

# The gate is narrow

## Crisis, friendship, patience

Sue Sorensen

In spring 2012, the year I turned fifty, I took a trip to Ireland and Wales on my own. During one of my first afternoons in Dublin, I explored. I had a map, though it turned out to be inadequate. I felt energetic and full of curiosity. I wandered, and then I went to St. Patrick's Cathedral for Evensong. After the service, trying to get back to the center of the city, I somehow walked off my map in the wrong direction.

I walked deeper into unknown territory, increasingly uneasy. At one corner, I stopped and looked stealthily at my little map, and a Dubliner asked in a pleasant manner if he could help. "No, no, I'm fine," I lied. Being too proud to ask for help is, or was, an unfortunate feature of my character. Finally, far from anything I understood, I flagged down a cab.

### Losing my marriage but not my faith

*"So I say to you: Ask, and it will be given you" (Luke 11:9).<sup>1</sup>*

In Dublin, I had not yet learned how to ask for help. Two years later, I began this learning when my husband left me, the first and most devastating in a series of experiential landmines that kept exploding until recently. Most of these shocks and jolts were unexpected health predicaments, but that first detonation was the end to our marriage of over twenty years. I had believed we were happy, but he suddenly made it known that he had stopped sharing that belief. In losing him, I lost my church home; he is a Lutheran pastor.

Great chunks of the next few years are inaccessible. My memory would spring open a trap door and discard parts of my life: what play I was teaching, whether I had already told a counselor the strange responses to the agonized, hysterical questions I sent my husband. The worst day was when I did not remember to pick up our youngest son, who stood outside a community center for nearly an hour. I had no sense of what I was supposed to be doing until another parent called me.

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1 Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations use the NRSV.

I turned in panic to friends I had not realized were so resourceful and loving. They held me up. Not every friend, of course. Some disappeared. People are often embarrassed by grief. I learned that some people did not like me and were not sorry I had been hurt. It was a thorny time of learning.

I would not have called my condition *trauma* at the time, and neither (as far as I can remember) did doctors and counselors I consulted. *Trauma* in English has meant, since the seventeenth century, a bodily wound. My former spouse had not physically injured me. But since the nineteenth century, *trauma* has increasingly meant psychic injury, deep internal shocks that may be longstanding. William James seems to have been the

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first to use *trauma* in this way; he is also the originator of *stream of consciousness*, a term I use when teaching modernist fiction by writers like Faulkner and Woolf. Severe emotional harms, wrote James in 1894, if left untreated, can “act as permanent ‘psychic traumata’, thorns in the spirit, so to speak.”<sup>2</sup>

One problem with my own consciousness was that its stream became so very unreliable. Difficult literary works became, in those heartbreaking years, tough to navigate. I was an English professor who could not dependably handle complexity because my guidance system for what was reasonable or good kept malfunctioning. Most grievously, I realized that I felt estranged from language. Words my former husband had said or written, words I myself had said or written—everything now was in question. I could not trust the basis of my vocation: language.

I did not fail to trust the Word of God, however. Because of my recent position as a pastor’s spouse, people thought I would lose my faith. I did lose faith in individual members of the church—and in my former congregation, which for the most part turned its back on me, probably due to their own bewilderment. But God had not betrayed me. I held tight to certain passages of Scripture. The Psalms were a constant comfort:

*Hear my prayer, O Lord;  
let my cry come to you.*

2 William James, “Hysteria,” *Psychological Review* 1 (1894): 199.

*Do not hide your face from me  
in the day of my distress. (Psalm 102:1–2)*

In the horrible nights, I sang repeatedly to myself Psalm 116's "Be at rest once more, O my soul," in a setting by Gord Johnson. Psalm after Psalm named my bafflement accurately. Such naming is one of the first steps in healing, though I could not sense much healing. I took consolation in God's mighty exclamations to Job:

*Do you give the horse its might?  
Do you clothe its neck with mane? . . .  
It laughs at fear,  
and is not dismayed" (Job 39:19, 22).*

God's world of wonders—the "springs of the sea," "the storehouses of the snow" (Job 38:16, 22)—became almost all I had confidence in. Like Job, I recognized how little I understood. God was my foundation; the love of my two sons (wounded like me) sealed that foundation.

One of my heroes, children's broadcaster and Presbyterian minister Fred Rogers, once said, "Anything that is mentionable can be more manageable."<sup>3</sup> I did more than *mention* my anguish. I spoke its terrible trajectories again and again. It was good that so many friends were willing to listen; it would have been exhausting for one or two listeners. I began to breathe again. I got up on my feet again.

### **An untrustworthy body and a trustworthy God**

At some point, hard to locate but impossible to dismiss, the throbbing meanness of menopause shoved its prickly self forward. I hesitate to mention it; most of us are awkward around the topic of menopause (actually perimenopause, when raucous hormones are most volatile). But it was an undeniable misery that seemingly no one understands. In the worst moments of perimenopause I thought, *This feels like the upheaval of adolescence and pregnancy, except at the end of this, we don't have more life to look forward to—just old age and death.*

And then I got cancer. Three years after my husband left, he divorced me, and soon after that doctors discovered I had fairly advanced colon cancer. There was surgery and, soon after, six months of chemotherapy.

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3 Quoted in Deborah Farmer Kris, "The Timeless Teachings of Mister Rogers," [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org), 20 March 2017.

I did not shed a tear about cancer. (Why should riotous cells turning cancerous bother me more than loss of a good marriage?) Paul’s words in Romans 9:20 were among my lines of spiritual defense, and I appreciate



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the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases them in *The Message*: “Who in the world do you think you are to second-guess God?” In the hospital after my hemicolectomy, I apparently evinced calm. My sister said she could tell when I had an episode of pain—I became still, fixing my gaze on the distance. She said I looked then like our mother, who in her sixties also had colon cancer. One reason

I was unperturbed was that my mother had been unperturbed—and chemotherapy back then was crueller. Mom survived and flourished, eventually dying when she was nearly ninety-six.

My mother had been there ahead of me. Christ was there ahead of me. Christ’s declarations of assurance were central in my mother’s life. She embodied the “take therefore no thought for the morrow” lessons of the Sermon on the Mount. (Born in 1916, she grew up with the King James Version.) She did not talk about faith; she lived it. I am certain that built into her very being were Christ’s words: “In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). I held tight to her example.

Like my mother, I began to appreciate Christ’s companionship. In the worst nights after my marriage breakdown, Christ was nearby. Brotherly, a friend. This friendship strengthened in my illness; I did not pray for healing, but I was grateful for presence. “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease” (Matthew 4:23). The good news comes first. *If healing follows, I thought, it is not in my hands.*

I did not find cancer frightening—although days felt barren and marked by the fatigue of chemotherapy. At night when I could not sleep, I muttered simple prayers: *God, stay with me and give me strength. Christ, be with all who suffer and mourn. Holy Spirit, hold close those in need. Thank you, Lord, for your many blessings to me.* I prayed endless variations of these phrases.


My most recent health issue involved mild arthritis, which precipitously worsened. It was only one hip, but it turned into (according to

one X-ray tech) a “nasty” hip. The pain became constant; because our health system is overwhelmed with joint replacements, I waited an almost unbearable length of time. My surgery got the green light after about eighteen months—and then the COVID-19 pandemic happened. I waited another two months, but by that point everyone was waiting, for everything. Being immobilized was an experience I was sharing. Finally, I received a new hip. I began to breathe again. I got up on my feet again.

Except that my feet were untrustworthy. Chemotherapy left me with peripheral neuropathy in my hands and feet, something I had never heard of. (Now I know it is a common predicament in diabetes.) My hands have improved, but my feet remain partially numb. In spring 2018, right after my last chemo treatment, I visited family in Ontario. Once there, I eagerly headed toward Lake Ontario, where I found myself tilting forward and falling into the water. Since my feet are untrustworthy, I have had to learn even more new ways to trust.

### **Finding company in Christ and poetry**

A crisis can focus the spirit splendidly. Confronting mortality earlier than I thought I would have to stripped my values back to the studs. This renovation has been good, overall. One attribute of serious illness is the sense of connection we can build with others who are suffering. Before I had neuropathy, this irritable numbness was not on my radar. Likewise, I

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once saw people with canes without truly *seeing* them. A cane just signified that someone was wobbly. Now I see that a cane can represent agony.

I am not a patient person by temperament, but the strange unsleepy fatigue of chemotherapy meant I simply had to lie there and wait. I was awake through every hour of the chemo drip (fed slowly into me, or I would start to shake). Around me, other patients dozed in recliners. At home, I watched *The Crown* and waited. I did crosswords and played Solitaire. The British call Solitaire by a different name: Patience. It became plain that the way to go forward was simple: living day by day and putting aside ambition and pride.

Yet I grieve my continued struggle with words. I do not trust them, and they do not trust me. The life narrative I was fashioning no longer works. And I struggle to be optimistic. Even today, only dire poems really

speak to me. After my husband left, I repeatedly read Auden's 1936 poem "Stop all the clocks," which concludes with a sweeping gesture of misery, histrionic but apt:

*The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.*<sup>4</sup>

In dark times, poets make excellent company.

But Christ, always, is the best company. I have felt variously about Christ—when rebellious, I admire his iconoclasm; when hurt by others, I try to recall his prayer: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23.34). In crisis, that Christ became my close friend was entirely Christ's idea. The Lord knows what we need—not what we want—and responds. I heed William Barclay's advice on prayer: "The answer given may not be the answer we desired or expected; but even when it is a refusal it is the answer of the love and the wisdom of God."<sup>5</sup>

There are places on the map where we think we should be, and then there is the map that God holds. If all that proceeds out of crisis is that we can truly see someone else in similar straits, maybe that is enough. Christ tells us, "The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life" (Matthew 7:14); the gate is also sometimes covered in thorns. Telling the names of the thorns is one of the ways through.

## About the author

Sue Sorensen teaches English at Canadian Mennonite University. Her latest book is *The Collar: Reading Christian Ministry in Fiction, Television, and Film* (2014). She is also the author of a novel, *A Large Harmonium* (2011), and editor of *West of Eden: Essays on Canadian Prairie Literature* (2008). She is a member of Winnipeg's Home Street Mennonite Church.

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4 W. H. Auden, "[Stop all the clocks]," *Collected Poems*, edited by Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 1976), 141.

5 William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1953; rev. ed. 1975), 146.