Spirituality

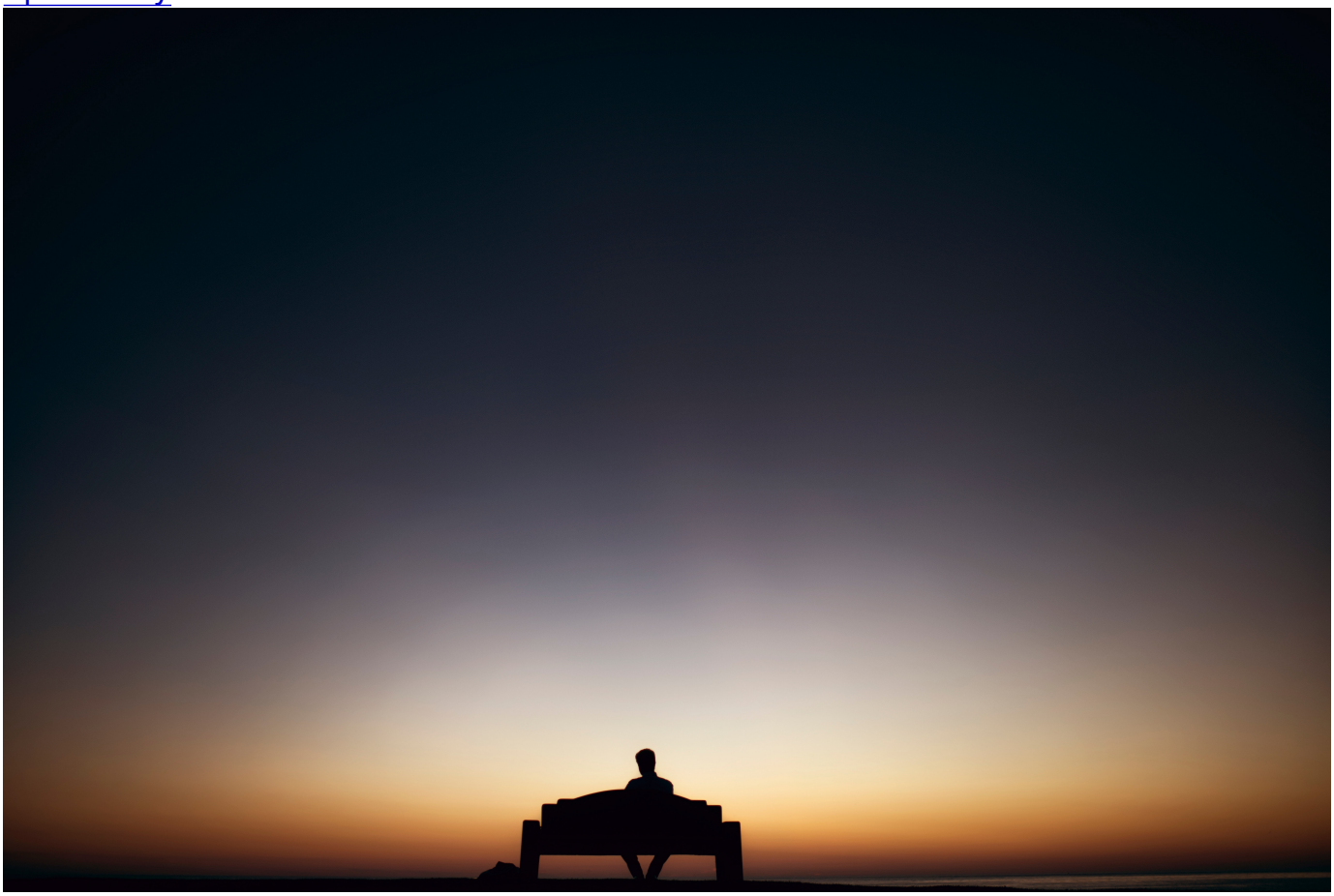


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by Amy Morris-Young

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During particularly challenging times in my life, some well-meaning friend will invariably tell me that "God never gives us more than we can handle."

At those moments, that just feels like rubbing salt in my wound. Talk about adding insult to injury.

For example, when I was robotic all day and raging all night after burying my twin sons — and my anger at God felt as big as my level of faith was small — that platitude just made me feel worse, like my intense grief meant that I was not only a weak person, but a bad Catholic. That I was somehow letting God down with my inability to function, to think, to laugh, to breathe.

While I know that my friend was trying to somehow comfort me, that bromide was almost as bad as saying that my little boys' dying was "God's will." While this is often said with great love, when I hear it, it feels as if I were just punched in the gut, and I silently scream, "Then God is cruel!"

But, surprisingly enough, I have come to believe that I can indeed trust God's will, even, and maybe especially, when it hurts so badly, and that I am in actuality not given anything I can't handle. But I arrived at that place of acceptance not in the way you might think, and certainly not from being Catholic.

A couple of years back, I shared my story in NCR about how on May 3, 1988, the day after son Nick was born, I died from an eclamptic seizure. The 20 minutes or so that I spent in heaven forever changed me and my relationship with God.

A cradle Catholic, I was educated by 16 years of Catholic school in Southern California. From the nuns at St. Euphrasia Elementary School in Granada Hills, the priests, brothers and nuns at Bishop Alemany High School in Mission Hills, and the Jesuits at Loyola Marymount University, I received very specific ideas about who God is and what heaven would be like. But it turned out to be nothing like I expected, and everything I needed.

First, I was taught that when we die, we go directly to some big judgment place. I would be shown a slideshow of my life. The menial and mortal sins on the chalkboard of my soul would be tallied, and, accordingly, I would be assigned to one of three places.

If my slate was clean, and I was repentant and thus sinless, I would be sent to heaven's pearly gates.

If I had the remnants of bad thoughts or deeds lingering in me, I would be sent to purgatory, sort of like a minimum-security jail where I could work off my guilt and earn my way to heaven.

And if my sins were just too serious for any cosmic work farm, I would be sent straight to you know where. H-E-double-toothpicks. Hell.

So, at least as far as my brief time in the light showed me, that is not how it goes.

Surprisingly, my soul was shuttled not to some bureaucratic sorting place, but directly to the Big Guy. I found myself right next to this being of light, whom I assumed was Jesus, but there was no need for a name. There was only love. Seriously. The light that enveloped me was liquid love.

And in that warmth, there was total acceptance and peace. They — because the being was not so much a He as an Eternal They — knew every single thing about me. More than I knew myself. And in that all-knowing, there was all-understanding. If there was any review or question, it was only this: How have you loved and been loved?

And this was my second great surprise. Everything I had ever done, every choice I made, good, bad or ugly, was understood in relation not just to my current life, but all the way back and all the way forward. Each choice was weighed in respect to the entire arc of my existence, the evolution of my soul, through many uncountable lifetimes: an infinity of learning and growth, all with one final goal, to be unified with God, to be one with and in love.

Again, being raised and educated in Catholicism, this was news to me.

I could see that, in those many lives I'd led, I had tried out every possible role. Female and male. Rich and poor. Powerful and meek. Kind and bullying. Gay and straight. And I understood karma was not so much a judgment —you have been a real jerk, so next time you are going to be a slug — but a choice in my soul's educational process.

If there is such a thing as hell, it is more sort of a cosmic rehab of our own choosing. A sort of time-out from our journey, so we can do some literal soul-seeking; a rest area off the soul's highway, where we can ponder how we screwed up and how we can do better next time.

But how long that lasts and what I do there is literally just between God and me. I can't judge you, and you can't judge me. It is personal and only understandable in the framework of my entire journey.

And here is my third huge revelation. I was not some minion, being chided and told what to do. Amazingly, I was being treated with respect, like a colleague or a peer. I was made to understand that it was my choice, and it was all good. I could stay in heaven, or I could go back to my body. Either way, it was okay. In the big scope of things, it would "all work for good," no matter what I did.

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Now, even though my son Nick was not yet one day old, from that vantage point, I could see that he was going to be disabled (Nick is nearly 30 and has autism and Tourette's Syndrome). I saw his future, and that of his big sister, Chelsea, who was nearly two. And I made a choice.

I started to say, "I want to take care of them," but before I had even finished that thought, I was sucked back down this tube of light into my body, which was covered by a sheet.

I was told later that when I sat up and started moaning (because my body really hurt, and I mean everywhere), the poor nurse who was in my darkened room pooped her pants. Small wonder!

At that painful moment, I admit to raising my right arm (my left side was paralyzed for about a month) towards the ceiling, and internally yelling: "Hey! Can I have a do-over?" Because this place is hard. And that place is wonderful.

But I was here, with my kids, just like I had chosen. So I trudged through that pain, and all the pain that came after, because it was my choice. And that is amazing and glorious and a big responsibility.

But here's the thing. I have to remember that I was given a very rare gift: a glimpse behind the curtain, a vision of eternity and an assurance of my place there, infinitely.

When I have shared these insights with people, many times it just makes them mad. It does not fit their view of life and death, and it is not scriptural (at least not in our religion).

It seems they need their Old Testament God. They are relying on that judge to send the people who hurt them —who do bad things to good people — straight to hell. And they want to know that heaven is a final place of peace, a reward for a lifetime of suffering and disappointment, where their crown of thorns will be transformed into one of gold and jewels. They are tired by this life, and when they die, they want to be done. Over and out. Amen.

I get it. And have learned to just respect that and shut up.

I can only accept that "God doesn't give me more than I can handle," or that the terrible things that happen during this life are "God's will," if I remember that wider view.

My soul may be eternal, but my body and mind just get plain beat up and worn out.

I need to remember that I chose to be here. That this is on me. I saw what lay ahead — the unfairness and pain and terror of life on this planet — but I accepted it, and dove back in.

And I did that for one reason: love.

[Amy Morris-Young graduated from and taught writing at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.]