

Set in Stone

2020 March 29

In Japan, along the northern coast, for centuries, people have left messages in the form of carved stones, hundreds of them, up and down the shoreline, some of them ten feet high and four feet wide. They're called tsunami stones, warning future generations about what the sea can do, how terrible the storms can be. For hundreds of years, survivors of earthquakes and tsunamis, people whose names and whose losses all have been forgotten, erected these stones with carved warnings: *Do not build your home beyond this point!* says one in a little village. No one knows who put it there, or when. It stands a great distance from the beach, on a wooded hillside, and it confused people for a long, long time, because until recently, no wave had ever reached it. But historians and geologists now know that centuries ago big waves did come up that far, and no one's built a house there ever since.

Some stones are so old that the characters have been worn away by wind and weather. Their silent insistence still speaks. Someone, many someone's, worked a long time without engines or technology to quarry and transport and carve and then plant these giant warnings in the ground. People must have done this after losing everything they had, maybe after losing every loved one they had. Think of some person, five or six hundred years ago, standing on the very spot their house had been, the day after a disaster, gazing at the sunlight sparkling on the placid sea, thinking, *We have to let them know, the ones who will come here after our children and our grandchildren and great-grandchildren are all gone; we have to let them know: do not build your homes here!* On some stones, to make the point more plainly, they listed the numbers of people washed away, recorded their ages. Others give advice on what to do in an earthquake in case a storm surge might follow: *Let go of everything; drop your possessions; run to higher ground!* The stones look like they're made of granite, but in fact they're made of willful tenderness, they're made of grief that is a generous grief, the concern of the ancestors reaching out their arms to their unknown descendants. It's never too late or too soon or too far or too near to imagine someone else's struggle, to call across the centuries, or just across your backyard: *I see you. Be careful. I want you to stay safe.*

It makes me wonder what kind of people we're all going to be, what kind of people we intend to be, on the other side of our disaster, the other side of this pandemic, whenever that is, whatever that means. At some point in the future, when we come stumbling out of our houses again, blinking in the light, stunned and sad and grateful to standing, who will we be then, when this is over, whatever "over" means? What message would we send to future generations about how to survive, not just physically, but morally, and emotionally, spiritually intact? When future archeologists comb through the archives of all of our Zoom meetings, digging with their little brushes through our emails, and Facebook posts and Tweets, looking for clues as to who we were and what we cared about, what will they decipher in those hieroglyphs? Do we even have the wherewithal, the stamina, to imagine who comes next?

I think we do.

This is about covenant, what Amy was talking about earlier: the covenants that bind us to each other and our deepest principles, to our better selves and to the holy. We decide what promises

we'll keep to the ancestors and to the descendants. We make it known by how we treat each other in the present. That's how we practice our religion.

Gary Snyder, in the reading, talks about the steep climb ahead of us, the challenges we face, the statistics going up, up as so many people go down. "In the next century or maybe the one beyond that," he says, "there are valleys, and pastures; we can meet there in peace, if we make it." Not "make it" as in survive, but "make it" as in build it as we go, build peace and compassion and justice right now. "To climb these coming crests," he says, "one word to you, to you and your children: *stay together, learn the flowers, go light.*"

Stay together. Learn the flowers, meaning *love the earth*, pay attention, try for once to understand the natural order and the elegant dance that holds you in its hand. Notice the beauty, which will save you from despair. And, *Go light* – meaning *let go of everything that you don't need*. If we learn nothing else from this catastrophe, that one lesson would suffice.

A long time ago I read that shortly after the Black Death in Europe in the 1400's, a rabbi in compiled for the first time a manuscript he called "the Book of Customs," comprising not scripture, but his own description of all the rituals, the practices and prayers, in the Temple, in the home, the foods and fasts and holidays, the ordinary blessing of the bread and candles on the Sabbath, the ways of blessing babies, and marriages, and the dead, ways of atonement and forgiveness, all these habits of being put down in plain and simple language, that could help a Jew to be what the rabbi called "a good person." There was this mystical sense during the plague and afterwards, that even if the people themselves were scattered, even if they all died, the essence of the community, its vision, its purpose, its power, would survive, through persecution, expulsion, war, and what was then called "pestilence." So he gathered it up and wrote it all down, made copies by hand and gave them away – tsunami stones made of parchment.

Let it be known (you might write this in your own "Book of Customs"), let it be known, (you might carve this in a stone in your yard ten feet high), that we were a people, **we are a people**, who learned over time, a lifetime of time, to hold fear in one hand and hope in the other, all at once, all the time, a people strong enough and smart enough and brave enough to be scared and hopeful, out loud, all together.

Let it be said that among our customs is generosity of spirit, and empathy, such that even in the hardest time, we could lift our gaze from our own (very real) concerns and ask our neighbors if they needed us to do a grocery run or set them up on a computer; ask our clinics if making cotton masks would help; ask each other how to keep supporting the people most at-risk and vulnerable, our homeless guests from Project Home and People, Inc., and everybody poor, everyone for whom sheltering in place is really not an option, and has never been an option. Let it be said that among our customs is an empathy so emphatic that it always finds its way to action.

Let one page in our "book of customs" show that for us to wash our hands during a pandemic is a holy sacrament, twenty seconds of sacred multitasking, during which some of us sing, and some of us breathe, some give thanks for running water, and some take a moment to hold in prayer the ones we love, or ones we've never met, in Syria, maybe, or Palestine, or in prison, or in detention

on the border. *Water is a gift*, we say in our holy communion each fall. *May your love of life be replenished.*

Let it be carved in stone or memory or written on our hearts that we're a people who thought we couldn't handle uncertainty, we just could not - and then we discovered we could. That we are in fact a pack of old dogs learning new tricks, and much to our surprise, we can hold ambiguity and unknowing and open-ended questions and our open-ended, scary future with grace. We are a people who thought we could never handle uncertainty, and then we took a breath, and washed our hands again, and paced ourselves, and redefined "long-range planning" in terms of days and hours and minutes, instead of weeks and months and years. We re-adjusted our ambition and our lofty goals to the attention-span of toddlers, and practiced present-moment mindfulness as they do all day long, Zen masters that they are.

We will carve in stone, or in the monument we make of every day, that the kind of people we mean to be when this is over is the kind of people that we are right now: giving and forgiving, humble, brave, and joyful, filled with wonder, and curiosity and hope, though we have considered all the facts. We're not *only* anxious, depressed, worried and exhausted, let the record show. We are also playful, gentle, creative and resilient.

Adrienne Rich said,

*A lifetime is too narrow to understand it all...
No one ever told us we had to study our lives,
as if learning natural history
or music,
No one told us we'd be
forced to begin in the midst of the hardest movement,
the one already sounding before we are born.
At most we're allowed a few months of simply listening
to the simple line of a woman's voice singing to a child against her heart...*

... and then suddenly it's our turn to sing.

*But there come times – and this is one of them –
when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die;
when we have to pull back from the incantations,
rhythms we've moved to thoughtlessly,
and disentrall ourselves,
bestow ourselves to
a severer listening...*

No one ever told us that be here now, living with this virus, this affliction, this fear. We're not ready, not prepared...

But you know what? We are.

Someone said to me the other day (actually more than one person said this this week), *You know, I'm seeing now that all my years in 12-step programs, all my years in meetings learning, against my will, how to "take one day at a time," is all paying off, all of a sudden. It's like I've been in training for this moment.* Someone else said, *For years now, at my church, I've been studying and practicing, how to be who I am and who I'm called to be, in all my vulnerability and all my strength.* They compared it to muscle memory, how you know without knowing how to do what's needed and what's right, because you've practiced all this time.

We are seeing mighty things, on a scale that we won't understand, I think, for years and years, when this is behind us, whatever that means. Doctors and nurses who were never trained to be heroes, in fact just the opposite, but here they are. I read a heart-breaking story this week by a respiratory doctor whose husband is a surgeon. They're both in their forties, with three children, exhausted and working opposite shifts. In the few hours they have overlapping at home, they are revising their will, and lining up people, four couples deep, to care for their kids if something happens, which they both believe almost certainly will. They're getting their affairs in order before some of their best affairs, *their life*, has even begun. We are seeing in our lifetime mighty things, so a prayer for the doctors and nurses and aides, the technicians and food service people in hospitals, the cleaners and receptionists and laundry staff and drivers, and everyone on the front line. Let the record show for future generations that we are a fiercely grateful people, and we carried our ferocity to the public square, demanding change.

I think of the people who've been calling to ask, whether they can donate the money that comes from the government, the stimulus check of \$1200, or whatever it will be – people who don't think they'll need it, already wanting to give it away, so households at risk can use it. *Can I send it to the church to pass on to someone else?* Yup – you can. And that's a mighty thing.

We'll set it on stone, for future people to see:

Our doctors and nurses and our teachers and our grocery clerks are our heroes.

Our congregations are communities of care.

Our neighborhoods are neighborly in constantly evolving ways.

Our hearts have infinite capacity for love and hope and joy.

Build your house here, make your home here.

This is safe ground, we'll tell the children of the future.

This is holy ground, sanctified by waves of compassion that crashed against the rocks, and saved us.

Kurt Vonnegut, Unitarian Universalist, once said he wished he could offer a message to every new baby that's born:

Hello babies. Welcome to Earth. It's round and wet and crowded. On the outside, babies, you've got a hundred years here. There's only one rule that I know of, babies-"God damn it, you've got to be kind."

For just a moment - holding each other across the miles, and holding everyone- let's keep silent together, speaking into the shared moment the names of those you're holding in your heart.

SILENCE

PRAYER

Spirit of life,

we pray for those with loved ones far away
for those most at risk financially or medically,
and everyone afraid and everyone alone.

We pray for those whose treatment for other medical conditions, is postponed for now,
and for those with mental illness, depression, or anxiety – for everyone, we breathe in peace and
breathe out love.

We hold those with cognitive and developmental disabilities, or dementia, who cannot
understand the disruption and the changes,
and we pray for those who mourn, that they may be comforted.

As we're able, one by one and all together, may we shine our own light brighter,
for together, we are strong.

AMEN