

## **The Thin Places**

*B All Saints--John 11:32-44*

When I was in the fourth grade, our teacher, Mrs. Huber, made us memorize the Robert Frost poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." In the poem, the speaker pauses on his way home to "watch [some] woods fill up with snow." In the last stanza, he says, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep./But I have promises to keep,/And miles to go before I sleep,/And miles to go before I sleep." So there we were, a class full of nine and ten-year-olds, discussing this poem, and Mrs. Huber asked us what we thought that last repeated line was about. A number of us pick-me, hand-raiser types made valiant efforts to explain it, but clearly we were missing something because Mrs. Huber kept waiting. Then Jim Helms, the class screw-up, raised his hand and said, "It's about dying."

Jim was a kid that most people didn't like. He had a husky voice, pale skin, and thick, wavy brown hair through which he was always swiping a comb from his back pocket. He gave off a sweet, nauseating smell. He strutted around a lot. He was, in the callow parlance of the 4th grade pecking order, a "loser." He used to talk about Agent Orange a lot, and how his dad had died from exposure to it in Vietnam. The emotional reality that lurked behind those stories was really just a fog to the rest of us, who had mostly lived our lives untouched by the cruelty of change. Jim, though, had experienced early the fact that time never shifts into reverse, so it was no coincidence that it was he who piped up that day with this insight about the end of Frost's poem: "It's about dying."

And it was no coincidence, when Mrs. Huber's husband died in an accident two years later, that Jim was the driving force behind a secret collection from kids in the

school to buy Mrs. Huber some flowers. In this effort he formed an unlikely alliance with my best friend, Colin, and me. The three of us collected the money and our moms bought the flowers. Then we showed up at the end of school one day, back in our old fourth-grade classroom filled with kids who now seemed puny and young. Mrs. Huber looked up in surprise. She had been our favorite teacher, all three of us, and I remember feeling tongue-tied. I think one of us stammered out something like "We got you these because, you know, about your husband." She tilted her head and smiled at us, and she suddenly looked worn out in a way that I had not known an adult to look. We let her give us each a hug even though we were in the sixth grade. All three of us--I and my best friend, Colin, and Jim the loser--had organized this gesture together. But only one of us truly understood what it was all about.

Celtic spirituality offers us this notion that there are places and times in which the membrane that separates heaven from earth becomes thinner. The otherworldly and the this-worldly touch each other and we, on this side of the divide, find ourselves in the presence of those who have crossed over. That is very much the spirit of this day in the calendar of our worshipping life as Christians, this All Saints Day. We light candles, and create our memory boxes, and hang the names of the dead in this beautiful cloud of witnesses hovering over us here, to name and connect with them, to acknowledge how alive they still are to us. We invite God to make the space between the living and the dead thin, to help us to reach across it for nourishment and strength.

And I think that's very much what Jim Helms was trying to do in presenting Mrs. Huber with those flowers in honor of her husband. He understood in a way that none of the rest of us could that death brings a double-loneliness: the loneliness of the loss itself

compounded by the loneliness of the social silence which surrounds that loss because people are embarrassed, or don't know what to say, or don't want to remind the mourner of the person who has died--as if he or she could possibly forget. Jim, whose mother had remarried after his father died, knew that loneliness well. He knew that the worst thing to do was to step past a death as if it had never happened. So without ever having met her husband, Jim helped us to find a way to call him up for her, to keep him alive by acknowledging that he had died. I know that sounds like a paradox, but I believe it's true. Failing to acknowledge a death is the best way to keep the dead person dead. It's no accident that when Jesus calls Lazarus from his tomb in today's reading, he calls him by name: "Lazarus, come out!" So naming the dead, remembering them, telling stories about them, opening ourselves to their presence within and around us--that is how to touch them in their ongoing aliveness. That is how to draw sustenance from the ones who have gone before us, as we set our own steps to the miles we have to go before we sleep.