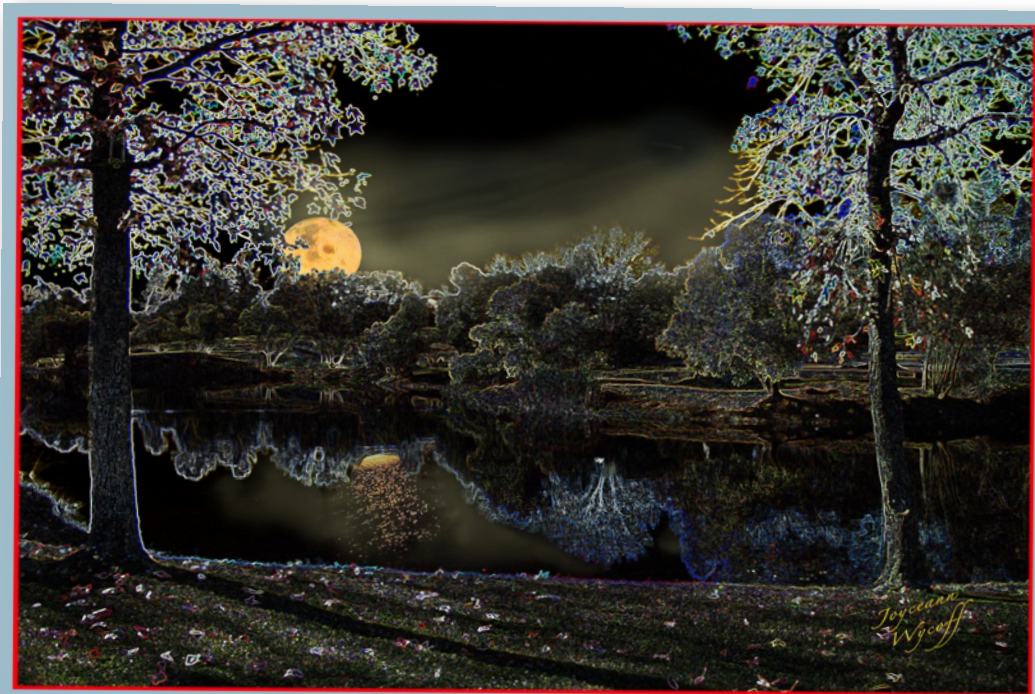


## Chapter 5: Solitude -- The Howling Wolf (2009)

*"You and I are the Phoenix.  
We too can reproduce ourselves  
from the shattered pieces of a difficult time."*

-- Elizabeth Lesser



I backed the U-Haul truck up to the garage  
of my old life on July 14, 2009.

I had “shed my stuff” and my life was in motion again: destination uncertain. Fear coursed through my system, as I drove a cavernous truck toward a place where I knew exactly one person.

I knew I had to leave Arkansas, but I actually did not know why I was going to Colorado. Everyone who knew me assumed I would go back to California. I assumed I would go back to California, but instead I headed for a suburb of Boulder where I would truly be alone for the first time in forty years.

My kayaking friend, coauthor and longtime friend, Lynne Snead, had persuaded me to try Lafayette, a small Boulder suburb. I went there to check it out and since I had no idea what my criteria were for making a decision, I simply put down a deposit on a tiny house one block off the main street of this charming small town. I did not have any place better to go, anything better to do.

For a few weeks Lynne and I explored her favorite places in the mountains and she showed me my first moose, a memorable experience including a mini-charge that jump started my adrenaline. Then Lynne's mom fell and cracked her skull and Lynne went to Salt Lake City for several weeks. Solitude boomed like thunder.

Right behind the ubiquitous Rule #1 (in case you have forgotten: never make a big decision in the first year after a significant loss) comes **Platitude #1**: *you must learn to be alone without being lonely*. My feelings at the time showed up in a blog post:

**From *Blog*, September 19, 2009:**

Solitude. Call it joyful. Call it angst. Call it what it actually is: a frightening, overwhelming aloneness, a howling wolf in the dead of winter trying to chew its own leg free of the steel trap that binds it in the dark night. Its blackness stretches endless before me obliterating everything, blinding me, deafening me with its endless message of pain, loss and abandonment. Translation: It sucks, big

time. After a lifetime of companionship and longing for the joys of solitude, I now have solitude and long for the joys of companionship. Be careful what you wish for.

Rilke says: *"Do Not be confused by surfaces; in the depths everything becomes law. What is necessary, after all, is only this: solitude, vast inner solitude. Walk inside yourself and meet no one for hours--that is what you must be able to attain."*

### **To Rilke ... hours are not the same as a lifetime!**

I want to swear at Rilke. I do swear at Rilke. Today I had lunch in a lovely Aspen park filled with families and children and dogs chasing each other in circles. Togetherness, family and friendship surrounded me, but did not include me or invite me in. I am on the fringes looking in, just like the lonely little girl of my childhood, nosed pressed to the screen doors of the neighborhood asking if there were any children who could come out and play. Now I am expected to look in the screen doors of my own soul and ask if there is anyone there (here?) who wants to come out? And this is supposed to bring me joy?

I turn to a more modern source, and Wikipedia says: **Solitude** is a state of seclusion or isolation; *i.e.*, lack of contact with people. It may stem from bad relationships, deliberate choice, contagious disease, disfiguring features, repulsive personal habits, mental illness, or circumstances of employment or situation (see castaway).

Castaway. That is what I feel like. Cast away by death, by rejection, by circumstance. I would like to take my solitude in small doses, thank you very much. A day here, a week there. Not this life

sentence of aloneness; not this loneliness that seems to be stalking me through the long night.

Turning to what others say about solitude, I find:

*"There are days when solitude is a heady wine that intoxicates you with freedom, others when it is a bitter tonic, and still others when it is a poison that makes you beat your head against the wall." -- Colette*

*"When we cannot bear to be alone, it means we do not properly value the only companion we will have from birth to death - ourselves." -- Eda LeShan*

*"The happiest of all lives is a busy solitude." -- Voltaire*

Colette seems to hit the nail on the head and, while reading Thoreau on Solitude, I find that he, at least briefly, questioned the value of solitude and wondered if the near "*neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life.*" However, he goes on to recognize a pattern in his own thinking, "*But I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and seemed to foresee my recovery.*"

I recognize that "slight insanity" in my own mind. I am the wolf chewing away at my own leg to get free of this dark sense of loneliness, but I am also the wolf roaming the quiet, moon lit woods called ever forward by sights and sounds of the world of freedom and solitude.

**I foresee my own recovery.**

I foresee a time when I can be "alone without being lonely" as a dear friend who learned this lesson earlier in life describes it. I foresee a time when solitude is more joyful than angst. However, right now, it is a dark and lonely place so I remind myself to relax and breathe in the joy of each moment.



After forty years of being married, I took companionship for granted and thought complete solitude would be a lovely, peaceful and calm thing. It shocked me to find out how hard it was to adjust to living alone. I do many solitary pursuits: writing, art, walking, so I thought it would simply mean more time for those activities. However, the punctuation of conversation and connection in between those activities made the solitude sweet. Without someone to share stories and memories, solitude lacked spice and became interminable.

Of course, I had exiled myself to Colorado where I knew only one person and now she had left to take care of family. The normal networking activities to meet people worked, but only took the edge off the loneliness. I stayed busy, or at least in motion. I took a remarkable trip to the Aspen Balloon Festival and went into photographic overload trying to capture the light, color and magic of the balloons. Later that day I wrote the above blog post as the wolf came howling back.

In spite of the raging loneliness that permeated the trip to Aspen, two experiences reminded me that I was still alive and connected to the Universe.

Maroon Bells, one of the most photographed sites in the nation, lies just outside Aspen. This line of rust-colored peaks rising behind an alpine lake fringed with aspen thrills photographers with the ever-

changing light, clouds, reflections and colors. I spent a glorious afternoon taking pictures, and then decided to walk about three miles to the van pickup point.

The afternoon light dwindled and I could feel myself wanting to be comfortably and safely back in my hotel room. Just as I reached the end of the lake, I looked over and saw a man quietly gazing across the water. Something struck me about his peaceful posture, his wispy white hair and worn rust-brown hat. I raised my camera and snapped a picture just as he glanced my way. We waved and I hurried on.

Later, while I transferred the photos into my computer, I saw his face up close and realized I had missed a moment for connection. I could see an invitation on his face, one that I had been too rushed to catch in real time. His face began to haunt me and I wound up writing this poem:



### ***My Lost Brother***

*My brother,  
I am sorry I did not stop to talk.*

*I am sorry I did not stop to hear your heart.*

*In my rush to be on my way,  
I simply snapped my photo and  
added another image to my collection.*

*I did not see you sitting there  
willing to share your wisdom  
willing to explore our connection.*

*Too late now, I know  
that you are my brother and  
you held a priceless gift for me.*

*My brother, while we will never know  
our linkage to each other, I promise  
to never again miss a moment of connection.*



The story continued on though. Lynne's brother lives in Aspen, and his girl friend knows almost everyone in town. I told the story to Lynne who told it to her brother who told it to his girlfriend who knew the man from the description and the photo Lynne had sent along to her. One day, on an Aspen bus, she saw the man, sat down with him and told him the story. She got his name and address so I sent him a copy of the photo. I never heard from him and still missed the connection that might have been, but at least he knew that someone had seen him that day.

### **An unexpected gift.**

The second gift came when I tried to transfer my pictures to my computer. It is one of my favorite activities since it is usually the first time I truly know what I have shot. I am not a DSLR-type photographer. I hate carrying stuff and messing around with lenses, tripods and equipment so I carry the best compact camera I can find.

Almost all viewing happens through the digital display which tends to be obscured or lost altogether in bright light conditions. Even when I can look through a viewer, the scene is usually so small that I only have a vague idea of what I am capturing. So, when I finally get the pictures on my computer screen, it is always a thrilling session of “Rats, missed that one,” or “Why did I even bother?” or, even an occasional “Wow!”

However, I discovered that I had forgotten to bring my transfer cord or a card reader so I went to the local photo developing store to get the pictures put on a CD. I met Rusty who promised to get it back to me in an hour, but when I returned at the appointed time, they were still processing (I had taken a LOT of photos) so we had a chance to talk. Rusty started telling me how good he thought my pictures were. I brushed it off as the normal “being polite to customers” talk, but he continued to be lavishly encouraging about my work and telling me about other places I should go.

People had occasionally told me they liked my photography before this instance, but they had always been friends, obviously biased in their opinions. I had never considered myself a “real” photographer. Real photographers carry large cameras and know f-stops and gray cards and a thousand things that I barely understand. Real photographers take those unbelievable shots of the bear catching a salmon in his jaws or the sun setting just so over a monastery in Tibet. While I do not consider myself a “real” photographer, this stranger’s words sank in just a little. A few weeks later in another state and another media, this experience would echo itself and make me wonder if I could possibly, someday, finally call myself a real artist.





- ❖ If you had to describe yourself in one word right now, what would it be? What would it have been before your loss? What would you like it to be three years from now?
- ❖ What triggers your feelings of being alone and lonely? What helps you feel less alone?
- ❖ What do you look forward to with anticipation?

Somewhere on this journey, I began to realize how much I needed people, especially my friends. I had always considered myself self-sufficient and independent, now I needed help understanding what was happening with me. I wrote long, often whiny letters to my friend Judy, and she always replied immediately with messages that were almost as comforting as sitting at her kitchen table drinking a cup of tea. I discovered the camaraderie of three blog sisters (Louise at [Recover Your Joy](#), Maureen at [Writing without Paper](#), and Diane at [Contemplative Photography](#)) who were unfailingly supportive and our friendship deepened with every post, theirs and mine. Plus, I became a phone person for the first time in my life spending hours in conversation with friends.

Planning something that I could anticipate also kept me stabilized. I found if I had something to look forward to every three weeks or so,

it kept me going as I could savor the anticipation. Every trip, every event seemed to change me and expand my horizons. Somehow, I knew that if I kept opening myself up to new things, I would eventually feel whole again.

It dawned on me again that the hole left in my life by Richard's death created space for new experiences, room for my new life. Just as life bloomed again after the eruption of Mount St. Helens, life returned for me, but in new forms. Creative expression, art and writing sprung up and became the garden of my spirit. I became the gardener, tending it, nourishing it, harvesting its joy.

**About this Image: *Winter Moon***

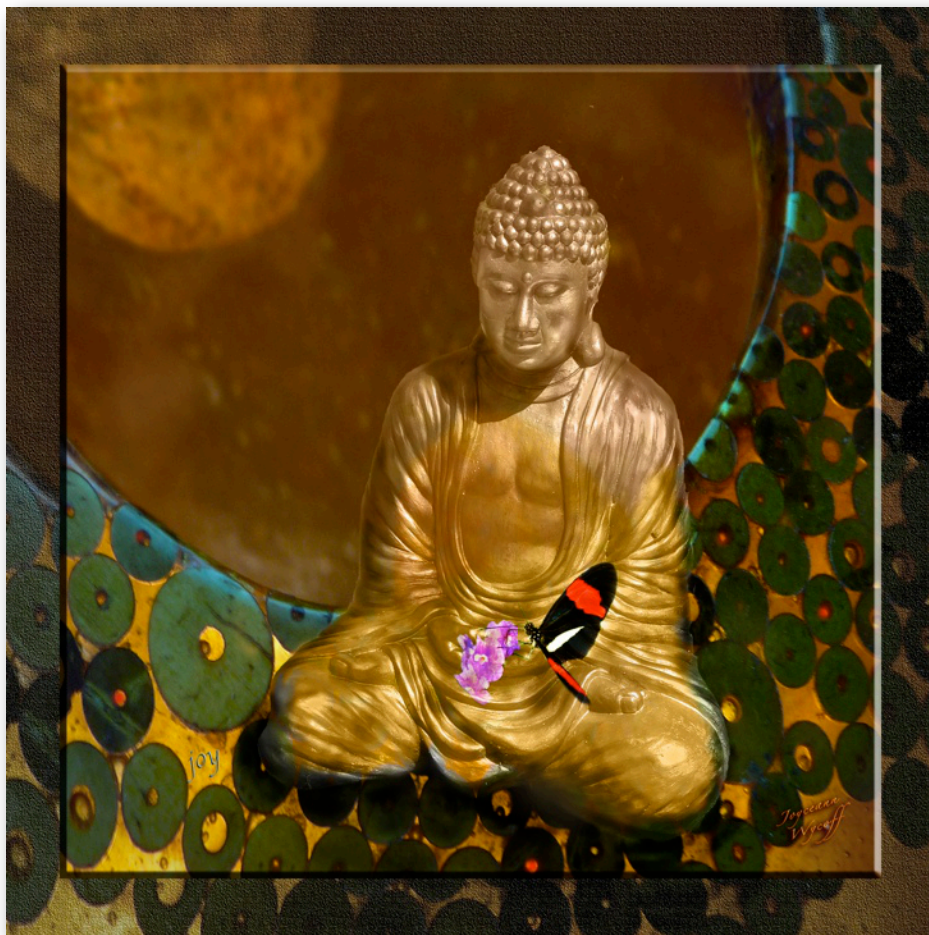


Sometimes in the dark of winter, there is a magical full moon that paints the icy trees with a ghostly light. "Winter Moon" captures that mysterious and fleeting moment in the dance of light and shadow.

## Interlude 5: The Beauty of Death (2009)

*“In the end, it is not the sorrow of the world that matters,  
but our heart's response to it.  
Compassion is sharing in the beauty  
of life and in the ocean of tears.”*

-- Jack Kornfeld



**G**rief is capricious.

Some days it feels like it has released its vice grip on my heart; the next day it roars back demanding attention. On December 19, 2009, I wrote in *my blog*:

This morning I woke with the weight of the past year heavy on my chest and nothing I tried seemed to help. I read the latest postings of my blog circle, reminded myself of my many blessings, and meditated. Nothing lifted the pain. So, I decided to go for a long walk at the L.A. Arboretum which is only a mile or so from where I am staying with my friend Emily. The grounds of the Arboretum are stunning so I played with some peacocks, hugged a Blue Atlas cedar, and walked through a spiny Madagascar forest. My spirits lifted somewhat and then a rust-orange stump called to me from a clearing in a eucalyptus grove. I walked over to get a closer look and fell into a world that I had never seen before, a world that I did not know existed, a world that "*sang so sweetly I could not remember my troubles.*" \*

Worm tracings riddled each segment of the fallen iron bark eucalyptus (I had to ask its name), writing ancient stories I could not read, wisdom that hovered just out of reach. I started taking pictures of the delicate trails and picking up pieces of bark only to find the most incredible, subtle shades of blue and touches of purple blending with the paths and stories, turning them into mesmerizing paintings. I wanted to frame each piece. I kept taking pictures, falling deeper and deeper into the beauty that lay unremarked in this quiet grove until it started to feel like the most hallowed art gallery, a gallery proclaiming the beauty that exists all around us, even in death. I began to put pieces of this art on each of the fallen logs, honoring the gift of beauty just waiting to be absorbed into the wounded places in our soul.

\* From e.e. cummings ["Maggie and Millie and Molly and May"](#)



- ❖ Where do you see beauty?
- ❖ How do you honor beauty in your everyday life?
- ❖ How could you see beauty in something today that you have never noticed before?

One lesson that I learned during this time is that everything has a season. About a year after writing the blog post above, I went back to the Arboreteum to see what time had done to this magnificent tree art gallery. It was gone. However, it lives forever in the images I took that day and in my cells. It is part of me. It reminds me of the lines from Octavia Butler's poem *Earthseed*,

*All that you touch  
You Change.*

*All that you Change  
Changes you.*

Finding beauty is a spiritual practice. When we begin to see the beauty in endings as well as beginnings, it allows us to rest in the

deep peace within us. Beauty heals and beauty can be found anywhere ... in birth, in death and in the living in between.

**About this Image:** *Compassion*



"Compassion" represents the gentle and reverent holding of life. The butterfly is a universal metaphor for transformation and this image reminds us to be gentle with ourselves as we face change and transformation.