

Being present in the absence

She came to see me the other day. Her husband had died two years ago. She was wrestling with some anger issues. She was angry at God, not so much because her husband died, but because her husband lived with anger all his life, angry at God. He was angry at God because God “took” his mother when he was twelve years old and his father when he was fifteen. Both died from brain aneurisms. Her husband lived the rest of his life being angry at God with no one to help him work through his anger and process it. He even died at odds with his children and was not able to make peace with them. Some of that anger was transferred to his wife and she adopted the same anger in her relationship with God.

Having listened to her, I tried to help her understand her husband’s anger as well as how she adopted some of that anger herself. Some time later, she left after making a confession.

The encounter reminded me of a novel I had read recently. It was called, “Let the Great World Spin,” by Colum McCann. It was the winner of a National Book Club Award.

McCann takes a “Stab at personal healing” in the aftermath of 9/11 and the Twin Towers tragedy in New York City. He wondered “how it might be possible to talk about the events of that terrible September, and all the Septembers that followed.” He realized he “should go backwards. Wherever we are now is wherever we once were.” Interestingly, he “wanted to know how he felt about war, and art, and liberation theology, and issues of technology, all of these things that were on our minds back in ’74 (when Philippe Petit walked a tightrope between the World Trade Center on August 7, 1974) and are on our minds today.”

We meet characters who are citizens of the world thrown together in a mix of concrete maze. We meet trollers in the night; judges on the bench; firefighters in their boots, immigrants in their search, monks in their quest to save and innocence personified and often tarnished. We meet life-size but flawed characters such as Corrie, the rebel priest, Tillie, and Jaslyn the trollers; Soderberg, the judge and his wife Claire. They all walk the tightrope of life, searching for love, recognition, healing and hope.

Prostitutes share some wisdom about love. “Some people think love is the end of the road, and if you’re lucky enough to find it, you stay there. Other people say it just becomes a cliff you dive off., but most people who’ve been around awhile know it’s just a thing that changes day by day, and depending on how much you fight for it, you get it, or you hold on to it, or you lose it, but sometimes, it’s never even there in the first place.”

Another prostitute wrestles with the idea of God, and says, “I don’t know who God is but if I meet Him anytime soon, I’m going to get Him in the corner until He tell me the truth. ...I’ll get him to tell me why He done what he done to me...and why do all the good ones die...and how He allowed me to do what I done.”

We meet Corrie, the radical, monkist priest who befriends the trollers and defends them against the demands of the pimps. The trouble is that Corrie dies too soon, looking out for the least of His brethren. Along the way, he wrestles with his own demons and his own vocation. He has an uncanny ability to see that life must pass through difficulty in order to achieve any modicum of beauty. He discovered that “there was no better faith than a wounded faith.” He seemed to spend his life wounding his faith in order to test it – “just another stone on his way to God.”

Perhaps Corrie’s most poignant reflection was when he reminds us: “That’s what I like about God. You get to know Him by his occasional absence.”

Amid all the destruction, there is still a certain innocence that pervades life; a certain Presence in the absence, a certain healing and hope amid the ashes of people’s lives. Maybe the irony of life is when one of the prostitutes quotes the poet, Rumi who says, “whoever brought me here is going to have to take me home.”