



Soul
searching
in the
winter rain

*"My friends tell me I have an intimacy problem.
But they don't really know me."
— Garry Shandling*

The January rain melts through the layer of snow on our lawn. While I watch the rain, my wife spends Sunday afternoon visiting her mother at a senior care home in Rutland.

She has visited her mother in many nursing homes in the last 10 years. I cannot go; I have lost both my parents in hospitals and hospices. The visit is something she does alone.

My parents and my wife's parents were not together in their final years. As a result, Alberta and I do not imagine what it is like to die alone: we have seen it.

Up close. Three times.

What happens to marriage in the final stages of life?

"Infidelity is the primary challenge of marriage," said the one-armed poet. When Cecil Giscombe told me this in the Earl's restaurant in Prince George nearly 20 years ago, I thought he was just another in a long line of people who ought to know better.

"It's not a matter of if," Cecil said, "it's when."

I burned when he said this. I was sure I could do better.

We have all known people who have indulged in affairs. The standard wisdom is that infidelity will threaten and destroy most relationships sooner or later. Others say that infidelity is a shared "product" created in some way by each partner.

Therapists will tell you with certainty that most relationships can overcome infidelity and even grow stronger.

Like you, I have seen all kinds.

Some of us have a zero-tolerance view of the subject. One strike, and it is over. Others see infidelity as natural, not unlike winter rain.

Infidelity, I have learned, is not really what we think it is. It is not really about sex. It is not really about betrayal. It is not really about dishonesty, morality or religion either.

Infidelity is about a deep indescribable sadness.

I learned this about infidelity, not through personal experience, extensive in-



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terviews or by reviewing academic research.

I learned this in possibly the most unlikely place you can think of: the hospice.

Ever been to a hospice?

Since I have, I will spoil the surprise: there are some very wise people who visit, work and volunteer there. The joke is that everybody in a hospice is dying – dying to get in, dying to get out.

People at the end of their lives can offer some very interesting and counter-intuitive insights about life and love.

Hospices are places where you will see much beauty, comedy and truth – and we are just talking about the nurses.

If you talk to someone who is dying, if you listen intently to the stories, if you listen for the truth, then you will conclude something about we human beings; we are very hard on other people and ourselves.

I know a 40-year-old woman who cheated on her husband after she successfully fought and overcame cancer. Her husband continues to sleep beside her on the same bed, but he is a virtual stranger to her heart. More than that, he is a stranger to her deep disappointment in him.

She says she cannot leave the devoted father of her young children.

Nor can she express her sadness to him. Ironically, her victory over death has killed their intimacy; but she cares for him just enough to be unable to speak the truth.

I know a 45-year-old man, a doctor and father of teenagers, who is having an affair with a young woman.

They have never touched; they do not even speak intimately.

"All I know," the man says, "is that I am lost. I want to feel something, and all I feel

is nothing. I want to feel more alive."

"Intimacy is not what we think it is," says the dying person at the hospice. "Intimacy is one way we counter the fear of death, the feeling of nothingness. Will I find intimacy through one true love or a dozen affairs?"

"I wish had more relationships. I wish I had deeper relationships. I wish I hadn't been so afraid to live."

"Can you stop the sadness?" I ask.

"I don't know," says my friend. "We're all sad. A sad person thinks that love will heal all wounds. A sad person mistakes excitement for contentment. A sad person believes the fairy tale of life: that love can heal anything."

While my wife is visiting her mother, I will play music with my children, maybe try a game of Scrabble, and then we will wait until Alberta comes home.

Invariably, she will return emotionally exhausted. It is not easy when your mother doesn't know your name. It is not easy to watch your parents at the end.

Sixteen years ago, my mother's last conversations with me were very direct. She taught me on her death bed that it is never too late to speak honestly and lovingly.

"It is never too late," she said.

Men desire. Women desire, too. Desire may be a simple fact of life.

What we imagine in a split second of fantasy does not tell us that we are sick or unhealthy or immoral. Our imagination tells that we are alive, that we are not blind to beauty and possibility.

At the same time, in these brief yet timeless moments, we can become aware of our own sadness, of the incompleteness of our unions; of the unfinished desire in our souls.

Sadness, my friends at the hospice tell me, is soothed by an openness, by something close to confession.

"I don't want to wait until the end of my life to speak truthfully," says an old friend. "After all, there may be no one left to hear me say that I wish I had loved more deeply."

The winter rain can heal.

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