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Guardian at the Threshold between Life and Death.

I drove home from town at about eight o'clock. I had seen the movie "Walk of the Penguins". It had filled me with joy and excitement about life and about my own sixty-seven years of human existence in this mysterious and beautiful world. I love to see movies that linger like good friends with whom one could sit silently or talk and muse. I avoid criminal thrillers and close my eyes when I see blood and brutality on the screen.

When I approached my house in the hills outside Santa Fe, I saw flashing lights of police cars and an ambulance. My chest tightened. In these drought stricken hills of New Mexico, the first thought is always: "Fire?" No, I didn't see smoke. My neighbor Linda stood beside the road and waved.

"There was an accident, right near your driveway," Linda pointed up the road. "Somebody came to our house to call 911 and George walked up the hill to help the injured person. I told them to take a towel with them" she stretched her hands forward as if holding something precious. "Head wounds bleed a lot and maybe George could put the towel under the head of the young guy who fell off his four-wheeler bike. It seems he turned over, lost control in the steep curve. I think you can't drive home today. They won't let anybody through. I'm just out here to regulate traffic", Linda said.

I saw a black police car slowly roll backwards down the road. It stopped in front of my car. The officer walked towards us. I thought “tight uniform, they always look so sexy with these heavy belts.” And then I felt ashamed about such an untimely thought.

The officer had a serious face. “You can’t get through, Ma’m, there’s an accident up the road,” he leaned into my window. Sweat gathered on his forehead.

“I live there, the next driveway up. That’s my home,” I whispered, as if that gave me special rights. “Is the accident before the driveway?”

I want to be home, I thought, and God! why just at my driveway, a person suffering, do they need my help? I’m not good when somebody’s bleeding.

The officer pointed, “That’s where the injured is. At the driveway, nobody’s allowed in”. He turned and walked away, his car phone screeched and he hurried to take the call.

I said to my neighbor. “Linda, is it o.k. to leave my car at your house? I can walk through the rocks to my place before it gets dark. I’ll pick it up tomorrow?”

She agreed and I parked and gathered my stuff to carry home. I locked the car and saw George returning down the hill. I realized I didn’t want to hear any details. I felt shaky, afraid and helpless and wanted to avoid any lengthy descriptions. I needed to be alone.

I scrambled up the hill through cut branches and fallen trunks from dead trees. A cactus cut my ankle and my sandals slipped on the steep terrain. The grocery bag fell, I picked it up and continued. When I neared the voices and flashing lights I felt like a thief. I approached this “forbidden territory”, diligently avoiding being seen from the road, as if I might be caught by the forces of life and death and sentenced to something. I felt childish.

“But that’s my home, my land” I thought. It didn’t matter. I opened my door, at last and dropped the bags in the kitchen.

What to do now? I brewed a hot tea and sat outside on the porch bench. I have never been at the scene of an accident and have been spared the world of police and emergency. I felt anxious and concerned. I am not a viewer of television shows about police activities.

I walked slowly along my driveway towards the accident. I approached hesitantly with respect and gentleness, feeling deep compassion for the unknown person who was hurt. A cool wind blew the scattered noise towards me. I stopped at some distance so not to catch the attention of the officers. As I arrived the Ambulance car turned and left. I was relieved thinking – “Things are o.k now. He’s taken care of.” I stepped out on the road. And then I saw this pile of mangled fabrics and discovered that the young man still lay there, on the asphalt road. There was no towel underneath his head.

“Like Christ on the cross” flashed through my mind. He was on his back his arms spread wide and his head rolled to the side. He seemed to look downhill in the direction where his trickling blood, as if he watched it leave his body. No one was near by. The loneliness of this body on the barren road pierced my heart. He lay there in the still center of a wheel of police activity. Voices snarled around him like bats and bright lights carved black shadows with sharp lines. But where he lay on the ground was ice-cold stillness.

I realized that he was dead. The blood had left his body like a red garland and had taken his life with it and spread it thin over the ground.

A police officer approached me, “Ma’m you can’t be here. This is a crime scene. We have a dead person here and nobody’s allowed close”.

“But this young man is all alone on the barren road”, I protested. Tears ran down my cheeks. I felt timid. This was official territory circled by yellow ribbons shouting “Keep out!” and I was an intruder or a stranger, like this forlorn person on the road.

I walked back into the shadows of the trees and settled on a rock to hold vigil for this human being. Somebody needed to embrace and support this soul that was leaving the body. I prayed and stayed near for long time. In my personal way I created a space for one of the most profound experiences, the transition into death. I envisioned the angel of death sitting at his head and embracing the soul of this young man, wings spread out over his lonesome body.

I came back every hour to look for the man on the road and to bless him. At midnight the blinding lights were still flashing. More photographs were being taken

of him and his vehicle. It seemed that the whole machinery around this so-called crime scene was functioning perfectly. Every inch and trace was explored to reconstruct the accident that no one had witnessed. But I also saw that at the core of this eerie scene was a human being who had drastically ended his life moments ago. And this person was treated as an object in this research.

I stood there in the darkness and felt deep sadness, realizing that there were no rituals for situations like this, rituals that would honor the magnitude of this event. Technology and mystery met in the place where the young man died, but the mystery was disregarded and little attention given to the sacredness of death.

I asked the police officer “why does no one take care of his body, why do you let him lay there on the barren road for hours?” The officer shrugged his shoulders. “We don’t have a vehicle for his transport right now.”

When I fell asleep after midnight I knew that I would not forget the image of the lonesome, bleeding person on the asphalt in the middle of all the activity and noise.

The next morning, when I approached I saw they had poured sand over the blood that had trickled down the hill. The color of the sand had turned pink.

A neighbor who lived on top of the mesa drove by. He stopped his white pick-up truck and said “So that’s where it happened. I knew the young guy, he was always speeding and didn’t use a helmet. He courted danger, that’s how these things occur. Once he almost drove into me. I expected something like this, one day.” He waved his hands in the air.

I thought it might help to think that it was this young man’s own fault. But it did not. What helped was to build a stone monument and put a cross on top. I fixed a red plastic rose on the wooden crucifix, in the place where Jesus usually hangs. “That’s tacky!” I argued with myself, but did it anyway.

On the same day and the next other people brought fresh flowers and crosses, stones and shells. And the relatives of the young man held a memorial service at the place of his death. His father came and knocked at our door to thank us, he was bent over with quiet grief.

I stopped every day when I left the driveway and looked at the colored sand that spread down the hill like a banner. Some days later a gorgeous thunderstorm moved in from the west. The rain washed the sand into the trench where the bright New Mexico sunflowers held on to it with their roots.

But the stain stayed on the road and marks like a dark banner a long trail down the hill, more than twenty feet long.

I suggest that our police corps integrate volunteers into their crews, volunteers who can be called and asked to come to scenes of accidents. Like fire fighters, they just show up as soon as possible. They do nothing except sit beside people in sorrow and fear and pain or those who have perished. They offer presence and compassion, prayers and care. They touch nothing and do not disturb the research around the scene, but give their attention solely to the human being's dignity and spiritual needs. They may pray, comfort or be totally quiet, but they are present. That's one of the best gifts to offer a person in distress, at the threshold between the worlds.

There are many retired people who are familiar with thoughts and experiences of dying. They have time, wisdom and maturity to assist and fill this need for guardianship. Why not build a corps of "*Guardians at the Threshold*" and use this potential to make our bloody scenes of sudden transition from life to death more human? That will lift it to the level of magnitude and sacredness that it deserves.

We need somebody to sit at our side when we leave our body. This has been tradition in all cultures at all times. I offer myself to be one of them.

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