



HOW CAN THIS BE?

GENERAL ASSEMBLY, UCESM 2024

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My God these are such distressing times! Tonight for the first time I awakened in darkness; my eyes were stinging; before me passed images and images of human suffering. But there is one thing that is more and more obvious to me, that you cannot help us, but that we ourselves must help you, and in that way we help ourselves.



QUESTION

- Why is it that so many different groups – particularly among those pursuing consecrated life – are focussing on vulnerability. WHY NOW?
- is there something deeper that we are being asked to acknowledge, something that touches the core of our human journey?

MORE QUESTIONS

- **What does our tradition say on this topic?**
- **Who are our ancestors in the faith that exemplified the ability to embrace vulnerability?**
- **Where is the blessing in this?**
- **How is this counter-cultural?**

“

Who are we? We find that we live on an insignificant planet of a humdrum star lost in a galaxy tucked away in some forgotten corner of a universe in which there are far more galaxies than people.

~ Carl Sagan

JESUS

- . I have been programmed since birth to see Jesus of Nazareth through the lens of organised Christianity. What would happen if I changed the way I approached him?
- “Jesus of Nazareth turns upside down everything that religious people think about God.”
- “The historic Christian doctrine of the divinity of Christ does not simply mean that Jesus is like God. It is far more radical than that.
- It means that God is like Jesus.”

THE GOD THAT JESUS REVEALS IS NOT THE PATRIARCHAL GOD THAT IS THE THEISTIC MODEL: ALL-POWERFUL, OMNISCIENT, JUDGING HARSHLY, VENGEFUL AND VIOLENT. IT IS QUITE THE OPPOSITE.

- **Weeps over Jerusalem**
- **Frustrated by the blindness of the Twelve**
- **Feels abandoned on the cross**
- **Wracked with fear in the garden**
- **Amazed by God's predilection for the simple and lowly**
- **Surprised by the fact that all are God's chosen**
- **Caught up in the love of the Abba whose beloved son he feels**
- **Forgives those who grievously wrong him and hate him**
- **Reaches out to the one who denies him and the one who betrays him**

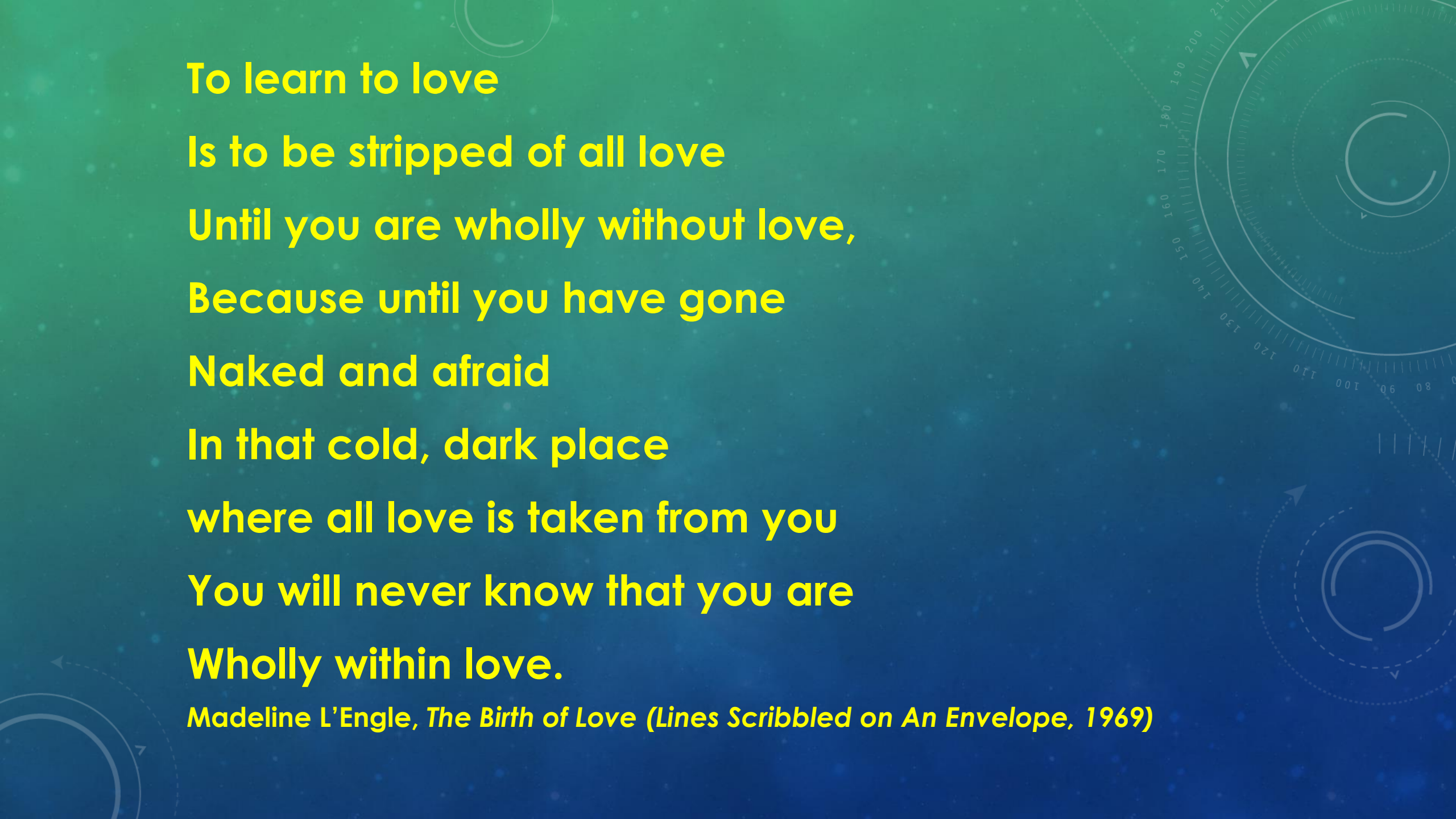
GOD REVEALS GODSELF IN VULNERABILITY

- **The God Jesus reveals is a vulnerable God**
- **love makes God vulnerable.**



**We are here to learn to
endure the beams of
love.**

William Blake



To learn to love
Is to be stripped of all love
Until you are wholly without love,
Because until you have gone
Naked and afraid
In that cold, dark place
where all love is taken from you
You will never know that you are
Wholly within love.

Madeline L'Engle, The Birth of Love (Lines Scribbled on An Envelope, 1969)

THE SON OF MAN

- The title Jesus chooses for himself is “Son of Man”, the human one.
- He chooses this to show us how to live our humanity fully: **I HAVE COME THAT YOU MAY HAVE LIFE, LIFE TO THE FULL.**
- Jesus did not come to make us good. Jesus came to make us whole.

EMBRACE VULNERABILITY

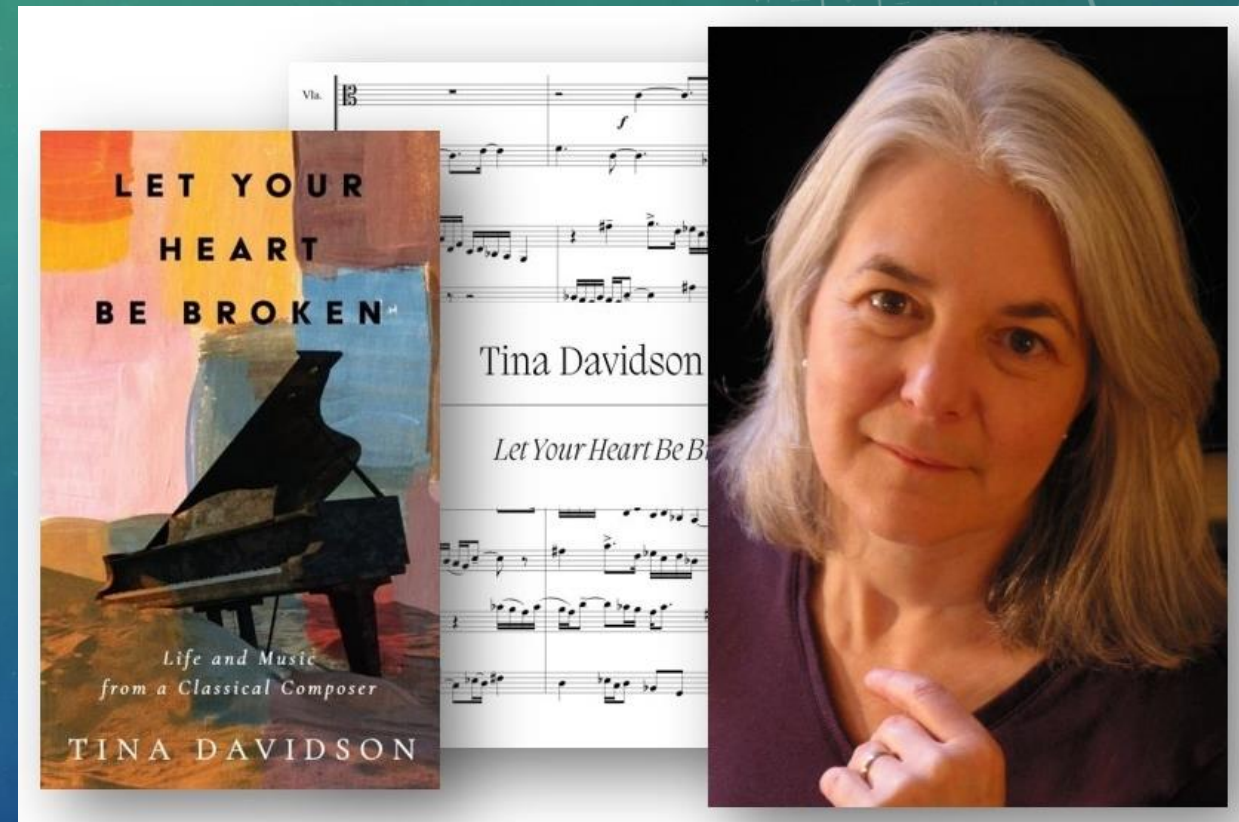
- **As we grapple with what it is to be human in the 21st Century, we come to the realisation that we need to embrace vulnerability. It is essential to our growth.**
- **Mary, the mother of Jesus of Nazareth: How can this be?**

THE EXAMPLE OF MARY

- She has to consent to evolve...to wonder...to stretch...She has to learn that faith and doubt are not opposites—that beyond all the easy platitudes and pieties of religion, we serve a God who dwells in mystery. If we agree to embark on a journey with this God, we will face periods of bewilderment, and bewildering suffering.
- Part of our dealing with vulnerability is learning to allow our understanding of god to expand

- **Stephen Levine, the poet and author, best known for his work on death and dying, was once asked by a member of the audience what was the meaning of life. Acknowledging that this was a vast question, he proposed that “the meaning of life is to let your heart be broken.”**
- **To let our hearts be broken, is to risk loving.**
- **To risk loving is to embrace vulnerability.**

- The composer, Tina Davidson, reflecting on his words writes: Let your heart be broken. Allow, expect, look forward to. The life that you have so carefully protected and cared for. Broken, cracked, rent in two. Heartbreakingly, your heart breaks, and in the two halves, rocking on the table, is revealed rich earth. Moist, dark soil, ready for new life to begin.
- (Quoted by Maria Popova in *Marginalian* 23/04/2023)



FACING CONGREGATIONAL BROKENNESS

Personal experiences

harrowing, yet blessed

Discovering who we really are...under the externals

Finding the blessing in the wound

LESSONS TO BE LEARNT

- No avoiding the truth...face it squarely: no denial
- Feel the pain and the shame
- Name what is happening
- Living with uncertainty
- Stay with the Word of God
- This is our mission...not anything else
- A new face of God

WRESTLING WITH GOD



RELIGIOUS LIFE DENIES VULNERABILITY

- Financially secure and independent
- Putting the institution above all else
- Little risk being taken...very calculated steps
- When we find resources lacking, it is the work with the poorest that is dropped
- Resistance to change: holding on to the past
- Not helped in dealing with emotions
- Little help in learning to love

- The decision not to feel vulnerable means we need to create defences to protect our self-esteem.
- We all use armour to protect ourselves, but that armour is heavy and prevents us from growing, being seen, and being in connection with others.

- When we're in fear, or an emotion is driving self-protection, there's a fairly predictable pattern of how we assemble our armour, piece by piece in the stories we tell ourselves or the statements we make.
- Some examples of armour:
 - Making excuses
 - Rationalizing
 - Blaming
 - Joking

What is the armour you tend to use?

The whole globe is shook up, so what are you going to do when things are falling apart?

You're either going to become more fundamentalist and try to hold things together,
or you're going to forsake the old ambitions and goals and live life as an experiment,
making it up as you go along.

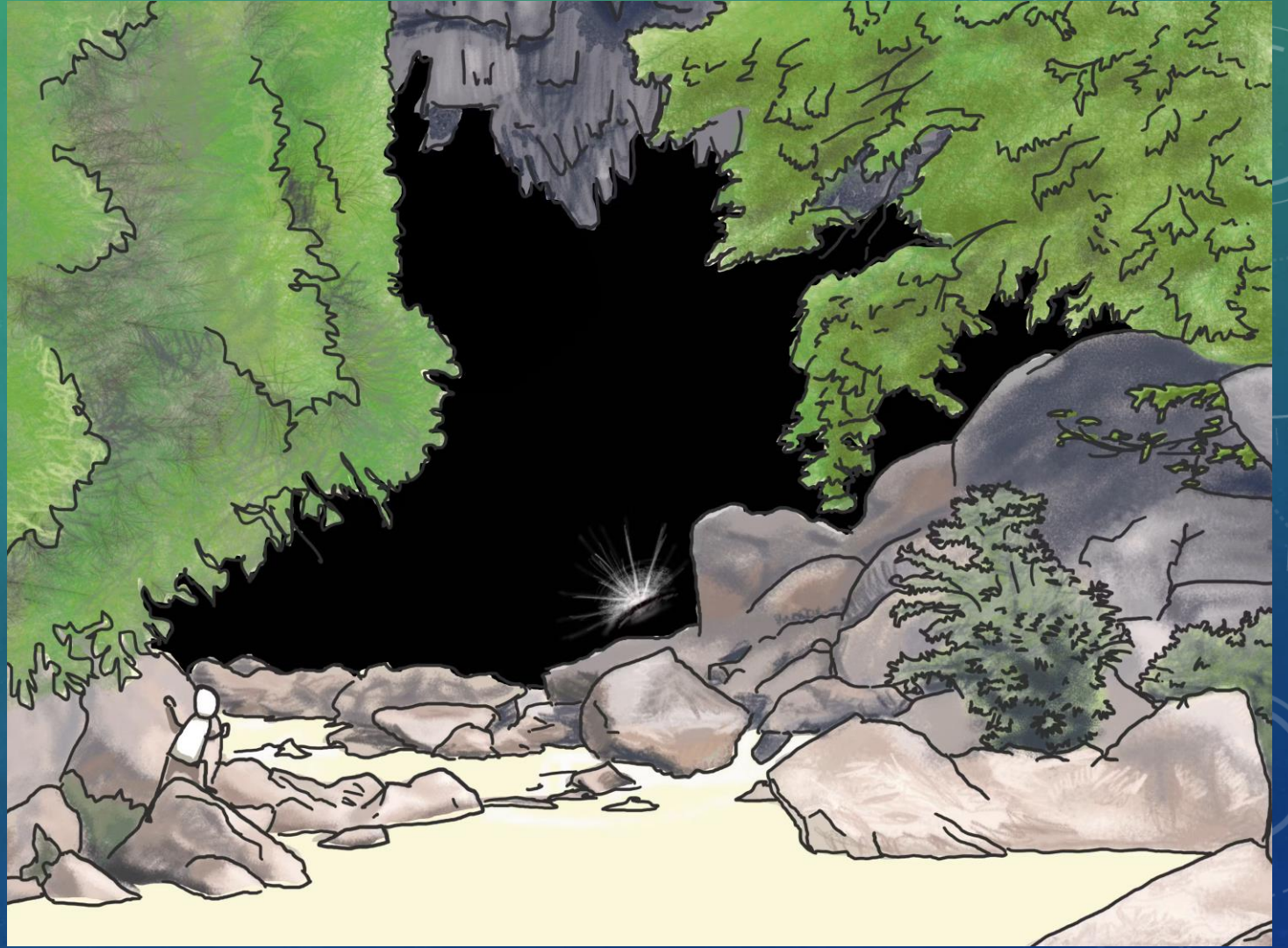
—Pema Chödrön, Buddhist Teacher

VULNERABILITY

- Vulnerability is emotional risk, exposure, uncertainty
- It is our most accurate measure of courage
- To be vulnerable is to let ourselves be seen, to be honest
- Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, change
- Adaptability to change is about vulnerability

**“The cave
you fear to
enter holds
the treasure
you seek”**

- Joseph Campbell



REFLECTION

- Where do you feel particularly vulnerable at this time?
- How are you dealing with it?
- What is the vulnerability that your Province faces?
How are you dealing with it? What help do you need?
- How has this situation helped you to approach God?

OUR CONGREGATION

What is our sense of diminishment and loss? Can we see it?

What are we being invited into?

Do we see the struggle that is taking place in our midst?

What is the future for us?

What is your role as leader?

