Spirituality
Soul Seeing



(Unsplash/Nicole Honeywill)

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I sensed the wave of emotion approaching before it arrived. One daughter on my right and another on my left, we were attending an event for prospective students.

My three older children have already graduated from this Catholic high school; now, the twins and I sat in the auditorium, wedged in a tight row of burgundy theater seats. A choral piece was introduced. With the opening words, "I believe," the wave crested, and broke, and flooded my soul with its simple creed:

I believe in the sun even when it is not

shining.

I believe in love even when I do not feel.

I believe in God even when he is silent.

I had befriended those lines — or rather, they befriended me — almost four decades ago. As a teenager, I found solace and companionship in poetry. Raised in the Catholic Worker, I had always known that our upbringing made me and my brother different. (Who else brought to school sandwiches made on homemade brown bread?) What I hadn't known was that my life would be made of cycles: lonely years followed by happy ones, followed by exhilarating ones, then more lonely ones, then happy ones again.

Here I am, sitting with "the babies" in an auditorium during confusing times, when hate crimes are on the rise and school shootings have become commonplace. Suddenly, this open house becomes a reunion: meeting up with lines I first met when I was the same age my daughters are now.

Being fraternal (not identical) twins, my girls look different; however, for this hugely important day, they have both decided to wear their hair loose. Out of the corner of my eye, I see long, flowing tresses the color of caramel. Out of the other, a glossy chestnut mane. Younger parents — full of questions — sit around us, nervous about sending their first children to high school. The twins, our fourth and fifth, are our last. And, as the girls frequently remind us, they are also "the last" in their class — as in, the last to get cellphones.

I would like to tell my daughters how this song brings a rush of memory: walking the pine tunnel, two towering rows of trees, at the Catholic Worker farm where their grandparents still live. How these words measured my steps. How quietly feet tread

a path of dried pine needles. How that simple creed (written during the Holocaust) shone as a lamp in dark times — and how during my own dark times, it led me to other poems, including one written by a child, published in the book *Pictures That Storm Inside My Head: Poems for the Inner You*:

> *He doesn't know the world at all*
>
> *Who stays in his nest and doesn't*
>
> *go out.*
>
> *He doesn't know what birds know*
>
> *best*
>
> *Nor what I want to sing about,*
>
> *That the world is full of loveliness.*

At 51, I find myself slipping down the other side of a (hopefully) long slope. More and more often, I use a Spanish expression to distinguish the generations, *Ellos van para arriba* ("They are on their way up"). The implied, often left-off second part of the phrase is, *y nosotros para abajo* ("and we are going downhill"). In case the meaning is unclear, hand gestures portray a sharp incline followed by a sudden dive downward.

Yet, there are unexpected perks to aging.

At my age, the thing about memory is that there is so much of it. So many poems to revisit. So many books to reread. Tuning in to a radio station, pure joy! Oldies from my first years of riding the bus in Mexico. Better, even, than the first time around — because now I understand the lyrics. Reunions allow for deepened encounter.

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The worst thing is how everything outside the nest feels different now. The world feels colder, more violent, uncertain. But then again, what about the origin of the

choral piece now being performed? The unknown writer (possibly imprisoned in Auschwitz, or in hiding in Cologne) witnessed evil. Not just a nebulous, metaphysical evil, but a horribly concrete, historical evil. A genocide the girls will learn about, must learn about. This Catholic high school will teach them what they need to know and acquaint them with simple creeds for difficult times.

My life has certainly not been as I would have planned. But if it were, they would not be here. These two treasures of my heart would never have been born if I had not gone out of my nest to meet the world.

When the presentation ends, we can stay for the basketball game, or go home — back to the nest. There will be plenty of time for cellphones. Here we are, given a last chance to shelter them. To protect glossy leaves and slender, supple stems. To nurture them for four more years, so that they grow hardy and firmly planted. Meanwhile, I savor meeting up with old friends. Even if I never fully understood them, I am given another chance: to appreciate them, to thank them, and to promise to never forget.

[Deirdre Cornell lived in Mexico for three years as a Maryknoll lay missioner and has, with her husband, Kenny, worked with migrant workers in upstate New York for many years. She has written about her experiences in *A Priceless View*, *American Madonna,* and *Jesus Was a Migrant*. Soul Seeing columns can be found at NCRonline.org/columns/soul-seeing.]

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