A Life in Light

Meditations on Impermanence

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Introduction

Thomas A. Edison was born in 1847, and on October 21, 1879, he invented the incandescent light bulb. I was born on October 21, 1947, one hundred years after Edison's birth and on the sixty-eighth anniversary of his famous invention. By the time I discovered these facts, I was in my forties, but I had already developed a lifelong fascination with light.

Indeed, my first memory is of light dancing in the leaves of a tall tree in my grandmother's front yard in Sparta, Missouri. Aunt Grace had placed me on my back on a blanket under this tree. I remember the sunlight sparkling through the changing colors of the fluttering leaves and the occasional patch of cloud shadow that affected everything. I didn't have language, but I knew what I was watching was beautiful.

I remember nothing else about the first two years of my life, but I recall this as clearly as if it happened this morning. Light sticks in my memory that way. And ever since that seminal moment, dappled light has held the power to induce wonder in me.

I take note of shadows and sunspots and if a cloud crosses the sun. I stop to admire the sparkling dew on grass and flowers, the rainbows in lawn sprinklers, and the way certain kinds of light shine on birds' wings or breasts. I notice my cat glistening in the sunbeams and the way light sparkles on nearby Holmes Lake.

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These minute alterations in light affect me emotionally and even spiritually.

When I swim, the parabolas of light dancing on the bottom of the pool make me happy. So does the way sunlight splashing through rain can paint my porch with light. When I see shafts of sunlight breaking through storm clouds, I pay attention. When we travel, it is light that most astonishes me. Light in the Sandhills of Nebraska, in Alaska, in San Francisco, and in all the mountain towns along the front range of the Rockies.

As a college student and waitress, I avoided living in basement apartments. I cannot stay long in a room without a window, and, during the day, the shades are always up at my house. I would rather shovel horse manure outside than work in a cubicle or back room of a store.

I am solar-powered. As a child, I spent every waking moment outdoors in the summer. I spent my mornings mixing mud pies, cookies, and cakes on wooden slabs under an elm tree. And I spent long afternoons and evenings in our municipal pool. That's when I began reminding the other children to look at how sunlight twinkled on water.

I am fascinated by every kind of light—sunrise and sunset, light sparkling in fountains, and the light of celestial bodies. A prism anywhere makes my heart sing.

My memory is encoded by light. Whether I've been hunting for morels along the Platte or listening to my grandson Coltrane play music, I filter my experiences by quality of light. I can tell my story by simply remembering these lightscapes.

One of my favorite words is the Japanese word *komorebi*, which refers to the interplay of light and leaves as sunlight shines through trees. It has other meanings too. It can refer to a melancholic longing for a person, place, or thing that is far away. Or it can refer to impermanence. Dappled light shows us that what is here now will be gone in an instant. Nothing stays the same.

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Resilience is the ability to find light in dark times. We build it by our attitudes, efforts, and coping skills. All of our lives we face crises that require us to grow. Struggle defines and builds us.

As a child, I worked hard to stay sunny. I looked for people to love me, and I basked in the nurturing relationships of those who did. I found solace in the natural world and in swimming. I discovered early the joys of hard work and of helping people and animals. The coping skills I learned as a child have stayed with me. With each life stage, I have used them to stay calm and grounded.

All through my life, I've loved people and lost them. When I was a child, my father was off in the army in a faraway war. After he returned, I spent a year without my mother. In my twenties, my father died, and in my forties, my mother died. As I've grown older, I've had to say goodbye to many people I love.

When I wrote my last book, *Women Rowing North*, I was in full sunlight. My adult children and all five grandchildren were nearby. I lived a life of travel, family, and friends. On weekends I danced to live music.

That brightness has faded. The young children who surrounded me have grown up or moved to Canada. And the pandemic has created painful separations for our family.

To be happy the last few years, I have needed to grow. I have utilized every skill I know to find the light. And I have learned to look inside myself for the love I cannot find in the world. I've developed new rituals and routines and now feel a renewed appreciation for life as it is, not as I wish it to be. If the first part of my life was about building attachments, the last two years have been about learning to detach. I am making an effort to find the love and warmth I need in my own heart.

No matter our age, we experience loss. A kindergartener must say goodbye to a beloved teacher at the end of the year. A pet dies. Or a grandparent. And every day we lose the world that was yesterday.

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As we age, the losses multiply. We may no longer be in the workplace. Our friends and relatives move away or cross the River Styx. If we have children, they grow up and move on with their lives. We have no choice but to face impermanence.

The pandemic heightened our sense of isolation and loss, but these emotions are inevitable under any life circumstances. Eventually, one way or another, we all say goodbye to everyone we love. However, in the interim, we have the opportunity to grow our ability to find light within our own hearts and to orient toward the light of transcendence, which is finding joy and bliss in the midst of our pain. When we face loss, we can learn to experience wonder in order to restore our balance. There is a way to make this arithmetic work.

We can experience flashes of enlightenment. In the midst of ordinary life, a certain quality of light can transport me into bliss. My self dissolves into deep time.

Bliss is an absolute state. It can't be rated on a ten-point scale, and an experience can't be more or less blissful. If we are experiencing bliss, we are feeling the most wondrous possible experience. Over our lifetimes, if we grow in our capacity to live in the moment and pay attention, we may be fortunate enough to experience bliss more frequently. We may even have times in our life when we are showered with epiphanies. What was once an unusual experience may become an everyday one.

Komorebi describes our lives as we follow a path through a forest where the trees offer us both sunlight and shadow. Our journeys contain stories of loss and reunion, of despair and self-rescue. Most of us develop an identity that allows us to feel grateful in spite of our sorrows. We can feel a great sadness for our broken world yet still taste the spring strawberries or enjoy the smell of rain. Our hearts shatter into pieces, yet we hear the song of the cardinal and watch the exploding electricity of a thunderstorm.

This book describes my experiences with both literal and metaphorical light. As a therapist for twenty-five years, I helped

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clients build more transcendent narratives and progress on their journeys toward a luminous life. I now hope to do that for my readers as well.

As a therapist, I had several tools. One was predicting positive outcomes for clients, since we often find what we are looking for. Another was listening for evidence of growth. When I could find that, I underscored it so that clients could see they were moving toward light. No matter how painful their situations, I always asked clients two questions: *What did you learn from your experience? When you look back on this event, is there anything that you can feel proud of?*

This last question was particularly useful for people who had experienced trauma. It enabled them to move from a feeling of victimization to an awareness of their small acts of heroism, which I learned were always present.

I helped people create more empowering life stories. Without stories, we are without a self. With only stories of loss and sadness we are unhappy people. However, we can all learn to craft healing narratives. We humans are heliotropic. With a little guidance, most people can move toward more resilient, more connected, and more light-filled lives.

This trajectory is my hope for you. My story is really everyone's story. Yours will differ in its particulars, but the main themes of finding coping tools, appreciating beauty, and seeking transcendence are universal. We all must come to terms with impermanence and discover ways within ourselves to balance loss with joy. Let's explore this journey toward the light together.

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Attachment and Loss

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The Fountain

When I was five, my family was in a difficult situation. My father had signed up for the army just as the United States entered the Korean War. He had been home once in the three years since he had left in the fall of 1949. During that visit my mother had become pregnant with my brother John, who had yet to meet his father.

Occasionally our dad sent us presents from Korea. I received a cocoa cup he had decorated with raindrops and a pink umbrella. He had carefully printed my name on the side and at the bottom of the inside of the cup as a joke he had written STOP. He also sent me a doll and some bright Korean cloth. But really, we children had almost forgotten our father.

Mother's name was Avis, from the Latin root word for bird or soul. She was indeed soulful, although her singing voice was as croaky as a crow's. Our father was Frank, appropriately named because a more authentic and direct man did not exist. I was the oldest of three. My brother Jake was one year younger, and my brother John was a baby. Our mother was in her third year of medical school and working long days. After putting us children to bed, she studied far into the night.

In a picture of her from that time, she is holding Jake and me on her lap, showing us a picture book. Jake is wearing a shirt so small for him that his entire belly is exposed. I am wearing a

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white T-shirt with the logo of Fitzsimons Army Hospital. Mother is in a cotton housedress with a flowered kerchief tied around her head. Her face is thin and she looks exhausted.

As our mother walked out the door early mornings, she would often say, "Be kind to each other." During the long days, we children were left with a series of housekeepers, none of whom could satisfy our mother's standards. She would deem the women she could afford to hire to be lazy or unclean and would soon fire them, only to hire an inept replacement. My brothers and I were free-range children living on a dirt road in a tiny house in what was then the small suburb of Aurora, Colorado.

From our relatives' stories, I ascertain that I was an early reader and that, even as a toddler, I could fall asleep only if I had a magazine or picture book to thumb through. I liked to ride my tricycle on the cracked sidewalk and to play hide and seek with my brothers. Every night I waited on the stoop for my mother to come home, and, when she did, I barnacled myself to her side until bedtime.

Our mother was brave, unflappable, and endlessly patient. But her tasks were many and her free hours were few.

When our mother was with us, she was loving and attentive. She liked to bake and sew. Once, she made me a Lady Baltimore cake for my birthday. Sometimes she drove us into the mountains for picnics beside fast-moving, clear streams. We would take off our shoes and wade into those cold waters, walking gingerly on the sharp rocks and slipping and falling into the water, only to be carried a few feet downstream by the current. Chilly fun for all of us.

We could not afford most amusements, and the polio epidemic kept us out of public parks and away from large gatherings. On Saturday evenings we drove to the KOA radio station. We had discovered it by accident one night when our mother had taken us for a drive on the High Plains to see the stars. Jake noticed a tall lit tower and asked if we could go see it.

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When we arrived, we discovered something much better than the tower.

In front of the station was a large fountain illuminated by rotating colored lights of red, yellow, and blue. Our family would climb out of our car, sit on the warm hood of our Chevy, and watch the splashing colors change.

I remember everything about this experience—the heat of the day still emanating from the car hood, the cool breeze from the mountains, the sagebrush smell of the air, and the glittery stars above. But it was the fountain that entranced me, the way the light danced in the cascades of water and spray splashing red, then blue, then yellow, and of course the rainbow hues in between as it turned from one color to the next. Dazzled by the sparkling, colored lights, I forgot my missing father, my indifferent caregivers, my loneliness, and my restlessness.

At the time I didn't have words to explain my fascination, and I am not sure I have those words now, but this light on water was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I would stay focused on the fountain for a long time.

Of course, my little brothers quickly grew bored and ran around the parking lot. Our mother retired to the driver's seat and dozed. She was an expert on catnaps and would take them all her life.

Eventually, it would be time to climb back into the car for the ride home. I shut my eyes and would try to keep seeing those lights. Their beauty, the beauty of light, soothed me and carried me away from my everyday life into something vast and universal.

It still does.

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A Motherless Child

The summer before I started first grade, my father returned from the Korean War. He rejoined a family that had long managed without him. My mother was absorbed in her medical studies and had her ways of doing things at home. We children hardly knew our dad and were not eager to bond with a man who might be leaving us again soon.

By age six, I was old enough to observe how different my parents were. They were both smart, but in different ways. Mother was a hardworking scientist, steady and serious, but stiff and awkward with people. She did not like us to touch her face or hair and was not a physically affectionate person. I believe now that she was on the autism spectrum, long before that category was known to exist. Dad was extroverted, impulsive, charming, and a big talker. He was chubby with jet-black curly hair, and he looked and acted a little like Jackie Gleason on *The Honeymooners*. He liked to say he worked to live and lived to play. He could create a party out of thin air.

He was always cooking up plans and trying something new. I remember people asking my dad, "Frank, where's the fire?" Or, "Do you ever sit down?"

When he reentered our family, he wasn't used to being a father. He had been living with army men who in their rare free hours drank, played cards, and explored local nightlife. As a

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medic at Incheon and the Chosin Reservoir, he had carried men off battlefields and patched them up. Some he had declared dead and collected their personal belongings to send home to the families.

The trauma of this brutal war was compounded by the trauma he had suffered during World War II, when he had been on a submarine in the South Pacific and a medic in Okinawa and the Philippines. My father had experienced too much killing, death, cruelty, and sorrow. And he lived in a time when men had neither the language nor the permission to discuss their emotions.

Of course, I didn't know about his suffering, and even my mother had never heard of PTSD. What I knew was that he could be grumpy and hot-tempered. He and my mother fought every evening, and he usually made her cry.

Jake, John, and I hadn't been exposed to shouting and cursing, and it scared us and left us unsettled. We couldn't predict what our dad would do next. In the space of ten minutes, he could make us all laugh or have us in tears.

After about a month of rather dreadful days, my dad announced that the family would be splitting up for a while. He would take my youngest brother John to live with our grandparents in eastern Colorado. Then he would drive Jake and me to a trailer just outside Sparta, Missouri, behind my Aunt Grace and Uncle Otis's house. This was where he had grown up and where most of his relatives still lived. My mother, who was newly pregnant, would stay in Denver to complete her internship year. Every night I knelt by my little bed and prayed that we wouldn't have to go. I begged my mother to let me stay with her, and she said sadly but firmly that it was impossible.

After that, my memories grow blurry. I don't remember leaving my mother or saying goodbye to my little brother, or the long drive from Colorado to southeastern Missouri, or reconnecting with relatives whom I had forgotten.

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What I remember is the trailer, which was small and dark. It made me uneasy. We walked up three rickety steps into a small kitchen / living room area with two windows, a cereal-box-size one over the kitchen sink and a larger one over the orange couch in the living room. Just off this area was a small bathroom and a hall that led to a bedroom. The bottom bed was for my dad, and over his bed hung two shelves for Jake and me. The bedroom felt like a claustrophobic cave.

During the fall and spring, Jake and I could be outside, but in the winter and after dark we spent almost all our time inside the trailer. I developed a physiological and psychological response to this that I called *squishy*. This word to me meant that my stomach was upset, my mouth was dry, and I felt sad, confused, and not quite in my body.

Our father was rarely there, and mostly Jake and I just lay on our beds and slept or talked. Our life force was weak. Or perhaps I should say we were hibernating.

Some nights our father came home and made us dinner or brought us groceries, but other nights he stayed late in Springfield, where he was going to school on the GI Bill. When he finally arrived home, Jake and I trundled out of our beds, hungry and dazed. Sometimes he brought us food, sometimes he didn't.

Even as I describe what we would now call neglect, I feel the need to defend my father. That year he was holding on for his own dear life and trying to deal with his war trauma in the only way he knew to do it, by drinking and running around with his buddies. He had almost no understanding or empathy for the needs of children. He didn't even understand himself. If he could have done better, he would have. I loved my dad, and, in spite of his lack of responsibility that year, I knew he was a good and heroic man. Just not all the time.

On weekends, he would take us to visit his sister Henrietta's family. Her son Steve, who was six years older than me, became our best friend that year. Steve was a skinny kid with a crew cut, a shy smile, and a laconic personality. His soft voice and

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accommodating manner helped calm Jake and me. Steve told us jokes, took us fishing, and listened to our ideas. I remember one afternoon when the three of us sat in a mulberry tree eating berries. Jake and I poured all our miseries out to him. Steve just handed us more berries and said, "Things will get better." And, "You are going to be okay."

Sometimes, Dad drove us to Grandma Glessie's house. She loved us up and fixed us big meals, always with biscuits and gravy. Glessie and Dad would drink coffee, smoke, and talk far into the night. Jake and I could walk to downtown Sparta and look in the store windows or buy a candy bar or can of pop at the gas station on the highway.

My great-grandmother Granny Lee, Glessie's mother who lived with her, suffered from rheumatoid arthritis. She never left her daybed in the windowless living room of Glessie's tiny house. Jake and I didn't care for Granny Lee because she was always ordering us about and shouting if we didn't please her. Mostly we stayed in the bright kitchen with its wood stove, big table, and pump from the outdoor cistern.

Every weekday morning, Jake and I rode to school on a bus that stopped in front of Uncle Otis's mailbox down by the road. We wore ragged, ill-fitting clothes and had meager social skills to match. I liked school with all its bright colors, books, and activities. My classroom had a piano, and one day a little boy and I played a duet of Chopsticks. Afterward he gave me a kiss on the cheek. That made me happy and excited. He was a sweet boy, shy and polite. I thought I had a boyfriend, although I didn't even know what that meant. But I knew I had a tender friend who would smile at me when I walked into the classroom.

Another day my class rode the bus to Sedalia for the state fair. I had a dollar to spend, but I held my dollar out the window and it blew away. I cried and my teacher gave me another dollar. This kind teacher, who no doubt understood I was struggling with a difficult home life, probably didn't have many dollars to spare.

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After school, Jake and I would walk into the dark, messy trailer and wait for our father to come home. One night, we were out of groceries and he didn't return. Resigned to our fate, we lay, stomachs growling, in our bedroom cave. Just as we were falling asleep, Aunt Grace knocked on our door and invited us over. We walked across the dark lawn into her kitchen for a meal. Her family had eaten, but she piled our plates high with fried chicken, biscuits, mashed potatoes, and green beans with bacon. The food tasted delicious, and we ate like the famished children we were.

What I most remember about that night was the brightness of Grace's kitchen. Her floor was tiled in cherry red, and, instead of a dinner table, the family had a shiny yellow leatherette booth. Everything was sparkly, and the electric lights made the room look radiant. I am sure Aunt Grace asked us over other times, but I remember this one special night, when we felt saved by the yellow booth, Mr. Edison's lights, and fried chicken.

In the summer, Dad took Jake and me fishing, mushroom hunting, or visiting his pals who were scattered all over Christian County. Sometimes he drove us to a rocky ford on the James River, and we would hunt for crawdads while he washed his car.

On one of those occasions, Jake and I were swarmed by leeches. When we got out of the water, our legs and bellies were covered by what looked like giant purple grapes. We asked our dad what they were, and when he told us, we started screaming. I screamed the loudest and begged to be helped first. He removed them one by one by holding his cigarette lighter up to them until they fell off. It was a gruesome experience, but Dad was calm and steady.

We didn't have a telephone in the trailer. I assume that my mother wrote my dad and also us children letters, but I don't remember this. I have no recall of Christmas or any other holidays that long year. Our relatives were kind to us, but most

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of them had busy, complicated lives of their own. The best thing I can say about that year is that it came to an end.

That year without my mom has shaped my life. Ever since then, I can't stand enclosed or dark places, I have anxiety attacks in trailers, and I wilt when I am not in contact with family or people I love. When I am reexperiencing that earlier trauma, I again feel "squishy."

That year without my mother was mostly shadow, but light arrived in the form of a kind teacher, my calm and steadfast Cousin Steve in the dappled light of the mulberry tree, the yellow booth in Aunt Grace's kitchen, and Grandma Glessie's expansive love. That year taught me one of the tricks about staying alive: always finding the light.

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Golden Light

In June, just after school was out, my father told us we were rejoining our mother, brother John, and new sister Toni. I remember the morning, a spring Saturday. Jake and I headed through the meadow to Uncle Otis's farm pond. The dew sparkled on the purple clover and the blue flax. Spiderwebs turned into kaleidoscopes in the sunlight. Birds seemed to be singing with the same high spirits that I felt. Jake and I were twirling and shouting for joy. Soon we would see our family. We had a new baby sister. I felt as if I were awakening from a nightmare into the dawn of a fresh, bright day.

A few days later, Dad, Jake, and I drove the six hours from the Ozarks to a small town in Kansas where we would meet up with our family. Then all of us would caravan to Dorchester, Nebraska, where Mother would start her first medical practice.

Dad, Jake, and I arrived after dark when all the stores had closed in the town. Dad parked on the quiet main street and lit a smoke. Jake and I were hungry, but we didn't much care. We were used to it, and besides, we were waiting for our mother. We sat quietly in the back seat. As I watched the red tip of my father's cigarette, I fell asleep.

The next thing I remember is my mother tapping me on the shoulder and saying, "Mary, I am back."

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As I embraced her, I felt infused with warmth. A heat lamp had been turned on inside me. What had been frozen for a year began to melt.

Seeing my mother and brother again was more than a reunion with beloveds. It was my own awakening after a year of hibernation. I had stopped growing physically that year, and I had slept as much as I could. But now, I was out of the cave and on my way to someplace better.

I even had a baby sister who had been living with my Aunt Agnes since her birth. My mother had picked Toni up in Flagler along with our brother John. Toni was almost three months old, with gray eyes and white-blonde hair. She curled her hand around my thumb and pulled it toward her face. She was a pretty baby, but my attention was focused on Mother.

I knew I would be joyous on seeing my mother, but I didn't anticipate the two of us being enfolded by golden light in the back seat of our old car. This is not a metaphor. The light was visible, as real as my mother herself. I felt this light inside and outside my body.

This golden light stayed with us while we held each other. It haloed half the back seat, and I was conscious of its presence alongside my joy in a way that I could neither understand nor describe. I didn't know that this golden light would return in my life many times over.

That night I thought I had survived the hardest thing possible. But I was only six, and there were some surprises ahead.

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My Father's Shirt

Dorchester, Nebraska, was a town of four hundred inhabitants, most of whom were Czech. The Mariskas, Hrdvas, Walenchenskys, and Dzerks were my mother's patients and my second-grade schoolmates. In my class, the four other girls were two sets of cousins, and all of them spoke Czech at recess. My brothers and I played alone in the schoolyard.

That year we had a housekeeper who took care of Toni and baked us cinnamon rolls and pie. I saw my parents every day and was happy to once again be with John. The teachers let me borrow all the books that I wanted, and I inhaled *Heidi*, *the Bobbsey Twins series*, *Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*, and *Little House on the Prairie*.

One day I came home from school early with a bad stomachache. Our housekeeper sent me to my mother's office for a checkup. My mother felt my stomach, drew some blood, and quickly diagnosed appendicitis. After work she drove me to the nearby hospital in Crete.

I had never before been a patient and was quite frightened by it. Because my mother had privileges at the hospital, admittance was quick and I was soon in bed in a big white room. There was a window, but the shade was drawn and the room felt dusky even with the light on. A nurse came by for a urine sample and another blood draw.

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