

## Transfiguration Sunday: God Has Answered // February 26, 2017

I have a million pictures of my nieces but there is no photograph, no evidence—no song, no poem, no footage, nothing— that could ever adequately re-create the moment I first held them, minutes old. And there is nothing that could recreate what it felt like to watch my friend’s last breaths as he lay dying. And no matter how many pictures I look at from the spring I spent in Italy, I’ll never get close to what I felt — a love that was more agony than pleasure, such incredible beauty I could not help but weep daily. Maybe these are divine moments that, try all we want, are never going to be kept the way we wish to keep them.

Most of us use social media or, at the very least, use our phones as a camera, with us all the time. Or we keep scrapbooks, photo albums, framed prints. I’ll just say what you likely already know: We have this instinctual desire to document our lives. We like having a record of *everything*. Our species learned to write, we invented the camera and the tape recorder. We have diaries and journals and photographs and Facebook. We keep a history of our life. We’re curators, makers, story-tellers, picture-takers. It’s how we’re made.

I wanted to title this reflection “In Defense of the Selfie” because I think the selfie phenomenon—this obsession many of us have of documenting ourselves (and our vacations, our families, our pets, our meals, our injuries) is all about documenting a life. It’s further proof, too, of our human strangeness and our human desire to save what is precious. This was an on-going discussion, particularly with my high school students, where I’d say, “why must you take so many pictures of yourselves?” and sometimes “why a picture of your lunch?” Several years ago, the internet coined the Instagram Era’s motto: “pics or it didn’t happen.” If there is no proof of your life, no evidence of your daily existence, how can we be sure you are even real? Social media might ask, “Is your life even happening?”

Interestingly, the word “keep” has as its etymology the old English word *cepan* (*ke-pan*) meaning desire. And it’s from the Latin “to look.” Which makes sense — what we look at, what we see, is what we keep. We keep what we love. It makes that verse “the Lord bless you and keep you” even more beautiful for me: may the Lord keep you, desire you, preserve you.

Several years ago, the journal *Psychological Science* published a study concerning the connection between photograph-taking and memory recall. Research began with students in an art gallery—some took photographs of the artwork they saw, and others simply stood before it, observing. What the study found is a supremely ironic contradiction: it is assumed that we take a photograph of something in order to remember better our experience. But what evidence says is that for the majority of people, *not* taking a photograph actually *improves* our ability to notice details and recall them. We *absorb* more. The students who simply stood before the art were better able to recall colors, facial expressions, light, shadow. It’s a phenomenon scientists call “photo-taking impairment effect.” Interestingly, the more we record, the less we fully experience. In other words, when our memories can rely on external aid, we subconsciously turn *off* our abilities to observe intently. Just last week I read a headline that said, Your smartphone is making you dumber! You don’t need a former teacher to tell you: if we don’t *have* to pay attention, we generally do not.

But I said this was in *defense* of the selfie. Because of course our photographs are valuable. They are our records. We *should* cherish them.

My family has what we call “the farm tapes,” which is VHS footage from a heavy, unwieldy camcorder circa 1988 that my dad rented for a weekend one summer in order to capture life at my grandparent’s farm before the property was to be sold. It was a way of saving what was precious. There are some sweet tape recordings of my twin sister and I, age 6, talking before bed about our day at school and about our baby sister about to be born (though there is also an unfortunate record of my saying I hope I get a brother, but I didn’t mean it). I cherish that evidence of my happy childhood. I cherish my old diaries and journals — humiliating as they might be— because it is a record of my life. So the selfie isn’t necessarily a problem. The camera isn’t the problem. What’s probably dangerous is the notion that our ability to live fully, attentively is compromised by our understandable human desire to need proof, to save what we love.

Who can blame Peter when he wishes to build dwelling places on the mountaintop where Jesus is transfigured? Dear Peter, who hardly knows what to do after seeing Jesus lit up in glory. He cannot help himself. How many of us would have been desperate to document this moment: Jesus, the voice of God, Moses, Elijah — it’s almost too much. Some of us? We can hardly cook a meal without taking a picture before we consume it! Sometimes I think *doing something* is a way of preservation. But we all know it never works that way. Look at a photograph of your baby, or the ocean, or your dog, or a sunrise, but it is never going to do it justice. And of course Jesus knows this: “Get up,” he says. As if to remind us: You cannot reproduce this. You cannot claim it. There is nothing you can do but *be here, take it in, be changed*.

When I first read this lesson, I found myself pitying Peter. And identifying with him. And also envying him. I envy all three of them— what luck that of Jesus’ 12, you get to go to the mountaintop. What luck that on that mountain, you hear the voice of God, the veil is lifted, the miracle happens. Why can’t I have a divine experience like that! I’m probably not alone in wishing that my experience of the divine felt a little more like glory on a mountain than what it actually is — a daily, cautious, curious affair. No thunder. Not much dazzling.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the day we recall Jesus’s change before his disciples. But of course it was not only Jesus who was changed that day, but Peter and James and John. As they behold Jesus transformed, so too are *they* transformed. There is no way to save this moment by external aid, nothing to do. It must be absorbed. The transfiguration is as much Jesus’s change as it is the change in those who absorb him. They and *we* are the record. They and we are the change.

And this is the epiphany: what if it’s not just the record of some other life long ago but a record of *our* lives too? What if this is a story not only of change but of witnessing? What if this story is but a metaphor for divine encounter and the ways we are changed by beauty and by love. Maybe my envy of Peter is also my becoming Peter: maybe I *have* seen the face of God. Maybe *we* are the three. Maybe what I once only dimly perceived to be true has been made dazzlingly clear. Years ago, at my lowest, my sickest, in a sort of fevered delirium on a cocktail of pills to ease what was crippling depression, I had an epiphanic encounter with God though it certainly did not feel holy. It felt only like emptiness, spiraling downward and inward. Everything hurt.

I was teaching and writing, working on poems that were mostly fragments and stray images. I kept trying to write through my sadness and I tried to explain, to document, what I had seen: a figment, a vision. I had what doctors called a “psychotic break” that I think about now with equal parts scientific and spiritual curiosity. My memory from those years is poor, but I do remember a figment,

a woman's form, in my house. And I realize now, from a healthy distance, that these experiences were not only of medical concern but of *divine* concern.

Carl Jung says, "There is no coming to consciousness without pain. People will do anything...to avoid facing their own Soul. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious."

I am certainly not enlightened but in what eventually became a book, those fragments and images attempted to understand the darkness this figment embodied. Her name was Liliana—I don't know how I knew. I can only explain it as a dream, the way you know your own dream life to be true. But I was conscious, lucid, very aware of myself hallucinating. Months later, by what seemed to me pure coincidence, I came to study the origin of my name, Allison. One thing I learned—the miracle, the epiphany—is that variations of Allison include Liliana and Eliana, for which the Hebrew translation is "God has answered."

It's the single most mysterious experience of my life. A transformative moment of mine, just as you have yours and Peter and James and John have theirs. Of course it's also one I cannot prove or explain though what I wouldn't give to have some evidence. But there is none. Only me.

"Get up," Jesus says. You don't need to understand entirely. There's no need to document this, or even to tell anyone. But don't be afraid. Don't worry. There is always proof enough. It's already saved as part of you. It's *in* you. Get up, he says. You have what you need. God *has* answered. The evidence is you.