



Midlife Sacrament

CONNIE BATTEN

THE SUN FELT COMFORTING ON MY back as I knelt to remove an earthworm from a hole I was digging. Something about this gesture reminded me of helping my mother with garden work when I was a teenager. With the memory, a distant yet familiar inner chill came over me, like a dark cloud moving across the sun.

My mother had been the same age then that I was now, forty-five. It was hard to go on thinking about this, but I allowed myself another memory of an evening several years later, when the phone rang. By then I was nineteen years old. I had moved several hundred miles away from the confusing world of my mother's menopause and had been trying to create a new life. The long-distance voice over the phone line told me that my mother was near death and that I should come immediately. I was given the address of a hospital where they were trying to revive her from a deep unconsciousness caused by an overdose of sleeping pills and the inhalation of gas from an open oven in a closed kitchen.

I had kept these memories neatly locked out of my emotional awareness. But now they were returning, full-blown phantoms, to invade my life. As I moved the earthworm to a safer spot, I was in two places at once—I was in that garden, age forty-five, feeling the sun on

my back—and I was driving through the night, age nineteen, feeling cold confusion all around me. While my mother's body was being resuscitated, some part of me went into hiding that night as I made that long, dark drive.

Twenty-six years later, it was my turn to pass through menopause. The time had come for me to regain consciousness of some wrenching disconnections which I had covered with the busy-ness of my early adulthood. My body was visibly aging after years of relative stability. Catching an unexpected glimpse of my reflection as I passed a store window, I would be startled by the stranger who was myself. Returning home after such an experience I would sometimes stare for long minutes into my bathroom mirror trying to identify with the aging image whose weakening eyes stared back at me. My inner chemistry was changing as my accustomed monthly cycles lost their regularity, and my inner equilibrium gave way to extremes of feeling. The cords of tolerance which had held me to my assigned role as wife and mother in this male-dominant culture thinned to threads and finally snapped, ending my marriage. I found myself living alone, older than I had ever expected to be, plunged into a period of internal darkness—redefining my relationship to almost everything.

Through the ancient practice of tending to seedlings, I was able to contain the emergence of painful memories. The crucible of menopause was transforming them, to be integrated at last, so that I became more whole. At times, when the memories were almost more than I could bear, I could feel myself being held by an inner sense of balance which took its source from the earth—the mirror of my embodiment and the receptacle which will receive its dissolution.

Respite came to me when there was nothing more in my consciousness than the wonder of being. Taking in the smells and sights, the general feeling of the season, the fresh earth, the early wild plum blossoms, the brooding sky gathering for a storm, the steadiness of an all-day rain, the gusts of wind, the clearing sky and changing light on the day after, with all the colors new and crisp, the luminosity of existence would astound me. The exquisite feeling of the air on my skin stripped me of thought, filling my senses, bringing me back to the shimmering boundary which both defined my separateness and dissolved to reveal that there is no separation.

Seven years have passed since menopause cut so abruptly across my

life, changing me drastically. I've grown used to being unable to see clearly without glasses. The reflected image of the middle-aged woman with thinning hair and deepening wrinkles no longer looks to me like someone else. She and I are one. I no longer expect to be able to hike twenty miles in a day with a pack on my back. Nor do I wonder at the dry, tissue-papery skin of my legs and arms, thinking it looks more like my grandmother's than my own.

My inner journey during these years has required that I come to terms with my particular life story, working to heal wounds so painful that I had hidden them from my day-to-day awareness. Bringing them back to consciousness, I've felt isolated, at times to the point of despair.

I have mourned the loss of the dream that I would grow old within the comfort of a marriage kept vital by mutual commitment to common values and woven together by a shared interest in the growth of children and grandchildren. I am not just alone, but invisible: a middle-aged woman who has given up her identity as wife and mother, without having developed a career outside her home. The leaden fear of not knowing if I will find a way to survive financially has frozen me as I've filled out applications for entry-level jobs and been turned away.

It is from this dark place at the center of my own story that the seeds of compassion for my mother and for myself have begun to germinate. My fury at her for trying to kill herself, my guilt for being part of the context that made her want to die by her own hand, and the pain of abandonment in every direction can give way from time to time to a larger, more primal experience: just being upright on this planet, sensing the mystery of consciousness as it continues to unfold.

Last summer I hoisted a familiar pack onto my back, loaded with the supplies I would need to spend a week in the wilderness. My muscles responded out of age-old habit. As I started up the trail I thought of my mother and many of the women in her generation who had no access to the experiences which have sustained me. Any stirrings toward wholeness which my mother may have felt at menopause were progressively extinguished by the electroshock treatments that inevitably followed her repeated suicide attempts. She was divested, like so many of the women in her generation, of the inner source of direction which has guided me to sit still in silence on a *zafu*, or to fast for days in desert solitude—experiences which have allowed me to glimpse the paradox of my simultaneous separation from and union with the universe.

I realized, as I settled into a rhythm moving on up the trail, that my backpacking trips each summer have been an essential part of my spiritual path for many years. These journeys outside the numbing effect of modern culture have put me in touch most intensely with the implications of my embodiment. When I have put two days of steady hiking between me and the car I left parked at the trailhead, I know my personal insignificance relative to the forces and rhythms of nature. Primitive skills for dealing with the elements—earth, air, fire, and water—are essential to my survival. When I'm in the wilderness in this way, my personal impermanence is palpable.

As my boot prints stretched farther out behind me, the terrain shifted away from the sheltering presence of tall evergreens and thick forest loam. Scrubby sage, clinging tenaciously to unlikely crevices on granite slopes, began to define the landscape. By midday in arid surroundings, I pricked up my ears for the faintest sound of flowing water. I stood still for a moment to increase the silence. Yes, there was a stream off to the west. I stashed my heavy pack, removed my water bottle, took out the small stuff sack with lunch food, and started off toward the magical sound. Within ten minutes I had come to a ledge dropping off some ten feet toward moss-covered rocks and lush stream-side vegetation. Scrambling down the steep slope took no time at all, and I was suddenly in another world where the rich smell of water and wet earth filled the green shade.

I washed away the trail dust with my bandana, returning it again and again to the clear running water, and finally tied it, soaking and cool, around my neck to refresh me when I returned to the hot trail. But meanwhile there was time for a leisurely lunch of sunflower seeds, raisins, my ration for the day of one slice of bread spread with sharp mustard, and finally, the sweet sections of an orange to be savored slowly, one by one. Such simple joy in elemental existence, breath after breath, brought a pang of sorrow that my mother had never dared to venture into the wilderness in this way, though she had habitually taken long walks close to home. I would have loved to have shared such a timeless moment with her, but my life remains a frightening mystery to her. Our paths diverge, further and further it seems, as she approaches her eightieth birthday, while modern mood-altering medications have mitigated the desperation which once made her life seem intolerable.

I finished my lunch, refilled my water bottle, and returned to my backpack and the trail I would follow until I found a spot to set up a base camp.

Late the following afternoon I came upon a granite basin which held a small lake and I knew I would stay a while. There was simple pleasure in the unfolding of rituals which create a temporary home in the wilderness—the search for a flat tent site, the scavenging for firewood, the creation of a cooking area, the checking for good places to view the change of light, sunset, moonrise, stars, and sunrise.

On the afternoon of my second day in this camp, I sat on a granite slab overlooking the lake, watching the reflections of changing cloud patterns move across its surface. The sun was warm, the air was pleasant, there was no urgency that anything in particular should happen or not happen. The only justification I needed for my bodily existence was this moment of unencumbered witnessing. I remembered the story of the Buddha's enlightenment as he sat beneath the Bodhi tree, himself a clear lens through which the universe could see and delight in itself. Buddha recognizing and enjoying Buddha.

As I sat there beside that particular lake on that particular afternoon, one being among numberless beings, one afternoon among eons of afternoons stretching back and forward into infinity, I could feel my edges beginning to dissolve. There was no separation. And then the light shifted as a cloud's shadow crossed through the sun's warmth, hinting of approaching rain. The firewood supply, the location of my tent if a storm were coming in. . . .

Suddenly my attention crystalized around survival. Instincts designed to preserve this particular being leapt into prominence, unfurling the line that defines duality.

Scraping a trench in the earth to carry runoff around the edges of my tent, sheltering a small pile of dry kindling for the first fire after the rain, preparing to separate myself from the oncoming storm, to ride it out inside the tenuous protection provided by my camping gear and my wilderness know-how, I could hear in my head the words of the Heart Sutra, rumbling like thunder:

. . . all things are essentially empty—not born, not destroyed;
not stained, not pure; without loss, without gain.

Therefore in emptiness there is no form, no sensation, perception,
formulation, consciousness;

no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind,
no color, sound, scent, taste, touch, thought. . . .

If I am one of the prisms through which the universe perceives itself, it is part of my purpose to maintain a distinct and separate position made up of personal history, desire for safety, and fear of extinction. And as a temporary bubble afloat on the stream of universal flux, I am sometimes given the gift of knowing in utter effortlessness that there are also no distinctions.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS



Connie Batten is a mother and grandmother. She is also a woman in midlife, for whom the passage of menopause has been profound. Her work in the world is with children and adults, helping them to build relationships and respond creatively to conflict. Her work and play at home are about living as simply as possible in close connection with the earth, sky, and changing seasons.

BUDDHIST WOMEN ON THE
PARADOX OF EMBODIMENT

being bodies

edited by

LENORE FRIEDMAN & SUSAN MOON



With contributions from

Charlotte Joko Beck ~ Joan Tollifson ~ Pema Chödrön
Rita M. Gross ~ Toni Packer ~ China Galland