

NIGHT TERROR

July 29, 2006 “Heather Trail” – Manning Park

At the beginning of our summer holiday in July 2006, Heather and I spent two hectic days in Vancouver with our daughter shopping, running from restaurant to restaurant, and spending hours driving back and forth through the city during rush hour to replace the flat tire I caused when I hit the curb doing a u-turn in the middle of a side street.

Friday morning (the 14th of July) Heather and I leave Vancouver and drive three hours north to Manning Park. That night we hike in to Buck Horn campground at the beginning of the Heather Trail. This is the start of a seven-day hike that will take us some twenty kilometres into the backcountry. The campground is quiet only two other sites in use. We eat dinner, get to bed by 9:00 p.m., and fall immediately asleep.

At 11:30 I wake up in a complete terror. I feel trapped, suffocated by the tent. I panic fumbling to open the zippered door of the tent. I am totally disoriented and utterly terrified. Finally, I get the door open and lie in my sleeping bag looking out at the dark still night. My breathing is heavy and, despite the piercing cold of the mountain air, I am sweating. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. I have never experienced such fear. I cannot lie still.

I don't know what to do. I feel completely lost, totally isolated, entirely cut off from all the world. I am helpless and powerless in the face of whatever is this violent force that has taken hold of me. I have a deep sense of foreboding. Something terrible is going to happen. I feel incredibly vulnerable. I think about our daughters, one at home in Victoria, the other in Vancouver. They are so dear to me and I have a growing anxiety that they are both in some horrible danger and I know I cannot do anything to protect them.

I am certain that, if I make it through this awful night to the morning, I will be absolutely unable to continue with this hike. I know that when the morning light breaks I am going to have to return home. When we get back to Victoria, Heather is going to be burdened with figuring out what to do with me. I know that I will have to be committed to a psychiatric facility for the foreseeable future.

I wonder how I am going to explain to the Bishop that I am no longer able to work. I picture myself telling the parish that I am cannot carry on in ministry. I know that I am going to live the rest of my life as an invalid. The darkness and fear create an unstoppable agitation in my being. I cannot stay still. I toss and turn trying to will myself to remain in the tent.

Finally, I unzip my sleeping bag and stumble out of the tent. I walk through the dense darkness of night to the outhouse. The mountain air is bitterly cold. As I return to the tent, I notice the clear sky and the untold multitude of stars overhead. The beauty of the night

and the vastness of the space above only increase my sense of being desperately cut off from anything familiar and safe.

I get back into the tent and turn my sleeping bag so that I can lie with my face at the open door. I close my eyes, imagining that perhaps by some miracle I might fall asleep. But my heart is pounding. It takes every ounce of determination I can muster to stay in my sleeping bag. When Heather asks again what is wrong, I cannot speak.

Then, as I lie there with my eyes closed, my body completely dissolves into the black deep dark space of the night. There is no longer any physical substance to my being. I am just gone. It is not like falling into anything. I simply dissolve; there are no longer any boundaries. Although somehow I sense that I still exist, I know that I am not confined. At this moment all I can do is pray. Desperately, I ask God to make me safe and to take away my terror.

As I pray, words form in my mind. They are not exactly audible, but they seem to be more than a thought. I hear the words, "Peace. Be still," and then – "Do not be afraid." There is nothing more. Then it seems almost immediately I fall asleep.

When I awake in the morning, I am stunned to realize that I feel fine. I have no fear. I am not restless. I am at peace. It does not even occur to me to think that I might be unable to continue with this hike. And yet, I know that only a few hours earlier, the prospect of carrying on along this trail into the wilderness was utterly unthinkable.

Even more amazing, the next night, after a long day of hiking, I step into the tent and crawl into my sleeping bag and fall off to sleep without a moment of hesitation. There is not a thought that I would want to be anywhere other than right here, right now in this tent miles from any other human being, removed from civilization, completely alone with Heather.

Christopher Page 2006