothing in my life either before or after to which I can compare it. There were no words, only a knowing. I knew that God had a purpose for me. I knew that I could trust in God and rely on God even in the darkest and most frightening times. I knew this because I experienced the flaming, burning fire of God's passionate love for me—for everyone of us. That love knit together every fiber of my being and held me in existence. To live...simply to be...was to be held in God's loving embrace.

It seemed as if I was caught up in the light for hours...eternities of wordless joy...but it was only moments. The priest held up the Sacred Host and Precious Blood, inviting the congregation to proclaim the Great Amen at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer. I realized then that the boundaries were once again in place between the rest of creation and me. The light that bathed my mind, heart, soul, and body was no longer visible to my mortal eyes. The only remnant of the experience was the peace and joy in which I continued to rest as an infant in its mother's arms.

After Mass I stayed in the chapel for almost another hour. I wanted to spend some time in prayer and thanksgiving. I wanted to continue to bask in the peace and joy that still filled me, even if it was now only a memory...a remaining ember of a once all-consuming blaze.

I explained to Terry that I had no more answers then than I had before Mass. I was still in the dark about God's plans for me. The only difference was that now I didn't care. If I had been St. Peter called from the boat to walk on the water in those moments, I would have jumped from the boat and tap danced across the waves with utter confidence.

The situation I was now, without employment, was probably more precarious than when I was in Israel the first time; at least then I had a job to which I was returning. Yet, this time I didn't worry nearly as much. While I left my tap dancing shoes at home, I was at peace and trusted that God was working His will in my life whether I could identify exactly how or not. The past few years had been an excellent school for learning to trust in God and I hoped that the lessons had been learned. In the end I offered my experience to Terry as a testimony of hope and trust that might be of help to her as she traveled through the current uncertainty and transition in her life.

The next day we took a taxi out to Acco, wandering its ancient streets and taking in its atmosphere that seemed to transport us to a long forgotten era. We visited the Crusader Citadel and a number of the little gift shops that dot the area. It was well after noon by the time we reached an outdoor cafe on Haifa Bay near the Acco fishing docks. We relaxed over a delicious lunch of fresh caught fish and salad. During the lunch I had the strangest sensation that I had experienced this before. I remembered that Barti and I ate here on our pilgrimage but the intuition told me that the source of the eerie sensation was much more recent. Then it struck me and a cold chill ran down my spine. We were sitting in exactly the same seats in which Barti and I sat during my dream only a few weeks earlier! Perhaps, Barti was reminding me that where one door closed, another

opened. Was this emerging friendship with Terry another door, the beginning of a new adventure!

The deep insight of Christianity is that death, no matter how tragic in its details, is ultimately the prelude to resurrection. This is true whether we speak of physical death as with Tabitha, or of the emotional “death” experienced by those who loved Tabitha and grieved at her passing. Darkness yields to the dawn. Thus, we find even in the great pain and sense of loss experienced by Theo, the glimmerings of a new beginning—the stirrings of resurrection even while Theo has yet to emerge fully from the dark valley of grief.

What will come of this new beginning for Theo? That we will need to explore in another story. The focus of this story has been departure and all of the important departures of this story have been made. As with any departure, we must look to the future with hope and trust in God. However, this particular story has come to its end.