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Fallen-away Catholics: Story of the swans

Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés | Mar. 10, 2009 El Rio Debajo del Rio

A story is not something we tell. A story is a living being that shows up in answer to our questions about the mysteries of life ... Often enough, a story comes forward on its own, having traveled a long distance to be with us, often hoping to remember us back into some layer of the mysterium, the parts that most nourish our souls ... and the souls of others.
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In my Latino heritage, the following story is one spun together during a time with La señora Maria Elena, a member of my spirit family -- she, a muñecadora, a marionette maker, who lived in a fronterizo, border village near Nogales long ago.

As a young woman, the questions I had asked Maria Elena were these:

Why do we have deep in our souls such a longing to be reunited with our own ... whether in my case, a lost brother, siblings and parents ... or in the case of others ... a lost mother, a lost father, sister, grandparent, a lost child, a lost friend, lover, a lost soul?

Why do we yearn so hard to find the *desaparecidos*, the missing ones, on this earth? -- those who even if we have never met them -- we know they are 'out there' ... and they are so dear to us that we pray for them everyday ... not even knowing their names, not even knowing where they lay their heads? We know them because we know, that's all.

So together, as Maria Elena danced her "puppet-os" across the floor, we listened to a greater Soul, and out came this story.

"Los cisnes, The Swans..."

> Once long ago, the swans, great gorgeous birds of soft plumage, were created in many colors. There were red swans, black swans, white swans, and blue swans.
>
> The swans of all colors lived together, and chose their mates for life. They showed each other how to weave their nests with grasses and sedges, human hair, and sometimes red threads or blue threads they'd found along the way.
>
> The elder swans showed the younger how to care for their children together; how to shelter and protect each other; how to fly out in wing-to-wing formations together; how to sing and sing to raise the sun at dawn and to bring the night at dusk.
>
> Thus the swans were at peace for eons until one dark day when came a terrible tempest rolling

across the land. Creator flew down to warn them: 'To be saved, all swans must, under great duress, fly to the four distant points of the world.'

Creator foretold that the tempest would reach all points of the earth and destroy much ... but for the swans, their being separated from one another -- rather than being together in one place -- would ensure the survival of more, rather than less, of God's great creature called Swan.

And so the swans, with their small bindle bags of underwater grasses, and their little children and lifelong mates, flew as refugees.

They rose into the air in a flurry, heart-frightened, leaving most everything behind, not knowing where they were going ... only knowing they were fleeing mayhem ... only knowing that as long as their feathers held out, they would fly through rain storms, lightning strikes, and over mountains ...

they would fly over the wires that kill, over the waters poisoned ... they would fly through hails of bullets, they would fly over wastelands with nowhere to land or rest ... they would fly and fly as far in every direction as possible ... to preserve that which Creator calls Swan.

It is said the red swans flew as far as they could to the west where, in the color of the setting sun, they would be given camouflage and refuge.

The black swans flew as far as they could to the north where, in the darkness of long winters, they would be camouflaged, and thereby be as safe from harm as possible.

The white swans flew to the south where they took refuge among the spinners and weavers of white cotton, and there they were camouflaged and kept as safe as could be.

And the blue swans flew as far as they could to the east where there was a great ocean. On this ocean, the swans could barely be seen so blue were the swans, so blue were the waters. And there they made their homes as safely as possible.

Yet in the swans' cross migrations to the South once a year -- the most dangerous of times, for their camouflages were not intact then -- the old swans of every color were ever seeking the swans descended from their first home place, which now numbered many generations.

And, finding so many, the old ones especially would tell the stories of their most immaculate place of origin before the mayhem had separated them.

And this joy of reunion belonged to all the swans, together; their souls were fastened together by that one incorruptible place of origin.

And how did they find one another after so long separated, for there are millions of birds in any sky? Before the tempest came, the swans could speak, just as you and I do. But when mayhem came over the land, Creator took pity on the swans and said, 'I will give into your hearts the one thing that will set your pace and save your lives and the lives of others forever.

Thus, Creator gave the swans but one cry. The original cry the swans trumpeted sounded like this... *¿Dónde está usted?*

But, over time, to give them more breath to fly farther, and since all the swans knew the full cry by heart, Creator shorted the cry to one you can hear the swans cry today. They fly overhead,

trumpeting, *¿Dónde? ¿Dónde? ¿Dónde?*

Where are you?
Where are you?
Where are you?

¿Dónde?, this the Creator gave specifically ... not *¡Alto!*, Stop right there!; not ¡Dejame solo!, Leave me alone ... but rather, ¿Dónde? ... the short version of Creator's long lesson about Love on earth.

¿Dónde? -- the only words Creator tenderly placed into the souls of the swans ... the cry granted so they would never, ever, completely lose one another.

Not Fallen-Away, Rather, Pushed Away

I apologize for using the phrase "fallen-away Catholic," in the title above. It's a familiar old fashioned phrase, but not one I find precise. Yet, in the one inch square space for the title of each weekly column in the sidebar of NCR's main page, a writer has only very few words to lead readers to articles. I'd hoped using the familiar, albeit, imprecise phrase, would let people know the idea we'd be gathering over.

But, the actual phrase ought actually be "pushed away Catholic" or "pushed out Catholic."

These many months at *National Catholic Reporter*, as I've read the comments on articles I write here, as well as many of the comments on other articles at **NCRonline**, I see that there are every now and then, souls who tell of leaving the church.

For most, the common denominators seem that they were flayed needlessly; or hounded sadistically as children; or else shunned for imperfect knowing; or shamed for finding their ways in a manner that was more of a mythic journey than the rote one laid out by mere mortals.

Or else only offered the food of ferrets when they, in fact, were swans needing the food of swans. Nothing wrong with ferret food for ferrets (meat), but ferret food for swans (grains and underwater grasses), makes the swans slowly die from starvation.

Most of all, many of the pushed away, by their telling of their own stories, came to rest, torn and bewildered, in a hollow. This occurred because for years, for decades, no one with wisdom and clear vision that they could understand without crippling themselves further, came to their rescue. These souls were not fallen from the nest, they were pushed.

The Mr. Mean Jeans Syndrome

Yet, I have also noted some who claim, online, to be Catholics, commenting to those pushed from the nest, that they are glad they're gone and good riddance ...

but without ever once assessing the wounds of those who have been brave enough to say how on a journey of such undeserved and often unrelieved torture, they could not go on being injured without repair. They had to seek their solace and repair elsewhere, if at all.

It could be said that Catholics who make such excoriating comments to the seriously wounded, appear to be more interesting in being harsh and 'correcting others,' than in healing hearts.

But I believe there's more to most persons, even if one in an occasional fit of ill temper, condemns a wounded

soul who is crying, "I am wounded, and doing the best I can ... and I'm trying to stay away from those who harmed me and would harm me yet. "

You and I, old believers, know the goodness inside all souls can sometimes be overwhelmed by the ego's ambitions to make pronouncements that seem so clearly grand in the moment -- but turn out later to have made us sound like complete nincompoops. We've all been there, sinned there.

That's why I think it's the old believers most of all, who can see that those who act too brusquely to rid themselves of the wounded, would on most days tend to the wounds of others if . ...

they, in fact, came across a swan trembling on a stone ledge, a bird so traumatized, and so muddy and bedraggled from having gone through storm, having barely survived hunters, having sickened from drinking bad water, having had to walk fire-burnt environs, gotten trapped in oil saturated beaches that glued the swan's feathers together so they could not fly freely ...

It is in the goodness of most souls, when confronted with a frightened and defensive swan, or a frightened swan with love pleading from its eyes ... that even a chronically impatient person would not harm this creature, but rather try to bring it aid.

Seeing Christ in the face of the creature and all they have suffered through, can make impatience and its pronouncements seem cheap and easily gotten.

Seeing the thorn-crowned Cristocito in the heart of a wounded soul, seeing that soul is still a swan, and still has intact feathers and still has potential for flight that is not of the fleeing kind only, but also, as they were born and meant to be: of the soaring kind...

Wouldn't a person who has grown used to their own harshness have yet another chance to remember they also have a soul that insists on being happy with those who are happy, and sad with those who are sad? Instead of imperious or pre-emptive?

I believe even those who have never had to wade into facing the gut injuries of the battlefield, would find a way to have mercy on the wounded.

I believe people from all kinds of ?normally-arch? perspectives, if given a clear reading of one who has been devastated, would choose helping to heal that person instead of helping to harm that person.

Especially if they remembered, they too, are from the same original home place.

Good Shepherd, swan, so similar. The soul's work is to find, to protect, to stay close by if we can, and if we cannot stay, or they cannot stay, then to leave behind as much medicine and nourishment as possible, to provision them for the next step in their journey.

There are rarely fallen away Catholics, but there are many unhealed ones.

¿Dónde está usted?
Where are you?

¿Dónde? ¿Dónde? ¿Dónde?
Where are you?
Where are you?
Where are you?

Aqui. Aqui. Aqui.
We are here.
We are still here.

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CODAS

1. Story of the Swans, *Los cisnes*"

Some might ask: What shall we do for swans who bite and say they want no help/healing? Well, first of all, it's rare we hear of death by swan, so do not be afraid. Yet, for those who are or have been just regular communicants like us, I'd advise retreat, but only with the goal of regrouping and praying to be shown, "Is there another way through, and how?" In the meantime, for certain, regarding those who are clearly wounded and are saying so aloud ... if you cannot help, do no harm.

2. Your e-mail

My mailbox has been flooded with letters from religious (women and men) and lay persons (women and men) re last week's column: Nuns, The Civilizing Force of the Church [1]. I will in future columns be writing about the deep concerns, the humor, the wounds and gifts, the hopes and dreams that are part of our consecrated sisters' (and brothers') lives ... ones that may not show on the surface. I thank all who wrote such heartfelt missives, and invite you who have yet to say anything or have more to say, to please write me (your confidences will be held completely) at projectscreener@aol.com

3. Prayer ribbons: your comments

You have likely noticed the spiffy new website NCR has put up. It takes time and a lot of skate keys to get everything just so.

Many of you have written me asking about the new format, and for now, til we see all the tweaking in place, I'd like to address only the loss of comments on my articles for the last year. Please know that NCR gave me notice when the old site would be taken apart and that comments would not make it to the new design. So, one night after the midnight hour, I downloaded each article I'd written along with all your comments. I have your comments all here, printed out and safe. Don't think they disappeared into the vapor. They didn't.

Here is why. Whenever anyone comments on my articles here, their name goes on a prayer ribbon, which is a piece of colored paper I've carefully cut into strips and keep a pile of here at my desk. Then, these might go on my *ofrenda*, my little home altar, or they might stay with me here at my writing desk for a time, depending on the urgency I sense. Each day, I ask that all souls be lifted and looked at to see what each might need, and to please help in whatever form each soul can understand.

(You can't get out of it, even if you go by the name 'anonymous' ... for I just write that down too along with one or two words from the comment so I know which 'anonymous' is which.) As always, if you have a prayer request, you can always put it at the end of your comment. You needn't name names unless you wish to: Creator knows everyone by name. Probably has some hilarious nicknames for some of us more, ah, unusual types. I'd ever be honored to pray for your intentions.

Be blessed.
Dr.E

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