

WHAT WILL OUR DEVOTION LOOK LIKE?

2020 April 19

*I want to tell you that the world is still beautiful...
I want you to know that spring is no small thing...
and I still believe that we are capable of attention,
a great and common tenderness...*

So writes one poet, in the reading. As if to answer her, Mary Oliver said once *Attention is the beginning of devotion*. Over these past six weeks, you all have testified to this, every day sending glimpses of how the world outside your window or your door is saving you right now. These quotes are from your recent emails:

The outbreak of Spring is a saving grace: green plants popping, hearing birds, getting out for walks and bike rides.

Our daily walk through the wooded paths at Battle Creek Park has been a focus of my days and so important to my hopeful mood.

The weather yesterday really got to me. I didn't go out all day and that was a big mistake. Next time I will take an umbrella and raincoat and just go out, no matter what. Feeling better this morning. The blue sky helps.

I am trying to do a longer walk each day and see seasonal changes, the small icicles that form where the snow melts into the creek

I've seen Buffleheads on a golf course lake near me and a badger or beaver-not sure- swimming in McKusick Lake.

The pink Super Moon – I don't know why it made me feel so much better, but it did.

Today I conducted my weekly bird count with my partner. Guess what? When we first got to the Carpenter Nature Center and looked down the trail, we met a coyote! We don't know if it heard or saw us, but it did not seem alarmed!

Today I was trimming weeds along the fence when suddenly a small brown pile moved to attack my clippers. It was a critter who unsuccessfully tried to go through the chain link fence, got caught, and decided, therefore, to follow the Stay In Place Edict. I pondered the situation. I have nothing that can clip a chain link fence. I noticed my neighbor out hauling wood, so I called him over. Between the two of us, he with his tools and me with a stick keeping the muskrat from attacking us, and the 3 neighbor kids and their dog and their 6 chickens (all at an appropriate distance) my neighbor clipped enough and I nudged enough to release the traumatized animal. I'll check tomorrow to hopefully find that she has found her way home.

Yesterday morning my dog and I saw a muskrat gliding across the pond. It was so serene and beautiful. I felt filled with this calm that helped soothe me during the rest of the day.

My weekly report on the Mississippi view from our balcony: River is rising fast and running hard. Downriver end of Raspberry Island underwater to the steps below the band shell. A bit of green blush in the big landscape, just from the patchy winter-brown grass, nothing in the still-sleeping trees. But yesterday, I walked up to the Cathedral, and the shrubs and bushes have fat buds on their ends. It can't be long now.

This week, driving west, I saw three eagles and 6 hawks.

The watchword of our Earth Ministry team is NOTICE. CHERISH. PROTECT – and that’s what you are doing. These emails are not sentimental postcards from pretty scenes in nature – they are field notes, they are testimony, evidence, the stuff of survival and sanity. This is a time, when, with the poet in Jack’s reading, *we must uncenter our minds from ourselves; we must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident as the rock and ocean that we were made from.*

When we go outside now, we’re not escaping reality; we’re returning to it, putting ourselves back into right perspective, recalling our place in the family of things, the holy family, this living world and the sacred mystery within which it spins. Recalculating. A Global Positioning System for the spirit.

This week in Wednesday *Soul Work* we read a poem that invited us to imagine flying less in airplanes, driving less in cars, doing less of pretty much everything we do, wanting less, consuming less - and then we asked each other, tried to confess to each other in the weird intimacy of our Zoom break-out rooms, “What does this world need from you right now? When the pandemic crisis is past, what real and lasting changes in your own life might signal that you truly love our threatened earth?” It’s a good question this week, as we approach the 50th anniversary of Earth Day.

What evidence will your lived life, your daily life, speak of your devotion? Of your thanks now for the life-giving, spirit-healing, soul-softening, bird-loud, flower-spangled earth? What evidence will there be, on the other side of this time, of a transformed relationship, between you and the land, the water, the air? Between us, and all the other things that live and breathe?

About a hundred years ago, in the midst of the first World War when thousands and thousands of people were dying, both in battle and by sickness, a poet wrote about the springtime then:

*There will come soft rains
and the smell of the ground,
And swallows circling with their shimmering sound;
And frogs in the pools singing at night,
And wild plum-trees in tremulous white;*

*Robins will wear their feathery fire
Whistling their whims
on the low fence-wire;*

*And not one will know of the war,
not one Will care at last when it is done.*

*Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree
If [humans] perished utterly;
And Spring herself
when she woke at dawn,
Would scarcely know that we were gone.*

That's as true now as it was in Sara Teasdale's time. The rest of nature doesn't really care, and doesn't really need us here. The wild world would survive and thrive just fine, if we were gone; snow would come and spring melt and the gorgeous fall, and life in its wise non-wisdom would go on evolving one lovely species after another. We have to **want to know** what we need to know about our purpose in all this; we have to want to learn our place; we have to want to pay attention; we have to choose devotion religiously, in a way that trees and rivers and insects and elephants don't.

These weeks have reminded us how vulnerable we are, our bodies and our spirits day to day, and our grand economies, supply chains, food, and all our plans: how fragile this all is, and how utterly dependent we are upon each other. We see it on a micro scale, sharing makeshift masks and recipes, tips for d-i-y home repair and distance learning and muskrat liberation from a chain-link fence; tips for how to stay sober and how to stay sane, literally, and everything from how to cut your hair to how to hold a funeral on line. In just a few weeks, with no notice at all, we've learned and are sharing the rigors of a new discipline, a strategy, these skills for staying safe by distancing, not just one by one, selfishly, but all of us, holding all together, building all together, an underlying understanding of what's needed, what is asked of us. It is like a murmuration, the great flocks of starlings that know without knowing how to all move as one, hundreds of birds, thousands, in their elegant, sweeping formations. Has this ever even happened among humans on a global scale before? Every continent and country? All the humans, all at once, (or most of us) trying to practice, together, apart, an urgent, powerful, difficult thing?

It makes me wonder, what all else could happen on a global scale.

Gregory Orr, in the reading, says

*This is what was bequeathed us:
This earth ...
No other world
But this one:
Willows and the river
And the factory
With its black smokestacks.*

*No other shore, only this bank
On which the living gather.*

*No meaning but what we find here.
No purpose but what we make.*

*That, and the beloved's clear instructions:
Turn me into song; sing me awake.*

What would that music sound like, from all of us together? What will that singing sound like, from all of us together when our masks come off, not only from our faces, but from our blinkered consciousness, the denial we've indulged for far too long about the implications for our fragile planet of all our polices, politics and careless practices, our addictions to oil and convenience? We are seeing glimpses of what's possible – but we have to want to see.

Devotion is complicated and demanding – otherwise it's sentimentality. People have been writing about the blue skies opening above the city of New Delhi, clear skies not seen in the entire lifetimes of people who live there. People are writing about native birds returning to Wuhan in China, flying through the clean and quiet air, and fish returning to the rivers. The earth is breathing more deeply as we all quiet down, our cars and our planes and our ships and our factories and mines. We see a glimpse of what's yet possible, wisps of living proof that not yet everything is lost. We asked on Wednesday night, "What does this world need from you, not just now, but going forward? What real changes in your own life will signal, when the crisis passes, that you truly love the living world?" Notice. Cherish. Protect.

It's an intimate and a political question. We're all so desperate now to return to normal again – but why would we do that? What needs now to change, forever to change? The truth that we're glimpsing is complicated. Maybe the earth is breathing more deeply, but the cost is unspeakably high, and the people are gasping for air, scrambling for food and medicine, for shelter, for work. Who gets to decide when the factories in India, the coal plants in China, get to reopen or if they stay closed? Who gets to decide who dies and who lives, in the short term or the long term, so the trees and the grasses can breathe? It can't be the case that we'd rush back to normal, if normal means that those who use the most, consume the most, demand the most and waste the most just keep on clutching their power – our power. ***What will sacramental, sacrificial devotion look like?*** There's still time – but not a lot – to take a breath and recalculate just about everything.

What we know is what we've always known, and it is what we need to *want* to know by heart: everything is intersected and interconnected, interdependent, interwoven of shimmering, miraculous strands. It's rare we get a chance to see the weave so clearly.

There's a lovely poem by Ross Gay that brings this home for me, in this moment even more than when I read it first some months ago. He's writing about Eric Garner, the black man from Staten Island who was choked by police in 2014 - and he's writing about plants and seeds and life on earth, all of our relations. Garner's final words, spoken 11 times, spoken on the pavement where he died, were, you remember: "I can't breathe."

A Small Needful Fact by Ross Gay

*A small needful fact
 Is that Eric Garner worked
 for some time for the Parks and Rec.
 Horticultural Department, which means,
 perhaps, that with his very large hands,
 perhaps, in all likelihood,
 he put gently into the earth
 some plants which, most likely,
 some of them, in all likelihood,
 continue to grow, continue
 to do what such plants do, like house
 and feed small and necessary creatures,
 like being pleasant to touch and smell,
 like converting sunlight
 into food, like making it easier
 for us to breathe.*

For all of us to breathe.

Our moment now - which, like all moments in our lives, could be a turning point, a tipping point, a sacred threshold marking the difference between one era in our history and another, one chapter in our sacred story and the next, one way of being human, the way we used to be, and now the way we're called to be – this moment asks us now the questions we've been holding all along. It's asking us to pay attention, to want to see the questions clearly and answer with brave hearts:

Who matters?
 What matters?
 Who has voice?
 Who holds power?
 Who decides?

Who owns the water and the land, the birds and crops and animals, the smokestacks and the sky?
 Who says who's expendable?
 Whose lungs deserve to fill with air,
 and in these days of crisis, and the days that will come after, what will our devotion look like, to the earth and to each other?

When we go outside these days, into the arms of the budding trees, the muskrats and the eagles, it's not just to catch a break or catch our breath. We restore our souls – so we may then discern together how we will restore everything else.

silence.

from Rebecca Baggett, adapted

Testimony (for my daughters)

*I want to tell you that the world
is still beautiful.
I tell you that despite
the death in city streets and school rooms,
despite the slow poisons seeping
from old and hidden sins
into our air, soil, water,
Despite my own terror and despair,.*

*I want you to know that spring
is no small thing,*

*I want to remind you to look
beneath the grass, to note
the fragile hieroglyphs
of ant, snail, beetle. I want
you to understand that you
are no more and no less necessary
than the brown sparrow, the ruby-
throated hummingbird, the humpback
whale,*

*I still believe in a great and common tenderness
that we are capable of attention,
that anyone who notices this world
must want to save it.*

AMEN