

Written upon learning my sister had an incurable cancer - 1998

I used to think: how lucky Bible characters are! They not only get to see but wrestle with angels, to witness miracles or as in today's Gospel to see Jesus transfigured and hear the thunder say: "This is my Son, my Chosen One. Pay attention to him." People nowadays never seem to have experiences like that. Why? Perhaps it's because we're less impressionable. I mean, now that science explains almost everything, we are less prone to see an apparition amid the shadows or hear in the sighing of the wind the lament of some ghost. Instead we go through our world the way we go through a Safeway, each pushing one's own little cart, preoccupied with one's own shopping agenda, alert only to surface impressions, labels on a shelf. And I used to think: how sad that we've lost our capacity to see things more profoundly, to see transfigurations everywhere the way those disciples did on that mountain top.

But notice, I said, *I used to*. Because I've come to believe that even now, given the right circumstances, we too may witness transfigurations. It has to do with my kid sister (she's no kid anymore). Of course, I've known her all my life. We lived in the same house until I left at 15. And you know how it is with a kid sister. Until she came along, you were the sole object of your parents' attention. Suddenly there's this other baby who gets to occupy your old crib. Then she grows up into this nuisance that lives down the hall, where she plays house with silly girlfriends who intrude upon your own space to disturb the precise alignment of your lead soldiers. She exists only within your peripheral vision. In the school corridors you dread the day when her classroom is close to yours and you have to put up with her "Hi, Geoff!" as she passes among your peers.

And she has this way of interfering in your neighborhood fist fights, wanting to get between you and your opponent, shouting, "Don't you dare hurt my brother!" - so that you wince for weeks after whenever your pals bring it up. And then you leave your hometown forever to pursue a college education while she stays put, immediately marries, settles into domestic life and except for occasional visits and chit chat about family, the gap widens - the bond seemingly reduced to genetic. Except that two weeks ago I received a call: "Franny's undergone surgery; they've found a malignant tumor."

Bingo! Transfiguration! Suddenly from deep down somewhere, this kid sister whom you've taken for granted all your life, acquires an importance, a radiance you never noticed before! Suddenly you're shaken by the possibility that she won't be "there" anymore where she's always been and where (despite your distraction) you've always needed her to be. Suddenly you realize how central she is not only to your life but the life, the cohesion of an extended family. Suddenly you find yourself talking to her every day on the phone. Suddenly she's a priority and you wonder, with regret, what could have made you repress such feeling, such appreciation of the very fact of her existence for so long.

You can see why my opinion has changed about the possibility of our witnessing transfigurations even in this day and age. The only thing that troubles me is why we have to wait for pain to open our eyes to the radiance and hear the thunder say: "This is your Sister, my Chosen One. Pay attention to her." I certainly shall from now on. I began with a Valentine's Day card, the first I've ever sent her - inscribed: "Dear Franny: This is long overdue! Love, Geoff."

Geoff Wood