

VIRGINIA'S JOURNEY

In a small coastal village in eastern Maine, there lives a woman who is as at peace with her life as anyone I've ever met. She is slender and delicately boned with innocent eyes and long gray hair. Her home is a small, weathered, gray cottage with big windows that look out over the Atlantic Ocean. I see her now in my mind's eye, standing in her sunlit kitchen. She's just taken molasses muffins out of the oven, and the water is warming on the old stove for tea. Music is playing softly in the background. There are wild flowers on her table and potted herbs on the sideboard beside the tomatoes she's picked from her garden. From the kitchen, I can see the book-lined walls of her sitting room and her old dog snoozing on the faded Oriental rug. There are sculptures scattered here and there of whales and dolphins; of the wolf and coyote; of the eagle and the crow. Hanging plants grace the corners of the room, and a huge yucca tree stretches up towards the skylight. It is a home that contains one human being and a multitude of other living things. It's a place that once entered, becomes difficult to leave.

She first came to coastal Maine in her early forties, when her hair was deep brown and her shoulders stooped. She has remained here walking straight and tall for the past 22 years. She felt defeated when she first arrived. She had lost her only child to a fatal automobile accident, her breasts to cancer, and her husband four years later to another woman. She confided that she'd come here to die and had learned, instead, how to live.

When she first arrived, she hadn't slept a whole night through since the death of her daughter. She would pace the floors, watch television, and read until two or three in the morning when her sleeping pills finally took effect. Then she would rest at last until lunchtime. Her life felt meaningless, each day and night just another test of her endurance. "I felt like a worthless lump of cells and blood and bone, just wasting space," she remembers. Her only promise of deliverance was the stash of pills that she kept tucked away in her top drawer. She planned to swallow them at summer's end. With all of the violence of her life, she would at least die in a gentle season.

"I would walk on the beach every day. I'd stand in the frigid ocean water and concentrate on the pain in my feet; eventually, they'd go numb and wouldn't hurt anymore. I wondered why there was nothing in the world that would numb my heart. I put on a lot of miles that summer, and I saw how beautiful the world still was. That just made me more bitter at first. How dare it be so beautiful, when life could be so ugly. I thought it was a cruel joke -- that it could be so beautiful and yet so terrible here at the same time. I hated a great deal then. Just about everybody and everything was abhorrent to me.

I remember sitting on the rocks one day and along came a mother with a small child. The little girl was so precious; she reminded me of my daughter. She was dancing around and around and talking a mile a minute. Her mother seemed to be distracted and wasn't really paying attention. There it was, the bitterness again. I resented this woman who had this beautiful child and had the indecency to ignore her. (I was very quick to judge back then.) Anyway, I watched the little girl playing and I began to cry and cry. My eyes were running, and my nose was running, and there I sat. I was a little surprised. I had thought I'd used up all of my tears years ago. I hadn't wept in years. Thought I was all dried up and out. Here they were though, and they began to feel good. I just let them come and they came and came.

I started meeting people. I didn't really want to because I still hated everybody. These villagers are an interesting lot though, awfully hard to hate. They're plain and simple- talking people and they just sort of reel you in without even seeming to pull at your line. I started to receive invitations to this and that, and finally I accepted one to attend a potluck supper. I found myself laughing for the first time in years at a man who seemed to love to make fun of himself. Maybe it was the mean streak I still had, laughing at him, but I don't think so. I think I was charmed by his attitude. He made so many of his trials seem humorous.

I went to church the following Sunday. I sat there and waited to get angry as I heard this fat man with soft hands talking about God. What did he know of heaven or of hell? And yet, I didn't get mad. I started to feel kind of peaceful as I listened to him. He spoke of Ruth. Now I knew very little about the Bible, and this was the first time I had heard about Ruth. Ruth had suffered greatly. She had lost her husband and left behind her homeland. She was poor and worked very hard gathering fallen grain in the fields of Bethlehem to feed herself and her mother-in-law. She was a young woman with a very strong faith for which she was rewarded. I had no faith and no rewards. I longed to believe in the goodness and existence of God, but how could I? What kind of a God would allow such terrible things to happen? It seemed simpler to accept that there was no God. Still, I kept going to church. Not because I believed. I just liked to listen to the stories that were told in such a gentle voice by the minister. I liked the singing, too. Most of all, I appreciated the peacefulness I felt there. I began to read the Bible and other spiritual works. I found so many of them to be filled with wisdom. I didn't like the Old Testament; I still don't. Too much violence and punishment for my taste, but I loved the Psalms and the Songs of Solomon. I found great comfort in the teachings of the Buddha, too. I began to meditate and to chant. Summer had led to fall, and I was still here, my pills safely hidden away. I still planned to use them, but I wasn't in such a hurry.

I had lived most of my life in the southwest where the changing of seasons is a very subtle thing compared to the transformations that take place in the northeast. I told myself that I would live to watch the seasons unfold before departing from this earth. Knowing I would die soon enough (and when I chose) brought me some comfort. It also inspired me to look very closely at things I had been oblivious to for so long. I watched the heavy snowfalls for the first time, believing that this would also be my last, as I would not be here to see them the next winter. I had always had such beautiful and elegant clothes (I had been raised in an upper middle-class family where appearances were of the utmost importance). I cast them off in exchange for the comfort and warmth of wool, flannel and cotton. I began to move about in the snow more easily now and found my blood invigorated by the cold. My body grew stronger as I shoveled snow. I began sleeping deeply and well at night and was able to throw my sleeping pills away (not my deadly stash though).

I met a very bossy woman who insisted that I help her with her various humanitarian projects. She taught me to knit for the poor children as we sat in her delicious smelling kitchen surrounded often by her own 'grandbabies'. She scolded me into accompanying her to the nursing home where she read and ran errands for the elderly. She arrived one day at my home armed with a mountain of wrapping paper and demanded that I help her wrap gifts for the needy. I usually felt angry and invaded by her. Whenever I could, I pretended at first not to be at home when she came calling. One day I lost my temper and called her a busybody and stormed out of the house. A few days later she was back in my dooryard. When I opened my

door, she plopped down at the table, told me to make her a cup of coffee, and behaved as if nothing had happened. We never did speak of my temper tantrum in all of our years together.

We became the best of friends, and it was during that first year that she rooted herself into my heart, that I began to come alive. I absorbed the blessings that came from serving others, just as my skin had gratefully absorbed the healing bag of balm I had been given by my friend. I began to rise early in the morning. All of the sudden, I had much to do in this life. I watched the sunrise, feeling privileged and imagining myself to be the one of the first to see it appear as a resident now in this northern land of the rising sun.

I found God here. I don't know what his or her name is, and I don't really care. I only know that there is a magnificent presence in our universe and in the next one and the next after that. My life has a purpose now. It's to serve and to experience pleasure - it's to grow, and to learn and to rest and to work and to play. Each day is a gift to me, and I enjoy them all (some certainly less than others) in the company of people whom I've come to love at times, and at other times in solitude. I recall a verse I read somewhere. It says, 'Two men look out through the same bars: one sees mud, and one the stars.' I choose to gaze at the stars now, and I see them everywhere, not only in the darkness but in the daylight too. I threw out the pills that I was going to use to do myself in long ago. They'd turned all powdery anyway. I will live as long and as well as I am permitted to, and I will be thankful for every moment I am on this earth."

I carry this woman in my heart wherever I go now. She offers me great comfort and hope. I would dearly love to possess the wisdom, strength and peace which she has acquired during her lifetime. We walked, she and I, on the beach three summers ago. I felt such wonder and contentment at her side. When it was time for me to return home, I glanced down and noticed how our footprints had converged in the sand. I hold that image within me still; of our two separate sets of footprints united for all time in my memory.

©Tammie Byram Fowles, LISW, Ph.D., [SagePlace](#) excerpt from her book "BirthQuake".