

Everything Lies Before Me

I was in Europe, leading a retreat in a lush vineyard on an Italian hillside. Each morning every man and woman attending the retreat gathered on the grass in a circle and spoke these simple words:

This is the day that lies before me.

These are the hours.

This is my life.

Sometimes now, when the day ahead of me is hectic, I walk outside my kitchen door or outside my hotel room and whisper the words again. They are a particularly meaningful prayer for Advent, when everything lies ahead.

Repeat them often, until you believe the deep truth they carry.

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The Road of My Life

I think about what it would take for me to deeply trust the road of my life.

I don't take a long view often enough. Along with everyone else, I can be so easily swept up in the traditions and events of the moment, all of which are heightened at this season leading up to Christmas. House lights are strung earlier each year, and on my own street seasonal displays fill many yards before Thanksgiving. Last year a professional lighting company left a flyer in my door handle offering their services to outline my dark roof. But our traditions, though beautiful, also have the power to distract us from reaching into the heart of the world. Bushmen storytellers speak of our great hunger for meaning. There is something so much greater than the decorations and gaily wrapped gifts, if I'll let myself know it.

The truth is you cannot stay the same, stay busy and overcommitted, and be walking toward that Bethlehem stable in a way that will change you. The manger makes a fierce demand: Will you allow something extraordinary to materialize in your life? Will you take full responsibility for your life? Will you look around you and reach into the world, willing to love more deeply?

I don't want my arms to be so full, my attention so distracted, that I cannot hear that fierce demand. In my better moments, I know the final work of every life is love. All we have is this moment. Right now. The journey to Bethlehem beckons.

For these days of Advent I will slow down, not speed up. I will take more care with people, not less. I will be aware of my own personhood. What am I creating with this life I've been given?

PAULA D'ARCY



Learning How to Wait

I sit alone on my deck watching the deer. It has taken nine months for them not to run away when I'm here. I turn the pages of my journal softly, straining not to make a sound. Still, they hear me. A head looks up, watches me, and then bends again to eat the corn I've scattered. We're learning to be together. They're teaching me how to wait. How to let things be.

I marvel at their beauty. The tender lines of their legs, the loud sound of their chewing. The heaving chestnut flanks. The wind gently rocks my wooden swing and I sway back and forth, trailing my foot across the deck boards. They are no longer frightened by the motion of the swing or the soft scrape of my slippers on the wood. I keep speaking to them from within. It's a conversation that goes on all day long.

Now the sun begins to set, and I watch the horizon surrender itself into lavender. I sit there until the lavender grows dim. Finally, the deer begin walking back to the nearby grove of cedar, finding the path their hooves have cut through the trees. As they disappear in a long line, I rest my head on the arm of the swing and let darkness be my cover.

I wonder if it *is* this way, or *could be* this way, when God and an individual soul approach one another, each of them moving just as tentatively, yet respectfully. Maybe they circle one another with no intention on the part of God to alter anything, only a will to bring something into being—to awaken the hidden core of life. And what might it be for the soul if she took the time to approach slowly, aware that this solitary approach was the very thing she came to do? What if the soul approached with no demands? No fists raised against unanswered prayer. No expectations. Just walking toward something with the intention of knowing it, abandoning herself to it, as well as she could.

I think it makes a difference. I think how you walk *toward* something determines what you're able to see. I consider these days of Advent to be days of impending birth. What if I made a resolve to approach them as carefully as I approach the deer, alert to their power to direct me?

**Days of Advent,
days of impending birth.**

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Taking Nothing for Granted



I wonder if any of those who lived in and near Jerusalem and Bethlehem at the time of the birth—ordinary persons like you and me—had a sense of anticipation. Did they feel the earth was about to bear a great light? Did anyone dream, ahead of time, the revolutionary words he would speak: “Come to me...and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). If so, I doubt they were able to put their sense of anticipation into words. But what hope must have accompanied that inner knowledge!

And then how did they prepare? How do you open up your life for the divine? How do you increase the likelihood that you will recognize a power that’s able to touch you—and change you? Do you make great effort? Exactly how do you honor the inner longing to recognize a totally different presence than the world esteems—and let your soul find rest there? How do you bridge the distance between longing for something and finding it? What takes us past our small successes and failures into a readiness to receive what’s trying to be born?

Maybe the magic is in our own will. And perhaps preparing for this birth can be accelerated by a simple gesture. What if we vowed that, during these weeks of Advent, we will try to take nothing for granted? This, I think, would help us wait and live differently. From the time you awaken, look upon everything as sheer *gift*.

*How do you bridge the distance between
longing for something and finding it?*



New Images for the Journey



All journeys cause us to leave something behind as we move toward something new. I experienced this with such power during the period of grief following the loss of my husband and child. To accept their absence and build a new future, I had to let go of the way I wanted my life to be. I also

let go of many illusions, like the illusion that life was really within my control. I let go of my belief that life had guarantees. I let go of the idea that without those two people I couldn't be happy. I faced the fact that clinging to such beliefs produced suffering.

But the most difficult letting go, by far, was letting go my former images of God—the kind of God I wanted God to be. I wanted a God who would stop the speeding car when the drunk driver hurtled toward us. I wanted a God who removed pain and created a world of fairness and justice. But grief forced me to grow up.

My black-and-white, right-and-wrong version of faith shattered into a million pieces. It was a narrow faith that wasn't leading me to fullness or joy. Once I gave up my old ways of looking at things, something began to shift. Being willing to experience God in a new way created an opening. I became no different from Mary, Joseph, or the shepherds. Nothing but an inner guidance would show me the way.

Are we willing to experience God in a new way?



Keeping the Heart Open



Pain is not our greatest difficulty. It's the way we relate to pain and the beliefs we defend that hurt us. "I'll never get over this." "This is simply my fate." Such deeply held convictions decide how we'll respond when we're disappointed or where we'll turn when our hearts break. But love says,

Keep your heart open. Keep your heart open until, through that tear in the heart, you see something new.

A man in Eastern Europe told me he found a stork at his front door early one morning. The stork was pecking at the glass with his bill. The man followed the bird into the yard and saw that the stork's nest had been toppled by high winds during the night. A baby stork had a broken wing, which he set.

Three weeks later the same stork again knocked on his door. This time the old man returned to the nest and carefully removed the splint from the baby's wing. Then the injured bird flapped his wings and slowly lifted into the air. Suddenly the sky was thick with dozens of storks who'd been waiting nearby. They'd delayed migration until the baby healed—only then did they take flight. Magnificent flight. It was the nature of the birds to wait. To wait expectantly, open to the old man's skills, intent on finding a way. How different that morning would have been if they'd concluded instead, this small bird cannot be saved.

Waiting...to find our way.





Advent is a time of waiting, longing, anticipating. With moving and stirring words, Paula D'Arcy's reflections for this holy season touch on these seasonal themes. But more important, they focus on the need to be open to the love that dwells deep in our hearts. We hear God say, "Give me half your heart, and I will show you half my power. Give me all your heart, and I will change your life." Take the risk.

Begin your day with a *Daybreaks* meditation. Find a quiet, peaceful place and allow the message to unfold. Each reflection will take only a few moments, but these ideas can help you shape your life, think about ways to change your attitudes and beliefs, and hear the words, "Come, follow me."

PAULA D'ARCY is an internationally known retreat leader and conference and seminar speaker. Her ministry grew out of tragedy when her husband and 21-month-old daughter were killed by a drunk driver in 1975. Paula survived the accident and gave birth to another daughter six months later.

Paula is the author of several books, including these titles published by Crossroad Publishing Company: *When People Grieve: Overcoming Pain Through Love*; *Gift of the Red Bird: The Story of a Divine Encounter*; *Seeking With all My Heart: Encountering God's Presence in Scripture and Literature*; and *Sacred Threshold: Crossing the Inner Barrier to a Deeper Love*. She is also the founder of the Red Bird Foundation, which ministers to people in prison, to the disadvantaged, and to those in need of healing.

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