

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
*Fierce with Age : Chasing God and Squirrels in Brooklyn*

# RIVER DIARY



MY SUMMER OF  
GRACE, SOLITUDE  
& 35 GEESE

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CAROL ORSBORN

*To be shaken out of the ruts of ordinary perception,  
to be shown for a few timeless hours the outer and inner worlds  
not as they appear to (one) obsessed with words and notions,  
but as they are apprehended directly and unconditionally by our souls.*

--Aldous Huxley

## June

Alexander the Great was leading his troops through India when he spotted a saint sitting serenely on the banks of the river.

*"I wish I could just be sitting there as you are, enjoying the sun,"* Alexander said.

*"Where are you going?"* the saint replied.

*"I'm going to fight one more battle and then I will return to sit beside you."*

The saint looked deeply into Alexander's eyes:

*"If what you really want in the end is to sit here with me enjoying the river, why don't you just do it now?"*

## 1 : Where Are You Going?

I first heard the parable about Alexander the Great's encounter on the riverbank when I was in my thirties. Even back then, while steeped in the heat of initiating my adult life, I wished to identify with the saint rather than the warrior. Little did I know that it would take thirty more years before I could make the pursuit of this deeply-held aspiration my priority.

Then not long ago, when I turned 65, my husband Dan and I had the opportunity to downsize into the house of our dreams with the promise of increased freedom to choose how I spend my days. Dan, our little dog Lucky and I moved from Los Angeles to live near our grand family in Nashville, Tennessee. We found a stone cottage on the banks of the Cumberland River and settled in.

It took a few seasons before I started this diary, shortly after my 21st book was published and Dan and I were just beginning to recover from the logistics of living in a new place and time in our lives. While I rose to the many occasions every day brought my way, it was becoming increasingly clear that there was a parallel life being lived beneath the surface of my busy days: a relentless drumbeat pushing me to grow spiritually.

While I had no right to complain about my life, I wanted something more. No—more than that. I wanted everything. I wanted no less than merger with the Divine. Audacious as this may sound, this aspiration is at the root of numerous religions and spiritual disciplines. As

author John C. Robinson notes, the Eastern Orthodox Church refers to this experience of transcendence “theosis”-- union with God. Buddhists describe the state of becoming a bodhisattva: “an enlightened being who remains in the world of problems in order to serve the spiritual growth of others...The Kabbalah, Hindu and Islamic poetry and sacred text find their own metaphors and language to describe the expanded consciousness of unity, love, freedom and transcendence.”

Why not me? This diary is the chronicle of the summer of my 65<sup>th</sup> year—the summer the story of the warrior and the saint ceased being an inspiration and became a calling. Should you choose to join me on the riverbank, it will be my pleasure to enjoy this spot of sun with you.

## 2 : My Vow

When we moved into the old stone house on a cold day in winter, I had pictured myself come spring sitting on the riverbank in a state of bliss. In reality, several seasons came and went before I actually took a seat by the river for anything other than entertaining friends with barbecue. And while it was always fun, beautiful or exciting to look at, the river had inspired nothing close to bliss. But as summer approached, by God's grace, the river stopped being mere entertainment and started demanding that I pay attention.

At last, there came a day when I instinctively understood what was being asked of me. I vowed to simply sit by the river day after day. I purchased a new diary and collected my pens. But I found myself facing one last hurdle. I didn't want to write about transcendence. Rather, I wanted to be a mystic. If I actually put pen to paper, I wanted to write as a mystic, not a diarist, academic or author. I realized that this was not something I could custom-order to happen to me spontaneously. I hoped it could be a case of "fake it until you make it," for if I at least acted as if I were a mystic at the beginning of the day, perhaps something of the merger with the Divine for which I yearned would eventually sink into my bones.

How to fake being a mystic? I would set aside an hour every day where I would clear my busy life out of my heart, soul and mind, and trust that by doing so, I would be doing what I could to remove as many of the self-imposed obstacles as possible that were separating me from God. In part, I would do so as Buddhist practice suggests: take the "one seat" and simply

sit in witness of whatever is happening in the world around me. But I would also draw upon my Jewish roots and Christian influences to pray for divine intervention. I knew from my reading that to see through the veil of the illusion of separation even for one minute over the course of the summer could be a life-changing event.

Before I made the commitment, the river was alternately flirting and scolding me as I rushed about the house, too preoccupied with the aftermath of the move, the dynamics of my suddenly extended family and the fate of my newly-launched book to simply stop and sit. But there came a day when I finally took my seat and began. I had my diary and pens at my side. If there were words in me, I would capture them. Otherwise, I would just have this experience for its own sake.

What follows is the record of what I heard, felt and saw as at last I learned how to simply sit on a riverbank.

It all began on a rainy day in June.

### 3 : Crash of Thunder

A crash of thunder startled me awake, and I lay in bed resisting the persistent urge to get up and sit by the river. I know, deep in my bones, that this is a summons to at last begin this long-mulled project. But I have had a series of anxious, remorseful dreams—and I don't want to use this time to feed regret. Sister Joan Chittister rightly refers to this deep ruminating I hope to leave behind as "a sand trap of the soul," self-indulgence dressed up like serious introspection. I don't want to throw away yet another diary in the end, wiping out evidence of my trail of stale complaints about my deceased mother, processing professional and personal disappointments and projections of my own issues on others. None of this should matter, not here, not now. This is not my hour to talk, but to listen. And this, my first morning, is what I hear the river saying to me.

"There's a lot going on with me today, more than usual. There's thunder hitting my surface like sonic booms; rain is alternately pelting me in sheets and bullets."

I fear getting drenched and so have taken refuge in my second floor meditation room overlooking the river. Before long, the thunder has moved on. I can still hear it in the distance, but from my vantage point, the river has taken on a blinding glow, like sun reflecting off of snow. Suddenly, I am realizing that this spiritual practice is not only about what I can "get" out of sitting with the river every day—the lesson or learning or whatever may prove to be a take-away holding value or benefit. Rather, it will be challenge enough to see, really see, the river,



itself. For in doing so, I will have to clear away all my thoughts and ideas about the river, and everything else in my mind cluttering the view separating me from the divine essence I sense all around me. As the old Irish saying puts it: "Heaven is always just 7 inches above your head." I am determined to do everything in my power to close the gap.

Minutes pass, a half-hour, an hour. The rain only comes harder and in my solitude, I resort to prayer. Not my own, for I am uncharacteristically out of words. Rather, I remember a prayer by John O'Donohue copied out by hand and stuck into the back pages of my diary for just such an occasion as this.

"May my mind come alive today to the invisible geography that invites me to new frontiers, to break the dead shell of yesterdays, to risk being disturbed and changed. May I have the courage today to live the life that I would love, to postpone my dream no longer. But do at last what I came here for and waste my heart on fear no more." Amen.

I look up from the page and through the raindrops on the window, a single beam of sun is suddenly illuminating the river bend. At last, the river reveals its deeper truth to me. In the distance, I see echoes of Buckingham Fountain and Cascade Falls, a castle made of light and a magical city glimmering through the rain that has nothing to do with anything I have done to deserve any of this. Nothing to do with good news or bad, no past nor future.

All I needed to do was wake up, sit and see.

This is day one.

## 4 : The Giant Thumbprint

This morning, when I went eagerly to my perch in the meditation room overlooking the river, the sun had lit a slender path in the wide ribbon of water, teasing me to come outside to sit. The water today swirls counter-clockwise, like the whorls of an ancient thumbprint.

I see now that the sun is playful, indeed. Teasing me to the edge of the cliff overlooking the Cumberland, the sun lights up the path just long enough to make itself known, then hides both self and path behind the clouds.

Just when the show appears to be over, the sun bursts out once again in an even more dazzling display. The thumbprint of the river is pulsating with effervescent sun but even before I capture the picture in words, it's gone, now back, now bigger than before: a host of fireflies sparkling on the uneven edges and so blinding in the center, I feel I must look away.

What am I afraid of? I do not really believe it possible to go blind from reflected light. But I have a bigger fear. A secret fear. I do not know if, despite my best efforts to disconnect from the tasks of my persistent midlife, I am still writing for my imagined audience. It is so deep in me, this performing for others that I do not even trust I can write a single word just for me. "Never mind," the river replies. "Whatever your fears, the impulse you have heeded first and foremost is to come to me. You have seen me at last. And now I am putting on a show for you. All you need now is to put down the pen and let me dazzle you, asking absolutely nothing in return."

## 5 : Last Chance

Yesterday, I awoke too late for my time with the river and so went straight into my day. I was met with a series of mildly distressing early morning phone calls. After that, I never did catch my breath.

I have this sad, scared feeling that this river is my last chance to learn to disengage from old, engrained patterns that I no longer want or need in my life. How can I even dream about reaching up to heaven while still so deeply-mired in mud?

I am reminded of the time, long ago, when I gave one of my first speeches before a large audience. I was proud of myself for having made it all the way through to the end, and felt waves of relief as the audience chose to applaud. But it was what one young man said to me when it was finally his turn at my book-signing table that I have not yet shaken after all these years. "You're a powerful woman, Carol. Let it out."

I found his comment provoking. Over the decades, I have been alternately angry at the memory, or defiant. Sometimes hopeful, sometimes helpless. But always, I have used his comment as a yardstick, asking myself "Am I powerful enough yet?"

The truth is the answer is "no." Too often, I give bits and pieces of my power away to the opinions of others, indulging in doubts and concerns.

Late in the day, still unable to make my way down to the river, I at least thought to do what was yet within my power. I could read. I picked up my copy of George and Sedena Cappannelli's *Do Not Go Quietly*, and opened randomly to this story.

One day Grandfather was walking along with his grandchildren when they saw a wolf standing on a rock cliff high above them. Pointing toward the wolf, he spoke to them about life.

*“A battle is raging inside me...it is a constant struggle between two wolves. One wolf represents ego with all of its fear, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, and superiority. The other stands for joy, peace, love, hope, sharing, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, friendship, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.”*

The old man looked at the children with a firm stare.

*“This same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other person, too.”*

They thought about this for a minute, and then one of the children asked his grandfather:

*“Which wolf will win?”*

*“The one you feed,”* said Grandfather.

## 6 : A Glimpse

More than a few wordless, unremarkable days have passed then yesterday, for no apparent reason, a beam of wholeness made its way through the thick clouds: a moment of detachment from external stimulus opening a crack of time and space for fleeting unity with the Divine. Then, as quickly as it descended, it was gone.

This glimpse, however brief, is a sweet reminder of my first encounter with the river on Day One, the rainy day of thunder. I had been granted more than a glimpse then. It was an immersion of what it would mean—no, what it is—to simply be giving and receiving love. Transcendent consciousness: no judgment, no fear, no regret, no ambition, no desire. Then, just as fast, the moment again descends and just as quickly lifts, as if none of this had ever occurred, leaving not enlightenment or bliss, but discomfort in its wake.

Picking up the Cappannelli's book again, I read: *Is it any wonder that our experience of the present moment is often uncomfortable?* "We fidget. We experience anxiety. We wonder what we are supposed to do because we have been taught that 'being' is not enough. That 'doing' and 'becoming' rather than 'surrendering and allowing' are the reasons for living. As a result, 'being' is unknown territory. And when faced with the suggestion that we just 'be', discomfort shows up."

Not being able to wish, drive or even find it in my heart to hope the discomfort away, I do only what I have promised myself to do: sit with it.

## 7 : Tikkun

A new day dawns and the river is out of sorts—an apt reflection of my inner self. This morning, the water is clearly going against its normal flow of left to right: the natural direction that to my senses feels like a cleansing and a moving on. Today it is flowing exactly opposite, pushing against its own nature. Right to left: it is as if the river is being forced back towards the outlived past it was meant to have left behind for good. The color is a flat army green: Alexander the Great marching foolishly into battle, all fake bravado on the surface but, in truth, listless and uninspired.

Of course, I take this as a sign, feeling sorry for myself and for the river. But something stirs. In the flat green water along the far bank: sudden movement. A flock of geese, 35 all in a row, one following the other this way and that. Effortlessly, they go about their business of healing creation, the Jewish notion of *Tikkun*, letting the wayward, recalcitrant water exercise its freedom with detached compassion. I take a deep breath—my first of the day—and upon the exhale, impossibly, magically, the birds gently float into a grand circle that fills the river before me, as if in loving salute. “See how easily this is done?”

I weep with joy, to have been sufficiently present—even in pain—to witness such a gift.

Perhaps the miracle of the 35 geese, the waterfalls in the mist, the dazzling light castles at the riverbend do not just come and go with my consciousness, but are there all the time. It’s only up to me to transcend my story and partake. Not out of effort or even worthiness. But simply by taking my seat and trusting.

I look down to write this, reluctantly taking my eyes off the majestic circle of geese even for the moment. By the time I look up again, all but one has disappeared. It is only catching a glimpse of the tail feathers of the last goose that tells me I have not imagined the whole thing. The brown, black and white fluffy feathers shake in a final sashay to the left and to the right up the far bank and vanish after the others into the foliage.

## 8 : Collision

Night is falling and I've been beaten up by the day. As poet May Sarton wrote in her *A Journal of a Solitude*, "Every meeting with another human being has been a collision."

And so it is that in the gathering darkness that I've just now found it in myself to make it to the riverbank. I'm here, not in an act of affirmation, but of desperation. My breathing is rapid. Sarton speaks for both of us when she writes: "I feel like an inadequate machine, a machine that breaks down at crucial moments, grinds to a dreadful halt, 'won't go,' or, even worse, explodes in some innocent person's face."

I will say only this much. I did something insensitive to another for which I've already made amends. I will not feed the sad story with any more words. What happened today happened. And yet, I have to believe that I am worthy of being loved, even if only for the pathos of my humanity. And so, to the evening river: willing myself to take my seat and put faith in the present moment.

Tonight, while it is far too generous for my present state of mind, the river is once again flowing as it was meant to do, left to right, brisk and cleansing. The moment I stop writing, I stop seeing. My mind starts re-running scenes.

I bring my attention back and the river whispers: "The past is over. There, then, I entered your frame of vision as a long thin ripple, but already I have bent in two and now as I depart, I am but a dimple of green, now already gone. Tonight, I have no profound lessons or gifts for you. Only the offer of relief that however you are feeling—hopeless, despairing,



angry—you are welcome to sit at my side. I see you, just as you are, as you see me, as I am.

Your pain is fresh. Mine is old. I will not judge you. I will only love you.”

## 9 : Same Old

Hoping for fresh miracles, I peek out between the slats on the bedroom blinds this morning to see what new message the river holds for me. It is the same river as last night and though ashamed to admit it, I am disappointed.

We're leaving for a long weekend, fulfilling the last obligation to my publisher: a talk at a bookstore I agreed to months ago. Given that I'm going to miss 3 days anyway, why not skip the river today and just go pack?

Indeed, that was the plan until I heard a whisper reaching my ears from today's "nothing special" river. It said: "Same old, same old."

It's been years since I heard that phrase, but I instantly place it. That is what my father used to say when I called cross country the many years we were on separate coasts. They were comforting words in that once spoken, I knew that both Mom and Dad were handled and that this time would be just for me. I didn't have to worry about them, get caught up in family drama, fix anything or put their needs or opinions above my own. I was free to engage in the heat of my life, raising kids, being the best possible wife, turning my skills into income and attempting to figure things out for myself. I realize now the graciousness with which Dad provided the time and space for me to grow wild and free with those simple words: "Same old same old."

To live in a place beyond expectations and judgment, to simply be the *same old, same old* river as last night and the next day and the day after that. I started this journal with magic tricks—crystal palaces made of mist, geese circling in soundless homage--messages and gifts, and I got hooked. But today, this river is telling me to run deep, and to run true.

There was time enough in the end when my father could no longer give his shorthand assurances. His needs became my own as his end of life narrative unfolded. There must have been a last time he could say “Same old same old” to me, and because I must have taken it for granted, I now weep doubly for the loss. Between the dramas that bridge the years between coming of age and end of life, I shall forgive the river, and myself, for the days of being “nothing special.” In fact, I will cherish them.

## 10 : Home Again

I am back to my beloved Cumberland from my book-signing, glad to be home.

Everything about this morning, this river, is gentle. The warm, pleasant moist air smells of summer camp: the freedom of leaving home for weeks at a time so many summers, so long ago. Every summer, I was able to reinvent myself in the company of new friends and only a few familiars who accepted that I could be one person at school in the suburbs and quite another in the woods of northern Michigan.

The talk at the bookstore went well. No, more than that. I gave the talk of my life. I was unbridled, on fire, joyful. There were seats for nearly everybody who showed up, which while a disappointment to my publisher was liberating for me. For the few hours that followed, and most of the way home, I entertained the notion of abandoning my project of merger with the Divine to go for just one more round of applause. But the moment I woke up this morning, in the transitional light of golden dawn, I heard a hungry wolf howl and returned to my senses.

The river is so still and calm this morning, one must really look to see that it is flowing at all. One discovers only a hint of movement in the reflection of the treetops, where deep olive green meets the light mint of the reflected sky in a ragged edge and dappled spots here and there. But one can see this only if one becomes still and gentle, as well.

This is a challenge for someone who has been trained from early childhood to lie in bed surveying the inner and external landscape with one question in mind. *What do I need to be anxious about today?* Every morning since, waking up has not been so much a summons to the

joy of the day as it is a call to arms. Of course, as each day unfolded, there have been unexpected pleasures, hard-won successes along with wounds and white flags. But still, in some hidden corner of my heart, I lie in bed with that old question still darting about: *What do I need to be anxious about today?*

The river this morning has an answer for me—a good one. “Nothing,” the river says. “Nothing today. Today, you can choose to be free. Tomorrow, too. This is my summons to you: Joy. Only joy.”

## July

*How can you follow the course of your life if you do not let it flow?*

--Lao Tzu

## 11 : The Open Window

Too wet for my taste to sit outside this morning. So much for the fantasy of aspiring to be like the rugged monk sleeping on a plank or the Zen master plunging into an icy waterfall. I am curled up in a wicker chair, snuggled in a fuzzy pink throw, reluctant to sacrifice comfort even for enlightenment. Through the fogged window in my meditation room, the river seems only to be a diffuse glimmer of white. The only thing big enough to show through is a large black log moving downstream at such a regal pace, I have to laugh.

Still, I want more—*Are there ripples in its wake; Is the flow going backwards or forwards?* I want more and the desire unsettles me. Should I stay put and accept just the sighting of one log? Should I push through my sloth and go out into the damp soupy air for a closer inspection? Or should I pack it all in today and just journal about my indecision?

Then, as suddenly as disappointment descends, I have a solution: open the window. I thrust it open and there is my beloved river, revealed, intimate, forgiving. I can see now that the surface is not just an undifferentiated glimmer of white with the occasional bold log, but rather a canvas of hundreds of thousands of tiny bright points, as if a rain cloud had burst overhead punctuating the surface with a legion of brilliant, discrete rain drops. But I put my arm out the window. There is no rain coming down. Today, the storm must be beneath the surface, the rain falling upwards.

## 12 : Back In

I am writing these words through a field of black spots, for I attacked the river with my eyes and was blinded on return. So eager for today's gifts, I ran to the rail and leaned over. My eyes were instantly met with the reflection of the sun on the smooth, stagnant surface, as bright as the sun itself. I didn't want to believe in its danger, and so stared too long, too intently, too demanding.

I fear the river may not settle me this morning: has my faithful servant turned on me?

Even as I write these words, I realize how in error I am. For neither the river, the sun, nor the universe, itself, is my servant. Neither is God. I've got it completely backwards. I have been given these weeks on the river as a gift from a Power greater than myself—and now—so soon—I am making demands.

I have backed off the rail and taken my seat by the riverbank, remembering my vow to do so dutifully regardless of how I feel about it. Even these few feet of distance provide an edge of safety. The sun's reflection is tucked away behind a fence post.

I understand now that my spiritual practice is not to run to the railing, demanding answers, joy or anything—but to do something so much harder: to just sit quietly, patiently in a state of wide open trust and acceptance. I am not here, at this riverbank, at this point of my life, to make anything happen: not even good things.

I am here to let. Today, when I allow and trust, I find myself sitting with sadness and irresolution. But the black dots have receded and the river, so stagnant and inhospitable just



moments ago, is suddenly undulating with unexpected intimacy. Sadness and all, I have been let back in.

## 13 : Loneliness

Today's river is shrouded in a light mist. All is still and I feel utterly alone. Until this morning, I had thought of solitude as a presence—not an absence. But in the mist, I find myself restless, wondering whether this attempt at a contemplative life represents some kind of failure. With the completion of my last obligation to my publisher, and sitting on the bank of the river rather than sending out emails to an endless network of reviewers, librarians and prospective readers, my book is an orphan, its destiny left to the goodwill of others.

My decision to release my book to the universe is a completion, but it's also a loss. This is something that will need to be mourned, not just today, or even one summer. I could be rejoicing in my unbridled speech and reinvest in the dream, but by God's grace, I am sitting here instead because I feel the need to protect the tender seeds of spirit that are sprouting despite the odds. If I'm not careful, I'll judge myself as having been rejected, forgetting that I am the one who chose to withdraw. Yet still, here I sit willingly, feeling more broken, less successful, more alone than I'd ever before believed for myself.

As priest and author Henri Nouwen writes, the spiritual life "does not take away our loneliness; it protects and cherishes it as a precious gift...Sometimes it seems as if we do everything possible to avoid the painful confrontation with our basic human loneliness, and allow ourselves to be trapped by false gods promising immediate satisfaction and quick relief. But perhaps the painful awareness of loneliness is an invitation to transcend our limitations and

look beyond the boundaries of our existence. The awareness of loneliness might be a gift we must protect and guard because our loneliness reveals to us an inner emptiness that can be destructive when misunderstood, but filled with promise for him who can tolerate its sweet pain.”

This pain, then: it is not a denial of God’s love. Rather, it is the meeting place where God’s presence and our wounded spirits intersect. It is a simple, bittersweet sadness that enlivens rather than disempowers. Here, in the void, a new understanding is secretly birthing: that there need be nothing here about “solving” the dissonant notes of my life. My spiritual path—my discipline—is to just come to the riverbank and sit.

## 14 : Divided

The river is divided in two this morning. The half that hugs the far shore mirrors the many shades of lush foliage hovering heavily over the bank. But the most distinctive quality is that this palette of green is flowing neither forwards nor backwards, but rather undulates gently towards the center of the river.

The half of the river nearer to me, on the other hand, is a choppy pale mint, flowing as it ought, downstream—as if normal describes anything close to this river’s truth today. For even as I hurry words on the page to capture the river’s split personality, the whole of it is suddenly roughed up and all rushing in a piece back towards source. But wait, now it’s split again, but the half closest to me is now the half that is smooth and undulating towards the center while the far half has turned choppy and pale.

I am exhausted trying to keep up—not just with the split river but with my own divided self. On one hand, I am committed to detaching from the concerns of my everyday life in order to unblock the clutter that separates me from the Divine. On the other, I still feel called to make a contribution, to bring word of my challenges and discoveries back to the world. If it were just that—answering God’s call to make a contribution—well and good. But I have the growing awareness that even certain of these things that I believe are mine to do are doing me violence. The urge to write even these words wells up in me as doubt. *Is writing truly my vocation—or an addiction?*

## 15 : The Easy Way

A new day, still divided. I have brought a book with me to the riverbank, hoping to find resonance. Sitting beside me now is Thomas Merton crying out to God from the opened page on my lap: "You have contradicted everything. You have left me in no-man's land. You have got me walking up and down all day under these trees, saying to me over and over again: 'Solitude, solitude.' ...You have got me kneeling behind that pillar with my mind making a noise like a bank. Is that contemplation?"

Like Merton, I want to be free of the tyranny of ambition, and yet, the writer in me persists in believing that the perceptions I am hurrying to capture have value for others. Which am I? Prophet or contemplative, or worse, as Merton at his darkest moments feared for himself, a "bourgeois" merchandiser of spirituality?

I'm tempted to put this diary down and throw my pen into the river. But my intuition tells me this is the easy way: the grand gesture which does not so much say "I'm free" as it stamps its foot at God like a petulant adolescent.

Confused and embarrassed, I return to Merton.

"There was this shadow, this double, this writer who had followed me into the cloister," he writes. "He is a business man. He is full of ideas. He breathes notions and new schemes. He generates books in the silence that ought to be sweet with the infinitely productive darkness of contemplation...Sometimes I am mortally afraid. There are days when there seems to be nothing left of my vocation—my contemplative vocation—but a few ashes."

I am not just reading Merton now, but copying out whole passages that speak to me. Here are Thomas Merton and his fellow monks—austere, in poverty, humble, silent. I know, I know. They are approaching oneness with God with a degree of self-sacrifice and withdrawal I can only admire from afar. But how, then, to explain that it is their words that resonate with me most deeply?

I understand that there is some degree of relief and possibly pride in identification with something that aspires so purely to the holy as a monk. But I cannot help but wonder—in fact I am now sure—that even the monk worries about the same things that are on my mind. *Am I doing this for God or for self-gratification? Is doubt an obstacle to be overcome or a summons to pause and reflect. If I am called to write, and find reason not to, isn't this disobedience, or worse, in and of itself, a kind of arrogance?"*

Sadness again.

At the very least, coming to the river every day is a container—a sanctuary where I can witness my divided soul. When I come to sit by the river, this sadness is not self-pity but humility. This has to be enough for today.

## 16 : The Lost Week

Despite my prayers, or perhaps because of them, the divided river is not done with me yet. I am back after a long week of furtive glances, abysmal sadness and flashes of anger. I could not shake the concern about whether I was truly called to this: not just the spiritual discipline of sitting, witnessing and writing, but pretty much the whole of my existence. I have wanted so much to be done with the drama of my life. Instead, I have found that I continue to bring much of this threadbare narrative to the river, itself. Perhaps it is this residue of shame that is sorely tempting me to derail this project, confessing that I am back on its banks only because I'm even more afraid that giving up this last commitment will bring me face to face with the limits of my faith.

It is ironic that I found the secret to real power at the exact moment I no longer believe the heady fruits are worth it. At the talk I gave a few weeks back, I finally had the answer to the challenge issued so long ago by the young man in my audience. "You're a powerful woman. Let it out." The secret to real power had always been simply not to care about others' opinions. That is freedom: to give voice to what is authentically one's own without worrying or even wondering about how it will be received. But just as I have been struggling to embrace the divinity of loneliness, I am increasingly aware that this degree of freedom comes with a steep price.

The challenge of heeding the urge to merge with the Divine is no less than the questioning of the frames of reference we have taken for granted all of our lives. We turn our

attention to other realities that shake the underpinnings of our investments, our addictions and even our passions, kicking and screaming as we go.

In his *Journey to Emptiness*, Robert Jingen Gunn describes it like this: “Our experience of emptiness and bliss take us to the exact edge of life and death...There, we are forced to make a choice about how to live: whether to follow vitality with its attendant risks, struggles and promise, or whether to succumb to the death within life of unconsciousness and refuse to receive and take responsibility for that particular form of life that has been given—revealed to us.”

We think we are going for bliss, but discover, instead, that the flipside of seeing behind the illusions is detachment; and the price of detachment is that one becomes, well, detached.



## 17 : On Becoming a Saint

Awakened to a new day and it is the most natural, obvious move in the world to take my seat by the river, as if last week's doubts had never happened.

Up earlier than usual this morning, just as the fog is lifting off the hidden river in wisps and pieces. I marvel at this transitional moment, apparitions rising to reveal the smooth river surface and then vanishing into thin air.

Something has, indeed, shifted overnight—a division healed in both the river and in me. What changed? Simply this. Unable to sleep in the middle of the night, I grabbed my diary, re-read everything straight through for the first time, and saw value.

This is why I write. May Sarton, citing Robert Cole, advises that not everyone can or will “give his specific fears and desires a chance to be of universal significance...To do this takes a curious combination of humility, excruciating honesty and (there's the rub) a sense of destiny or of identity. One must believe that private dilemmas are, if deeply examined, universal, and so, if expressed, have a human value beyond the private and one must also believe in the vehicle for expressing them, in the talent.”

For whatever reason, there are those amongst us who have the audacity to believe that what we write could possibly be of universal significance. But Cole and Sarton lack the ambivalence that often accompanies my own sense of a calling. I am less the enthusiast than I am the reluctant prophet who stutters on the mountaintop, begging God to pick someone else.

“Self-importance is exhausting” writes author Wendy Lustbader, as I suddenly realize how much simpler it is to surrender to one’s calling than to rail against that to which one is inexorably drawn.

Providing guidance, once again, is Thomas Merton.

Merton, when asked early in his spiritual career about his aspirations, answered:

*“I guess what I want is to be a good Catholic.”*

His mentor did not accept it.

*“What you should say is that you want to be a saint.”*

*“I can’t be a saint,”* Merton replied.

But his mentor answered back:

*“No. All that is necessary to be a saint is to want to be one. Don’t you believe that God will make you what He created you to be, if you will consent to let Him do it? All you have to do is desire it.”*

So here I sit, feeling at once audacious, called and insignificant, grateful that I need only want to be a mystic who writes, free to leave sainthood to others.

## 18 : The Joke

This morning, I am writing too fast, just trying to keep up. The river, it seems, is once again playing games with me, and all I can say is that if I had any expectations that sitting on the bank, simply describing what I'm seeing, would be a spiritual exercise leading to serenity, the joke's on me. Of course, this is making me laugh, so perhaps it is spiritual experience enough to give up any pretense of even the possibility of attainment by simply sitting and writing down what I'm seeing.

Instead, I'm ready to put the pen down and at least for the day give up trying to capture anything—no matter how noble the intention—and simply enjoy the magnificence of, well, whatever.

## 19 : The Prow

Still again. Then, silent as a breath, the water begins to stir and the prow of a barge comes into view, pushing the water aside as it plows through. The river, as surprised as I, holds onto its smooth rolling sheets of water as long as possible as, count them, six box-car-sized containers slide past my line of sight. Each is laden with hills of shiny black minerals. The roaring of the motor reaches my ears, the captain and crew invisible behind the equally shiny and dark windows of an elevated cabin that claims utter authority over its domain. The water can no longer hold its surface and has broken apart into roiling tails of white capped surf. Long after the barge is out of sight, the river continues to churn like a storm at sea, choppy bits and pieces of muddy froth running hither and thither in all directions.

Can I find it in me to say “How nice” now? I am tempted to skip writing about this. After all, I came here to the riverbank in good faith, open to the beauty, feeling God’s presence even as I took my seat—and now, this rude interruption! I put down my pen, planning to read Nouwen until the river settles back down again and I can return to the prayer I intended. And Nouwen, once again, instructs me:

“Often you will catch yourself wanting to receive your loving God by putting on a semblance of beauty, by holding back everything dirty and spoiled, by clearing just a little path that looks proper. But that is a fearful response—forced and artificial. Such a response exhausts you and turns your prayer to torment.”

Nouwen advises us, rather, to dare to let it go and offer up everything to God, including our fears and expectations. “You must be patient, of course, very patient until your hands are completely open.”

Perhaps, today, I am asked to trust that even this roiling is *same old*, too.

## 20 : Churn

The same choppy churn that disturbed the peace yesterday has lasted the long, dark night. But this morning, in the light of a fresh sun, each broken bit appears to be topped by a cut diamond. The whole expanse is glittering in a gaudy display of sheer joy.

Unlike the river, I, however, am not feeling joyful. In fact, I feel unwell.

If I had journaled last night instead of this morning, I would have captured a moment of peace. Deep, heartfelt communication with each of my adult children showing me the depth of our love and connection and the sprouts of the future that have taken root in the challenge to live their dreams. One was long-distance, all the way to London, and so there is a touch of the bittersweet, as well. Clearly, I wish I could be closer to all my offspring; I wish I could make life easier for them. When I catch myself daydreaming, I'm often longing for when I had the illusion that I could protect them from pain. Sometimes, the fantasy takes them all the way back into my womb where I try hard to remember the first time I truly tasted immortality, with their little arms and feet tumbling against my belly from the inside.

They were birthed in the nuclear age, one of the first of a generation to be born knowing, as Nouwen puts it: "The future is an option." Perhaps it is this sense of existential opportunism that has spawned the greed of bankers, the duplicity of politicians, the callousness of corporations, global warming and environmental melt-down. Why live for the future—build and sacrifice—if there may literally be no tomorrow? I read in the newspaper that the fall television series features an endless stream of mini-series all devoted to the end of the world.

And then, there's the kids, who are struggling to find meaning, regardless. Are they, as a new generation's flag bearers of humanity, Nouwen's "Pioneers working for a new future...Exhilarating experiments of living by which they try to free themselves of the chains of their own predicaments, transcend their mortal condition, reach beyond themselves, and experience the source of a new creativity?"

Or is it too late and humanity already nothing more than "a failed experiment?" It takes a leap of faith to pay heed to one's aspirations embodied in children and grandchildren, rather than to simply rattle one's own rusted chains.

## 21 : The Mountain

Some days I do better than others. I go about my life as best I can day by day. I make decisions. I only want to do good for myself and others. I sit. But still, things happen that I cannot fix. Where do I turn for solace? I recall a story I once heard former Trappist monk Jim Finley tell.

Imagine that you live in a village and all your life you aspire to get to the top of the neighboring mountain, where you have been assured that you will find the loving presence of God.

For years, you struggle up the mountain towards your destination and at long last, you are just yards away. Then, uninvited, you hear a cry coming from the valley below. Somebody is sobbing.

What should you do? You are but inches away from unity with the Divine. But you cannot deny the immediacy of the sorrow: you are being called. Reluctantly, but with conviction, you turn around and go back down the mountain to answer the cry.

You walk through the village, following the sobs, and are astonished to discover that you have been led to the front door of your very own house. You open the door and see that there, huddled in the shadows, is a young child. You look more closely: it is not just any child. It is you. You go to provide comfort, your heart bursting with compassion as the young child gratefully lays her head upon your shoulder. Suddenly transported, you look up, and to your astonishment, find that you are at the top of the mountain.



Today, I am called to follow the cries, come down off the mountain to put my arms around myself to provide comfort. And even though they don't need it today, because today they are pioneers working for a new future, I can embrace my children and all those whose turn it is to believe in the possibility of a better world.

"I can't protect you," I say to each one. "But I can love you."

## August

*Where is your self found? Always in the deepest enchantment you experience.*

--Hugo von Hufmannsthal

## 22 : Flow

Thinking about the river and its days of churn, I recognize some small degree of spiritual progress. For weeks now, when the river was peaceful, so was I. When the river was disturbed, I struggled to redeem the disturbance for both of us. But what is the difference, really, between allowing the river to determine my moods versus allowing a publisher, some guy in an audience, a friend's mood to take me up or down? But this week is different. While I wish the river would perform its magic and lift me up, I do not force it. No begging, searching, hunting, trying, imposing, wishing—any effort at all. Instead, I just sit.

Today, the churn is finally calmed and in its place is a shimmering expanse of pure joy.

I realize now that I have been mistaken about the river, projecting my moods on it. Until this week, I assumed that the river prefers serenity over roiling: a smooth surface to choppy bits. But, in truth, what the river does so well is accommodate. It accommodates the gentle breeze and the cutting prow of the barge equally. It does not judge. It lets. And so, today, I release my beloved river—and my life—from my grip. Today, the river is joyful. I, however, I am sad. And this, for whatever reason, seems less an observation than a prayer.

## 23 : The Simple Truth

The river this morning. The surface: smooth and dappled like a fine old tin cup gently dented by generations of use. When suddenly, a dozen wild ducks descend from the sky and land in formation, each bird trailing a “V” in the water. The birds appear to be floating downstream against the upstream current. But the flock’s apparent defiance of nature serves only to reveal a deeper truth. The ducks, plump with summer’s largesse, have sunk just deep enough for their tweedy bodies and wide webbed feet to encounter the true trajectory of the river.

Beneath the dappled surface: secret depths and paddling legs.

## 24 : Bottles and Twigs

The river is full of purpose this morning after several big days of rain. Yesterday, Dan and I saw a tree trunk with bare broken branches rush past in the tumescent flow. Today, the river is down to twigs, a brown bottle and a sprinkling of foam. Only I sit absolutely still, not even able to put pen to paper as the rain immediately runs the words into inky black rivers down the page. Surrendering, I put the diary down, sitting not with purpose, but with relief.

After months struggling to make peace between my vocation as a writer and my aspirations to be a contemplative, I am reconciled. Each discarded bottle, twig and smear is taking something of me with it: the urge to save those for whom I care, the compulsion to be loved and adored. None of it matters.

Writes Thomas Merton: "If You allow people to praise me, I shall not worry. If You let them blame me, I shall worry even less, but be glad. If You send me work I shall embrace it with joy and it will be rest to me because it is Your will. And if You send me rest, I will rest in You.

Only save me from myself. Save me from my own, private poisonous urge to change everything, to act without reason, to move for movement's sake, to unsettle everything You have ordained. Let me rest in Your will and be silent. Then the light of Your joy will warm my life. Its fire will burn in my heart and shine in Your glory. This is what I live for. Amen, Amen."

I am beginning to understand that there really is nothing to fear, for when all is stripped away, what remains is God.

## 25 : Ahhhhhh

Just like that, I, too, am releasing a whole flotilla of wounds, outdated emotional habits, behaviors and regrets I no longer want or need in my life. Of course, this means that at least for today, I can no longer take comfort in such familiar havens as jealousy, compulsive wishing, righteous indignation, or neediness. How much time have I wasted justifying my bad behavior to myself? I am judge, jury, witness and often, as well, the accused.

But today, even before I open my eyes, I stop myself and remember to pray. I pray to God to help me complete the unfinished work of my earlier life stages—neither walking in lock step with childlike obedience to past limitations, nor rebelling in knee-jerk reaction against them. Instead, I pray to God, to free me from that which is passing away and show me the way to engage with life in a way worthy of me. Must my judgmental mother long passed away; the deficits of love, foolish choices made long ago stay with me forever? Every moment of life is precious. Facing limited horizons, there is no more wasting time in emotional self-indulgence masquerading as personal growth. And there you have it. A heartfelt prayer, answered as purposefully as a dead tree dislodged from its brittle roots and carried briskly away.

This morning, in place of waking to an onrush of anxiety, I floated awake in wonder. Nothing grand, just lying in bed wondering how the river might look this morning. Still in my nightgown, I can't wait to get outside.

It's drizzling today, a fine mist cooling my cheeks and forehead. As I stand in rapt attention, an emotional fog lifts and in its place a clarity so mundane, quiet, serene, I barely

notice that something momentous has occurred. Wonder, tender and fresh, has been freed to admire two majestic cranes and a bit of foam.

Wonder is still with me as I move indoors to my protected perch in order to capture my thoughts without running the ink.

Now dry, I am wrapped in a colorful afghan crocheted by the same mother who no longer stands accused. Lucky curls up in the comfort of my cozy lap.

## 26 : Pudding

The hot afternoon river is a whole other affair, with a consistency somewhere between soup and pudding, thickened by the sultry late day sun. What more can I say? At least for today, I've replaced worrying and grappling to make sense of things with the renewed desire to experience awe and wonder. Why not? Why not aspire to be an ecstatic, so on fire with love that I'm in danger of burning up?

I am taken completely by surprise by what is so obvious. I cannot simply sit here for twenty, thirty or more years grappling just with the shadow. What about appreciating the stars and planets? The birth of a child? The loving gaze of a dog?

This is a big turn all the way through the shadow and back into the heat of life. An arrival back to the place I started, as a young child who kept her belief in bliss alive despite being born into a difficult family. I want to reclaim my birthright: my name in Hebrew, which means joy, life and light.



## 27 : Why I Write

Is this too good to be true? To sit by the river feeling myself to be part of Divine order. It is like a wisp, faint, but strong: a spider's web that looks like smoke but could lift a mountain. I sense the filaments entwining my heart and I begin to weep. I have risen to the occasion, as moving a thousand miles has called forth from me. Not only the move, but life, itself. What if fulfilling the human potential has always been not a going forward, but a stripping away? Tears flow, as if a huge burden has been lifted—perhaps by the filaments of simplicity I'd sensed in this moment of river, web and sunlight: a wholeness not dependent on making things happen or anything even remotely related to ambition.

This is an irony, of course, as over the course of this summer, I have not only struggled to make peace with my ambition, but with my calling to write.

At last, the two are no longer linked, as I have begun to write as I breathe—no ulterior motives, no push or drive. In ambition's place is love—love of God and acceptance of my gift to capture the whole of it in my diary. Thomas Merton teaches that the source of this freedom is God, and the means to expression the embrace of contemplation. Imperfect as he is, Merton comes to realize: "Writing is one thing that gives me access to some real silence and solitude...God shines there and is immediately found, without hunting, as if He had come close to me while I was writing and I had not observed His coming."

The fact is that I, too, am who I am—flaws and all—and yet, I have been given a gift: the urge to capture the truth of my life, as best as I can, in words. It is in the commitment to sit,

witness and write where God welcomes me home. Writes Merton: "The strong soul, arrived at last to true contemplation...overflows with a love that must communicate what it knows of God to other men."

And so I am grateful to simply sit by the river again, pen in hand, not so much sharing just the right words as I am overflowing onto the paper from the fullness of my heart.

## 28 : Way Station

There have been days during these months of summer when I did not come out to sit at all, despite my commitment and best intentions. But today, was the first time I came out to sit and forgot to bring my diary and pen with me.

Over these past few months, I have relied on words to help me really see the river. But this morning, I do not need words. I see the river. I feel the warm breeze. I hear the crickets, frogs and a dog barking across the far bank. I smell hints of redolent vanilla hidden in the midst of the moist tropical air.

Today, I do not need to write about whether the river is out of sorts (it's not) or whether the river is my friend (it is) and so, the last bit of narrative that propels my forgotten pen forward is this: *If I haven't yet arrived at my final destination, am I, at least, at a way station?*

## 29 : The Last Inch

I am sitting by the bank of the river. Not because I am fulfilling any obligation, practicing a discipline, or even doing something good. *The I Ching* has words of guidance for me: "Time to use my strength in the service of others without making much of it."

Am I really, finally finished? Not as in "I'm over. I'm through." But as in "I've done all I've been asked to do. I can at last live simply, owing nothing, pushing nowhere. *A gaggle of 35 geese. A riverbank. Enjoying my spot of sun.* Can I really trust that this is enough?"

Once again, Merton talking about his fellow monks has a message for me:

"The best of them were the simplest, the most unassuming, the ones who fell in with the common norm without fuss and without any special display. They attracted no attention to themselves, they just did what they were told. But they were always the happiest ones, the most at peace."

## 30 : Summer's End

When I started this project, I thought that setting the goal of achieving unity with the Divine would be something big—a rising up to spiritual heights. But here I sit, instead, small and insignificant. A sinking into instead of a growing larger.

I still do not know if I have it in me to trust that I can do so little, and yet have value for the world. But today, the same old river tells me that no matter how many days I come out to sit, pen in hand or not, and even on those days when I won't or can't come any more, the answer will always be the same. *Joy. Only Joy.*

## Postscript: A Thousand Thousand Fold

A couple of seasons before starting this diary, I read these words by Evelyn Underhill in

*The Mystic Way:*

“The wistful eyes of life are set towards a vision that is also a Home—a Home from which news can reach us now and again...It is a Becoming, yet a Being, a Growth yet a Consummation: the very substance of Eternity supporting and making actual the process of Time.”

When I first read these words, I determined that I deserved no less for myself—to engage with the living presence of an “eternal and spiritual Energy”—a merger with the Divine. It took me until early summer before I could finally take my place on the riverbank, and longer than that until I could simply sit. Nevertheless, I was determined to do everything within my power to free myself from what I recognized to be the outgrown storyline of my everyday life. In its place, I hoped to transform myself into a mystic.

The Cappannellis put it like this.

“The universe is constantly giving us opportunities to learn and grow in countless ways and sometimes the smallest expansion of focus between head and heart, between the object you are focused on and the magic that is happening between, around and within can be of inestimable value.

It follows then that if you want to have a fuller, more remarkable and rewarding life, you may want to expand your focus beyond your thoughts. You may want to pay attention to all

that is occurring simultaneously in each instant with and around you. In this way you can deepen your experience of life by a hundredfold, by a thousandfold, perhaps by a thousand thousand fold.”

*Did I succeed? And more to the point: Did it extract a bigger price than I had anticipated having to pay?*

Thomas Merton, one of the many teachers whose writing accompanied me on my summer’s journey, has the answer for me.

“If a man’s vocation is to be really fruitful it must cost him something and must be a real sacrifice...He can peacefully accept that when his false ideas of himself are gone he has practically nothing else left. But then he is ready for the encounters with reality: the Truth and the Holiness of God, which he must learn to confront in the depths of his own nothingness...This is the only liberation. The only way to true solitude.”

Over the course of the summer, by simply sitting by the river day after day, I learned that the experience for which I yearned would not come out of the quest for mastery or displays of strength, neither in the material nor spiritual realm. Rather, it would come out of the gift of discernment: a deep and unshakeable commitment to telling the truth about who I am at this moment of my life.

It is ironic that the losses that come about with advancing age—that which so many of us dread—turn out to be the very means of deliverance. As John C. Robinson writes in *The Three Secrets of Aging: Seeking Enlightenment in the New Aging*: “As we move into old age, our familiar identity loses its importance. It is fading or long gone. We also begin to lose interest in thought, itself—our thoughts no longer seem so important and seem to disappear more

quickly, along with all the underlying ideas that structure our conventional understanding of identity, time, reality, and story.

As these contents of consciousness empty, we can become aware of consciousness itself, pure and omnipresent. Exploring this experience, we discover, as the mystics before us, that consciousness is not 'mine' but rather part of the vast and all-inclusive consciousness we call Divinity pervading the cosmos. When we experience consciousness directly, free of thought, we are literally experiencing Divinity, and a door to eternity opens in the human psyche."

This is a profound gift, but one that exacts a steep price. It turns out, happily, to be a price I am more than willing to pay.



## Three Spiritual Exercises

The following 3 exercises are adapted from my book *Nothing Left Unsaid: Words to Help You and Your Loved Ones Through the Hardest Times* (Conari)

### **1: Let, Wait, See**

This is perhaps the simplest practice, but sometimes the most difficult to do. Find a pleasant, comfortable place where you can sit for as long as you'd like undisturbed.

Perhaps you can't make it to a riverbank today. Ram Dass has a version of this spiritual practice based simply on watching clouds. Wherever you are, simply sit with an open heart. Keep your eyes open and breathe slowly and deeply. If concerns, fears or negative emotions enter your mind, simply note and release.

Do this long enough, and you will eventually be freed from the projections of your own busy mind to become a candidate for merger with the Divine.

### **2. Comfort Your Pain**

Imagine any emotional, spiritual or physical pain you are feeling to be a small child who is crying to you for help. Now take the child in your arms and comfort your pain. If you'd like, rock gently back and forth, or sing the child a soothing song.

### **3. Take Spiritual Inventory**

If you are asking questions of meaning, greet each thought by taking spiritual inventory. Here's how.

- Each time you think of something pleasant, say a prayer of gratitude to God.
- Each time you think of something in need of healing or forgiveness, ask God to show you the way to rectify the situation.
- If there is nothing now to be done, let it go.
- If there is something you can do, do it now.

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## About the Author

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Dr. Orsborn received her Masters of Theological Studies and Doctorate in History and Critical Theory of Religion from Vanderbilt University with post-graduate work in Spiritual Counseling at the New Seminary in Manhattan, Stillpoint and the Spirituality Center at Mount St. Mary's College. A former top marketer helping brands like Ford, Humana and Prudential build relationships with the Boomer generation, she is now committed to both living and expanding awareness of aging as a spiritual path.

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For Carol Orsborn's personal blog, and for on-going conversation on the topic of spirituality and aging, visit [www.CarolOrsborn.com](http://www.CarolOrsborn.com). You are invited to visit the home page for video of the Cumberland River, the river behind Carol's house that inspired this diary.

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