THRESHOLD OF DISCOVERY

A FIELD GUIDE TO SPIRITUALITY IN MIDLIFE

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For
Simeon, Silas, and Mary Clare

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— TRAIL ONE —

Facing Death and Change

I rebel against death, yet I know that
it is how I face death's inevitability
that is going to make me less or more fully alive.

–Madeleine L'Engle

Suppose we speak of the death of a cloud.
You look up in the sky and don't see
your beloved cloud anymore, and you cry,
"O my beloved cloud, you are no longer there.
How can I survive without you?" And you weep.

–Thich Nhat Hanh

WALK 1

I Tell You a Great Mystery

This gift-giving opened palm of a place, it didn't ask me what I wanted to receive on my first walk, what gift besides maids-a-milking I wished for on this Eighth Day of Christmas. If it had, I might have chosen a different image to notice, an alternate koan to contemplate, to circle in my mind as my feet stumble along this still unfamiliar terrain. Maybe I should have started in May, when nature's hands would have held out to me rainbows, bluebirds, butterflies, and other assorted wonders of spring.

But not on this day. Today it asks me to begin with the end in mind. It gives me a gift it will take some time to fully unwrap. On the other hand: Why not? Why not step into the threshold with this difficult mystery in mind?

As I park, I see two perky couples are getting out of an SUV. A double-date aura hangs about them, a flirtatious manner as they skip to the playground, radiating youthful energy. *No, they are not turning forty*, I think. *They are half my age.*

I consult my map and start along the same route my family took when we were here after Thanksgiving: past the shop and the education center on the left, to the entrance of the Upper Fields trail, which will lead me to the Spring Hollow trail. I notice the brown brush ranged along the path. Since there is no snow, I can see how leaves still cover the ground. The green grass on Upper Fields transitions to gravelly dirt as the trail inclines. A few red honeysuckle berries hang on an otherwise bare bush.

As the path turns upward, a mystery: at shoulder height to my right, a red length of yarn, a few inches long, dangles from a branch. Another one hangs fifteen yards ahead, and another after that. These did not grow here; someone tied them on purpose, and I can't imagine why.

Near the top of the first short incline, I pass beneath a dead tree that has snapped six feet from the ground and fallen above the path, lodging itself in the forked trunk of a tree on the other side, just high enough for me to walk under without ducking. The splinters, rough and sharp at the break, rise like stalagmites from the trunk where the gray-brown bark has fallen off, exposing the pale wood.

As I inspect the tree my field of vision widens, and I see what I have not registered

until now—signs of death all around me: dozens more like this toppled tree, fallen this way and that like the dead on a battlefield; barren ground beneath my feet; brown leaves, cloaking the frozen earth like a pall; denuded trees, vulnerable, exposed; the deep silence of winter. All of it contrasts sharply with the *joie de vivre* of the couples I saw when I arrived, as if to say, *It all comes to an end. It doesn't last, not the energy of youth, not life itself*. The varied and vivid shades of life fade into the mundane tones of death. It can come with a sudden, brittle break, as with the tree, or with the slow loss of chlorophyll in the leaves. And what part of creation is immune to this process?

"The heavens tell the glory of God and the earth declares God's handiwork," says Psalm 8. But today creation seems to be declaring something else, what another psalm affirms: "As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower in the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more."

As I continue, I can't shake the image of the tree or the lesson of the psalm. I wonder if I am uncovering the gift I am to receive on my first walk. Is the beginning of midlife too soon to ponder these things—death and decay in general, and also the inevitability of my own?

"Thanks," I mutter under my breath, not sure if I mean it. Maybe those maids-a-milking would have been better. But I realize I am primed to see these things, more ready than I might have expected.

A few days ago Ginger and I lingered at the dinner table while the kids played in the family room. Usually we all leave the table at the same time, the kids to take their plates to the kitchen, Ginger to put away leftovers, and I to my dishwashing post. But not that night.

"I can't believe she's dead," Ginger said, almost inaudibly. "And I can't imagine what Susan's going through."

Ginger grew up with Susan. They went to high school together, served on youth mission trips together, sang in the same choirs. Ginger had just learned that Susan's twelve-year-old daughter had died of leukemia.

Ginger said she couldn't imagine, but, of course, we could imagine: the clothes in the laundry basket that would never be worn again; the laundry basket that would sit there for months until a gentle friend or relative convinced her it was time; the unmade bed; the way the grocery bill would be a little less each month, and there would be no need to remember to buy Captain Crunch, a favorite cereal; the way she would avoid the cereal aisle altogether. We *could* imagine, and that's what broke our hearts. We sat silently, listening to the giggles of our children and aching for a mother who would hear giggles now only in her memory.

Yes, I have been prepared to notice these things.

For the past couple of months two students have been coming to my office every other week for their independent study. We have been studying the themes of grief and lament in Christian memoir. Along with books that have become classics, like *A Grief Observed* by C.S. Lewis and *Lament for a Son* by Nicholas Wolterstorff, we read Madeleine L'Engle's memoir, *Two-Part Invention*, that weaves the story of her meeting her husband, Hugh, with the last months of his life as he succumbed to cancer. I also required the students to read novelist Ann Hood's memoir *Comfort*, the account of her and her family's grief after her five-year-old daughter died suddenly from a virulent form of strep.

"If this book does not make you weep," I warned my students, "I'll wonder if you're human."

Hood's is not a Christian memoir, but I wanted my students, who are preparing to be pastors, to see how she describes her and her husband's visits with pastors and rabbis as they sought comfort in their grief. "Foolishly, I believed that clergypeople might hold the answers I screamed to God for every night. . . . But I saw how their eyes drifted toward the clocks on their walls, and when an hour had passed, they assured us time would heal and sent us on our miserable way." I wanted my students to hear her words, to feel her indictment of our work.

And to appreciate her discovery. Three years after her daughter's death, she writes, "Our loss still filled our home, every corner of it. It still filled us. Time doesn't heal, I had learned, it just keeps moving. And it takes us with it."

And now, I wonder, is she alluding to that hymn, the one I know we'll sing on the first Sunday of the New Year, the truth of which even a middle-aged doubter can't question, however much he might want to avoid it?

> *Time, like an ever rolling stream, bears all who breathe away;*
> *They fly forgotten, as a dream, dies at the opening day.*

The prayer request in worship the Sunday before Christmas also made me think of this hymn. "Pray for the family of Frank Thompson," Laura said, and I saw a few nods of recognition as she filled in the details. Frank was coaching his daughter's basketball practice when he collapsed on the court and died instantly of a heart attack, with his daughter watching; Frank was forty-two.

Time doesn't heal. It just keeps moving. And it takes us with it.

The invitation to consider the inevitable is all around us, but we have so much else to think about that we push these thoughts away, repress them as thoroughly as we can.

Until a walk in the woods opens your eyes to what you've been hiding from, been defended against for decades. Until a snapped-off tree invites you to face the fact of mortality.

Upper Fields meets Spring Hollow a hundred yards beyond the fallen tree. Spring Hollow slopes into a valley after it passes between two stately chestnut oaks a yard apart, sentries guarding the entrance to the valley below. A rapid descent with three switchback curves, and I'm in the valley heading back in the direction of the parking lot.

Eventually I arrive at Harts Run. This still-trickling stream testifies to the above-average temperatures of this winter. I hear the water sluicing beneath the footbridge, rolling under me and down into the valley toward the road that takes its name from this trickle: Harts Run Road.

Living water—that's what some streams of Christianity would call this, those that insist baptisms be performed in flowing water. No dunk tank or swimming pool or still-as-ice lake, but rippling, living water. There's not enough water here to submerge a new convert, though plenty for a Methodist, Presbyterian, or Episcopal sprinkling. Watching it, I recall that Jesus told a woman at a well that living water would spring forth from her soul. Here is a source of life for birds, squirrels, chipmunks—who knows what else. For the deer that pant for flowing streams just like this one.

My prayer book has the minister say at some point in a funeral, "In the midst of life, we are in death," as if those gathered need the reminder. And that seems to be the lesson being impressed on me as I stand here above the stream: in the midst of life, indeed, we are in death, *so stop avoiding it*. After all, I have just walked through a valley of death—the fallen trees, like a community of dead comrades; the not-yet-decomposed leaves; the gray winter sky blanketing me like a shroud. But when the clouds break briefly and I see the flashing of daylight in the stream's mini-waves, it occurs to me the opposite is true as well: in the midst of death, we are in life.

Spring Hollow leads me out of the valley. A few sharp turns, some panting as I climb, and I'm back on level ground. The path widens and straightens, and at the end, though I can't see it yet, is the play area to which the perky couples bounded, flaunting their youthfulness.

As I walk in that direction, behold!, a snippet of red yarn tied to a twig. But not yarn alone this time; from the yarn dangles a pine cone. *Of course—mystery solved.* In my mind I can see a kindergarten class here on a field trip, twenty bundles of energy huddled around tables in the activity room, gluing bits of yarn onto pine

cones, then messily dabbing peanut butter onto each scale, and pressing birdseed into the peanut butter: kid-made birdfeeders.

"You are helping the birds survive the winter," I imagine the activity director saying, "because it's hard for them to find food when it's snowy." These kids are agents of life, kids for whom it's too soon to contemplate the braided mystery:

> *In the midst of life, we are in death.*
> *In the midst of death, we are in life.*

But at forty, it's not too soon for me.

Some mysteries are easier to solve than others. And some mysteries are not meant to be solved but inhabited. "Behold, I tell you a great mystery," the apostle Paul wrote as he tried to make sense of the sting of death and the power of resurrection. I wonder, as I walk past the pavilion by the pond, now able to see the playground and the parking lot just past it, if the simple Christian narrative many of us have adopted—life, death, heaven, with its confident assurance of the immortality of the soul—shields us from what seems to be the necessary task of exploring this mystery: death in life, life in death, woven inseparably together, the two, part of God's story, part of the story of this place, part of creation's story from very close to the beginning.

And, I'm beginning to see, part of my story as well.

WALK 2

The Word God Might Whisper

Today you wouldn't know it's winter. Silas, our ten-year-old, still wears his hoodie, but Simeon, our twelve-year-old, has tied his sweatshirt around his waist. We trek across ground muddy from a recent thaw that followed the five inches of snow we received a week ago. Sixty-five degrees and sunny: I'm glad for this reprieve. I feel hopeful—*Could this weather last?*—hopeful and out of breath.

"Slow down. Let me catch up," I say. I never expected to need my walking stick so soon, but today I do.

When people ask me how I'm doing, they often say, "Well, you had the laparoscopic kind, right? That's supposed to be a lot easier." Sure, this heals quicker than a six-inch incision, but today, two weeks later, I'm still weak and sore.

But I'm alive, which is not, I admit, a complete surprise, even though the risk of death under general anesthesia is on the rise—seven deaths per million, as of a few years ago. But anytime you sign the form acknowledging the risk, and your wife stands in the doorframe and cries as they wheel you into the operating room, it's a more concrete opportunity to reflect on death than most Friday mornings provide.

On Thursday, January 14, I stood from a chair in a small room in the church basement, having finished leading the first week of a twelve-week study on spiritual disciplines. We ended with a poem by Denise Levertov, "The Avowal," considering its images of resting in God. She invites the reader, like a swimmer, to dare to float on their back, invites the reader to imagine floating in God, and I invited those present to dare such trust.

As I stood, I felt a dull ache in my back where my lower ribs attach to my vertebrae. I blamed the chair, old and hard, suspected that sitting in it for an hour had triggered arthritis pain, which I've been used to for years. As I drove home, the pain intensified and spread, sharpened. By the end of the eight-minute drive the pain radiated to the front of my ribs, sternum, and right shoulder. An hour later, pain was swallowing my whole torso, and Ginger was driving me to the emergency room.

Mention "chest" and "pain" together at the reception desk in the ER and they waste no time. A nurse whisked me to a room and began an EKG. Then blood tests, an x-ray, a CAT scan, by which time a second dose of morphine had given me

minimal relief, allowing me to lie still for the scan. "When I inject the contrast dye, you're going to feel like you're wetting yourself," the technician said helpfully. "Don't worry, you're not."

Back in the room, a physician announced good news and bad: I wasn't having a heart attack, but my gallbladder was horribly inflamed. She ordered a stronger narcotic, Dilaudid, and scheduled surgery for the next day.

My post-Dilaudid memory is hazy, but I remember two things that mattered.

By eight in the morning they were ready to wheel me to the OR antechamber. I said goodbye to the children, who looked more unsure than they had the night before. Ginger said she would run them to school and return before the surgery and told me Pastor Tom was on the way.

In the corridor, as the orderly pushed my bed toward the prep room, I experienced an urge to confess. Surely, before surgery, before a general anesthesia from which there's the slightest chance you might not awaken, my conscience began to suggest, surely it's wise to offer a confession, and I felt the need to ask forgiveness for a host of things: for my angry impatience with my children; for not being as attentive a husband as I should be; for ripping up that picture of Sarah Conder, my older brother's crush in sixth grade, and then denying it; for leaving *reading knowledge of Latin, Greek, Hebrew, German, and French* on my CV because I had passed reading comprehension exams in those languages, though I had failed to maintain what little facility I once had. And for my more recent faintness of faith, my intermittent wondering if the God to whom I needed to confess was even real.

I suffered a sudden case of scrupulosity, and I felt afraid, and sorry for the unsuspecting orderly on whom I was about to unload my guilt. Then I remembered the previous day's Eucharist service in chapel at the seminary where I teach. I was the celebrant, the one with the privilege of reading and preaching the Scriptures, of leading those gathered in prayer, and of inviting them to the table where I would do my best to point them to Jesus, the host of the sacred feast.

Before inviting them to the table, I led a corporate prayer of confession. And then, as the ordained clergy person, I looked around the circle of worshipers—students of mine, friends and colleagues, administrators (who happened miraculously to be also friends and colleagues)—and I said, "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven." Then they said to me—all thirty of them in one voice the church calls the voice of Christ's body—what their baptisms had commissioned them to say: "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven."

This cloud of witnesses suddenly surrounded me while I was lying on my back, smoothly gliding through a nondescript hospital corridor, and spoke to me in my

imagination, reminded me that one of the last things anyone had done for me was to announce that my slate had been wiped clean, polished even for extra luster. I don't know if the orderly could tell, but at that moment I believe the bed got easier to push, got a little lighter.

That was the first thing I remember that mattered.

A few minutes later my pastor walked into the prep room. I was surprised how glad I was to see him. He asked if he could read a psalm and pray for me. I knew which psalm I wanted, but my drug-fogged mind couldn't summon the number—the list of drugs I'd been given by this time looked to me like the signatures on the Declaration of Independence. So Tom suggested Psalm 91, the very one I was struggling to recall. As he read this psalm of assurance, a declaration of God's protection—*For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge . . . you will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, or the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday*—tears began to stream down my cheeks.

When he finished, I looked at him through a saltwater blur, and I said the truest thing I could think to say, though not in the most eloquent of terms. "I really believe this stuff," I said—not a confession that will ever rank with Peter's "You are the Christ" or doubting Thomas's "My Lord and my God!" but it was good enough for Tom to use later in a sermon, appropriately cloaking my identity.

I'm not sure I knew what I meant. It was just a nod from deep within me, a sense of trust. It wasn't that I believed no harm would come to me. I knew better than that, knew that his praying a psalm over me was not an incantation, a spell to secure my safety. A prayer wouldn't magically keep me from becoming a statistic; some people had to be those seven per million. But I believed somehow, trusted at a fundamental level, that I was safe, that I had nothing to fear, that I would be OK, whatever that meant.

That was the second thing that I remembered, a little gift the older writers on spirituality would have called a consolation.

Ginger returned from taking the kids to school. Dr. Edwards, the surgeon, came to remind me of some of the risks of the surgery and get me—or was it Ginger?—to sign more papers. Dr. Go, the resident who would be assisting, cheerily introduced herself. Dr. Pickle, the anesthesiologist, said not-so-comfortingly to Ginger, "I can't stand here and say to you that there's not some chance of life-threatening complications from the anesthesia." She looked stricken with worry as they pushed me into the operating room.

Next thing I remember, the nurse anesthetist was pressing a plastic mask over my nose and mouth, telling me to breathe normally, that in just a few seconds I would be asleep.

"Aren't I supposed to count backwards from ten?"

"You can if you want to," she said.

"Well, that's what they do on TV and in the movies, count backwards from ten. Shouldn't I?"

"You can if you . . ."

Close curtain.

Anyone one who knows anything about Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth-century English mystic and saint, knows at least two things: She said, "All shall be well," and she saw a vision of a hazelnut. There are other things worth knowing about her—that she was a profound theologian, that she saw God as mother, that she was the first woman to write a book in English.

But it's Julian's hazelnut I think of now as Simeon runs up ahead with his brother, and I notice these few acorns missed by the squirrels during their fall gathering. The hazelnut's size amazed Julian. It represented all that God had made, all that is, including her, and yet: so small! Still God loves it, upholds it in being. Whatever happens, God claims the hazelnut and always will.

In one of my first meetings with Sister Anna a few months ago, I was struggling to express a sense of faith in the midst of doubt. She asked me a question, hoping to elicit some words that would express my deepest beliefs at the moment, and I felt ridiculous, because only one word came to me with conviction: *yes*. I didn't want to say it, it felt so silly. *You're a theologian who's published a seventy-thousand-word dissertation, and this is all you can come up with?*

I sat in silence on a small plaid sofa, a tiny lamp glowing faintly next to me, and Sister Anna waited, just a few feet away in her plush reading chair. I told her what I believed, in that moment: yes. Beneath the confusion, pain, and suffering in the world, beneath my own perplexity, anxiety, and doubt, stands the foundation of a divine *yes*, the affirmation that what is—including me—is created, loved, and upheld, and nothing can change that. As Julian's God told her, "I am keeping you very safe."

I'm glad to be alive, to walk through these woods with my boys on this last day of January, with a little help from a hickory walking stick. I'm glad this little corner of the hazelnut is close enough for me to explore, and that Ginger and these kids share this hazelnut with me. Yes, I say to all this. *Yes*.

But I also know, in a way I didn't just weeks before, and at a level that surprises

me, that for forty years I have tried to secure my place on the hazelnut and make it permanent and impressive—a futile task. Someday I will not wake up after the final curtain—no more encores, not here at least. But if I do awaken somehow in God, I won't expect to see a bright light, and I don't know if I will see loved ones or recognize them, but I wonder if I might hear a word, just one.

Might God be willing to whisper to me, as God does to us all every second of our lives, if Julian is right: "Yes"?

WALK 3

Facing Change with Buddhism and St. Francis

I gave him the benefit of the doubt. When you're in fifth grade and your knowledge is expanding every day, you might quiz your parents because you're excited about the new thing you know, not to expose their ignorance.

Like many evenings, two nights ago we were gathered in the family room after Mary Clare had gone to bed. The boys loafed on the couch reading, their feet propped against the coffee table heaped with overdue library books, school papers, and cooking magazines. Ginger sat in the sea-mist chair we inherited from my grandmother. I sat swallowed by the new oversized La-Z-Boy. As I sink into it each night, I fear I might never get up.

Silas was reading a Civil War novel for literacy. He'd already tagged it with a fifth grader's go-to judgment: boring. But it must have reminded him of something he learned in class, because he looked up at us and asked, "What Civil War battle in April, 1862, was the bloodiest battle so far in American history?" The question underlined my thinking about change lately.

Change catalyzed this midlife experiment, and January's meditations on death led back here to death's fraternal twin: impermanence. In the first four decades of life, change, if we notice it at all or give it any thought, is nearly synonymous with progress. In the previous two decades of my own life change has meant graduating a couple times with ever more letters to put after my name, getting married and having three children, pastoring churches, and moving to places where I would earn more money. By almost any measure you'd count these changes as advances. *Forward ho*!

And then Silas innocently posed a question.

His asking highlighted the new reality of change: after forty, change, that devilish shapeshifter, disguises itself ever more frequently as decline.

Ginger and I glanced at each other, at a loss. I'm sure we had once aced exams on the Civil War. We knew the generals and the battles, the dates and the body counts. But the neural pathways in our brains now displayed "road closed" signs, and we couldn't reach the information.

I said the only name of a Civil War battle I could recall at the moment. "Gettysburg?"

"No, Shiloh."

Shiloh. Isn't that the name of a dog in a famous children's book? Or a town in the Bible where something significant happened? But the only Shiloh I could recall was the restaurant perched on Mt. Washington, which overlooks downtown Pittsburgh, where they serve gourmet macaroni-and-cheese, to which they will add anything you want—"As long as we have it in the kitchen," a waiter once quipped. On our last visit I ate lobster jalapeno mac-n-cheese topped with an over-easy fried egg. I won't soon forget that meal. But a Civil War battle?

"Ah, yes," I said, "Shiloh."

Today I reverse the route I took last month, and it doesn't take me long to realize I don't know where I'm going; everything looks different. I know I usually come out near the playground, so I head in that direction, a meadow of Canada thistle on my left, and beyond that, the pond, drained for the winter.

Once I'm on the path, the wind picks up. I pause next to the pond and the pavilion and look up, resting my hands and chin on my staff. Gray clouds crowd the sky, but a patch of blue hurries past as if late for an appointment, and then, as quickly as it appeared, it vanishes, swallowed up in the throng of gray.

I think of Mary Clare, how she and I like to watch the clouds as we sit on the sidelines of Silas's soccer games. I remember one crisp morning last fall, Mary Clare sitting next to me in a camp chair, wrapped in a pink fleece blanket. It's always colder out there than the kids expect—they never anticipate the wind—so we bring extra blankets, knowing they'll plead for warmth. That morning my burrito-wrapped daughter looked into the sky and spied something. "Look, Daddy. That cloud looks like a dog."

"Where?"

She pointed, but by the time I caught what she was pointing at, the dog had become, quite obviously to me, a hippopotamus. Over the next twenty minutes the score of the soccer game remained the same—as soccer scores are wont to do—but a whole zoo of animals floated by, many of them morphing right before our eyes. A flamingo, she swears, transformed into a princess castle. I thought it had become a BMW.

Why can't all change be so benign?

The sky is all gray again, and I am cold standing, so I move on.

From the time of Socrates to today, we humans have been biased against change. We prefer the stable, the perdurable. Everything changes, yes, no one can deny it, so we have placed on the transcendent our need for stability—Plato's forms, theology's impassible God—and then prefer earthly things that mimic the permanent,

prove lasting: virtue, character, principle, mediocre Duke football—things we can count on to be, more likely than not, the same tomorrow as today.

But at the beginning of midlife, I can no longer avoid change, and must not. And the enduring religious traditions teach us to accept impermanence. That's why I've brought along a small book by Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, because aren't Buddhists the experts at enlightening us on ways of living with impermanence and accepting the inevitability of death without being crushed by that awareness?

I had planned to read some here, but like my kids before a soccer game, I've underestimated the chilliness of the wind. I hurry through the final half-mile, up and out of the valley, and down the Upper Fields path toward the shop, education center, and parking lot. By the time I reach the car the sun has prevailed; the crowd of gray clouds has largely dispersed, and those lingering have exchanged their gray robes for white.

But it's too late for me. I'm going to the library to read my book.

"Everything is impermanent; everything changes," Thich Nhat Hanh writes, and you won't find me arguing with him. But believing this truth doesn't help me deal with it. I can still resist.

To come to terms with change—to stop living in an illusory world of permanence, a world in which we gather, accumulate, and protect what we deem valuable, falsely believing we can secure our treasures and our lives, an imaginary world that drives greed and violence—Thich Nhat Hanh says to meditate on Buddhism's Five Remembrances, to let them sink into us, to get used to them so that we might lower our defenses against change, and live in something closer to reality. I'm willing to give it a try. Three of the five remembrances strike me immediately:

> I am of the nature to grow old. I cannot escape growing old.
> I am of the nature to die. I cannot escape death.
> All that is dear to me, and everyone I love, are of the nature to change.
> There is no way to escape being separated from them.

As I read, I feel myself assenting, and at the same time rebelling—and it's this rebellion I want to release. For how can I live the next decades of my life if I acknowledge this truth with my mind but fight it in my living?

"What we cherish, what belongs to us today, won't be there tomorrow; we will have to take leave, not only of our most cherished objects, but also of the people we love," Hanh writes. Is this the truth I'm going to need to contemplate, become comfortable with, to live well life's second half?

I've had to take leave of a father sooner than I would have liked, which was hard to accept. I struggle just as much when I consider what I cherish now. As I do, staring blankly at the shelves here in the back corner of the library, my throat catches. Not just my memory, or what's left of it, not just my mind and my vocation—yes, I cherish these things—but especially the ones who live with me and fill my life with joy and challenge, these people whose connection to me constitutes my life, these dear ones with their unique passions, quirks, and irreplaceable peculiarities.

Irreplaceable—heavens, yes. Permanent—dammit, no.

But I've learned enough from Hanh over the years to know what to do with this rising resistance. So I get as comfortable as I can in the wooden, straight-backed chair, and inhale slowly through my nose, saying to myself, "Breathing in, I feel my resistance to change," and then I exhale slowly, saying, "Breathing out, I release my resistance to change." After ten minutes of this, I'm ready to leave. I wonder what I'll be ready for after ten years of this, because that's what it will take, or longer.

I have this in my tradition too, I think as I exit the library.

"We will not fear, though the earth should change," the psalm says, and I realize I could have brought the Book of Psalms with me just as well. Or Ecclesiastes—the book of the wise one who teaches us it's vanity to work to secure a life, to bungee-cord your life together. You are born, you live, you die. Others are born to replace you; they live, they die; so it goes.

We have our own remembrance too, couched in Latin and out of fashion, what they called in the Middle Ages *memento mori*, the remembrance of death, an aspect of what writer Jon Sweeney calls the medieval "macabre fascination" with death. Death was inescapable, ubiquitous, after all, with no way to keep it out of sight as we do today. Think: plague, war, famine, disease; up close, next door, unmediated. And remembering death—keeping its frightening visage always in mind—helped people to straighten up and fly right, as the song goes. Death can come any time, and after that—judgment. And it's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of an angry God, or so they thought. *Memento mori*—motivation to live well.

But reading Sweeney's book reminded me that this approach to death wasn't the only one in the Middle Ages. There was the way of St. Francis, an outlier, acquainted with change and decline. In the waning years of his life his eyesight diminished, his body weakened, and the brothers began to squabble about the growing movement of the Franciscans. And Francis managed, in the midst of it all—in the midst of a culture that said, "Be afraid, be very afraid"—to befriend death, to welcome her as a sister. He somehow learned *not* to be afraid.

I want to overcome the fear of death, though I'm not ready for us to be friends, to share a Coke and a conversation. There's still too much beauty to enjoy, too many people to love, too many seasons of life to live. But I appreciate what makes Francis's welcoming of sister death possible, and different from Hanh's freedom from the fear of death: Francis trusted a divine steadfastness at the heart of the flux we call this world. Francis wasn't a metaphysician or a philosopher. He hadn't worked out a theory of the relationship between the Eternal and the temporal, but he knew the reason that psalm said we should not fear change—fire, flood, earthquake, death: God is our refuge and strength. And so Francis prayed, "Blessed be the Lord my God, for you have helped me, you were my stronghold when I was in trouble. To you, my defender, will I sing: My citadel is God himself, the God who loves me."

As his circumstances changed—as his eyesight weakened, as his fledgling order began to flail, as his own life ebbed away—he trusted that he was safe, that his identity was rooted and secure in another identity whose name is Love.

Now I know what I want to companion my growing acceptance of change, marked by these new gray hairs in my goatee that portend greater changes in years to come, even my eventual and final decline. Yes, I want the equanimity of Thich Nhat Hanh, but that's not all. I want a consoling trust to accompany me, what Christians have always called faith. The faith that, though what and whom I cherish will take leave of me, though I will one day take my final leave of this existence I have called life for forty years and hope to for many more, there is a Love that will not take leave of us, a Love that binds us to itself and to one another in unimaginable ways.

That when I leave this life, I will not have left the embrace of the Love that has held me thus far, through all my changes. That none of us will.