

Refuge

I have never cried as much reading a book as I did reading Refuge, by Terry Tempest Williams. After reading it through a second time, I cried, if anything, even more. The story and its telling convey raw emotion.

The author tells us clearly what this excellent book is about. "My refuge exists in my capacity to love," she writes. "If I can learn to love death then I can begin to find refuge in change." Terry Tempest Williams weaves together two stories of change: the story of her relationship with her mother who dies of cancer and the story of her relationship with nature. Each of us has difficulty with life transitions. This is the story of one woman's practice of coming to terms with the changes in her life by taking refuge in nature.

Refuge is a book about intimacy. The dictionary defines intimate as "Inmost, essential, most inward, most private or personal." Intimacy requires depth; it takes time. In an impatient culture which devalues intimacy, we have lost knowledge of the ways of essential closeness -- with ourselves, with each other and with nature. Terry Tempest Williams draws us into the intimacy of her relationships with her mother and with nature, and finally into the intimacy of death itself.

Diane Tempest's dying takes place within the context of her family -- her husband, her four children, her parents, and her husband's parents. We meet all of these people. We encounter too the Mormon community in which their lives are deeply rooted. But mostly we learn about Terry, about her mother, and about their relationship. In a moment of clarity about accepting her cancer, not resisting what is ahead, Diane asks her daughter to help her through her death. In the end, we witness this event. The rest of the family leaves Diane briefly; Terry remains with her, and Terry breathes her mother into death in the same way midwives and labor coaches help mothers breathe their babies into life. It is an unforgettable passage.

The connection they shared in the moment of death is reflective of the way they lived their lives. They spent a lot of time hiking and camping in beautiful places. Just as nature is the bed-rock of Terry's life, so it was also something the two of them shared. The richness and variety of their life together is phenomenal. They traveled to New York where they went to plays and got their faces made-up at a department store. They got their astrological charts done and discussed their meaning. They went to a casino and played the slot machines. They also got angry and hurt each other. Their mother-daughter relationship as portrayed here is one which many daughters would love to have

with their mothers.

The intimacy that exists between Diane and Terry is a constant in the book. Diane shared the most important parts of herself with her daughter, including glimpses into the magic of her marriage. While traveling in Switzerland with her husband, John, after completing eleven months of chemotherapy, Diane wrote to Terry: "We are hiking up and down the Alps together, walking farther than I ever thought possible. We have slept on the grass next to cows with bells around their necks. We have walked thigh-high in wildflowers. The natural world is a third party in our marriage."

From her earliest years, Terry finds refuge in nature. She works and lives as a naturalist, rediscovering herself as she explores the out-of-doors. "I know the solitude my mother speaks of. It is what sustains me and protects me from my mind. It renders me fully present. I am desert. I am mountains. I am Great Salt Lake. . . . Peace is the perspective found in patterns. When I see ring-billed gulls picking on the flesh of decaying carp, I am less afraid of death. We are no more and no less than the life that surrounds us. My fears surface in my isolation. My serenity surfaces in my solitude." Her own sensuality is mirrored in her visions of nature. When she is camping in dunes, she reports, "And they are female. Sensuous curves -- the small of a woman's back. Breasts. Buttocks. Hips and pelvis. They are the natural shapes of Earth. Let me lie naked and disappear."

Each member of the family comes to life as the story unfolds. Diane wins my heart over and over with her courage, her wisdom, and her honesty. The family gathers in her final days to grieve openly. Each member speaks of his or her love for Diane and tells tender stories from the past. Diane gently responds, "I am sorry I cannot be with your feelings. It is very different for me." She focuses on her passing; she says at another time that what she has to do goes beyond family.

Terry's father, John, shows his pain by erupting from time to time. At one point he throws his children out of the house, telling them he wants to be alone with his dying wife. In the morning, however, he realizes he cannot go through this experience alone, and goes to each of them to apologize. At the end of the book, the first acknowledgment the author gives is to her father. "First and foremost, I must honor my father, John Henry Tempest, III. He is a proud and private man. I thank him for understanding and respecting my desire to tell this story. "

Brooke Williams, Terry's husband, comes across as a quiet, sensitive presence. He shares Terry's love of nature and recognizes the profundity of Terry's involvement with her mother's death. On their 11th wedding anniversary, as they share champagne, Brooke tells Terry, "Don't worry about me in the coming months. I know where you need to be."

Terry shows us a family which is unusually open, communicative, and supportive. In these times when there is a great deal of focus on the pain within families, it is inspiring to read about an intact family -- one whose members are intimate with each other, who show their caring and connection.

The family lives within the context of the Mormon Church. While Terry quite clearly condemns the patriarchy which is rampant in the structure of the church, she also validates the support and the strength which that community offers.

The first time I read the book, some of Terry's descriptions of nature did not hold my attention. I began very carefully reading them, but as the process of her mother's dying became more immediate, I was less interested in hearing about the birds. I became immersed in wanting to know what was happening to her mother and to the family. When I went back the second time and read the story in a more meditative way, I reveled in the gems in her nature stories. At times the pacing of the two stories does not fully integrate, though they are essential to the central themes.

There is no way to describe the many layers of this book adequately. Weaving back and forth between images of nature and death is both so large and, at the same time, so intimate that we are stretched into a new vision. In a similar way, acupuncture teaches us to look to nature for refuge and guidance.

Her writing is beautiful, careful, passionate, and understated. I often had the experience of reading a brief paragraph, then just sitting there, stunned, almost unable to breathe from the intensity of the feelings of what she has just so deftly described. She is a minimalist. In describing a solitary journey to a forsaken corner of Great Salt Lake, Terry writes, "In the severity of a salt desert, I am brought down to my knees by its beauty. My imagination is fired. My heart opens and my skin burns in the passion of these moments. I will have no other gods before me."

When I was deciding whether to become an acupuncturist, I had two other possible career choices. One was to become a midwife; the other was to become a death counselor, in the style of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Ultimately I decided that in being an acupuncturist, I had the possibility of attending people in the process of birth, in the process of death, and through all the natural

cycles in between.

Because of a long-time interest I have had in knowing about death, and in order to be more helpful to dying patients, I have read many books on the subject. I recommend two that are similar in their closely human depiction of the dying process: one is another mother/daughter story, Simone de Beauvoir's, [A Very Easy Death](#); the other about a wife tending her husband's death, Gerda Lerner's [A Death of One's Own](#). Both are excellent.

[Refuge](#) is not a philosophical treatise. It is a nitty-gritty book about death, from the inside out. It includes the soaring, lofty experiences, but it also includes the down and dirty moments, both physical and emotional. Just as aspects of nature are ordinary, death too is ordinary; it becomes extraordinary here because it takes place within the context of intimacy. I believe most of us would like to be closer and more honest with our parents as they die. Terry Tempest Williams brings us an image of what is possible. The tears I so frequently shed as I read this book arise from a longing to be able to go through an experience like this with my parents and other loved ones as the times come.

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