

“ The Solace of Fierce Landscapes” by Belden Lane

I was standing on the cutaway bank of the Chama River that skirts the Christ of the Desert Monastery near Albuquerque and thinking about the possibility of finding much needed solace in this particular “Fierce Landscape”.

Lane’s book blindsided me. I had expected a safe, cognitive teaching on the history of desert spirituality with an illuminating description of the desert as spiritual metaphor; instead it quickly became an unexpectedly intimate companion and a peculiar grace. Lane said “I write for people...hungry for something of substance on the subject of spirituality, for desert lovers who can’t figure out why they are so drawn to wild and empty terrain, for those left numb by the sustained weariness of death experienced close at hand... with a sufficient sense of loss to make a landscape of abandonment particularly compelling”. Those words spoke to a deep and lonely place in me.

Lane recognized the desert experience in the death of his mother, weaving fear, abandonment, loss and historical desert spirituality together. His compelling words engaged my thinking while piercing my heart.

Within three years I had lost my only sister Kris, a dear friend Barbara, and my father. Their illnesses and deaths cruelly tag-teamed one another. I lived in the anxieties of medical diagnosis and equipment, hospitals, radiation, Hospice and endless tedious appointments for eight long years of care- giving and loss. This became my desert place. Lane’s comment, “All theologizing, if its worth its salt, must submit to the test of hospital gowns, droning T.V. sets, and food spilled in the clumsy effort to eat.” were loudly echoed in my own experiences.

Driving down the long dirt desert road towards the Monastery evoked forgotten images of my father’s ranch on the outskirts of a small Texas border town. Grief overwhelmed me in a flood of unbidden memories. I had not taken the time nor had the emotional reserves to mourn his death on the tail of the other losses. Now the fierce landscape and Lane’s writing conspired to hem me without and within and forced me to confront what I had stoically buried.

The decision to spend most of my time at the monastery in solitude and silence was an immediate, unplanned but crucial one. I rarely left my ten by ten foot cell but never felt alone. Here I was free to grieve, to remember, to memorialize and to finally move through my own desert place. Lane calls this a “difficult grace” for good reason. It was a painful and dark wrenching time as I lived in the confusing raw emotions of anger, abandonment and deep loss, all steeped in sorrow.

Outside the panorama of muted browns, ocher and red striated hills sporadically punctuated by cows and monks dressed alike in crisp charcoal calmed and blessed me. The gentle kindness and prayers of my companions soothed and protected me. Hearing the predictable sounds of the chapel bell echoing through the valley and the ritual daily offices cocooned my wounds, while the stark, raw beauty of the desert landscape touched me in many deep and powerful ways. The pale soft dirt, the solitude, the Chama River marrying the Rio Grande that would eventually flow past my father’s ranch, the sound of wind, water and wildlife engulfing the senses - all conspired to comfort, instruct and challenge me. Lane’s book became a true and dear companion. The desert near Albuquerque and Lane’s book became for me places of difficult grace as well as the welcome catalyst that eventually brought me to a place of deep restoration, healing and unexpected peace.