

## Embracing the Wilderness of Lent

March 11, 2010

I am pleased to be here today to share a personal reflection with you about the season of Lent. Since childhood, I've associated Lent with the wilderness – learning early on that the forty days of lent are symbolic of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness where he fasted and prayed and where he was tempted by Satan. Lenten wilderness enables us to look at our humanity and our own temptations and sinfulness. Most importantly, the season of Lent enables us to focus our thoughts on God and draw nearer to him. Lenten wilderness can be transformative. Even so, I haven't always been willing to enter the realm of the Lenten wilderness.

Then two years ago, I had a true wilderness experience when I was diagnosed with Stage II breast cancer. I had two biopsies, one surgery, six rounds of chemotherapy and six weeks of radiation. I was living something I had not expected and I was afraid. It was particularly hard on my husband because when we married 18 years ago, he was a widower with three young children. His first wife died of cancer. We have a son of our own who is now 14 years old. It was impossible for anyone to look at the five of them and say with certainty that it was all going to be fine.

This was a period of great adversity: I was battling cancer with chemicals that were making me sick. I was struggling with my diagnosis emotionally and spiritually. I felt very protective of my family. Intuitively, I understood that I needed a healing way to balance the treatment I was receiving. The healing approach I organized was made up of prayer, meditation, exercise, and regular acupuncture treatments.

Physically and practically I was aggressively engaged in battling my disease. But spiritually, this was a time of surrender. On a daily basis I would sit in prayer and meditation in the room adjoining our bedroom with a candle and incense – opening my suffering soul to the love of God. All my life I embraced God – I held on to God. But during this time, I surrendered and released my embrace. To my utter amazement, God embraced me.

Over the course of my treatment, there was an awakening in my inner sanctuary. I laid old hurts and disappointments on the altar of my sanctuary within – that I might be altered. There were parts of me that needed not only to be surrendered, but also needed to die. There were other parts of me that needed to be brought more fully to life. My interior landscape became more present and alive – a loving place to restore my soul. As I surrendered to God's loving embrace, my soul became more fully joined with God. I moved into the vastness of the collective soul. By this, I mean the "we" of the collective soul – God and me together.

God was resurrecting my soul during those many hours of prayer and meditation. God's resurrecting love is not something that happens to us. It happens with us and cannot happen without choices we make. Our spiritual journey gives us the opportunity to make choices every single day and it is these choices that make us co-creators with God in our destiny. Spiritual surrender happens every day – when we feel powerless and, as well, when we feel particularly powerful. Every situation or circumstance is an opportunity to

spiritually surrender -- to step inside our sanctuary within, experience God's love and remember that God is the center of our lives.

This was my wilderness experience: a time of testing, relationship and transformation. Each year I now look forward to the forty days of Lenten wilderness. For me, it is a more focused time of surrender and in the midst of the wilderness, God is there to embrace me.

By Julie A. Petersmeyer