

**Eyes are the windows to the soul. The windows to our being.**

**The gospel according to Luke records an image of an eye.**

**In this metaphor, Jesus describes an eye with a defect.**

**But how would we know? How would we know that something in our being is distorting our way of seeing, our way of reacting to others, our actions?**

**Well - two things:**

- **one take regular time to reflect on ourselves to figure out what is wrong with eye, to be in silence and hear the inner chatter out of which our speech flows.**
- **And two to pay attention to what we notice in others and what actions we are motivated to do.**

As a way of reflecting on this gospel I would like to share something of the story of my faith as we come to an end of this Epiphany Season.

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Mary struck a match and lit the candle on the table between us.  
“Settle in. Let your body arrive. And when you are ready, begin”

My monthly session with my spiritual director, Mary, had begun.

I closed my eyes. Glad for the spaciousness. I breathed.  
I waited.

Then before my mind’s eye there stood a large striped beast.

It was a tiger, pacing behind a cage.  
Now I am from South Africa. We get Lions, Leopards, Cheetahs... no tigers.

It seemed that...  
The Spirit was trying to get my attention.

This tiger had a restless energy – constantly patrolling the cage - it’s way to freedom.  
It was trapped.  
Her eyes were fiery, angry yet somehow also fearful.

My eyes popped open.  
Mary looked at me startled. From the expression on my face, she knew the Spirit had just shone her light onto something deeply buried.

Faith for me is saying yes to a journey inward. And that day I said one of my many yeses.

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A bright eyed, freckled South African girl... I was born with club feet.  
And I had entered the hospital system of the 1970's.

A pre-psychologized time where the effects of separating children from parents was not widely known.

At age 2 until age 5, I had been left alone for long days in a hospital (cage-like) crib - two weeks at a time for corrective surgery.

The pacing tiger was me. The cage was the pain of institutional separation.

In the late 80's the writings of Dr. John Bowlby became popular and shed light on my early experience.

He wrote:

Thus, just as animals of many species, including [humans], are disposed to respond with fear to sudden movement or a marked change in level of sound or light because to do so has a survival value, so are many species, including [humans], disposed to respond to separation from a potentially caregiving figure and for the same reasons.

This inner wound was separation anxiety.

And it was separation anxiety that motivated years of work.

I began as an occupational therapist wondering the halls of a post-apartheid South African psychiatric hospital. Patients were fellow travellers. I instinctively connected with their isolation, their shame, their pain of stigmatization, and the cages that enclosed them. My lived experience served me well.

The sun set on my life in South Africa.

And as a new immigrant to Vancouver, Canada, very aware of my cultural difference, I was given the opportunity to think more deeply about spirituality and mental health.

A masters in theological studies followed by a PhD in spirituality and the lived experience of mental illness.

My research produced a growing concern about two institutional barriers.

The first barrier often exists in faith communities, churches like ours...

**1. Where person living with a mental illness are 'barred' from the inner circle of communities of faith.**

cared for yes, programmed for yes, but also kept at a distance, not becoming part of. Never fully belonging.

The Barriers of institutionalized community.

The second barrier exists in mental health institutions

## **2. The person of faith can be 'barred' from spiritual conversations in mental health institutions.**

Mental health professionals, listening to story in a certain way, through a particular framework, not trusting spiritual experiences, that may just offer the energy, life, resilience needed for recovery.

A person of faith living with a mental illness did not seem to have a place to talk about both their spirituality and their mental health experiences. Church was for spirituality and psychiatry was for mental health.

Analyzing these barriers - a tigers cage as it were...  
... became my field of study.

**And, more than this...** it became my lived experience.

Alex Smith, my partner of 8 years, began to experience deep depressions. We were both studying theology in Vancouver. And while my research was bringing freedom. His studies were deconstructing his very being.

The friends in our faith community were concerned, and tried hard to be as present as they could be.

But they were simultaneously distant, afraid, powerless before his raw experience. They were unable to be with it, trying to fix it.

I felt this barrier acutely.  
And so mostly Alex and I journeyed alone.

In the arena of mental health institutions or psychiatry -  
This was the first time, I had sat on the other side of the desk.  
Experiencing first hand how our explanations of our experience were being filtered -  
spiritual explanations were treated with great suspicion.  
We were barred from the language of faith.

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Alex's suicide in 2005, further ravaged my inner world.

The years of grieving were hard. And the journey inward deepened.  
And connected to my childhood pain.  
It didn't take long for the caged tiger to become restless again.

Faith for me is also action. Action born out of the reflective life.  
And waiting for possibility.

And two doors presented themselves...

Vancouver Coastal Health offered 4 years of funding to work with mental health community services to improve the quality of spiritual conversations within the institution.

**And** a colleague and I received grant money to gather Christian leaders, in order to address mental health stigma in churches.

And out of these gatherings the organization Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries was born.

**I had a singular focus: Dismantling the cage. Addressing barriers in mental health and religious institutions.**

And as I journeyed in both arenas, the pathway forward became clear:  
- the vulnerable sharing of lived experience would break down the barriers.

People were generous with their stories of struggle

(1) a husband and wife shared how they had held onto each other through her ongoing depression struggle seemingly every Winter season of the year.

(2) a single Mom shared about her son, age 18 in addictions recovery in a program out in the Valley. She shared how her hope ebbed and flowed like the tides.

And I got to witness the Spirit doing her most amazing work.

For in diverse community contexts - the work of vulnerable honest story telling, transforms us all.

And it was because of others sharing their stories...

That I... began to see my need of therapy and I entered trauma therapy.

And began to see more clearly what was in my eye!

The pacing tiger turned into a memory of my family walking away from a hospital crib. Unbeknown to me, they too were traumatized. Crying, praying.

My Mom, my Dad and my brother bear their own wounds of those years.

Wounds that when explored have led us on a surprising path.

For somehow...

“The knowledge of ourselves, is not only an incitement to seek after God, but assistance towards finding God.” Calvin’s institutes

And while my pacing tiger is now free...

Surrender and silence deepening my inner journey toward God is my daily practice of faith.

For I am my silence. I am not the busyness of my thoughts or the daily rhythm of my actions. I am not the stuff that constitutes my world. I am not my talk. I am not my actions. I am my silence. I am the consciousness that perceives all these things. When I go to my consciousness, to that great pool of silence that observes all the intricacies of my life, I am aware that I am me. I am that silence. So I take a little time each day to sit in silence so that I can move outward from there in balance into the great clamor of living...

~ Richard Wagamese

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In this season of Epiphany we are reflecting on Our lives of faith.

I have been inviting us to think about the question:  
What does it mean for you to live a life of faith?

Today I have asked the Alison Watt to share her reflections on this question: What does it mean for you to live a life of faith?