

Precious Pilgrim,

"This is deep Tuna." We all laughed, but knew exactly what that meant. The "Tuna Group" is made up of ladies who have been meeting each Friday for the last twelve years. Our main goal is to encourage each other in our walks with the Lord. Part of that encouragement is being excruciatingly truthful with each other. We give each other the gift of listening as each reports on their previous week's walk. We listen to concerns, failures, hopes, dreams. Everything is held in the utmost confidence. Nothing goes out of Tuna -- not to spouses, friends, children -- nothing goes out. Maybe that's why we laughed when "deep Tuna" was mentioned for everything is "deep Tuna." In other words, it's totally unmentionable if it's spoken at the Tuna group. Do you know what a gift that is? To have a safe haven where you can be totally honest, totally open, totally vulnerable. There is no judgment, no fix-it mentality, only listening and prayer and truthfulness. It is the most important group in my life, next to my family, but these ladies are actually family, too.

We're called the "Tuna Group" because for the first ten years we met at our house, and Pearlíe Mae Lamar, our housekeeper, fixed tuna fish for our lunch each week. The name just stuck. It has a Christian ring to it, don't you think?

I love these ladies. They love me. We've gone through marriages, divorces, births, sickness, deaths. You name it, Tuna's been through it. We always celebrate birthdays in a big

way and love presents. At this point, children even ask for prayers from Tuna. Spouses have come to respect it. The Group is a gift not only to us individually, but also to our families.

I turn the light on. I turn the light off. I turn the light on. I don't want to give this discipline up of writing to you daily, but I am tired. It's 11:20 at night. It's been a full day. The volunteer work at Headstart was wonderful. Tuna was wonderful.

I don't know what this letter is about, what it's theme is. The experience for me today that was the strongest was walking into our burnt out house on Hull Street as they were ripping out the last part of the grand central staircase. Now the inside is more like a barn or a cathedral. It is totally gutted -- a shell. No interior walls are left, no honey-combed flooring, no carved paneling, no intricate doors, no plaster molding, no marble mantles, no shell-shaped corner cupboards. Nothing. Absolutely, nothing. The beautiful home which housed my family for the last sixteen years is gone. The exterior walls stand, but there are no insides.

What do you do with this? This is not the end of the world. Life does go on. In the big scheme of things, all is well. No one died or was badly injured. All our material things -- pictures, furnishings, are safely in storage. But somehow there are reactions. There's some mourning, some sadness. I'm trying my best to keep this house fire in the right perspective.

All of life is about building up and tearing down.

Holding on and letting go. I want to act appropriately to the situation, the circumstances -- to give the disaster its due, but then to dump it totally. I don't want to get stuck and remain in the year of the fire. I want to grieve it and then grow from it. I want this experience to just be woven into the fabric which makes up my life.

I don't know how either one of these images relates, but right now they are powerful in my brain. First, I can close my eyes and picture the English Anglican nuns at the last service I attended with them when I visited. It was a Friday noonday service, which ends each week with the sisters holding their arms outstretched and looking at a huge crucifix that hangs from the ceiling at the front of the church. They do this for about five minutes each Friday.

For me, it stands as a strong image of letting go. These ladies have nothing, own nothing, but even in their nothingness, seeing their held-out arms was and is a symbol of total relinquishing. I yearn to be that open, that unattached. I pridefully thought I was becoming less and less clingy, and then there was the fire. I have to come to terms with the realization that I was and I am more attached to "things" than I want to acknowledge.

Another image is a St. Francis garden plaque. Four are embedded in the concrete benches in the back yard at the Headstart kindergarten I just discovered this Wednesday.

Before I had ever started volunteering there, before I even

knew there was a Headstart program there, I fell in love with this backyard. There had been an article in the newspaper about St. Mary's of the Street Shrine. Mary Barwick, my friend, and I quickly went to see it. Under the direction and dreams of their previous priest, the parishioners of St. John's had created an inner city garden sanctuary. The whole property is encircled with two-foot concrete angels. Along one side of the property are larger, almost life-size statues of saints and angels and a cross. Strategically interspersed along the way are concrete benches. There are trees and azaleas and a large paved parking lot and driveway. A chain-link fence encloses a playground for the children. It is not that large a space, so every inch has been put to practical use. Teachers, four-year-olds and soup kitchen diners come through this backyard daily. Somehow, aesthetically, it works. It is a pleasing, pleasant place.

After Wednesday, it became even more meaningful, for it became a place of comfort for four four-year-olds. It was picture-taking day. I have never seen the children so excited, even more than at Christmas. In the room where I was helping, the children that were having their pictures taken had a name tag sticker placed on their backs. I noticed there were four without tags. The teacher told me these would not be having their pictures made. Slowly, it became apparent to this precious quartet that since they were unstickered, that meant something was wrong. They started telling their fellow

classmates, "We don't have stickers. We're not having our pictures made." There was some discussion, some consoling. You know, four-year-olds are usually candid and truthful, but kind.

Me and my "fix-it" mentality wanted to get thirteen dollars for each child or go find a camera and take a group shot so that everyone could have a picture and be included. But even I knew that wouldn't have been appropriate. It was, however, appropriate for me to ask the teacher if I could take the four outside while the others were being photographed. She said yes and we had a grand old special time.

We lined up and they followed me. Sometimes I was a quacking mama duck and they were my pretend quacking ducklings. Sometimes we were bees and we'd buz-z-z-z and land with our fingers occasionally on a dandelion or an azalea. Then we were graceful, quiet butterflies. It was important that we stay together, for there were other classes already outside playing. Occasionally we'd light on a bench where we five could fit perfectly. It was then, for the first time that I noticed the small St. Francis plaques that had been placed in the center of each. That was nice.

Maybe, maybe what this letter is about is sanctuaries -- holy ground sanctuaries. Sanctuaries are holy maybe because they're not tightly, but rather lightly, held. In such places, there's a sense of beauty and calm and safety where all is right in the world in that particular spot. The Tuna Group, St.

Mary's Convent, and St. John's backyard all have become, for me, Holy Ground sanctuaries. My prayer is that our Hull Street house will become such a hallowed home. A fire and a ripped-out of the insides and a tearing-down of the burnt staircase seems to be a good start in the building process of such a place. A holy sanctuary. Peace.

*I am your sister in Christ,
Lucy*