

The hidden ground of love

[IN MEMORY OF ELIZABETH JUANITA
MCFADDEN WRIGHT JOHNSON, 1911-2007]

It is strange the things one remembers first: not necessarily the gracious character traits her bereaved friends recall with such emotion on the sympathy cards they send: “She was so full of life,” “a cherished friend,” “one always felt so accepted in her presence,” “vitality,” “delightful.” Instead it is the snapshot-like moments from childhood, moments only she and I shared. Standing at the side of her desk as she fashioned the hand-drawn paper doll clothes, which I then colored and cut out. A mother-daughter adventure trip down the coast of southern California where we discovered an out-of-this-world millinery shop featuring outlandish hats, which we bought and wore for the rest of the trip. Or those later moments shared in the bosom of family – the seven of us flat on the floor arranged in a starfish pattern listening attentively as the somber scientific recorded voice on the “Frog record” instructed us in discerning the mating call of *Bufo americanus americanus* until we burst out laughing as *bufo* himself blurted forth in stereophonic sound. Or most recently, after years of a fat-controlled diet prepared by her solicitous health-conscious husband, an exultant girls-only drive-through visit to the fabled yet untested In-and-Out-Burger for double cheeseburgers and fries.

It happens only once. Of all the leavetakings we do and even at a ripe old age with a full, joy-filled life for which to be grateful, the passing is like no other. One loses one’s mother only once. This woman who was uniquely herself – no common story, an unrepeatable life – was also that most archetypal of figures, a mother. She was the constant: the supportive presence at the edge of the sand box, the unseen fan in the darkened theater during the high school plays, the only one whose interest in the minutia of my own children’s tiny triumphs matched my own, the one who in her last years relied on my daily phone calls to serve as ballast in her changing world. She was the hidden ground of love beneath each step at each stage.

It makes sense to me that, while Jesus in the gospels points his followers away from exclusive identification with the blood kin toward a more inclusive Christian family gathered under the parental love of God (Matthew 12:46-50), early generations of Christians did not forget his mother. Second century apologists Irenaeus of Lyon and Ignatius of Antioch extolled her as the “second Eve,” the one whose responsive “yes” to God’s invitation opened the gates of salvation for humankind. At the dawn of the fourth century at the Council of Nicaea, they affirmed her as *Theotokos* (God-bearer). She is imaged in the ancient Eastern icon as the merciful Virgin of Tenderness (*Eleousa*) with her Son, the child Jesus, in her arms, the intimacy of mother and child underscored by the mystery of the child’s divine origins. Her singular identity as the young Palestinian woman, wife of Joseph, of a whole with her archetypal identity as Mother. Jesus in the gospels did not, of course, forget his human mother. In his final agony, he entrusted her to his beloved disciple John and entrusted John into her motherly care (John 19:25-27). In a sense, he thus entrusted all of us to her and her to all of us. For a mother’s presence is the hidden ground of love that sustains us all.

Each of us, in families as unique and different as can be, in our discreet culturally fashioned ways, are also mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, brothers and sisters. Each of us touches the others in ways that, while stamped by our unrepeatable singularity, is also archetypal, as deep and mysterious as God-drenched humanity itself. May we remember that we are entrusted to one another, that our touch can heal or wound, that we tend each other to full flower or, through neglect, cause the ones we love to wither and die. May we fashion memories of each other that reach down into that hidden ground of love.



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