

Megan McKenna

THE HOUR OF
THE TIGER

Facing Our Fears



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*for Margaret with deep gratitude and love
and for all those who have
the hidden heart of a tiger within*

INTRODUCTION

No heaven, no earth, just this mysterious place we walk in dazedly ...¹

This book might appear to be about fear, since that word appears in the title. Or it might be about tigers, since that word also is there, and there are many tiger stories in the book. In fact, this book is about the present moment – every moment – and about the word ‘facing’. It is about facing life and death; about facing fear and love, about facing all the hard issues of life and all the mysterious deep places of living too. There is a short poem by a Chinese Zen monk, Qing Tian, that can serve as an introduction to this book and its reflections:

Late autumn rain is a rain of mist
tiger tracks appear in the moss
the west wind doesn't stop all night
by dawn yellow leaves are up to the steps.²

In Asia and in Zen poetry the season of autumn is the time of fullness, maturity and old age. It is also the time for letting go, for reflecting upon life and the passage of time and turning to face death – one's own eventually and the dying of all things. The rain in many cultures is a symbol of blessing, rich and soaking, like the ‘soft’ rain of Ireland or the fierce rains that

1. Megan McKenna.

2. From *The Zen Words of Stonehouse*, trans., Bill Porter (pen name of Red Pine), Mercury House, 1999.

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come upon the desert in spring. It is considered the grace and presence of the Holy when it rains on your birthday, wedding, anniversaries and the day of your funeral. It is a rain of mist – that weather phenomenon that shrouds all in haze, imparting a sense of mystery and the unknown to all the world. Into this natural setting comes the sight of tiger tracks left on the moss, imprinted in the still moist ground. It seems the tigers of China were small but, like all tigers, could roar, and so they were used as a synonym for the wind's roaring in the trees. It is the wind that shakes the leaves free of their tight hold on the limbs of the trees; and the presence, maybe even just the thought, of a tiger in our midst would be enough to shake us loose of whatever we were involved with at any moment. The whole feel of the poem is mysterious, as if one has stepped into a place of unknowing where things are in flux and disarray. There is the sense that there is a great deal of movement in all aspects of nature and that that energy and shifting slips into the person who has stepped into the scene. And yet the last line is serene, another note on what is and has happened – the leaves have piled up on the steps. In some ways this moment describes what is intended with this book's content and topic.

The tiger is often referred to as the lion of Asia, the king and queen of the beasts. When I have seen tigers in Southeast Asia I am fascinated by how they are strong and enormous, yet lithe and sensuous. They can move incredibly fast and yet they usually move almost languidly, silently through the jungle growth. I have watched them rip meat from bones and tear other animals into pieces with ferocity, unaware they are being observed. I was brutally and suddenly reminded of being on the bottom of the food chain in the wild. Poet William Blake describes a tiger as possessing 'fearful symmetry'. This is how they are described in Elizabeth Caspari's *Animal Life in Nature, Myth and Dreams*:

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... the tiger is so perfectly camouflaged in the dark and dappled jungle light that it can evoke apprehensive trembling over lurking, shadowed, sudden death ... At home in the jungles of India, the mountains of Tibet, or the taiga of Siberia, tigers require only water, shelter and an adequate supply of large prey Males do not involve themselves with raising cubs; the female, which is considered one of the most dangerous animals in the world when protecting her young, does that. Despite her zealous guardianship, however, only one out of three cubs will survive to maturity ...³

In legend and folk tale, as well as in teaching stories, the tiger is the master, the teacher usually, and though it is strong and can be vicious, it is most often met with a child or someone who acts unexpectedly. Just as the lion lies down with the lamb and the child sits at the entrance to the snake's den, so a child and a tiger can be companions. This is in contrast to the fact that tigers generally evoke in human beings emotions of fear, terror, violence and the threat of being attacked, maimed, killed and eaten. In the East the tiger is a symbol of power and one of the four great creatures: the other three being the dragon, the phoenix and the tortoise. The white tiger, the symbol of autumn, rules the cardinal direction of the West. It personifies the constellation of Orion, which is most clearly seen in autumn night skies. Tigers are painted on the walls of cities and of houses and temples to keep danger away, and people wear tiger charms to keep disease and harm away. I was shown a tiny pair of children's shoes elaborately embroidered with tigers for protection, and I have seen toys and pillows, clothing and pictures of tigers everywhere. The tiger not only protects the poor and the weak from harm and evil, but does battle in their name and is also considered a defender. It is a high honour in China to call a general a tiger and his followers tiger soldiers. The Chinese god of wealth,

3. From a study guide on the film *Two Brothers* (the story of two tiger cubs separated after hunters intrude upon their world, written and directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1989), by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, 2004, found on www.spiritualityandpractice.com.

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Chao Gongming, is often riding a black tiger. In Daoism, the First Master of Heaven, Zhang Daoling, rides a tiger as he escorts the dead to their final destination. There is a famous place called Dragon-Tiger Mountain in Nanchang (Jiangxi Province), which is the legendary palace of the head of the Daoist religion. Along with the dragon, the tiger is one of the rulers of sky and earth. The tiger is considered proud and honoured for its power, strength and royalty.

Religiously one rides a tiger to show the ability to overcome evil in Hinduism and Buddhism. In rural areas, the tiger was considered to be God, especially in heavily forested areas of India. In many religions, including Islam, tigers were considered messengers sent by God to punish evil-doers. The God Shiva rides a tiger and wears a tiger-skin robe in his role as destroyer. In ancient history only nobles were allowed to hunt the tiger, and kings set aside huge reserves so that the tiger could have enough space to live and raise their young. There are paintings and drawings of Buddhist monks sleeping with tigers on the inside walls of temples to teach that those who faced their fears could overcome and even tame the mystical forces of nature.

Today tigers are an endangered species and have disappeared from many of their native habitats. Tigers have been maligned as man-eating but in reality they instinctively avoid human beings. It is only when their habitat is infringed upon and the game they need to hunt for their survival is curtailed that the balance between what is predator and what is prey becomes upset and tigers turn and attack humans.

When more and more domesticated animals are available and there is less and less wild prey, tigers attack and become used to eating humans. Since they already have the characteristic of seeking out the most defenceless target in herds – the elderly, the sick and the young – they do the same with humans. It is said that in recent decades tigers have killed more humans than any other cat.

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Of all the cats – African, Asian, Siberian, South China, Sumatran and Indo-Chinese tigers – there are only about 5,500 left in the wild. In this century their numbers have been reduced by 95 per cent. They suffer from loss of habitat and large prey to hunt, poaching and selling of their body parts on the black market, mostly for use in traditional medicine. Tigers only live less than fifteen years in the wild if they have space and are not hunted. They survive solely on meat, usually deer, boar, wild pigs, water buffalo and small mammals. They ambush their prey, but even though they are good hunters – they have to be in order to survive – they are only successful at taking down their prey about 10 per cent of the time! Thus they need sufficient prey and territory. They travel between six and twelve miles a night – they are nocturnal creatures, usually solitary, only rarely hunting in packs. They can leap more than thirty feet in a single jump, they can climb trees and swim for miles. And they can disappear in an instant in the jungle, high grasses and brush. This is why they are considered both so dangerous and so mysterious.

This magnificent creature, at the top of the animal kingdom, could be extinct in the wild in the next fifty years. To paraphrase William Blake's haunting image: tigers are not 'burning bright in the forests of the night'.

Tigers are an apt image for human beings who face their fears instead of becoming part of a herd that panics and runs, easily frightened by others who seek to manipulate fear for their own ends. But I picked the tiger because of its mysteriousness and its illusiveness and its being so unknown. It is a mystery in itself and its presence pushes us to the edge of mystery, forcing us to delve into other layers of life and death. The tiger, on the edge of extinction, tells us that we must move to the margins and approach the gates of mystery so that we can live fully human lives. But there are so many places in the world where there are no tigers! Ireland, Europe and North America have no wild tigers, though there are cats like the

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puma, the panther, the bobcat, and the lynx, among others, in the United States and Canada, and small cats in most countries. But every culture and nation has an animal that conveys the sense of the tiger – its wild beauty, otherness, power, strength and interplay with humans.

Somehow catching a glimpse of this animal pulls one towards awareness, to the edge of mystery. It is often accompanied by a strange admixture of heart-racing fear and clear attraction.

For some people in the United States and Canada, the sight of a deer, an elk or a moose standing still and looking at you can elicit such awe. I remember one early morning – around 4 a.m. – I was looking out a window on the third floor of a school I was staying at. I was startled and shocked to see a large urban fox darting across the lawn. At breakfast I had to check out what I had seen and confirm that such a creature still found places to live in the heart of the city.

The horse, especially in Ireland and some other countries, is that symbol that evokes many of the characteristics of the tiger – its solitariness that attracts; its strength and power; its ability to run and leap; its being ridden; the lure to stand face to face with it, in spite of its size. I was recently introduced to the story of Columba and the white horse who came to him before his death, found in *The Life of Columba* by Adamnan in the section called ‘The Visions: Of the passing to the Lord of Our Holy Patron Columba’.⁴

When the time of Columba’s dying draws near he is an old man and yet his community is reluctant to let him go and his attendant, Diormit, mourns his coming death and is inconsolable. So Columba tells him that he will give him details of his dying that no one else will know. He tells him that he will die on the Sabbath and go to his rest, and it will be at midnight that he will answer the Lord’s invitation. Then, after talking with Diormit in the barn, he goes off by himself and sits down halfway between the barn and the monastery. And here the white horse comes to him.

4. Also known as Columcille, born 7 December 521, probably in County Donegal, and died in the early hours of 9 June 597 AD on the Isle of Iona, where he set up his monastery and was the first abbot.

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And while the saint sat and rested there a little while, being weary with years, as I said above, behold, there came to meet him a white horse, that obedient servant which used to carry the milk-vessels between the cow pasture and the monastery. It went up to the saint and, strange to tell, put its head in his lap, inspired, I believe, by God, from whom every animal has understanding and such perception of things as the Creator Himself has bidden; and knowing that its master would soon depart from it, and that it would see him no more, it began to lament and like a human being, to shed streams of tears over the saint's bosom, weeping and foaming profusely. When he saw this, the attendant began to drive the tearful mourner away, but the saint forbade him, saying, 'Let it be, as it loves us, let it be, that it may pour out into my lap here the tears of its most bitter lamentation. See, though you are a man and have a rational soul, you could have known nothing of my departure except what I lately disclosed to you myself: yet to this brute and unreasoning beast the Creator Himself has clearly revealed, in His own chosen way, that its master is about to depart from it. And saying this, he blessed the horse that served him, as it turned away from him in sorrow.'⁵

The story is touching, a marvel, and whimsical in its description. But it highlights the connection between someone who has lived truthfully, courageously and faithfully, and all creation, even the animals that share earth and sky, and life with us. There are certain things one only learns with life, with facing all the fear and goodness that there is in living and in facing it all with courage and grace. Columba's wisdom extends to all creation. He then stands up, when the horse leaves him, and looks over the monastery and the island and blesses it in that moment and for the future. Then he goes to

5. *The Life of Columba* by Adamnan, abridged and translated by John Gregory, Floris Books, 1999, pp. 54–5.

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his hut in the monastery grounds and spends his last hours copying a psalter. He stops at the thirty-third psalm where he wrote: 'They that see the Lord shall want no manner of thing that is good.' He said, 'Here, at the end of the page, I must stop'.

The next line, to be taken up by the one who succeeds him and to be penned and read by all who read his last words is this: 'Come, ye children and hearken unto me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.' This prayer and blessing on fear – the fear of the Lord as opposed to all servile and demeaning fear – is the beginning of wisdom in every age. Fear diminishes us, paralyses our physical bodies and drains our psyches and souls. It turns us to stone, cramping and tightening our hearts, reducing us to despair, rage and violence in retaliation and frustration. We begin to fear others, to fear change, to fear life itself and we think only of killing the tiger and so killing imagination, the power of goodness and strength, wildness, freedom, hope and balance in our life and world. Fear of the Lord allows us and teaches us to face the tiger, make friends with the tiger, enter the tiger's gate, learn to see and appreciate with awe the tiger and practise some of the tiger's behaviour. We can learn to purr like the tiger, lie in the sun like the tiger, hide when necessary and live with the fierce passion of the tiger. We can enjoy the expansiveness and spaciousness of the tiger, its freedom and its gracefulness. We can learn from the tiger that the vastness of fear is nothing in relation to the universe of communion and the balance of all things. We can learn to feed the tiger its prey so that it does not turn on other prey – humans. Perhaps we can even learn to ride the tiger and sleep with the tigers curled around us, safe with the tiger cubs, and like the child of yore live the mystery of lying down with the tiger and sitting close to it – the undying image of the peace of the kingdom of God.

Jesus the child of God, the prophet, was a tiger. Jesus and Columba, the pilgrim and monk of the sixth century, were

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known to another monk of this century, Thomas Merton. He tells this story in his journal.

Once upon a time there was a tiger with three young cubs. They were young and playful, but the mother tiger was trapped and killed. Eventually two of the cubs died but the other one wandered, eating grass and trying to survive. It came upon a meadow filled with sheep and goats, and even though it was very hungry he ate grass with them and settled down. He would butt heads with them, roll on the grass and sleep with them. And he grew stronger and larger. He was always hungry. Sometimes he would catch a small creature and chew contentedly on it. And sometimes he would look at those around him: sheep and lambs and goats and wonder what they'd taste like – but they were already like kin to him.

Then one day a tiger appeared on the hill and the goats and sheep bleated and ran in terror, but the cub stayed. It watched as the tiger loped down the hill so graceful, so strong and free, and fast! They stood and faced each other, full grown tiger and small cub. Then the cub thought to play and put down its head and butted the tiger! The tiger looked at it and took its great paw, pulled in its claws and batted the cub, sending it rolling over the grass. The cub was stunned, but did it again. This time the tiger batted him harder and he rolled farther. A third time he put his head down and ran for the tiger. This time the tiger pulled out his claws and gently but firmly hit the cub. The cub crouched and whimpered. The tiger went and picked it up in her mouth, as tigers carry their young, and walked off with the cub in her mouth – down to the river. At the river's edge, she dropped the cub. The cub looked at itself in the water, its eyes wide. Then it looked at the tiger beside it and its eyes grew huge. It looked back and forth from the water to the tiger. Then the tiger roared, shaking the valley and filling the air, and then the cub tried it – letting out a weak growl. The tiger roared again and again, followed by the cub until they were both roaring together. Then Merton says ... 'I never

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knew I was that tiger cub until God came mysteriously into my life and batted me once, then again and again, then picked me up in his mouth and carried me to the river that revealed to me my real nature and then I learned to roar. I think the first time I was batted by that great paw I woke up and looked at myself truthfully. The second time I got hit with that paw, claws still held in, I became a Catholic. The third time I became a trappist monk, and now every Advent and Lent I know that paw is coming and I'm to be swatted again, taken up into the mouth of God and dropped by the river's edge to once again learn to roar and to become more of what I was born to be.'

The tiger approaches us and it is up to us to face it in all its forms. Or we come upon a solitary horse in a field backlit by mist and evening shadows and we are drawn into reflection, into the eye of the tiger. All of life is a mystery and there are lots of edges and margins – tigers and horses, light, cloud, rain, mist, death, violence, war, suffering, pain, loneliness, sorrow, isolation, strangers, insecurity, others – all reeking of the mystery of the unknown and the fullness of life yet to be known, experienced, embraced and lived. It is the hour of the horse, the hour of the tiger now – it is always the hour that we are summoned with the words: Do Not Be Afraid! Come, children and hearken unto me, and I will teach you the fear of the Lord!

We are summoned to a way of life, the way of the tiger, the way of the courageous children of God. We are invited to live with and in imitation of the Tiger of Truth, Jesus.

1 THE HOUR OF THE TIGER

FACING OUR FEARS

Everything will be OK in the end.
If it's not all OK
it's not the end.¹

This is written on one of my refrigerator magnets. When I mention it to people, they all want to know where they can find one for themselves. Somehow it seems to give comfort, to make people ease up and even to laugh, a bit ruefully. I have thought about people's reaction to the magnet and realise that the quote and its sentiment touch a nerve in many people. It rubs against the underlying feeling of insecurity, a nameless fear and uncertainty that seeps through all of life: relationships, work, the political and economic situation, the climate of polarisation, the hype of terrorism and the vague sense of uneasiness in most human beings. Perhaps those feelings are just part of being human but they have most certainly been severely aggravated since the year 2000 AD.

The tag '*Anno Domini*' is important in describing years and the passage of time. In Western culture it implies that each year is 'the year of the Lord, *annum domino*' and that all time and all places, all things belong first and in the end to God – as do all of us who are believers. We don't usually remember that reality except towards the end of one year, the coming of the season of Advent when the Christian calendar begins another

1. Anonymous.

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year a month in advance of the secular calendar; or at the death of loved ones and other catastrophic events. In many ways fear and time are intimately linked, for both are subtle, subterranean and shadowy.

The hour of the tiger has its roots in Asia, in the zodiac that is based on animals – the year of the tiger, the rat, the monkey, etc. – and when one is born on the earth. But it has even stronger roots in Asian meditation practices and wisdom stories of China and Japan, in the Buddhist tradition of Zen. One of the ancients is believed to have lived through the hour of the tiger regularly and it became immortalised in a teaching koan (a Japanese story, like a very short parable, that teaches wisdom).

The monk was young, inexperienced and fearful. He lived in fear of failure, of disappointing his master, of not becoming enlightened, of death and suffering, of all the illusions of his mind and the fleetingness of life. Sometimes he would sit to meditate and he would shake. Others would tease him and say he was afraid of everything, even his own shadow. But his master was wise and he suggested a remedy. First he had to face his fears. But how?

The master suggested that he move outside into the world of earth, sky and animals so that both his mind and his body would be a part of what happened. He told him of a cave high in the mountains that was good for meditating in, very isolated and private. He told him to bring water and some oat cakes and go sit, his back up against the cave wall, facing the opening, and try meditating through the night. So the fearful student diligently went to obey his master's suggestion. What the master hadn't told him was that the cave was frequented by tigers. They slept there during the day and would go out hunting at night, returning at the hour of the tiger, around 4 a.m. That hour was the darkest of the night and often the coldest part as well.

The disciple found the cave with his master's map and

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settled in. He arrived just as evening came and the shadows were falling and he sat up against the wall facing the opening and he meditated. He dozed and woke fitfully. His fears came and went – about failure, about his own image and how many just laughed at him, about the future and death, and whether he'd ever be able to just live without fear. There were shadows and sounds he was not used to, even smells that assailed him, but he forced himself to stay seated. And then a tiger returned after hunting and feeding all night in the wild. The tiger was startled to find a human being (that he could smell long before he got to the cave, and moved stealthily, creeping up on him) and the young student was startled too – but he didn't know if it was just another of his illusory fears or whether it was real – an actual tiger! They were both stock still, eyeing each other. And then it dawned on the student – this was real! It was a stand-off. Minutes felt like years. The student sweated profusely, paralysed, terrified out of his mind, and didn't dare take his eyes off the tiger that was immobile, also deciding what to do.

The student remembered everything he could about tigers in the wild. He knew that if he moved and tried to run, or if he bolted, the tiger would see him as food. He wondered if the tiger had been successful in its hunt and looked more closely for signs of blood or anything that would indicate that he had eaten and may not be so hungry after all. And then another fear crept in – the cave! Did the tiger live here? Did the tiger live alone? He was aware that tigers protect their young fiercely from any harm. He hadn't had time to check out how far the cave went back into the mountain – were the tiger's cubs in the back? Did the tiger have a mate? If so, where was the other tiger? The time stretched out and he was aware that he'd never been more alive in his life. His mind and his body were alert and yet he grew ever more still, self-contained and resolute, though he had all sorts of fear rooting him to the ground. But these fears were connected to something real –