

“An Altar in the World”

March 19, 2017

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“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.

Be not afraid.

Because this is what we are about:

We hold hope for each other when hope is hard to find.

We plant seeds that will one day grow.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

We cannot do everything,

But we can do something.

So forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That is how the light gets in.”

It is mid to late March and even though you have seen the bags of mulch
Piled near the doors at Home Depot, waiting for their turn,
And the perennials peaked out in a blaze of climate change fueled February,
The second hottest month across the world in history,
Only to retreat, frightened and scolded, by icy winds of March coming
In and wrecking the place like a lion....
You know it is not good for you to stay cooped up all fevery with cabin
Fever...
CNN blurping on the screen, Kelly Ann Conway winking at you with fake
news,

Mr. Trump tapping away on Twitter, wielding presidential power like a
smart phone shaped truncheon, with is a compliment or a curse depending
on how you voted,
and NPR purring on the radio on kitchen radio in tones
That don't waver no matter the cataclysm they're reporting, unless its pledge
drive season when they seem at their most excited...

And yes, you know it's snowing outside, and yes,
There are high winds reminding you who's in charge,
And yes, you already packed away the winter jacket in a spasm
Of naïve spring optimism,
But the problem is you have a dog at your feet with eyes
Shaped by generations of Darwinian survival, softened and rounded
At the edges so perfectly that even the most weary, sheltered,
Shuttered, shut-in, don't-make-me go-outside human owner
Can resist succumbing to the longing held in those eyes,
They saying over and over: *you love me, don't you? Then please don't
Keep me caged inside; take me out into the world so we can be
Wild and free together!*
*And I can poop without anyone looking at me,
And you can turn off the news and turn up the folk radio without any family
Rebuke,
And you can sing out loud without worrying if anyone hears you,
Except me and the sky and birds and God, wherever she is.
Can we go? Let's go. Here, let me get your gloves and your boots
And your hat and treats to keep me in line, because look,
Dr. Pavlov was right; I'll do whatever you want if you reward me.*

I'm kind of like a politician that way...(says the dog).

168 hours. That's what each of us are given in a week.

You heard a minister say in the midst of all the great inequalities,
One thing all of us share are these 168 hours, even as how we use them
Varies so widely – working, sleeping, smart phoning (21 hrs. a week, on
average!), talking, eating, cleaning, driving, waiting, cooking,
Loading and unloading dishes, wiping noses, exercising,
And...for a precious few...resting in silence.

In this season of Lent, a season - forget everything else you've heard -
Is about looking at your life and changing what's not working...
A true confession – it feels hard sometimes to make time for the things you
most care about; it feels hard to have the time you spend reflect the values
you have.

How what do you have to say 'no' to in order to say 'yes' to how you most
Want to spend your time? Is a good question to ask.

So, given that, what's one hour spent out in a mid-march storm?
Boots on, laces tied, hat pulled down over eyes, neck thingy pulled
Up over nose, jackets layered and layered.
What are you? You are a dog-walking late-winter ninja ready to do jujitsu
Against any foe, be that foe a squall of snow, or wind,
Or wasted time, unexamined hours, and precious little noticing of this one
wild and precious life.

“*Holy*_____! You exclaim, as the Nor’easter breath of air pushes hard up against your body.

Interesting, isn’t it, how words like that ‘*holy*,’ which share the same origins As *whole*, and *heal*...are reserved most often these days for our curses.

I mean, you get it. Not too many of us pepper our language with religious words, for fear that others might think we’re more religious than we think we actually are,

But, nonetheless it does feel a bit sad, a bit of a loss.

Because you remember it was Emerson, Saint Emerson, who said that

The true miracles are found not in the breaking of natural laws told in the Bible but in what he described as the ‘*blowing clover and silver rain*.’”

Or in other words: isn’t this world holy and sacred? Don’t we say we believe that?

Well, yeah, but instead of clover and rain,

Here come the darts of sleet and slices of snow.

Those we might say that spirituality is found nature and walking in the woods sometimes seem to forget how terrible and terrifying nature can be, or life can be for that matter,

which you think of as you push and push against the weather resisting you.

The privilege of having a house to go back to, heat on and steaming cup

And slippers not 50 minutes away,

Means it is easier for you to bask in the holy glory of this earth

That is at once a beautiful and dangerous and fickle garden.

Because...what if it were different?

Would Emerson’s words resonate if you, tonight, are

Worried about your heating assistance being cut in the latest proposed budget, leaving holy nature to have its cold winter way with you...?
Would Emerson's words resonate if you, tonight,
Know you are one eviction notice and back rent due notice away
From turning from the housed to the homeless?
Does UUism, with its sunny, spring-time, no hell vision of the world
Only work best for the privileged few?

You wonder if the dog asks such difficult questions
As you watch him porpoise through the snow in the ocean of white and
white,
And then he returns to your side, smiling and in love, reminding you of the
quip that you want to be the person your dog thinks we are (and not the
person your cat knows us to be)....
Because how much there is to confess there in the harsh wind where
No one can hear you...

For letting loose the torrent of every curse word you ever learned in
high school at the neighbor whose dog nearly bit yours...let you be
forgiven..

For staying silent when the table of sort-of-friends snickered at a cruel
joke...let you be forgiven....

For losing touch with real friends who left a voicemail or send a card,
But live in a distant city...let you be forgiven...

For staying safe too often in the bubble of the 'burbs, finding too
many good reasons to get out of your comfort zone....let you be forgiven...

For taking for granted the living, loving bodies you share your home
with...let you be forgiven...

For lacking of the courage of your convictions, for choosing avoidance rather than accountability...let you be forgiven...

And for spilling creamer on the counter at Starbucks and not cleaning it up, and a thousand others messes you have left for someone else...let you be forgiven...

My nose is cold; Can I nuzzle into your hand? says the dog,
Reminding you that you don't have to drag yourself through this storm
repenting, repenting;
just confess enough to get the hurt off your chest, change what's not
working, and begin again those 168 hours per week in love.

And just then, as though the Nor'easter senses you need to clear the air,
A big gush of wind gushes down the hill,
Pushing through you, and into the woods beyond...
Where it catches an old, 'been there, done that' trunk of tree,
And presses it sideways until it snap, crackles and pops in half,
Sending the top cascading in a cloud of snow on top of younger,
Healthier saplings beneath it.

This is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.

And even though you don't want to be afraid, the dog's tail goes between its legs and if you had one, yours would, too.

Because these are dangerous times, these are Nor'easter times,

And in a sacred, sainted world you can admit to feeling worried and afraid
About the desecration you see,

Because in between the marches and the pink hats and the protest hashtags

And SNL skits and the fundraisers (thank you Emma) this how you
sometimes feel -
Caught in the storm, alone, afraid, worried...you the stay at home parent,
You the health-care worker, you the Obama care recipient,
You the immigration lawyer, you the transgender kid,
you the meals-on-wheels receiver,
You the black kid who just endured the 'talk' from mom about what to if
pulled over, you the Muslim in Worcester,
You the UUAC trying to figure out what it means to live your faith,
You the minister trying to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable
While realizing sometimes the listeners of sermons are one and the same...
The world so broken, so beautiful, so sacred, so desecrated...
Which is why you come to church, maybe, not because this is the only place
You can find healing or God or holiness or wholeness or forgiveness,
But because you need, we all need, as many altars as we can find....

Longing for home, wet at the neck, you turn left at the two trails diverging
In the wood, and like Frost said in his poem we all might remember,
That choice makes all the difference because at that time in the storm
The temperature ticked up enough, right above freezing,
So that the snow turned wet and heavy, sticking like white-blue cotton candy
To all the branches over the road,
Bending them low and folding them overhead like a canopy, a tent,
No even better, like a church, like a chapel, a filigree of snow
And flying buttresses of branches, stained glass of ice on either side.
Can you see it?

All leading, there at end of sight, to the boulder you have seen before in all
manner of weather and seasons,

But that now looks for all the world, at the end of this momentary sanctuary,

like...like what? Yes, like an altar...just for you, in the storm, just for you,
ready and waiting.

And because no one is watching,

And because you're spirit is shy and unsure,

And because even the dog isn't noticing you as he chases a far off aroma,

And because you're trying with Leonard Cohen to forget your perfect
offering,

And because you need strength to help bless this broken world,

And because you need help to be the person you want to be,

And because you need to help to acknowledge what's not working in your
life, and make changes,

And because you have things you need to be forgiven for, large and small,

And because you know there is more to life than meets the eye,

And because you long to find meaning in your griefs, your loves, your
losses,

And because you know God's home isn't only in the church,

You walk down that isle that is that road, and as you draw closer

To the altar stone, you do something that you, these days, only reserve

For checking the plumbing under the sink or the oil pan under the car.

What you do you?

Yes, you stop and you kneel.

Why? Because you know how vulnerable you are,
Because so much beyond us deserves praising.
Because we're so small and the world is so big.
Because humility is a counter-cultural character trait.
Because we need help accounting for our 168 hours per week.
Because we need courage for this world.
Because we need to be brave.
Because the storms are strong and the winds are high.
Because we long to remember we are not alone.

Stone, storm, wind, earth, sky, sea, air, birds, trees, snow, ice,
Animals, dogs, people, sanctuary...praise, praise, praise, praise.

Amen.