

There is hurting in my family and there is sorrow in my town.
There is panic all across the nation and there is wailing the whole world round.
But I am open and I am willing, for to be hopeless would seem so strange.
It dishonors those who go before us, so lift me up to the light of change!

December 15, 2017

My Dear Friends:

California singer-songwriter Holly Near wrote the words above years ago. I've sung them many times since. Our local Roman Catholic Women Priests congregation prays and sings them at the close of our Lenten liturgies. They've never seemed more timely and relevant than this past year. No need for me to catalogue all the reasons why. Just turn on the news. What intrigues me so about the verse above is the suggestion that to be hopeless feels so strange because doing so dishonors our ancestors who've faced similar and worse demons and not lost heart. I love that thought! We owe a great debt to all those who make up what Doctor King called "that great cloud of witnesses". A crusty British religious writer, Malcolm Muggeridge, wrote a book called *A Third Testament*. He argued that just as there had been a first testament, chronicled in the Hebrew scriptures, and a second, "new" one celebrated in the Greek gospels and letters, there was also a third. It was the lived witness of people of faith: women and men who struggled against injustice, and made the plight of the dispossessed their own, who fought to make a world where love and mercy and tenderness would not be strangers. They did so, often in the face of persecution and execution. But they didn't lose hope. For us people of conscience, their witness and courage and determination may be our greatest legacy.

Anne Lamott lives and writes in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is a beacon of light and joy and hope in a sometimes dark and threatening world. In her latest book she shares her insights about mercy, which she defines as **radical kindness**. It's what Pope Francis has been promoting - the alternative to a rigid and scolding obsession with correct, upright behavior. (A Jesus approach to life as contrasted with the Pharisees.) Take a moment, please, and remember a moment or two this year when you were lucky enough - **blessed enough!** - to witness a moment of radical kindness. And indulge me as I do likewise.

When friends ask lately how I'm feeling, I often say "older". My legs, which have been complaining for decades about having to carry such a large body, gave me a scare this summer. Nothing new, just the latest episode of Cellulitis, but this time a barn burner. Ended up hospitalized and in a nursing facility for almost two months, with questions raised about my future ability to walk unassisted. (I want to make something very clear. My health and medical adventures this year were **nothing** compared with the life or death struggles that my brother Dan and other friends have had to endure.) Anyway, on a hot

August day I ended up in the E.R. at Kaiser SF for the second time in two weeks with a high fever. After a couple of hours on a gurney in the corridor I got moved to a quieter area. A row of gurneys, each separated from the next by a curtain. Shortly after I arrived, a doctor came to the man next to me. He said, "Sir, I know you've already heard the bad news. The chemotherapies haven't worked. It's time to be talking about end of life issues. Have you thought about these?" The patient replied, "No, I keep telling myself that we'll cross that bridge when we get to it." "Well", said the doctor, "that day has arrived. There's someone I'd like you to meet." He brought in a woman who worked in palliative and hospice care and she proceeded to gently, and sensitively persuade the man to say "yes" to hospice care. I was profoundly moved by her exquisite tenderness! (By this time I'd put a pillow over my face so they wouldn't hear me crying.) She said, "There's some questions I need to ask. Do you have any family you'd like us to contact?" He said "no". "How about any friends?" "No." "Anyone at all?" "No." And she said "Well, we will do our best to be family and friends for you these next few weeks." He said "I do have one favor to ask. For the last few years I've saved so that I could take a trip every few months. I'm supposed to go to Las Vegas at the end of September. Can you make sure I live long enough to make that trip?" And she said, "I can't promise that, but we'll do everything we can to help you make it." Just then my own doctor arrived and I never heard the rest of the conversation just a few feet away. But I was haunted for days (still am) by two things: that poor man's desperate aloneness as he faced the final chapter of his life; and that hospice care giver's radical kindness as she tenderly, like some angel of mercy, became part of his life. I felt incredibly privileged to have witnessed such a sacramental moment!

My dear friend of almost 50 years, Marcy Anthony (Weckler Barr) died this autumn. After a titanic struggle with a rare form of skin Cancer, she agreed to an experimental therapy of stem cells. It worked. Beat the Cancer. But her body never accepted the presence of the stem cells. The cure ended up as awful as the illness. This wonderful woman was an earthy, holy and truly graced presence in a lot of people's lives, including mine. She gave up her chance for a career on the musical stage and concert halls to devote her life to sacred music. She and I shared a love of opera, a delight in bawdy humor, and a similar outlook on life. Even in her weakened condition she delighted making music for her fellow patients in the hospitals and rehab facilities where she spent most of the last two years of her life.

If I had to pick a favorite moment this past year it would probably be January 21st, on a cold, rainy, day, walking up Market Street, with tens of thousands of others as part of the Women's March. I was privileged to be walking alongside three generations of my family: my sister Marykay, her daughter Sara and grand daughters Rowan and Teagan. "So lift me up to the light of change!"

Lots of love from the City of Saint Francis!