

Getting Down on My Knees



A long walk in humility
in the aftermath
of knee replacement surgery

Eunice Russell Schatz

In the fall of 2014, I was diagnosed as a good candidate for left knee replacement surgery. I had heard rosy reports of the good outcomes from this surgery, and New England Baptist Hospital had a reputation for being the best for sports-related injuries and all manner of orthopedic procedures. In other respects, however, I went into the surgery blindly, poorly prepared for the effects of temporary disability on my over-all sense of competence and control. Therefore the hospital and rehab experience, even under excellent care, was jolting in unexpected ways.



This account begins two days before surgery:

December 20

I am surveying these next three days—and weighing my propensities for anticipating every minute detail of the essential “tasks” to be completed before I lose control of my life—handing everything over to the anesthesiologist and surgeon! How deeply ingrained in me is the need to be in control, to be ahead of the game, to already *know* and to achieve brilliantly!

So Curtis write that he prays for me, and that my “fears may be quelled.” So I drop down into that deeper place within where fears—legitimate fears in the case of surgery—are buried. Here is where I need the quieting, the quelling, the Spirit gives.

Something in me wants and needs to surrender. How terrible if I were to have to go through these days *knowing*. I want rather to rest in *unknowing*, to trust.

The relaxation tapes help, but even they invite my achieving energy. I ask Jesus to help me *let go*, as Peter did in the water. I need to be held in these days. Don’s arms are strong. But I also yearn for the deep embrace of Almighty God, and reach for that as others hold me in so many practical ways.

December 28

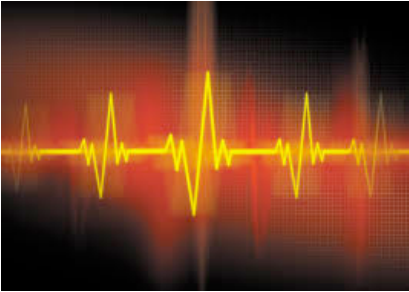
The surgery is over. Can it be? My hand trembles slightly—so unused to the page.

(I promised to write the story of this past week, starting with surgery at the Baptist Hospital Monday and continuing to rehab with the Episcopalian Sherrill House on Christmas Day and since. I am sending that out separately to a wider group of friends.)

But I am present this quiet gray morning listening to Trinity Choir on my iPod, and so aware of the minutes as the hour of worship at the monastery passes and my beloved Don decided to be there on his own, and may he be filled with the Spirit from on high.

Yesterday I awoke with the sensibility of Realism: that I am at the beginning of an ordeal of daily *work*. The physical therapy session accented that. It is a series of demanding tasks to be attended to faithfully.

There is a ritualistic element to it—a rhythm—and underneath a deep chord to be touched that will integrate the physical, mental, and spiritual—so that the body will be both healed and alive.



The nurse yesterday said, "There is no healing without pain," and that suddenly gave pain new meaning. Not something to avoid (lest I am doing something wrong) but something to be with, and as one of the songs says, "He bore the pain." Yes, healing comes from pain.

There is also such a symphony between the crassness of a good bowel movement and the feeling of the rhythm of pacing as I walk the hallway here. Another important intersection exists between independence and asking for help—for the most basic needs.

There is also the matter of time and solitude. (Some visitors for someone else just walked by.) I need contact more than I realized. I admit I could use just a little more of that. But having written that, now I wonder. . .if the aloneness has not been salvific. If I had the use of my iPad I could have manufactured instant company by reaching out and writing my thoughts, and usually eliciting response. I have made a couple of calls, but concern over the cost of cell phone units held me back. Perhaps there are subtle reasons for this *solitary confinement*—a prison condition I recently declared *not* to be torture—for me! Did I speak too soon?

A sobering thought came this morning; How will this experience change me substantially and more permanently? How will I absorb its lessons and fruits in the deeper long-term ways my soul desires? How sad to drink all this in, if I were then to see no continuing slowing down and softening of my edges—the aroused empathy for others in physical distress, for example. I see how far I yet have to travel.

December 31

The last day of 2014, heading into the unknown of 2015, beginning by going *home*.

My feelings are layered: an excitement of preparation of the space and schedule to fit into the new needs of this 85-year-old body! And some residual fear that I may not prove to be the typical recovery example that nearly everyone touts. . .that somehow this aging body is an exception and will find recovery both harder and slower. I don't add "impossible" because something incorrigible in me insists that *every* body knows how to heal itself.

I feel like apologizing to my left leg—surveying those purple bruises and seeing the stitches. Trauma was deliberately inflicted on this leg—no question about that. So we *wound* in order to *save*.

Now I face the question of how God and I work together as I go home and no longer rely on the routines and devices and helping hands available here. I feel so *clean* tonight. They do so many more ablutions in rehab and hospital than I am used to at home where washing is rather slap-dash. I've relied on nightly baths. . .and these are definitely *over* for the next month or more. But I have liked the feeling of paying better attention to the crevices and cracks and knobby fingers and numb toes—and getting refreshed.



I'm pensive as I think about the array of persons who have accompanied me through this week and a half—a good many surprises and opening me to a broader view of what community means. I think this ordeal has sifted out some whom I might have assumed would hang in close, and brought forward an odd assortment unexpectedly and opened my heart much wider than I could have imagined. I treasure this new openness, acceptance—sure that God is moving people to call—and aware of the good timing too.

I've been lonely at times. I've not had words at times. Somehow that's all a part of the pattern being created by the circumstances surrounding my rehab experience.

I'm saying goodnight now. . .reluctantly. Brother-in-law Stu called and we had a good talk. I feel close to him quite often, and especially at an under-the-surface level. He's much quieter and easier to be with since his traumatic bout of lung cancer. It's nice, and a balance to Don and his sister Penny's natural closeness.

January 18

What a difference a day—or night—makes. Spending the day at the Life/Work Direction retreat in Duxbury was fulfilling and I managed well, but was tired and in some pain on the way home with Claire. And then the nightmare descended part way home: the car engine began sputtering and threatening total breakdown out on the deserted night highway. Everything in my body froze as Claire skillfully nursed the car up to each stoplight, gunning to keep the engine going, once barely making it through yellow lights, until we pulled up in front of the house safely. I limped out the door and went inside and immediately to bed.

But during the night, terror revisited and I took an inner deep sea dive into total horror and depression, thinking about my part in creating such separate existences in our marriage, because our preoccupations did not synch easily. I was in abject terror, and grief-stricken about my part in this and filled with paralyzing fear of our future.

Then softly, Don's hands reached over to caress me in the night. He may have been asleep. But God gave me a vision: I saw my husband as a strong man—fully able to deal with me in my various labile states. It felt deeply true.

By morning I could say some of this aloud to Don and was reassured. It is hard to even write this bit about my experience. I do not fully trust my own perceptions during these weeks of recovery—still taking the pain meds. Sleep and eating are disturbed and I don't yet feel normal, by a long shot!

I am so dependent on God.

February 10 - 16

I want to record the deep lessons etched upon me these days—predominantly through continuing to read and meditate on Vanier's book, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus in the Gospel of John*. The days have been rich.

Today in John 14, when Jesus announced he is leaving—it raises the issue of Presence and Absence:



“Absence hurts but as the pain increases, the desire is strengthened, so that the presence that will come will be even fuller and more total. In order to live more deeply this friendship with God, other desires that have taken too much room in our hearts and lives may have to be pruned or cut away. But their loss can also be the prelude to being filled in a new deeper way with God. Absence deepens the well of our being.”

I find I experience this Absence of God now in a way that prepares me for this Presence, this fullness. What do I imagine this fullness to be like? It may be of a different quality than I have heretofore known. What would it be like *not* to want Eunice to “go back to her old self”?

Then in John 13, Jesus' new way of speaking of the old law, "Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself." Now the new law is: "*Just as I have loved you*, you should love one another." A new standard: Love others not as I love myself, but as Jesus loves me! How that relieves the pressure!

At the last supper, when Jesus rises to wash the disciples' feet: In John there is no record of institution of the Eucharist. Instead it is the command to wash each others' feet.



"There is a deep link between these two realities. The washing of the feet, too, is an intense moment of communion through the body."

The picture of Jesus *touching* each person, calling by name, addressing each one *personally*. Each person is important. We are a presence of God. It is a new way of exercising authority—as servant.

"It is sometimes easier for me to accept the experience of being acclaimed. . . than just to sit down, poorly and humble, and share my life lovingly with others. . . "As we get close to the poor and the weak, we begin to accept our own poverty and weakness; we learn how to become vulnerable to others, not to control them, and how to cry out to others and to Jesus: 'I cannot do this on my own! I need your help!'"

Yes, "*As we get closer to the poor, we begin to live the beatitude of the poor.*"

How rich *others* are who have paused to care for me in these days of my need.

"Our utter loneliness will be transformed into a total presence of God. Loneliness is the total emptiness of a human heart, the final and absolute purification in order to become the place where God resides."

But even in the loneliness God is present because Jesus is with us in agony and anguish just as the Father is always with him.

In John 11, at Lazarus' tomb, Jesus shudders with emotion.

"Something seems broken in him. Is he being confronted by the pain that his own death will cause. . . So here, in front of Mary, he is torn between his love for her, his desire to respond to her call, and the inner certitude that if he does respond, he will be condemned to death. It is this inner tension that seems to provoke his shuddering, this deep disturbance within him, and his tears. Jesus is so profoundly human, vulnerable, and loving."

I am touched by the human Jesus, and his capacity to feel the pain, and also act.

When Jesus came to the realization of his coming death (after the Palm Sunday parade) he speaks about how those who love their (psychological) life will lose it.

"For many of us, it is through an illness, an accident, loss or work or some form of failure that we are called to "die" to our own ways of doing things."

We may die to one success in order to discover another part of our being and to grow and develop in a more human way.

John 16: "I have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

An intriguing remark. What is it that Jesus wants to say to me that I cannot yet bear? An invitation to grow stronger and closer, with more desire and openness and trust.

March 2

This far into 2015, and still unclear about what it is that I am to learn and how I am to walk forward on both feet.

We went to the monastery for the first time yesterday—me driving! So good to be back. And yet. . . my life in God is not the same as before—which in itself is o.k. but whatever awaits me that is new has not yet arrived! I am in a no-man's land of the soul, and it is Lent.

March 3

On Sunday Geoffrey prayed for me, when I told him my spirit was broken. He prayed for a rock—God my rock. Today, Psalm 61 made the connection:

*Hear my cry, Of God and listen to my prayer:
I call upon him from the ends of the earth with
heaviness in my heart;
Set me upon the rock that is higher than I.*



The higher vantage point on the rock yields perspective. May I see my life today from that viewing point.

March 30

I am not sure why I have not felt the inclination to write in these pages all month. I continue to mark this as an in-between time, neither pre- or past- surgery—but in recovery mode. It is an unfamiliar terrain. I do note that my capacity for empathy has been aroused, and also my capacity for “answers” is muted, and/or non-existent. I bear the *weight* of waiting.



April 4 - Holy Saturday

The week has passed without much liturgical celebration for us—reminiscent of a childhood past that ignored Holy Week and simply plunged into Easter day.

This year is different. . .for the three-plus months of recovery have been something of an entombment awaiting release of full range of motion. I have entered another chapter of life—beyond question. I see my life differently—past, present, and future. I held off from this view for a *long* time and something in me still resists. I await the touch of the Spirit, and perhaps need to touch Jesus’ wounds

April 13 12.08 a.m. the morning of our wedding anniversary

My mind won’t go to sleep, so I get up to write thoughts. I’m thinking about three persons—one of whom calls and feels my listening at a deep level. Another is one who came recently and shared a dream, and who walks with the shadow of uncertainty of her life span. As we met, words and silence are intermixed. Both of these interchanges feel in harmony with where I am these days—more spacious than formerly and not tinged with words and worry. It is easy to listen.

A third person is one who came recently saying he has virtually no spiritual life just now. Usually, this sort of “vacancy” in a person is a drag for me, but in the night as I considered this, I suddenly realized that perhaps for him, sitting with me *is* his spiritual practice.

If this be the case with all three persons, it illumines what God seems to be using this strange time in my life for. My own “spiritual practice” (I have to put it in quotes) is non-emotional and usually that means I have trouble “counting it” as valid!

April 21

The conversation yesterday with all four of us here about the unknown future stirred new thoughts and I think undermined unexpressed assumptions. Witness last night’s dream:

I was in Wisconsin, a college student transferring to another school for the sake of my treasured special string instrument which was basic to my study. I arrived, driven by a friend and tried to enter the house where I thought my friends the Leers lived. But they were not at home. So I stood outside and wrote with my finger on the window pane. “This is a dangerous man” in an attempt at humor. I also roamed around in the back

yard, where the owner of the house was working, but he did not recognize me. Then I walked down the block to the lighted downtown area and entered a café. There I saw the Leers seated with friends around a table. I made myself known and they both arose and excused themselves to their friends, to join with us (Don was here too now).

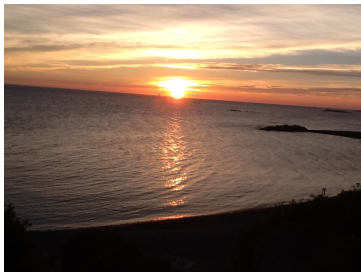
In working on the dream which I am sure was triggered by our conversation of yesterday, I felt that I was being challenged in some of my assumptions—especially my sense of my ability to take care of myself and my own needs right up to the end of my life, without much dependence on others. Already I have—we have—needed others, have depended on others by the way we have chosen to live and support ourselves in work. There are a ton of assumptions there, clouded by the articles of faith that were inculcated in me from childhood: “God will supply all your need.” And others’ love reaches out to you by their Christian commitment. *That* family is more real and dependable than biological ties.

April 28

I am four months into recovery from knee surgery, so I mark this point as a transition from “recovery mode” to—what? *Discovery*? My life has changed; my inner *attitude* has changed. I am more sober and realistic.

May 9

I am taking an overview of these past months in preparation for presenting to my Peer Supervision Group Monday. I see that my sense of working with Companions has been changing, in feeling more co-equal with them, identifying more with their struggles and seeing how the way I am being led by God coincides with what seems helpful to them, that we are often being challenged in some basic similar ways.



sunrise over the Atlantic

The silent Retreat I took last August-September by the ocean set me on a totally new ground. My intense introspection and self-consciousness were eradicated. For a time I experienced life directly without intervening self-criticism. I felt both more detached and yet more real.

Then came the surgery and BAM! My world upended and I was alone and needy and out of control. Everything I usually counted on to buoy me up and stay in charge was stripped bare—my ego with it!

Slowly now I am being reintroduced to life. . .picking my way through a thicket, looking for a sentence that speaks to me as I read each morning in the Scriptures or other readings.

As I find a sentence that seems etched in lights and meant pointedly for me—that very day someone comes to sit with me, to whom *that same sentence speaks*. I am learning to look for that synchronistic connection and the result has been spontaneous prayer for others—something new to me and that feels natural. Then I am a true companion, an equal. I am no longer a Helper (though I have been such a good one!). Now I am walking *with*.

May 14

Something is changing in me. Today's reading in the *Celtic Wheel of the Year* spoke to that awareness. I suddenly find myself with t-i-m-e stretching out in my days and I do not automatically welcome it and move toward something I desire. What I miss is the *desire* attached to action—in my case, usually the act of writing. But not always. So I am “caught” unawares and uncertain, forced to *wait*, for I do not want to move without desire. This feels like a very important point. . .to welcome *new* direction, not old “answers.” These words here are my prayer, my articulation of an unnamed feeling or sense. Suppose that the waiting itself were an important part of the change! To have less directionality and forward movement? Perhaps.

May 26

Last night's dream was of my parents wanting to give me a dress. I was not particularly eager, but since they wanted me to choose one from a huge pile of multi-colored dresses piled up in a heap, I agreed to choose. One on top caught my eye—solid purple, all in one piece with a scoop neck. It made me feel wonderful and all of a piece.



Something is unifying. . .that relates to my parents in me. The attire is not flashy, but regal and also plain, textured and lovely in color. I would be glad to wear that today.

I am heading toward our Sisters' Retreat at the end of this week. I don't know what to take with me. Can I trust I'll be able to *find* what I need once I arrive? I always go “armed” with books and notebooks.

May 28

I am here at Spirit Fire retreat house, disarmed! Wanting to be present to each person.

Conscious living” is the motto at Spirit Fire. It is a new environment, very green and woodland, and the sky is full of clouds today. It feels so like the New England of my childhood and I feel at home in some ways, though Spirit Fire has a particular esoteric foundation. No mirror in my room, I note with humor, and genuine appreciation. Healthy for me.

I came here determined to write. . .for some reason. It's my need for companionship in solitude. Not bad to have a pen be that companion—so trustworthy.

May 29

I am picking up Rowan Williams' *Where God Happens* —the chapter on “Neighbors” —wanting to absorb the value of being with these five women on my retreat. It is a new kind of relating I seek to find. Why did I cry when Stephanie offered to change bathrooms so I could have the one with a raised toilet seat? (Friend, come up higher?)



I quote Rowan Williams: “To find my own life is a task I cannot undertake without my neighbor.”

He identifies something more than (sentimental) “togetherness” — but “that willingness to ‘put on hold’ the perspective I want to own and cling to and possess,” so that something else may happen through my presence and my words, “connecting others with life-giving reality.” (the gospel).

I find a piece of writing that draws me irresistibly: *Making the Shift*. I look at my life with new eyes because of this writing by Sister Elaine Prevallet. She writes about “evolutionary consciousness” and the new sense of the universe, of aware of continual creation and change. These are things I’ve been sensing for months, and even years.

What quickly comes to mind as I contemplate today—with a whole new aura surrounding it now: How will I integrate this new perception of the meaning of the universe, of God the creator, and of my walk with God? I am in touch with those who hold a more constricted view. The integration of old and new is important, not to lose what is of eternal value and adopt and internalize only what God implants.



So I look for *language*—large and deep enough to contain and convey *truth*. Today’s psalm speaks of Love and Truth walking hand in hand. This stirs my desire to deal with others in a loving spirit that communicates a deeper truth, for deep truth always springs from and contains love.

I know now that my dream dress is not just for integration of my parents’ fundamental values, but also my integration into my Sisters Group through prayer for them. Prayer is what knits me to all of my “companions” —something I did not “know” before.

August 10

When I do not know answers to my questions, God always sends me a dream. I awoke with this:

I am conducting a session with Christy, a young woman who is capable of numinous experience with a childlike simplicity, that goes very deep. I say to her that there might be a way to give her childlike experience a frame of understanding, to ground it solidly. At the end of our time together we talk about “next steps”. I am careful not to undermine the sweetness of her experience, knowing that “becoming a child” is actually an advanced stage. But I ask her to tell her spiritual history from childhood on as a way to ground her capacity to experience these times of transcendence.

After recounting my dream to my spiritual director, she simply remarked quietly, “And you are the Christy child.”

“Oh!” I said. I was moved by that realization, wondering how I could have missed that symbolism. Who am I as a child? She suggested I pray with the dream, dialoguing with God about this childlike Christy.



So here I am this morning, wanting God’s direct care and attention, God’s reassurance and presence. I am beginning to unpack my childhood experiences and knit them into my current life. I feel the fullness of doing that—the richness of this long life I am privileged to live.

The work within me is very much in process. There is no dramatic denouement I can offer to tie my year together in one overwhelming realization that explains everything! Rather, I am content to take the place of the child, not only the child of my mother and father, but one born anew as a “Christy child.”