

Thanksgiving

by Jeffrey Flannery

When our kids were very young, my wife and I believed it was important to give our children traditions that they could grow up with. One such tradition that we shared each Thanksgiving was to walk down by the cliffs along the ocean. We'd all go, our kids and our dog. On this one particular Thanksgiving, we decided to try to keep this small tradition intact, even though this year we had decided to get divorced.

We got up that morning and began working together in the kitchen getting things ready for the Thanksgiving meal, when soon a fight erupted between us, a terrible fight over butter, which of course wasn't about butter at all, but more a fight because we hated each other, we hated who we had become. Hurtful barbs were thrown, hateful glances exchanged, the girls looked at us with a quiet fear and I could see the day was threatened.

And so I welcomed the decision to go for our walk, to give us some space, some room to regroup, perhaps start the day on a different note.

It was stormy on this Thanksgiving day, the winds were blowing and you could hear the waves crashing long before we reached the cliffs above the beach. Our dog took off ahead of us and disappeared over the twelve foot high cliffs at the bottom of which he would find a strip of sand where he could frolic through the surf. We didn't realize until we got to the edge that the beach had been swept away by the storm. Down in the deep, choppy waves I could barely see the head of our dog, struggling against the currents that pulled him out to sea, then reversed and threw him back against the rocks.

My two young girls grabbed and pulled at my arms, shouting desperately at me to do something, to save our dog which was going to drown. I was cast in that dreaded situation no father, no man for that matter, ever wants to be in, where I was expected to show the strength and courage of a hero, but in reality could do nothing, our

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dog was too far down to reach, the cliffs were steep and slippery, and if I fell in I would undoubtedly drown as well. And so while my girls screamed at me to save him, as I watched our dog being pulled under and hurled against the rocks again and again, I stood there and did nothing, said nothing.

Suddenly my wife pushed past me and began climbing down the cliff. I tried to stop her but she pushed my hand away with a look that said, okay, if you won't do this, then I will. Halfway down, however, she realized she had made a mistake, she was losing her grip and could not climb back up. I carefully climbed down a few steps, reached out and she took my hand. But there was nothing but the wet clay for me to hold on to and as the waves continued to hurl against us, her hand began slipping from my grip. She was looking at me with the same fear that I saw in my daughters and now I was facing an even more impossible situation. If she slipped, and I tried to hold on, I would fall in after her, and we both would drown. If I let her hand slip from mine, I would be nothing more than the coward who watched their mother die after she courageously tried to save our dog, something I did not have the courage to do.

It was a terrifying moment. And in this moment suddenly all went silent — the roar of the ocean, the screams of my children — all sound vanished. I looked out at the black void and I could not tell what was water and what was sky, the two had come together, they had flipped, turned on each other, in neither element was there anything to breathe, both were a dense thick solid mass, and in neither was there any sign of light or any indication of a new day or even a new night. And in this disorientation I grasped the reality that all was doomed, that this was indeed the moment that was last among all moments in this, my time, that my dog, my wife and I were going to die.

I watched the head of my dog disappear once again under the water and when he resurfaced he was not a dog at all but a seal, looking up at me with those big brown eyes, that whiskered smile. And it was then that I came to realize that he was in on this, I could see that he was part of the plan, the plan the ocean had, the great

mother of us all, the plan to take us back, to drown and bury this miserable couple which had failed in the hardest yet ultimately the simplest task of all, to find a way to love, to hold on to love, to keep our family together; we were now so filled with hate that we had failed not only ourselves but our children, and so we deserved to be dragged off into the depths, so as not to take our kids down with us in our own personal sea of hate.

As the ocean continued to pelt us, as my hand began slipping on the clay behind me and as I continued to lose the grip of my wife's hand, I saw that her face had changed, that the fear in her eyes had turned into what could only have been a deep and utter hopelessness, as if this is what she ultimately had come to expect from me, which was nothing, that when faced with this or any challenge I would do just that... nothing.

All was moving towards this inevitable end and as I looked in her eyes I too lost hope, and I just... let go... and I began to fall... and as I started to fall, I saw my wife rush past me as if being pulled away suddenly by much stronger hands and then I saw the face of my dog, the seal, I saw his face rise up toward mine and I was reminded of when I first met him at the rescue shelter, how he jumped up and smacked me in the nose with his nose, and with that bop I had decided to take him into our home, and now here he was again leaping towards me as if to bop me again, coming to greet me in whatever underworld I was hurtling towards, whatever world that he was taking me to, when suddenly, in a dizzying fraction of a second the ocean and the sky righted themselves and regained their earthly relationship.

I found myself standing on the top of the cliff, on one side of me was my wife, and on the other side, my dog, shaking the sea water from his fur. And at that moment, the cacophony of surf, wind and people crying rushed in upon me as I watched the huge grey back of a wave retreat back out to sea.

You see I hadn't been falling toward the ocean, and my dog had not been rising up to bop me in the nose; no, the water, carrying my dog, had been rising towards me, this wave rose up, picked up all

three of us, and with an unimaginable gentleness set us down safely on the top of the cliff.

My daughters collapsed upon us laughing and crying simultaneously, people who had been watching from a distance came running, shouting against the roar of the storm that they had seen what happened, that it had been a miracle, nothing but a miracle, as they generously covered us with their blankets.

My wife and I didn't even look at each other on the walk back home. Nature had surprised us with a gesture of some unknown mercy. To my daughters this came to be known as the day that I was the hero who saved their mother and our dog. But my wife and I knew the truth.

We went home to our Thanksgiving dinner, and for the first time ever we did not give thanks. If this miracle was a second chance, we did not take it, I guess we did not want it. Later that day, we heard the news that two people, a couple, had fallen into the surf and drowned. The search for their bodies would go on unsuccessfully for days.

