

Thanksgiving for Fifty Years of Service by the San Francisco Night Ministry: November 16, 2014

Reflections by Anne Lamott

Intro: Anne Lamott is an author and a seeker, a person who knows darkness and chaos, and yet has found in the midst of it, light, blessed light.

1. DARKNESS

“Yes I have, thanks be to God.

And the light does shine in the darkness. And the darkness has never once come permanently, but it sure feels like it has sometimes. Part of the human condition is to be plunged into unknowingness. And it is just a nightmare. It’s why they call the abyss the abyss – because it’s pretty abysmal. And the culture and even our families tell us to get over it and pretend not to be in the dark, to get over it as quickly as we can. But healing and truth, and salvation and new life do not come from pretending to be other than what we are, or to be doing better than we are, even though it would make everybody else more comfortable. I’m not going to name names, but some people in some of our families -- not yours I’m sure, not yours or mine -- some people, when we felt the darkness envelope us, told us it was all in our heads, told us not to see what we were seeing, told us that what we thought we were seeing was not true. And we learned to stop trusting in ourselves as reliable narrators of our own truth. And our families and the culture told us we could best deal with this by maybe going to Ikea, and getting a nice cute area rug with which to trick out the abyss. And a lot of us learned that we were supposed to stay one step at the abyss that might open at our heels, because if we didn’t, it would make the family look terrible.

And some of us fell in. And really everybody worth their salt, everyone I would trust with my heart and my secrets, knows from time in the abyss. And Jesus never says be careful, stay one step ahead. Jesus says, know that if you fall, I’ll crawl down in the abyss with you. Sometimes Jesus said, I’ll bring something to eat because you seem really hungry. But you will never be alone because I or one of my people will sit with you in the darkness. We aren’t going to make it be cuter than it is. And we are not going to get you out any sooner than you need to, because we are born in the darkness. We are born in the dark night of the soul. We are brought into the truth of our being when we are in mystery with not much to see by, except our own fear, which turns out to be a beautiful gift, because it’s true. And our own grief which turns out to be a beautiful gift, because it’s real. And because when we come face to face with our own tears of helplessness – and they don’t wash us away like people told us – they bathe us, they baptize us, they hydrate us. They water the ground at our feet, and so we wait in the darkness. TS Eliot said beautifully, “Be still my soul and wait without hope, for it would be hope of the wrong thing.”

I would hope to know what was going on, to have a plan for everybody to help me, really as soon as possible. But this would be a detour away from the real gift which is union with the mystery that is the animating love that created and sustains us and waits with us when it's very, very cold.

We love that you're here. You are all preapproved. And we forget that in the darkness. And we need each other to remind us we are loved and we are chosen and we are safe. We are safer in the darkness with God and goodness than we are anywhere else in the world without. So we remember to breathe – sometimes. We eventually remember to breathe and that connects us – our breath with the Holy Spirit, our breath with the unseen and the unseen is beautiful, beautiful, waiting to reveal a way for us forward.

2. The NIGHT SHIFT

“Where does the light begin to break through and how? Well, we don't know, often, but we know that it *does* and we know that Figure It Out is not a good slogan, although many of us from the age of about three or four were taught to try to figure it out and to try to help the rest of the family from going under by artificially pumping up the adults around us and trying to be who it seemed to make them happy for us to be, and it made us insane and it made the world very dark to be cut off from the central truth of who we are.

We were wonderfully and fearfully made –perfectly made -- in the likeness of God. But sometimes our parents forgot to mention this, and it got very scary in the world when you thought you were a mistake. But then the light came in. For me it was usually the light of someone's face and it was the miracle of those most chemotherapeutic words of all: Me, too. Me, too. Oh, that's funny, me, too. I know exactly what you're talking about. Oh, I'm that way, too. I never met anyone before. Oh, my God. It's like being in a foreign country like in Morocco when you first hear an English language station and you perk up your ears. You can't believe it. There's someone else who has or is or knows what you know to be real about you. That's how the light got in for me.

The great Leonard Cohen said, “There are cracks in everything -- that's how the light gets in” and that's been my truth. But the culture says, Spackle up those cracks. Get some bathroom caulking. The Holy Spirit says the opposite. The Holy Spirit says you are worthy of being cared for, and broken is good. We grew up thinking that to surrender was defeat--especially if we have older brothers. It turns out that surrender is where the miracles all begin -- in letting go. I hate when people say, Let go, and let God. I just feel like smacking them. I feel like: If I could let go I would, *believe* me. And it's hard but the right person comes along and they sit down with you and they don't hassle you. They're just there for you and with you and beside you. And they say what Jesus said: Do you want a sip of my water? Shall I sit with you a while? I'd love to.

Carly Simon sang, “There's more room in a broken heart.” The breaks, the cracks, the fractures, the meltdowns are where we find, paradoxically, spaciousness. We find ourselves if we don't need to spackle it all back up in a glade and a little of sun is coming through and a little bit of low light and it's like a miracle, every time. It's like two speakers in your head and one says, We're all doomed, it's all

over for England, it's hopeless this time, we aren't going to be able to get it to work. And the other voice says, Well, I think it could happen. We'll just stick together. If I just sit next to Lucy, Lucy knows what to do and she lets me come along with her and I feel really safe and if something happened I know she would come get me. We never met before a half hour ago. That's what the Night Ministry is. The Night Ministry says if you get very lost or disoriented or hopeless I'll just come get you. It's going to be okay. We don't fix and save and rescue each other. But something fishes us out of the darkness.

The fishers of men and women who say I can't make everything better but, Do you need a blanket? It's awfully cold in the San Francisco winter -- and summer. Do you need something to eat? Do you want a granola bar? Do you want my water? I'm sick but I'm not contagious. We think so long that we're hungry for what we're not getting, that we should have it more together, that we should have a house, that we should have a life plan, but we're hungry, hungry, starving for what we're not getting. And that's the Night Ministry. They show up. Love looks like blankets and love looks like sweaters. And love has always looked like water. Love looks like granola bars. Love looks like someone sitting beside you--someone you've never met before and you may never see again--who says, You're not alone. God is here. Emanuel.

It's almost Advent: the coming of the Light. You see it's easy to give up though when we're cold and hungry and scared and our kids are really broken, but this time of Advent is so perfect for the night ministry because it's a time of preparation and of waiting and Autumn grinds to this sort of dark and murky halt and everything is dying and falling to the ground and falling asleep and disappearing and the soil is rocky and awful and that's when we plant bulbs. Our fingers get nipped and dirty but we plant bulbs in the darkness. We show up. We do what we can. Who knew that that would be enough? Who knew that every single person here --has everything they need? Right now. There's nothing to go get. There's nothing to figure out. There's just breath. Ahh. There's just that umbilical cord of our breath, connecting us to the One. To the All of Us. The great All of Us, the motley crew that we are, doing what we can to bring a little tiny bit of light into this world today, tonight.

The Night Ministry is out from 10:00 at night until 4:00 in the morning. I mean time and space have never been my strong suit but 10:00 at night to 4:00 in the morning are definitely very challenging. And they're bringing Love. It's like God's love we deliver. Do you need a sweater? What do you need to have? You can have it. You need this pen? If I give you my pen, will you tell me your story? Because I care. The great Barry Lopez says that sometimes we need stories more than we need food. Do you need paper? I have all this paper, have it. Have the pen, too. Have my water. It's all yours. We do what we can.

I'll tell you a story from our church. There's a sparrow lying by the side of the road with its feet sticking up in the air and a great war horse—I always picture, like, Donald Rumsfeld—comes by, and sees the little sparrow and it neighs and laughs with derision: What are you doing? And the little sparrow says, Well, I heard the sky was falling and so I wanted to help. And the horse laughs and sneers and neighs again and says, Do you think that with those scrawny little legs you're going to hold back the night? And the sparrow says, One does what one can.

That's the Night Ministry.

So we show up. Emanuel means God with us. God as each of us understands God. Good Orderly Direction. And the gift of desperation—the gift of desperation met on the streets by God's heartbreakingly beautiful love. That's where it all begins. And we go forth and we show up and we stay awake. We stop hitting the Snooze button. We look around. Do you need me? Here I am. And we hold to the belief that God is with us, Emanuel close and present and we will be healed, and you know what? We are being healed. Right now, here, in community.

3. DAWN

The dawn feels like a small miracle every time that you've had a bad night. You almost can't believe your eyes that you're going to be okay. As EE Cummings wrote, "Now the eyes of my eyes are open, now the ears of my ears are awake." And it makes you smile to see the light, the golden blanket of the only thing there is: the energy of love that we're made of, that we're made by, and that we're made for. And it can make you laugh out loud —you've come through. And laughter is carbonated holiness. It's so God. It's God showing off, and when we can laugh and when we can smile and when we sit with somebody and we see that they can smile again, we know that we've been touched by grace. When I get my sense of humor back, I know that grace has arrived. I don't even know what grace is. I don't know how to describe it. I live by it. It's like spiritual WD40. It's like your stuck and clenched and tense and something gives you a little spritz, and all of a sudden there's a little bit of movement again, and things don't grind as painfully or as loudly. It's like water wings when you're a scared kid in water that's a little rough for you. It lifts you up. It's a second wind. If you've ever been caught, stuck in a tiny room with no windows and you found a crack in the wall and a little tiny bit of fresh evergreen, has somehow against all odds, like that grass that grows through the pavement, gets through and you smell it, and it spritzes you awake. It's like a plant mister. You go, Ahh. That's God. That's one of the great prayers. Wow. You don't go outside at night and go – um, it's a medium starry night. You go outside different than the person you arrived here this afternoon, and you look up and you say, Wow.

My pastor Veronica says that you can trap bees at the bottom of a mason jar without a lid on it because they won't look up. They kind of walk around bitterly, bumping into the glass, when all they have to do is look up. Look up. Look up. You don't have to understand. That's not what God wants. God just wants us, in our current condition, exactly as we are. There's a bumper sticker in Texas that says "God loves you exactly the way you are -- and god loves you too much to let you stay like this." I love that. Because I think what Jesus is always saying besides, Could you please go get that person some water for me? Jesus is always saying Look, I think you should eat. You seem a little crazy to me right now. Go down to the beach. There'll be fish in a few minutes. We'll talk later. Exactly the way you are. Knowing what you know now.

My little grandson who is five said the other day—at dawn -- Nana, what if you die? And he said: I hardly know anything. I said, what do you want to know? He said, "How to make coffee." Then he said, and How to drive. And then there was a silence and then he said, and how to work the shower

faucet. We know so little. I hardly know anything but I know Love when I see it. I know Real when I see it. And I have to believe that God loves Real. When we show up and we say to the God of our understanding, to that love energy: Hi. God is so excited. Hi. So glad to see you. My beloved. And that's what the dawn brings us. That's what the dawn brings us.

So, maybe now tonight, we can go forth and we can respond to others with amazement and the grace of all creation and we dig into our purses a little deeper. My son hands out water and cigarettes on the streets of San Francisco. That's what love looks like. We pray, Please help our brothers and sisters. In this church today, and on the streets tonight when the Night Ministry goes out we pray, Please let this person be healed. Please let this child be healed. Please let this person die easily and cross over to what awaits us. We pray, Please help them find their way. We pray, Please use me.

I'll tell you a really quick story: I broke my foot about two months ago. I dropped a sixty-foot box of tiles on it. And my older brother's wife had just died three days before, and I had just gone to get him to be with us because what we know, even before we know how to make coffee, is that we need to stick together. That's all. And I brought my brother down, and he was there and he scooped me up to make this kind of crazy boot out of paper towels and ice and duct tape. It looked like a loaf of bread, but really cold. And it was good. They say God created the world and separated the darkness from the light but that duct tape holds it all together. And we went up to the emergency room at Kaiser and the doctor started stitching my toe back together because the nail had come off, and then she started to cry, and she said I think I may have read one of your books. I said, really? And she said *Travelling Mercies*, twenty years ago. I said for God's sake, my brother was there and he was crying because his wife had died. I was crying because of the lidocaine. I have a very low threshold. And then the doctor started crying, and she turned away so that we wouldn't see her, because rule one is don't cry in front of the patient. I said what is it? She said, I'm okay. But you know, saying that you're okay isn't going to bring you the healing of which you so richly deserve. And I said, Listen we are a family of crying. Look at my brother; he was right there and kind of waves at her. I said, this is your lucky day if you need to cry. I said, You picked the lottery. She said, my daughter is in jail. She graduated summa cum laude in May. She's on her third DUI. And I said, you know what? I've been sober 28 years. A. Give me her number, but B., You're the one in need of care. It's me standing in the need of prayer. It's me standing in the need of your arms. It's me standing in the need of your silence as you stand beside me without bumper stickers and platitudes. Just being with me and breathing with me and maybe putting your head against my shoulder for a moment. And somehow the daughter is sober, and the mother goes to a program for people who have a disease of good ideas, a program for people who think that they can save and fix and rescue other people, people who think their help is helpful. I pointed out nicely to this woman, the doctor, if your help were so helpful do you think your daughter would be on her third DUI? And she's getting the help she needs and I got the help I need, and my brother started healing, and my brother will be home when I get home and we will stick together, and we will laugh, and we may cry. Don't ever get over your sorrow. There are people you are never supposed to get over. Don't believe what the culture says. There are people you are not supposed to EVER get over. There's more room in a broken heart. You are God's beloved. You are loved and you are chosen and you are safe, and we are going to go out tonight to be his love,

to be her hands, to be her eyes, to be her touch. To share the water that we have been so freely given. So I'm just feeling very, very blessed to get to be a part of this. I feel so full. And I feel the warmth of your love, and I hope you feel the warmth of ours, and I hope you will go out into the very cold world and share that, and I pray that God will guide each of our feet. I pray that we all stick together, and I pray that we Never Give Up. Because, ah, the dawn has come. I can see your future and you look better. No matter how you feel tonight, no matter what you went through today, I can see your future. And you look better. And we're here, to help you. Thank you."