Family, Friends, and the Communion of the Saints

Excerpt from *Chapter 3 of**Wild Things Poems Of Grief and Love, Loss and Gratitude*

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**H*ow could any of us survive our losses without each other?*** We can’t do it, but we don’t have to. I didn’t always know this fact, however, and you may not have either.

I began my graduate work as a lonely person. Most of the other students were male, and they regularly informed me one way or another that I didn’t belong there. My parents didn’t approve, and it seemed at the time like no one else in the world did either. One night I had a short but telling dream. I dreamed that I was a star, millions of light years from earth, all by myself. I realized when I woke up that having learned about Origen, a writer of the early church who believed that the stars were alive, prompted my dream. Origen believed that stars’ work in the universe came in praising God continually. If his speculation is true, the stars may appreciate this task, but I still remember the terror and despair that dream generated in me when I looked out into black and empty space, cut off from any other living thing.

The fact is that none of us is alone. From the eighteenth century onward, modern folks have been encouraged to glorify the “self-made” person, “the rugged individualist,” and the singular people who seem to have accomplished great things with no help from others. Fortunately, this way of viewing the world is fading. Most of us realize to a certain extent that we couldn’t exist without one another, if only to provide us with roads, electricity, the rule of law, schools, medical help, groceries in the stores, clothes on our backs, and so forth. Real people who work in our world with us provide our necessities. But our lack of aloneness goes beyond these areas to include our spiritual and emotional lives.

A friend told me a story once while I was trying to live through a bad patch and felt close to despair. When he and his wife were young, they had wanted a baby more than anything. For years they tried, until at last, his wife was pregnant. They were happy until the baby actually arrived. From birth, it was obvious that in spite of his physical perfection something had gone awry with the baby. He couldn’t stand to be touched; and as he grew, he seemed unable to connect with his parents or anybody else in any way. Of course the parents loved him and raised him as best they could. When the boy turned eighteen, he wanted to live by himself, so they set him up in a garage apartment a block from their house. From that distance they could continue to feed him, do his laundry, and care for his other needs. After six months, my friend went to check on his son one morning and found him dead. He had killed himself beside a pile of magazines with articles underlined about the hopelessness of schizophrenia, which was his diagnosis.

My friend and his wife were worse than heartbroken at the time. He didn’t know how they would survive the death, but he told me how they lived through it. At the funeral, people said to him over and over, “Tom, you know your faith will get you through this.” He stopped for a moment, looked at me, and then said, “Roberta, it was not my faith that got me through it. It was the faith of my friends.”

I have never forgotten this generous sharing of his painful story at a time I needed to hear it, a time when I was not sure I could believe in much of anything positive. That I have been saved by the faith of my friends I have found to be true again when my hope, energy, and, yes, faith have failed me.