



What Stillness Revealed

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This weekend, I locked myself in the bathroom. Not on purpose. And, not really in the bathroom itself, but in the tiny toilet room of my daughter and son-in-law's home. Our remodeling projects continue, including the installation of a pocket door to the toilet room. My primary role is painter, so I began painting the exterior of the door and trim while my husband worked around me, adjusting the door's slide mechanism. Finishing the first coat on the exterior, I moved into the little room and slid the door closed behind me to paint the interior door. That's when my troubles started.

My husband let me know he needed to run to our house for a special tool. "Fine," I said. "I'll be here." I continued painting the interior door, watching for drips. When I'd finished, I carefully touched the unpainted, leading edge of the door and tried to slide it open. Stuck. I tried again with a little more force. No go. I gave it a good shove, and the whole door rocked. Something was blocking the door from sliding.

I had my phone on the edge of the sink...on the other side of the door. So, I couldn't ring anyone for help. I thought about yelling down the air vent, but my phone was playing music – upon reflection, maybe a little too loudly – and my shouts would have been drowned out. Confident my husband would eventually return or my daughter check on me, I sat down on the toilet seat lid and waited. I counted the number of songs that played on my radio, and I waited. Eventually the paint dried, and I did a second coat. I waited.

Somewhere in that forced stillness, grief overcame me. It wasn't grief about being locked in the bathroom. That was going to resolve itself. It was grief that had been bottled up over the year. It was the loss of one parent and the signs of aging in others. It was confinement for months on end due to the coronavirus. It was the death of hundreds of thousands of Americans and even more worldwide – people I didn't know and will never have a chance to know. More than 400,000 people have died and more have suffered from a virus we could have managed better. My grief was also the smack-you-in-the-face awareness of racism throughout all segments of our country, some overt and ugly and some subtle, insidious, and equally ugly. It was the constant strain of a government in upheaval and, more recently, the horrible violence at the Capitol of people who wanted to kidnap, lynch, and execute government representatives. It was the continuing threats and plots of destruction even today, a day of the Presidential Inauguration when the peaceful transition of power is supposed to be a hallmark of our democracy and national pride. All of that bottled up grief came spilling out when I gave it the space to be felt.

I am reminded of this saying attributed to C.S. Lewis: "I sat with my anger long enough, until she told me her real name was grief."

Last night, the nation mourned the loss of lives due to the coronavirus through the ringing of church bells, the lighting of candles, and a memorial at the Reflecting Pool in Washington, D.C. Our anger melted into grief.

As we try to push through to the vaccine or a new Administration or finding a new pastor to fill the pulpit or a new school year or whatever we think will be necessary change, we can busy ourselves. The danger is that our very real grief can be pushed deep inside, expressing itself in anger when it's visible at all. For our emotional and spiritual health, we need stillness. We need quiet. We need space for the Spirit to take our hand and draw us close. We can choose it or have it forced upon us, but we cannot escape it. May you find healing in that stillness.