

Chapter 5, Waiting for Healing

“The laws of poetry command us to rise above our anger and try to see the present in light of eternity.” *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*

Healing is waiting for a bus at twenty below zero. You stamp your feet. Breath rises like the plumes of steam from a horse’s nostrils. The bus doesn’t come. Eventually you realize if you want to get where you’re going, you have to leave the shelter and walk.

The comment from Dr. Sternbach about a strained sacro-iliac didn’t make it into the final report; if I hadn’t written it down in my journal right after our talk, I would have thought I was dreaming. What the medical professionals were waiting for me to develop was full-blown ankylosing spondylitis.

“No pathology,” the bluff rheumatologist I saw in Vancouver said succinctly. He wore a fabulously well-cut grey suit. He was an older man close to retirement. The whites of his eyes fascinated me. They had yellowed and had thick bits in them like unbeaten egg whites. He shook his head when I confessed I used a wheelchair at airports. “Well, if I were you, I wouldn’t get into a wheelchair unless I absolutely had to,” he said. “Just walk. Walk as far as you’re able.”

“I’ve tried that.” I hesitated. Should I tell him the story about my book tour?

The rheumatologist frowned, drummed his fingers on his desk. I stared at his thick old-man fingers. They were blotched with sun spots, thick-furred on the backs of his hands. Repulsive. The beautiful crisp white cuffs of his shirt came down past his wrists. It was the second winter of my illness.

I had just come back from a book tour to promote my first book, *Harvest of Salmon*. It was about our adventures commercial fishing. I had warned my publisher I was pretty laid-up

and would need to have a hotel room for even a half day stop, as I needed to lie down. He didn't seem to mind. By then I understood why lying down was easier than anything else on my back. Dixon-Warren had me watch a series of videos put out by the Canadian Arthritis Foundation. Sitting put three hundred pounds of pressure on my spine. Standing put two hundred, lying down only sixty.

On the book tour.

In the TV studio at Terrace the journalist interviewing me said, "So, what do you feel about the fishing industry at the present time?"

Behind him, under the hot lights, was a live areca palm with years of dust on its green fronds. "I've ah, hurt my back (had I?) and am no longer in the industry." I felt like I spoke around a balloon in my chest; it kept getting bigger and black and the hollow feeling made me want to cry. I didn't, of course, say in what rough shape I was really in. I didn't tell the man how much I hurt and how little I could do. I didn't tell him I was turning into an invalid, one of those old-fashioned creatures who had to be prone all the time. Blah.

In Prince Rupert, I stayed with a friend, and pain pills plus adrenaline kept me going through radio interviews, newspaper interviews, another bookstore signing. In between, I'd take a taxi back to my friend's, stretch out, pull a quilt over myself, and go comatose. I was always cold.

The incessant gnawing of my sacro-iliac joints was unbelievably tiring.

After my interview with CBC radio, which had gone really well—I very much liked the two people who'd interviewed me, and the rapport showed—they invited me out to breakfast along with the station manager. "I'd love to, but I, uh, have a little trouble walking," I told them.

“It’s not far,” they assured me. Sure enough, when we emerged from the studio door, I could see the Crest Hotel, our destination, from where we were. “See?” It was two blocks away.

Two blocks was too far for me to walk. I opened my mouth trying to get myself to say *yes*. I’d really enjoyed our talk, I wanted to be agreeable, but I knew what would happen if I tried walking that far. The station manager took a look at my face and said quietly, “I’ll get my car.” He was one of the few people who saw something that made him aware of the magnitude of what I was dealing with.

The talk at breakfast ranged from fishing to the Coast Guard to current affairs. I felt the exhilaration that came from great communication. I was experiencing very little such communication at home.

Jamie was meeting me at the airport in Vancouver at the end of my book trip. I knew he loathed seeing me in a wheelchair. To please him, I decided to walk from the plane to the terminal. The flights from Rupert off-loaded very close to the main terminal. There wasn’t much walking involved.

Passengers from the flight from Rupert wound around one corridor and up another. Down an escalator. Around three curves. The airport disembarking pattern had changed since I had last flown Rupert to Vancouver. I had made a very bad mistake. I stopped and took stock. All the other passengers had stampeded out of sight ahead. There were no flight attendants to be seen. No captains strolling self-importantly along, communing with their gold braid. *Zero. Nada.* No one.

I walked. Slower and slower, but my feet kept moving, one after the other. The corridor walls unrolled like a bad movie that went on forever. No change, no change. White and navy

with stripes of red now and then. Blotches of dirt on the carpet and larger, clean areas.

Fluorescent lighting. Tears streamed down my face.

“Can I help you?” a voice said through the fog of my pain. It was a flight attendant, someone not even from the airline I’d flown on. I hadn’t even registered her. Her face was drawn up into lines of worry; she looked kind.

I made an effort to wipe my tears away with the back of my hand, which came away black with mascara. “Yes,” I said. “You could. Thank you.”

I saw passengers staring; I’d reached a more central part of the terminal and we were in a main hallway. I drew myself up and with as much dignity as I could muster, considering by then I was sobbing, said to the flight attendant, “If I could have a wheelchair? I’m sorry. I really am so sorry. I thought I could walk but it’s too far. . . . My husband is. . . .”

The flight attendant touched my arm. “You just wait here. I’ll go get a wheelchair, all right?”

That was when Jamie appeared, accompanied by an airline official: I’d taken so long to arrive that he’d come in search of me.

“What’s going on here?” he said. His body language was embarrassed, tense, as if he wished he was a million miles away. His eyes were doing a dart-all-over-the-place thing. They were flat and brown, without a trace of green, like bits of opaque rock.

But by then I couldn’t stop crying. “I thought I could walk. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Well, for Christ’s sake, at least let’s go over there and sit down and get out of the way.” He jerked his head toward a departure lounge, fifty feet further up the hall.

“I can’t. I can’t go any further.” I did, however, manage to move to the side of the corridor.

Presumably I thanked the flight attendant when she returned with a wheelchair. She said something low-voiced to Jamie. I hated myself. How many more indignities could a person take? I fished in my purse for a Kleenex. I desperately had to blow my nose; it was running. I was a mess, a horrible useless person who couldn't even do something as simple as walk off a goddamn plane. I had to stop crying. And I had to repair the damage to my makeup.

When the flight attendant left, I said again, gulping, "I'm sorry. It was going to be a nice surprise for you, me walking. It didn't use to be very far."

"Well, it was a surprise, all right," Jamie said.

Eventually, the airline official came back with my luggage. The wheelchair appeared in due course, which is to say forever, or maybe ten minutes. Jamie stood and brooded, wordless, beside my chair.

We never did say hello.

Surely, if I tried harder to make this rheumatologist understand— I looked at the framed certificates on his office walls. Fluorescents hummed loudly. I took a breath. "I do try. A couple of weeks ago when I was—"

"Well, if I were you, I wouldn't get into a wheelchair unless I absolutely had to," he repeated, shaking his head.

"At the airport I did walk and—"

"I'd push the damn wheelchair in front of me like a baby carriage first."

I shrugged. He just didn't get what living in severe pain meant. After that scene at the airport I'd been laid up for days. There was no way I would push a wheelchair in front of me like a carriage. For me, who could not have children—I was disabled, how could I look after a

child?— the idea had a bitter obscenity to it. I had trouble walking. I was not going to make myself better by self-flagellation.

“But for your sed rate and your temperatures. . . .”

I loathed going to this particular doctor. He always made me feel incredibly depressed; that if I tried harder, this wouldn't be happening to me. I was always incredibly embarrassed that some doctors thought I was hysterical and manufacturing my own problem.

I got Dixon-Warren to recommend a psychiatrist. If I was in any way contributing to my back problems, I wanted to find out how and stop. According to the dictionary, neurosis is “ a mental and emotional disorder that affects only part of the personality, is accompanied by a less distorted perception of reality than in a psychosis, does not result in disturbance of the use of language, and is accompanied by various physical, physiological, and mental disturbances (as visceral symptoms, anxieties, or phobias).” Well, I had a physiological disturbance that the doctors weren't finding a reason for. Did this mean I was making up my back problem? I poked at my psyche. It felt pretty much the same as it always had: easily wounded, highly literate, alert to the power relationships between female and male, left-wing, sensitive to nature, family and friend-loving, animal-loving, home-centered and garden aware.

I made an appointment with the shrink Dixon-Warren recommended. At the time I thought the psychiatrist was a real drip, a dishevelled blonde who couldn't even apply her makeup without smearing it. In retrospect I realize she displayed a great deal of common sense. She said things like, “Make some more friends, you need someone other than your in-laws for company. Think about going back to continue your education. You are deeply depressed; I'm going to give you a prescription for anti-depressants.”

Depressed? Me? I hadn't even realized until I was driving home that she'd been right. Everything I saw was rimmed with black. It was as though it was never morning anymore, but only afternoon, the end of another wasted sunny day. It was high summer, I was at home, I could have house plants for the first time since I'd gone fishing. I could have my beloved Siamese, Sinbad, with me. None of it mattered a scrap. Jamie was away fishing. He and fishing and the boat were my touchstones.

I guess I'll always say 'we.'

My boat. I was fiercely possessive. No one else took care of her the way I did. I had kept *Wyvern* immaculate: I had worn out two sanders taking down old varnish on the caprails and the gumwood sheathing at the bow and midsection. I painted her red on the upper three boards of the bulwarks. Every season I sanded her decks and put on a fresh coat of linseed oil mixed with turpentine. I wire-brushed the hydraulic motors on the gurdies and put red anti-rust paint on them. The hull I painted white. I arranged every spring for a professional to come down and paint *Wyvern* on the bow, a classy job, black italics with blue shading. The hatch and the cockpit cover at the back I painted grey, as I did the forward deck.

Inside *Wyvern*, I had swept the blue green commercial carpeting once a day. Her cupboards were fitted with stainless barrel bolts. In a fishboat, a person had to be able to put every single blessed thing away—and then make sure it stayed away. You had to be able to roll. Any loose object could shoot across the cabin and injure someone otherwise. Behind the oil stove was stainless steel quilted in a diamond pattern. That needed to be cleaned of spatters once a day. The top of the oil stove also needed sanding down and blacking. I knew perfectly well that the deckhands Jamie got were not looking after the boat the way I had. They didn't wipe off the

salt spray on the inside panelling with Lemon Pledge. They didn't wash the windows inside and out at the end of every trip.

When I was home, meaning Port Hawk, I was always wondering what was going on in the real world with Jamie and fishing. I'd close my eyes and think what spot were they fishing: Ramsay? The Shoe? And then I'd see a picture of the boat running and think *Ah, they're moving*. As if I really knew. But I would dream sometimes, very detailed dreams of Jamie bringing the boat by a specific place I was familiar with, say the entrance to Winter Harbour, and on a couple of occasions he would wake me up with a phone call an hour or so later from that place. In one letter home—he wrote me each trip, even though he'd phone when he came in too—he said, “We're moving to the Shoe later tonight. Look at that. I said ‘we’ even though you're not here on the boat. I guess I'll always say ‘we.’”

When you do that, say that, *are* that, it makes me crazy.

It's easy from a distance to say yeah, couples who've met so young can be hard on one another. It's like you have a right to push and nudge and mould that other person to being the perfect partner you know s/he has it in them to be. Accept a person for who they are? Don't make me laugh. You *fix* what's wrong with your partner and feel it's your perfect right.

I have fifty-year-old friend who's a homicide detective in the RCMP. One of the more notable things about him is his colourful vocabulary. He swears like he *invents* the words. He's still married to his high school sweetheart. His wife doesn't let him swear at home. She feels she has the right to insist on this. And he, who is a leader at work, finds her demand acceptable. I find it funny—and a little sad that he would be willing to bury a major part of who he is. But I didn't find it funny that after I developed back problems that Jamie went from being my best

friend to a man who was deeply ashamed to be seen with me. His eyes slid from the metal of the wheelchair I used at airports. He winced at being seen with a woman who leaned on a cane.

Take this prescription.

Aspirin. It made me sleep and did nothing for the pain.

222's. Much better. The kick of codeine superimposed on an aspirin formula worked.

Phenylbutazone. I liked this. For the month I was taking this prescription I could walk a whole block almost normally.

“You’re taking *what?*” Marjorie said, shaking her thick blonde hair. She opened her mouth a little in disbelief. “That’s what they use to dope horses at the racetrack. They call it ‘buting them. Sure it’s effective. Horses can run on broken legs then.”

“We won’t keep you on Phenylbutazone too long,” Dr. Dixon-Warren said. “It destroys white blood cells. Try this instead.”

Motrin. It was hard to keep my eyes open past nine at night.

Indocid. Tolectin. Standard anti-inflammatories. Something like half the people who take these end up with stomach ulceration. I noticed on this medication it became really hard for me to move around again. On an experimental basis, I discontinued the Tolectin.

Motrin again: I could feel the relief within four hours which led me to think it was the analgesic I was responding to, rather than the anti-inflammatory content. After some months back on this I started to have vision problems: headlights blurred into one swirling mass. I developed stunning headaches. I got more done, though, and I didn’t have so many problems with waking at night.

None of them was as good as the racetrack dope.

292's. More codeine. It was scary how much I enjoyed that white blotting out of pain, the softening of its harsh edges.

Tylenol 3's. Not so constipating as the former.

Handling it?

In contrast to my unhappy connection to the rheumatologist, Dixon-Warren and I had an oddly nice relationship. We respected one another, strange for a patient who wasn't getting any better, and a doctor who wished he could help and couldn't much. On Dixon-Warren's part the respect was mixed with cautious liking, and on mine, liking with cynicism about the medical profession in general. He was a thoroughly decent person who had gone everything he could for me. It was medicine in general I felt let down by. I wanted a miracle and I wasn't getting one. When I think of him now, I see a worried-looking man with a corrugated forehead, and scanty, wavy hair. He always wore a white lab coat over beige pants.

My x-rays continued normal, with the sed rate up. "It indicates an arthritic type of inflammation," Dixon-Warren said, looking at me over the cluttered surface of his desk. If mine were a classic case of ankylosing spondylitis with all the attendant symptoms, then radiological examination would show relatively rapid progress of the disease. Why wasn't it?

I shrugged. I had no idea whether it was worse to have arthritis that would cripple me or a back problem that some people assumed was made up. My mother-in-law called me a "cripple" already. She meant to be loving. She had no idea of how the label reverberated and abashed me, how I'd wake up in the middle of the night and say the word silently. On the whole, I'd weigh in on the side of a known disease. That way people—by that I meant Jamie and one of Dr. Dixon-Warren's partners—who treated me like an hysteric would perhaps be more gentle.

After a year and a half, Dixon-Warren told me, “You’ll have to learn to live with it.” I looked at my GP across his desk, and it’s possible I made some reply, but what I was saying internally was *Never*. I would not accept what he said. It was not right: I was only twenty-five. I wanted to cry, to scream, to rage against the unfairness of it all. Someone, somewhere, had come up with something that would help me walk again, and I was going to find it. I was determined to get back to normal, to be able to do all the things that I used to—work in my garden, plant lilies, push a wheelbarrow over the green fields of Port Hawk and then leave it all behind every spring to go north. North to the tossing grey waters of Hecate Straits that I loved. This year, for the second time, Jamie would take *Wyvern* out without me. It made me want to cry and scream against the unfairness of it all.

Dixon-Warren steepled his fingers together. “You are handling it much better than you were,” he said. “But I can’t tell you when you’ll get better. Or, really, to be honest, if.”

I looked at Dr. Dixon-Warren’s face, his high forehead with the eyebrows raised as he waited for my response. He reminded me of a greyhound, this lean man, head tilted slightly to one side, prominent nose, intelligent face.

“Well, thank you for the help,” I said politely, gripping the arms of my chair and levering myself up. I held my breath when the pain sizzled in. Courtesy was like a structure; when I couldn’t think, I could still rest my weight on it and the often-repeated words would come out at the right time. The pain lessened when I was all the way upright.

But excuse me, *learn to live with it?* There was no way on god’s green earth. Well, since conventional medicine had failed me, I’d try other avenues.

“Make another appointment to see me in, oh, three months,” Dr. Dixon-Warren said.

Not three weeks this time. Leaning on my cane, I turned and looked at him. Neither of us said *We're out of specialists*, but the unsaid words reverberated.

“Right.” Limping, I made my slow way out to the reception desk.

My back was giving me hell. As far as I was concerned, the “handling it much better” just meant that I was no longer saying how much it hurt.

Operating at twenty percent.

What stands out the most clearly about that time is the sense of dreadful mortification I felt. I had all this pain and disability to endure with no actual name attached to my back problem. And with no name it was . . . nothing. It was my fault.

I remember sitting on my bamboo gardening stool in my kitchen at Port Hawk, painting the lower cupboards a rich toffee colour. This was what I did: painted, cleaned, made things better. Only it was like it took enough energy to run an army to do this. It was like someone was always SHOUTING in my ear, only it was my sacro-iliac hurting. Sun slanted in through the front windows; the place faced south. I enjoyed the smell of paint. Now the cupboards would pick up one of the colours in the linoleum.

Jamie opened the front door. “Hello.” I heard him the thumping sound of his boots being shucked in the hall. “It looks wonderful, dear,” he said, coming into the kitchen. He ran a hand over my hair. “Good work.”

I smiled up at him. The smile felt a bit frayed. We had shared a place with a psych grad at one point and I knew Jamie was deliberately giving me positive reinforcement for doing things. It meant that I tried to find the maximum amount of activity I could tolerate every day and balance it off between how much pain I could endure.

Just thinking of this scene now makes me feel slightly sick. How hard he tried to keep me nailed into position. Why didn't I just go lie down? But, I guess to be fair to myself, I had tried that, and it hadn't helped much. So, eventually, I just got up and wrote or gardened, only at twenty percent speed. If I tried to type steadily at the novel I was working on for a whole morning, I'd be laid up for several days. So instead of doing that, I'd maybe type several poems. I couldn't weed the whole front flower bed but if I was clever and persistent, I could get in fifteen minutes a day gardening. It made me feel frantic. I defined myself by the amount I accomplished. Jamie did too. He wanted me to get on with things. Yet sustained activity meant I'd be flat on my back for three days or a week, really in pain. And the more pain I was in, the angrier Jamie got.

Our fights were drawn-out, vicious and frozen. I'd ask him something and it might take as long as ten minutes to get a reply back. He told me once he deliberately made our fights as nasty as possible: "If you're going to do this, I'll give you a real can of worms." His parents didn't fight and he didn't feel we should either. I had to be really determined before I brought up something which was bothering me. Almost each time we fought Jamie brought out the getting-to-be-standard heavyweight words, "I'm going to leave you."

"Quit threatening me with it," I snarled finally. "You're trying to make me get into line. You use it like some kind of club and I can tell you, I'm sick of it."

One particular quarrel we had in the kitchen, I hauled off and smacked him with my open palm across his face, movie style.

"You bitch!" His hands came up.

Oh, I'd hoped he wouldn't. But I should have known. I crooked my arm over my face. This was what, the fifth time it'd happened?

Jamie punched me in the head. Hard. My head smashed into the doorframe and I fell. I screamed when my sore back struck the floor. Jamie bent over and started hitting me with his fists. His face was so distorted he looked ugly: the mouth and eyes I knew were gone. At the same time I was fighting back, I saw for the first time how enormous his anger was. It was like a black cloud that bulged through my clean kitchen way out into the fresh air. I was amazed he'd go on punching me. Through the flail of my arms and his arms I could see the white paint on the doorframe was chipped a little; it could use repainting. My defence wasn't working. Jamie was a lot stronger than me. On the cold linoleum, I brought both arms up and covered my face so he wouldn't mark it, and just let him hit.

After the sixth undefended blow he stopped.

I picked myself up off the floor, panting with rage. He was going to pay for this. I had the format down by then. Once he had stopped hitting me for a good minute, I could pitch into him verbally for all I was worth. I hoisted myself all the way upright, crossed my arms over my chest and gave him a venomous stare.

Jamie's arms dropped to his sides.

I said, "I hope you're feeling really proud of yourself. Hitting someone in my condition takes a lot of courage."

His mouth was thin, his eyes like black glass. "Zo, I've had it. Had it to here with you and your abuse. Don't you ever bloody feel you can do that to me again. Ever, you understand? You cocksucking bitch."

My heart was galumphing but the thin cold whine of adrenaline straightened my spine. "Oh right, it's all my fault so you're totally justified in hitting me. Let's stop for tears of sympathy. Poor guy. Let's see, you outweigh me by forty pounds and I'm a woman and you're a

man, and you know what, I'm your wife. And I'm really really not well. Any one of those things would be reason enough to curb your temper. Any decent human being. . .”

Eventually Jamie would apologize. Eventually he would promise never ever to hit me again. But it really upset me because he'd promised before, too.

My mother volunteered on the Crisis Centre help lines for years and I figured she'd know how to respond. The next time I was over visiting, I waited until the two of us were alone in the kitchen. I noticed the white rice paper lantern on the ceiling was greasy; Mum needed a new one from Chinatown. On the black table with the chipped surface where she kept scores of pens in the drawers, the electric kettle was on for tea. I poured water from the kettle into the brown Betty teapot to warm it. Just another moment and the kettle would be boiling. I picked up the teapot and swished the water around. It felt warm and heavy in my hands.

Mum opened the back door to let her Siamese in. Camel bells jingled. I'd brought a string of them back from Montreal and they'd hung on the door from the sixties on. The brass was rusty now and the colourful rope they were tied to had faded to near-beige. The tinkle of the bells was incredibly comforting.

“Mum?”

“Yes?”

“Jamie hits me sometimes.”

My mother straightened up from patting her cat. She frowned and looked politely baffled.
“Really?”

I emptied the teapot into the sink, put in the teabags, poured boiling water onto them. We waited for our tea to steep, poured ourselves mugs, doctored them with milk and sugar and took them into the living room.

It took me a good five minutes to realize that was going to be the extent of our conversation on that subject. When I recognized Mum couldn't speak to me about the hitting, I felt a sad little shock in my chest. And I was embarrassed. I thought it was my fault for bringing it up. She knew and I knew that I shouldn't allow Jamie to hit me. Women who put up with that were foolish beyond belief. It was up to me to make my own situation better.

Now I look at the mother and daughter having tea in the livingroom of the Kerrisdale house with the coved plaster ceiling in the livingroom, and they are like figures wrong-way round in binoculars, far away in time but still vibrating with intensity. I sigh. Jamie did things like fix toilets for Mum without being asked, just show up with his tools one day, and make the upstairs bathroom work again. And he was supportive, helping Mum practically, if for instance a stoned daughter (my sister Karin) needed to be retrieved in the middle of the night. Mum and Jamie loved one another. It was quiet, it was low-key but I knew Mum felt like she couldn't ask for a better son-in-law. The two of them respected one another. They'd had eleven years of sharing family dinners, enthusiasms, sorrows. They greeted and parted with hugs. I would have thought in this situation Mum's loyalty would be one hundred percent with me. But obviously the crisp cut-and-dried answers that might suffice for a stranger on the phone weren't ones she could bring out for her own daughter, her own son-in-law. It was the only time my mother didn't, or couldn't, rescue me. She had no words for a landmine racketing about in her own kitchen.

In your notebook:

- 1.) Write down a couple of sentences on how you ignore parts of your problem(s) which seem too explosive to deal with. Allow yourself to feel the pain this brings. It will be truly fierce, but keep your attention on it, don't resist, and you'll find that in three minutes or so, as you learn how to acknowledge the magnitude and intensity of what you're really feeling, the energy will dissipate. The reason you do this is to genuinely let the pain pass. It's much more benign than allowing barely-acknowledged pain to lurk around and bother you for years. Which it will if you allow it. This can be a scary activity (no wonder I avoided this, you'll think!) but the results are so good; one actually deals with things instead of allowing the pain to terrorize/paralyze us. I wish I'd learned to do this years ago.
- 2.) Ask yourself: is there a power, a force, something good and wonderful and rich you believe in? What is this? Write down all the names you use. Do any of the names you use make you uncomfortable? Note which ones.
- 3.) Which names for good make you feel happy? Pick one you'll use for today.
- 4.) When your problem(s) come to thought today—maybe you're in pain now—look at that thought, acknowledge that you see and feel it there, and then slide in the name for good that makes you happy. Lean on that name. Put your weight on it. Say to yourself, *For the next hour, this is where I'm going to rest.* Allow that name for good to be the solid ground on which your thoughts come back and back to.
- 5.) Come back later in the evening and write a paragraph on what you noticed as you used that name for good during your day.