A Cry of Absence

Martin E. Marty

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Reflections for the Winter of the Heart

Illustrated by
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Reflections for the Winter of the Heart
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To
Wesley Carlson
Susan Teumer Marty
Connie Jaarsma Marty
"in-law"
with affection

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Acknowledgments

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Preface

SHE: What happened to Psalm 88? Why did you skip it?

HE: I didn't think you could take it tonight. I am not sure I could. No: I am *sure* I could not.

SHE: Please read it, for me.

HE: All right:

. . . I cry out in the night before thee . . .
For my soul is full of troubles . . .
Thou hast put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep . . .

SHE: I need that kind the most.

In that midnight exchange, though its author did not yet know it, this book, *A Cry of Absence,* was beginning to be conceived. (See pp. 88ff.)

In the little exchange above, "she" was Elsa, whom I married forty years before this second edition of a book occasioned by her illness (pp 161–62) and after her death (p. 39), and who died a dozen years ago. I had agreed, through the seasons of her terminal illness, to take turns with her reading a biblical psalm at the time of each midnight taking of medication. The medicines were pain relievers, fighters against nausea, palliatives. Half the psalms were not.

I had agreed to read the even-numbered and she the odd-numbered psalms. But after a particularly wretched day's bout that wracked her body and my soul, I did not feel up to reading Psalm 88. She noticed that. After the conversation I have recorded here, we continued to speak, slowly and quietly, in the bleakness

of midnight but in the warmth of each other's presence and in awareness of the Presence.

We agreed that often the starkest scriptures were the most credible signals of the Presence and came in the worst times. When life gets down to basics, of course one wants the consoling words, the comforting sayings, the voices of hope preserved on printed pages. But they make sense only against the background of, and in interplay with, the dark words. Dark/light. Night/day. Winter/summer: yes, here was a "wintry sort of spirituality." That phrase about winter by the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner came to mind and later got wedded to our midnight experiences.

After Elsa's death a kind dean urged me to take a winter quarter off from teaching. I would rise at four in the morning, let the snow blow past the study window, and hear the sound, not of the classical music that usually accompanies my writing, but of the wind. Only the wind. One of my ways of "working through the experience" was to write. A farseeing new acquaintance spelled these cold and dark times with the gift of flights to "summery" California and hospitality there. The trips were ostensibly for a scriptwriting assignment, but retrospect tells me he acted out of therapeutic regard for me during the development of what turned out to be a profound friendship. (One line of Psalm 88 never came true for Elsa and me: "Thou hast caused lover and friend to shun me. . . .")

In this preface I have deliberately given the page numbers of three specific passages of the book. My rereading suggests that they are the *only* three direct autobiographical allusions in this work. For the new edition I was asked to draw back the curtains from some of the midnight, midwinter experiences and "set the stage" for the book. This I am doing on these pages.

Why the diffidence the first time, and my not-all-that-revealing approach this second time? My late wife was a very private person who never bargained on having her intimate life details told to the public just because she married a garrulous and prolific speaker

and writer. The two or three times during her illness that I wrote about her in my weekly column, I showed her the manuscript and got her permission before publishing. She cannot give her permission now, which is why I am not saying much more now.

There were other reasons as well. I had read searing autobiographical works like C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, and felt no calling to replicate the genre or compete for attention with the many books of that sort, moved as I was by Lewis and others. Then, too, I am an academic, and we are trained not to put too much of ourselves into our books.

The editor of the weekly column I write insisted from day one that "the word *I* should appear in it every week." But comparing notes with other columnists, I have come to know that we columnists invent a kind of replica of ourselves who sits a few inches away during the writing, an invention that prevents us from splattering psyche or, as they say, in a vulgarization of biblical terminology, "spilling our guts" every week. The columnist's "I" is "not-I," in strange ways. The genre of *A Cry of Absence* allows for more of the real I than does such an invention, but in indirect ways.

Finally, however, I had a better motive than all but the first of these for choosing not to detail the story of an illness and death. The goal, mission, dream—call it what you will—for this book was to be as helpful as possible to people in their various pilgrimages without distracting them by telling someone else's story. I knew that at our house during the bad days we had a hard time finding books that did not say "Cheer up!" or "All will be sunny, because God loves you, and so do the authors!" Books of despair, unmarked by the hope that I hope shines through by the end of this one, or books of easy solace, which is no solace on nights that call for the realism of Psalm 88, were the most recommended but always unwelcome suggestions to us.

The response to this book through the years has been revealing. I have published over forty books, and most of them have been

reviewed perhaps more frequently than they deserved; the files pile high and the archives bulge. But reviewed books by historians do not often elicit letters. *A Cry of Absence* evoked more letters than the other dozens did together.

Many of the letters came from people who knew me and knew the story of illness and death behind the book. Just as many did not, since they had the book recommended to them by friends and had no reason to know the name of a University of Chicago religious historian. Those who knew said, and even those who did not know sensed, that a death shadowed these pages. When they were reading it as an accompaniment and companion in their passage involving a death, they were empathic as they elaborated their responses.

More often, to my surprise, the absence of which they wrote (and write, still) was occasioned not by death, but by other experiences. Almost always they could be summarized under two words: "separation" or "alienation."

Thus, let me paraphrase scores of them: "Dear author: I can sense that your absence was caused by a death. I extend sympathy. I, too, have known death up close. It is terrible. All the psychological surveys say that no traumas match the loss of a spouse or a child to death. I know, I know. Don't let it take anything away from their findings or your experience as I say the following, however: but I have to say that in its own way, separation is worse. During a terminal illness, you at least get to say everything, to show and express love, and love is stronger than death."

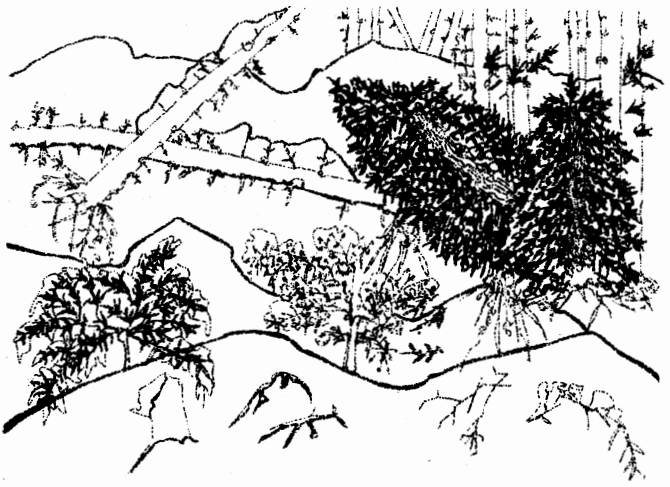
"Let me tell you," such letters would go on,"separation is really worse. I try to piece life together and go on working and planning—while my ex-husband is six blocks down the street, entangled in the limbs of a pretty young thing for whom he shed me. His plot line continues, and I am absent from it." Or: "I have custody of the children, while she has moved on, following a path of career development, and the path to not a few bedrooms

along the way." Or: "After nineteen years of loving our daughter, we find that she was born to be angry, and she is absent. We last heard she was in trouble, and we do not know where she is now—except separated from us."

Yes, I had to say as I read such letters—without being able to answer each in detail—yes, absence because of separation, absence because of alienation, can be as devastating, in their own ways, as absence because of death.

Rereading *A Cry of Absence*, which I do not feel moved to change basically after almost a dozen years, and in the tenth year of a marriage which more often than not brings its own kind of spring and sun, I found one note that might have been more developed. I refer to two sections, "The Need for Community" (p. 144) and "Congregating in the Sacred Courts" (p. 163). I grow more convinced than before that, whether in the valleys of the shadow of separation, alienation, or death, we do well to draw upon company and communion formed before, during, and after the profound experiences of life.

Writings, letters, and books can also be companions. One of the compensations of these years has been the thought that *A Cry of Absence* has been taken along the walks of those who seek the Presence. I hope in a new edition it will have thousands of new chances to do so.



1. Winter Journey: The Absence

The cry of winter

Winter is a season of the heart as much as it is a season in the weather. John Crowe Ransom connected the two kinds of winter:

> Two evils, monstrous either one apart,
> Possessed me, and were long and loath at going;
> A cry of Absence, Absence, in the heart,
> And in the wood the furious winter blowing.

I invite the reader to undertake a journey of the soul. It will occur in the face of the threat of Absence. Some psalms will be a guide. Winter will serve as an image for the seasons of the heart.

Winterless climates there may be, but winterless souls are

hard to picture. A person can count on winter in January in intemperate northern climates, or in July in their southern counterparts. Near the equator, winter is unfelt. As for the heart, however, where can one escape the chill? When death comes, when absence creates pain—then anyone can anticipate the season of cold. Winter can also blow into surprising regions of the heart when it is least expected. Such frigid assaults can overtake the spirit with the persistence of an ice age, the chronic cutting of an Arctic wind.

"Absence, Absence": a poet hears the cry. Winterly frost comes in the void left when love dies or a lover grows distant. Let a new love come into life or let the enduring one come close again, and summer can return to the heart. So it is in human affairs. The absence can also come, however, to a waste space left when the divine is distant, the sacred is remote, when God is silent. The wind of furious winter for a while blows without, and then grows silent as spring comes. The fury and the bleakness within the soul can remain, no matter what the season or the weather.

Who tends the spirit where winter takes over? The Christian faith and the family are prescribed to provide refuge and warmth, and for many they do. In our generations, however, to mention spirituality is to evoke images only of the long-day suns of summers. Those who begin with a sense of the void, the Absence, who live with dullness of soul, feel left out when others speak only of such bright spirituality.

Picture someone hungry for a warming of the spirit. He calls a friend who is advertised as spirit-filled. "Praise the Lord!" she responds, as she picks up the telephone. The two meet in person. One is chilly but open to stirrings, the other well characterized as full of stir. What transfer of spirit can occur when the filled person is compulsive about the summer and sunshine in her heart? Never does a frown cloud her

face. Lips, once drawn tight in disapproval, are now drawn tight in a cosmetic smile. "The Lord wills it." Never does the storm of a troubled heart receive its chance to be heard. The Lord has satisfied every need, one hears, so it would be a sin to stare once more at the void within. Christ is the answer, the spirit is warm and no chill is ever allowed between the boards or around the windows of the soul.

After such an encounter, questions come to mind. Is the summer-style believer being honest? Will she not have to face that void some day? Is the cry of Absence, Absence, unvoiced and unheard? Or does she ignore it? Worst of all, does she have a motive to suppress it, screen it out of her stopped ears? Does the spirit make its way only in a heart that has become a windowless hall of mirrors? Must a person, to survive, choose to create a mental sound chamber that screens out the signals of the world?

Spirit: to some the word suggests only the inner world. Nowhere, in such a case, can it connect with the images one carries of the swollen bellies of the starving or of swollen streams. Must one, can one, forget the parched tongues of children or the flooding rivers of catastrophe? "I am enjoying my spiritual high," the friend seems to be saying, "and you can have one, too—so long as you create illusion. You must vacate your heart's residence near the world of reality. Relocate yourself in a hermitage of the soul." The price for such a move seems too high: If this alone be of the spirit, one thinks, it is better to live only with the mundane. In that sphere, at least, there is honesty. There, at least, one can tend to the persistent cry of the heart, the Absence that will force itself to be heard and felt.

Beyond that individual friend with her summery smile, there is also a community that is the family of the faithful. This is the congregation of believers, the church of the practicers. The cry of Absence, Absence, in the heart is supposed