

## Reading

“The Enigma We Answer by Living”, by Alison Hawthorne Deming

Einstein didn't speak as a child  
waiting till a sentence formed and  
emerged full-blown from his head.  
I do the thing, he later wrote, which  
nature drives me to do. Does a fish  
know the water in which he swims?

This came up in conversation  
with a man I met by chance,  
friend of a friend of a friend,  
who passed through town carrying  
three specimen boxes of insects  
he'd collected in the Grand Canyon—  
one for mosquitoes, one for honeybees,  
one for butterflies and skippers,  
each lined up in a row, pinned and labeled,  
tiny morphologic differences  
revealing how adaptation  
happened over time. The deeper down  
he hiked, the older the rock and the younger  
the strategy for living in that place.

And in my dining room the universe  
found its way into this man  
bent on cataloguing each innovation,  
though he knows it will all disappear—  
the labels, the skippers, the canyon.  
We agreed then, the old friends and the new,  
that it's wrong to think people are a thing apart  
from the whole, as if we'd sprung  
from an idea out in space, rather than emerging  
from the sequenced larval mess of creation  
that binds us with the others,  
all playing the endgame of a beautiful planet  
that's made us want to name  
each thing and try to tell  
its story against the vanishing.

## To Love the World Enough

Rev. Kathleen McTigue Sunday, April 17, 2011

Many years ago, one of the great liberation leaders of our nation, W.E.B. DuBois, wrote these words, a springtime prayer for persistence: "In these first beginnings of the new life of the world, renew in us the resolution to persist in the good work we have begun. Give us strength of body and strength of mind and the unfaltering determination to carry out that which we know to be good and right. Forgive all wavering in the past service of [the righteous] cause, and make us strong to go forward in spite of the doubts of our friends and our enemies and in spite of our own distrust in ourselves. Out of the death of winter comes ever and again the resurrection of spring: so out of evil bring good, O God, and out of doubt, determination. Amen."

That seems to me a noble prayer for our times, a noble prayer for this week that holds so much life as spring rises, and holds as well such soulful power in the holy days of Judaism and Christianity. Persistence is the theme of the season, after all. After a long, cold winter that held more snow than most of us can ever remember, the steady emergence of springtime feels especially miraculous. It's a kind of physical echo of DuBois's prayer. "Nevertheless", it whispers to us: despite the setbacks, the cold wetness of early spring, the slow thawing that has come in fits and starts -- nevertheless, the new life we yearn for will push its way up through the cracks. All the earliest human celebrations of the spring, the Pagan holy days lost except in the oldest myths and murmurs of history, have to do with this hope and expectation that the new life of springtime will persist, no matter how brutal the winter.

The stories and lessons built up around the Jewish and Christian holy days of spring carry on the same theme in their own ways. Passover, which begins tomorrow, tells the tale of liberation from the generations-long winter of slavery. It's a story about the small, unlikely flame of hope that kept burning for all that time, and persisted in the hearts of those who would not forget that their true calling was to live as free men and women. Easter is the Christian story of persistence, of hope kept alive even in the face of the tomb, of life triumphant after bitter death. Easter turns us toward the power and meaning of a single life, the ways in which one person's truth and teaching could ripple out and make a difference in the world long after he had died.

It's a good and necessary thing for us to hold to all of these encouragements to persistence, in the face of so much that troubles us, especially as we think about and honor Earth Day this coming week. Persistence, steadfastness, is where we have to anchor ourselves, when what we care about is something as large as the health of the planet. A year after the massive oil spill began in the Gulf, we still have no idea what the full impact has been and will be. Six weeks after the tsunami, we still wait each day to know how bad the radiation leaks will become, how much of the earth and ocean will be scarred. As hard as our own winter has been, all evidence says that spring is coming earlier and earlier, and many species are suffering for it.

There are lots of reasons for worry. Because we know so much about what threatens us -- what threatens our fragile planet itself-- because of the looming backdrop of frightening news, the place to begin is with grounding ourselves in our mother, the earth. There is persistence there, too, and comfort in the ground that sustains all that we are and all that lives.

In a long essay I read a couple of years ago in the ecology journal *Orion*, Erik Reece wrote about camping out for a week on an island in Lake Umbagog, on the border between Maine and New Hampshire. The essay is a distillation of that whole week spent alone and in often mournful contemplation about his own troubled family history, and the troubled history of the human family itself, especially in relation to how we live on the earth and how we treat the other beings with whom we share the planet.

Reese writes, “After Heraclitus, philosophy turned away from the practical and aesthetic question, *How do we accomplish being in this world?* to the metaphysical question, *What is truth?*...It seems to me that a great majority of us human animals have become so consumed with the second, ultimately unanswerable question [about truth] that we have done a very poor job learning the art of being, and of allowing others to be -- namely the 1.8 million or so other species with whom we share the planet. *Homo sapiens* are in the middle of creating the Earth’s sixth mass extinction, due largely to overpopulation, overconsumption, pollution, and the destruction of other species’ habitat.... It is by no means an exaggeration to say that the monotheistic nations, those obsessed with their own one truth, are largely responsible for bringing the world to this brink...And really, herein is the root of our most modern sin: we do not love the world enough.”

I re-read this essay early in the week, thinking ahead to today and knowing that in this month in which *awakening* is our theme, I wanted to speak in some way to Earth Day, to the continuing need each of us has to waken to the peril of climate change and wake up more deeply to all that is or might be in our hands to make a difference. Of the two questions Reese poses as marking a shift from the concrete to the abstract in philosophy, I am not much grabbed by the abstract one, “What is truth?” But all this week I found myself living with the other question, the one he thinks of as older, more basic and far more useful: “How do we accomplish being in this world?”

Maybe it seems a silly question, an irrelevant one: no one among us had anything to do with bringing our own selves into being, after all, and in a superficial way nothing is required of us in order to continue to “be” in this world -- we just have to keep breathing, and eat enough food, drink enough water to stay alive. But we don’t just live superficially: most human beings ponder our lives and their meaning at least from time to time. We think about the passing of time, about how fragile our hearts are, how easily broken; about what seems the vast gulf between the bright light of our consciousness and the certainty of our oblivion at the end of our lives. This awareness of ours, this ability to cast the line of thought forward and backward in time, this ache that we have for a sense of things, all bring us back to that question: How do we accomplish being in this world?

Many of you know that my mother suffers from Alzheimer’s disease, which was diagnosed a little over three years ago. I know that some of you also live with the sorrow of this particular way of losing someone you love, and you know that the nature of this disease is that people spend some time on a plateau and then they slide down the shadowed slope a little further from you, a little further from who they used to be. This past week my mother has been sliding a little more, and it’s become harder for her to find the words she wants in order to share even the simplest thought. I sit cradling the other end of the telephone, three thousand miles away from her, listening to her struggle, listening to the threads of her bright mind as they come unraveled,

and I grieve. My mind goes spooling back in time to five years ago when she seemed to be intact, and then back and back all the way to childhood memories of her clever repartee, her delight in word games, her brisk and serious opinions about the state of the world. And I grieve.

So this week I needed grounding in something below that grief, needed it more than I usually do, or perhaps better said, I was more acutely aware of the need. Three different days I took long walks in the woods near my home, looking to ground myself in the new life of springtime.

I walked past the trees not yet leafing out, the moss turning its impossibly bright shade of green, past the vernal puddles in the middle of the track, full of clear water the color of strong tea, in which small, quick salamanders bask in the sun that reaches them underwater; past the tired old leaves in the tracks where I find the earliest spring butterflies the size of my thumbnail, as blue as the sky on its clearest day and sometimes willing to climb from the papery leaf onto my warm finger for a split second before flitting again; past the little ponds where at least four distinct kinds of frog songs come trilling, lilted, chirping and belching out; past a misplaced crocus blooming its brave and cultivated purple way out there in the middle of the woods, as though believing itself a wildflower; and past a stunning clump of brilliant blue wildflowers, hepatica, cradled in the hollow of an old oak tree, held there like some enormous, grizzled old man might delicately, tenderly hold a newborn baby.

The woods are full of these beautiful, comforting signs of new spring life. And also there I passed the matted, pasted fur of a possum, winter killed, and found the delicate, pure white bones of a mouse scattered against the greening moss, and passed a log, a tree fallen so long ago that now this spring, after the long and snowy winter, it has finally disintegrated completely to soil, still holding itself in russet outline against the ground but truly dissolved now into earth, feeding what once fed its own life, and I stop and lift a handful of it, a handful of what was once an enormous trunk lifting a whole canopy of green life, and it crumbles in my fingers, undeniably returned to the Earth from which it briefly rose long ago.

How do we accomplish being in this world? We take our own sorrows out there, into the life of the planet, which is never forever, which is also death, where we see that *everything is this way*: we rise, we shine, we fall again, and when we do, we are caught and held, cradled like the shining wildflowers in the hollow of the oak tree. We find our place in this unceasing flow of life and death by simply seeing that this is what *is*: there is no choice about it. We love what we love, but we don't get to hold onto it. We are drops of water careening down a spectacular waterfall and somehow we keep saying over and over to each other and to ourselves, "Oh, it's so hard to let go!" But it's illusion. There is no thing to hold onto, no thing to let go. There is just the tumbling water that we are.

There is a second question held in the paragraphs from Reese's essay, implied in his sad statement that the root of our modern sin is that we do not love the world enough. As I walked through the woods of my particular slice of the world this week, I also turned that one over and over like a worry stone in my pocket. What would it look like, to love the earth enough? Allison Hawthorne Deming offers an answer in the poem I used for our reading:

*...it's wrong to think people are a thing apart  
from the whole, as if we'd sprung*

*from an idea out in space, rather than emerging*

*from the sequenced larval mess of creation  
that binds us with the others...*

And so I see that the answers to the two questions are bound up together so tightly that the questions seem in some sense the same thing: we accomplish being in this world by loving the world enough. Or we discover what it is to love the world enough by understanding at the bone level, the soul level, how we are *of* the living world in precisely the same way that my finger is of my body, my eye is of my living body.

Mary Catherine Bateson has written, “The most important thing that the Gaia hypothesis proposes that was absent from earlier metaphors like spaceship earth is that we are immersed in, and brought into being by, a living reality, not a mechanical one.... in which all the parts are interconnected and everything we do resonates with the whole... [The Earth is] a sacred process in which we share, not an object to be used.”

*The Earth is a sacred process in which we share.* This statement is also an answer to both the questions that roiled around in my mind this week. How do we accomplish being in this world? *The Earth is a sacred process in which we share.* What would it look like, to love the world enough? *The Earth is a sacred process in which we share.*

Last Sunday The Guardian from the U.K. reported on a small piece of news coming out of a small nation that sits in the heart of South America. That nation has spoken out a word so contrary to how the western-dominated industrial world normally lives that it seems almost incomprehensible at first. “Bolivia”, reports The Guardian, “is set to pass the world's first laws granting all nature equal rights to humans. The Law of Mother Earth... redefines the country's rich mineral deposits as "blessings" and is expected to lead to radical new conservation and social measures to reduce pollution and control industry.

“The country... will establish 11 new rights for nature. They include: the right to life and to exist; the right to continue vital cycles and processes free from human alteration;...the right to balance; the right not to be polluted; and the right to not have cellular structure modified or genetically altered. “Earth is the mother of all”, said Vice-President Alvaro García Linera. ”

“[This law] establishes a new relationship between humans and nature, the harmony of which must be preserved as a guarantee of its regeneration.” The law... has been heavily influenced by a resurgent indigenous Andean spiritual world view which places the environment and the earth deity known as the Pachemama at the center of all life. Humans are considered equal to all other entities....”

What would it look like, to love the world enough? Imagine if it were our own Vice President, or our President, saying, “Earth is the mother of all” as he signed legislation to protect the earth’s life. Imagine this in our own country -- in which last week, new measures were taken to gut environmental laws, in which last fall the Supreme Court granted the rights of personhood to corporations -- imagine our own Congress waking up to the truth and saying, out loud, that the Earth is alive and has the right to stay alive. Surely, then, we would know, with a profound sigh

of contented relief, how we accomplish being in this world. We love it. We love it enough. May it be so: AMEN.

**Benediction**

William Stafford, "Starting with Little Things"

Love the earth like a mole,  
fur-near. Nearsighted,  
hold close the clods,  
their fine-print headlines.  
Pat them with soft hands --

Like spades, but pink and loving; they  
break rock, nudge giants aside,  
affable plow.  
Fields are to touch;  
each day nuzzle your way.

Tomorrow the world.