

## The Distraction of Conscience

Early one Sunday morning a hawk swooped down in front of me and grabbed a songbird in its talons. The next evening at dusk, a large, hollowed tree fell across the road in front of me while I was driving. It startled me, though I wasn't in danger. On the third day, my dog killed a groundhog. She refused to let it go, trotting with it in her mouth, triumphant. I had to trick her into dropping it so I could hurl it into the woods.

Each time, I was the only witness, and each event was emotional in a way I didn't expect. I felt a sense of grief but also beauty and fascination. I sensed I was on the verge of understanding something that could transcend the invisible wall that keeps me separate from the natural world. Maybe Mother Nature was telling me that she is indiscriminate; life is tenuous; that I should keep my dog on a leash. Or maybe that wasn't the message at all.

Mother Nature communicates in a way that is almost knowable, though if my friends' feedback is any indication, the signs are easy to confuse. Humans used to be fluent. We could decipher the symbols and read the details in the landscape, feel the language in our bones. We conjured myths about natural events that connected us to the earth and to our deeper selves and psyches.

Joseph Campbell cites a pygmy legend about a boy who finds a bird that sings the most beautiful song in the forest. He brings the bird home and asks his father to feed it. But when the father kills the bird through neglect, he, too, dies as a result. The meaning is clear: When the man kills the bird he kills the song, and without the song, he kills himself.

Mythologist Martin Shaw tells of other ancient folktales in which people bury their hearts under a tree. Why? “So they can acquire more power,” Shaw says, “without the distraction of conscience.”

\*

I know one way to bury a heart.

In my twenties, I got drunk almost daily. I feel a great sense of loss about this now, a sorrow about missed opportunities and the pain I carried. But back then, I slept with a bottle of scotch next to me in case I got thirsty, a trashcan by the bed in case I got sick. I was trying to escape loneliness, the trauma of sexual assault, and the weight of holding other people’s secrets. Unable to communicate that I needed help, I consumed—and was consumed by—the wrong things. I died quietly on the inside, suppressing my instincts and emotions, because otherwise I felt too much.

Actual heart-burial was a common practice in medieval Europe. Hearts were interred apart from their bodies as a way of revering and preserving a person’s emotions, soul, and conscience. Heart-burial was also intensely practical: When a person died far from home in battle or on a pilgrimage, it was much easier to carry a heart to its final resting place than transport a heavy, rotting body. So the folktales might have been borne from ordinary experience, but the metaphor and symbolism are profound.

The folktales suggest it’s possible for a young woman to cut out her heart and keep living. However, I can attest that I was very much deadened when I buried my heart. I stopped drinking in my late twenties before I killed my spirit completely, but learning to adapt to life without drugs or alcohol is akin to learning a new language. My recovery requires that I change significantly in how I manage my emotions, how I view and interact

with the world. I must cultivate emotional sobriety, which is to say, I have to care for the bird in order to keep the song alive.

\*

I've always been acutely sensitive. As a child in the 1970's, in the midst of the energy crisis, I remember being worried, sitting, hot and sweaty in our Ford Granada in a long line of cars waiting for gasoline. At home, my father subscribed to Mother Earth News, which promoted simple living and gave down-to-earth tips about gardening and home projects. He briefly considered building a windmill in our back yard. I was ten years old and bereft when I learned about strip mining.

My father explained that miners dig up long strips of soil and rocks from the earth's surface so they can extract a seam of minerals underneath. They unbury what's valuable. I saw it up close when my family visited a friend's farm in Garrett County, Maryland. Our friends lived in a hilly region where the Appalachians of Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Western Maryland meet. The farm next door was being strip mined. Large dump trucks rumbled up the driveway and into the woods to Mr. John's property.

My brother and I liked Mr. John and visited with him occasionally. He was a thin, stooped man with gray stubble and hair sprouting from his ears. A shy mumbler, he was hard to understand, but he liked to laugh. Mr. John owned maybe fifty acres of rocky terrain where he let his cows graze. His barn wasn't much, but it was nicer than the old rusty trailer where he lived. (This was decades before old trailers were retro and tiny houses were a statement.) He had a small kitchen with a few dishes and pots, and slept in a recliner in front of his television and wood-burning stove. Near his door stood a life-sized

cardboard cutout of a woman advertising tractors. He called her Sally. He'd gotten her from friends at the John Deere store.

Now, I realize that John sold the mineral rights to his property because he lived in poverty. He had no way of earning income from his farm. But the summer we visited, I felt like he was making a mistake. The miners sat in vehicles with wheels as high as my bedroom ceiling and plowed through the land to remove the top soil and rocks and trees and grass, everything green—the overburden, it's called—to get to coal.

Overburden. A funny thing to call the earth.

From my perspective as a ten year old, there was no such thing as overburden. Or rather, that's what held value: The verdant rocky hills that I loved about Western Maryland, the peace and quiet of the mountains and the fields. But Mr. John's property was reduced to ugly rubble and mud. The landscape was altered and the trucks were loudly offensive. It seemed to me that even the cows were unhappy. Everything had been assaulted. Plus, the land being removed had to go somewhere, had to bury something else. The men around me saw this as the course of things. They spoke their own language to assure themselves. "It will all grow back," they said, denying the destruction. "Other farms are being strip mined, too."

I remember wanting to comfort the cows, wanting to take them away and cry. But I had to be tough around the men, the old farmers and the miners. Maybe that's when I buried my heart. Or maybe my heart was plowed up and carted away with the overburden.

I remember another thing that summer: Mr. John took my brother and me for a ride in his white 1966 Plymouth one afternoon to a small grocery store in Friendsville to buy ice cream sandwiches. He was rich now, he said, and could afford to treat.

\*

In my thirties, I dated an ecologist. His job was to survey ecosystems in construction sites to ensure developers abided by regulations to protect natural resources. He told me about a site in Howard County, Maryland that had been bulldozed before the habitats had been properly assessed. The developers and builders had staked plots and moved earth in a rush to maximize the number of lots they could sell. They buried part of a stream, hoping no one would notice.

“What did you do?” I asked him. What I meant was, *How often does this happen and how do you fix it?* But I knew what was unsaid: Most likely, the developers would deny it and get a permit and variance after the fact. My boyfriend and I didn’t talk about the uneasy relationships that ecologists and developers sometime form, the corners that are sometimes cut. There is money to be made.

Not far from that construction site is the quaint, historic town Ellicott City. Stone houses two and three-stories tall, dating to the 1800’s, line a hill that curves down toward the Patapsco River. Unfortunately, in 2016, the town was destroyed by massive flooding. Water ripped through the town, killing two people. The flood was blamed on a “thousand year storm,” except that it happened again two years later in 2018. Turns out, “thousand year storm” is a statistical measurement that really means that there’s one tenth of one percent of a chance in any given year that a storm like this will hit.

Nature doesn’t really care about statistics. Or permits or variances. But maybe developers should. In both storms, raging floodwaters rushed downhill cutting through roads and building on the way to the Patapsco. Climate change had something to do with it, as did over-development uphill. Developers felled trees, moved dirt, asphalted over

habitats, and created a new landscape. They stripped away the overburden and sealed everything up tight with a thick layer of impervious surfaces. There was nowhere for the water to go. Had there been sufficient forethought about flood abatement? Had anyone listened to the landscape?

Stripping and burying are nearly the same. However, the conversation works both ways. Nature can strip and bury us, too.

\*

Our history of disconnecting from the natural world is long and complex. Many ancient villages built walls to keep nature out. In “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” there is a telling episode in which Gilgamesh and Enkidu make a heroic six-day journey to the legendary Cedar Forest to cut down the “sacred cedar.” To get to it, they slay the forest guardian, Humbaba the Terrible. Note that nature’s guardian is considered terrible. Note that this was written in 2100 B.C.

Some of these early stories were warnings, while others fostered the delusion that humans are separate from the natural world, somehow superior to it; that we control our environment and can exploit it; that nature’s value is derived from its usefulness to humans. These notions allow us to bypass the distraction of conscience and justify the destruction of our own habitat. Which is to say, the destruction of our souls and ourselves.

Even when the connection is clear, we tend to ignore it. “The Kill Hole,” an essay by environmentalist Linda Hogan, is about communicating with other primates. When we taught American Sign Language to apes, we learned about the rich emotional lives of the study subjects—their capacity for love and resistance, their pain and anguish—which was, perhaps, more than we were comfortable with knowing. “Yet the significance of this

research,” she writes, “has gone largely unheeded. Many members of the scientific community played down the similarities between apes and humans, ignoring the comfort of such connections. ...They searched for a new division, another wall between life and life.”

\*

Once, when I was walking in the woods, trying to connect with my instincts using my breath as a meditation, I came upon two women on the trail standing side by side, their backs to me. They were silent and their heads were bowed. *They're praying*, I thought and felt respectful of their silence. As I passed, careful not to disturb their reverence, I realized they weren't praying at all. Their heads were bent low because they were scrolling on their smart phones.

Our phones, which are supposed to connect us to each other, are pocket-sized walls. Or mirrors. We're like Narcissus gazing at the pool, lulled into a trance by our glowing screens, fascinated by the narratives we've curated about our lives, a torrent of selfies flowing downstream. It's relevant to remember that Narcissus died. So absorbed by himself, he lost contact with others and, depending on the version you read, he starved or killed himself or was killed by sorrow.

Or, let's say in this contemporary version, he is killed by denial. Narcissus is so engulfed in his comfortable life, and so disconnected from the natural world, that he doesn't see how his dependence on fossil fuels causes climate change; he doesn't believe he is killing himself and everything else, or if he does believe it, he's sad and frustrated, waiting for someone else to solve it. So he doesn't change. What he denies is his place in the family of things.

(I write this as if I am not also gazing at my phone hoping for an answer.)

Of course, climate change has lots of culprits. Foremost among them: petrochemical industries, their leaders, and the politicians they control. As early as 1831, naturalist Alexander Humboldt recognized the effects of human-induced climate change. Now we're witnessing the increased ferocity of storms and fires, draughts and floods, the violence of displacement, and species extinction across the globe. Still, some people say, "I don't believe in climate change," as if it is a belief system, though they believe in other things unseen: A god that allows them to exploit and pollute unbidden.

But this isn't about blame. It's about becoming unburied.

Fortunately, many people are working to effect positive change. There are a variety of ways to participate in the solution. I can make seemingly small gestures: Cut down on single-use plastics, or drive a more fuel-efficient car, or stop investing in petrochemical companies, for instance. These sorts of shifts can impact the attitudes and awareness of those around me, though they do not feel substantial enough to abate extinction or prevent large-scale environmental disasters. I become outraged waiting for governments, industries, and climate deniers to wake up and change. But outrage is unsustainable and ultimately disempowering.

What if the change that's needed is not global in scope, but personal: If I am Narcissus, how do I stop distracting my own conscience?

\*

It's tempting to wait for technology to save us. Certainly scientific technology has expanded our understanding of nature. But it hasn't penetrated the invisible wall. Instead, the natural world comes to us via Facebook and YouTube. Nature is cute. Dwarf goats are adorable. It's sad when elephants are hunted for their tusks. Flowing lava is really beautiful



from a distance, from outer space. We've learned facts, too: We know that quality soil contains billions of living organisms in it. A teaspoon of dirt has miles of fungal filaments and can contain more living organisms than people on earth.

Don't think about that too much, especially as it relates stripping and burying.

\*

There is the overburden that the dump trucks can't carry: The grief that settles in our souls from knowing—consciously or unconsciously—that we are hurting ourselves and each other. Our denial of our role in the family of things is just another way to suppress instincts, to numb out, to be drunk and pretend otherwise.

Denial isn't necessarily willful. It is the first stage in the Kübler-Ross grief cycle, and grief is appropriate, given the fact that we're killing ourselves. The other stages of grief—anger, bargaining, and depression—can motivate us temporarily, but grief alone cannot sustain long-term change. Neither can fear, blame, guilt, nor a sense of morality.

Deprivation is like a diet that doesn't last. All of these energies are strong enough to create some change, but they're also reactive and fail to motivate us adequately. Only the last stage of grief—acceptance—allows us to heal. True acceptance cannot be forced or manufactured. But it can be lived toward if we dig down far enough to unbury ourselves. It is a shift in perspective that reorganizes our understanding of the world on a deeper level. For me, acceptance is an emotional-spiritual state.

When I got sober, I had to take a leap of faith that my life would be better without alcohol. I had to believe that there was a way for me to live that was not based on deprivation and restraint. I couldn't hold on tight and "white-knuckle" my way through the world when I got thirsty. I had to learn the vocabulary of recovery. Those new words gave

me the ability to see, to study my own emotional landscape and identify the rare birds and subtle storms in my emotions. Living more freely and happily means my perspective and motivation has to come from a state of acceptance and deeper connection.

I believe the same is true in our relationship to the environment. Our healing resides in recognizing deep in our psyches and souls that we are *of* the natural world, not merely tethered to it. If climate change is a result of unhealthy dependence and addiction, what would environmental recovery look like?

For me, it's important to reconnect on an emotional level, to feel nature rather than think it. That means I spend less time in front of screens and more time outside where the unpredictability of nature can surprise me: Hawks swoop, trees fall, dogs chase. As long as nature is cute, like baby hedgehogs, or is seen as a scientific concept, then it's at a safe distance where I can manage the interaction. Maybe that's why Narcissus can't look away from himself: Denial of the larger world is comforting.

But feeling is part of healing. The grief and sorrow I experience after seeing dead seagulls and whales, their stomachs full of plastic, is the infancy of understanding. The awe I feel at the power of the ocean is also part of the vocabulary. Maybe silence and presence and observation are the building blocks of language. Nature is always communicating with us, whether we understand it or not. The apes that gave us a glimpse into their inner states by signing their love and anguish were translating *their* language into ours.

What's needed for our survival is for us to change the way that we communicate. We need to relearn and re-feel an ancient language, a deep wordless vocabulary beyond the intellect; a pervasive language that joins all things to each other, like tree roots splayed in a vast underground network that nourishes and grounds us, keeps us steady. Why? If we tap

into the world's soul and understand how powerful and vast nature really is—and that we're included in the vastness—we might find a way to save us from ourselves.

\*

Yesterday, I accidentally smacked the dog in the head with the door when I swung it open. "I'm sorry!" I said and rubbed her head. She didn't respond so I have no idea what she absorbed from my apology. The apology was for me, anyway. I usually feel better when someone responds, "No problem," which is a form of permission. As someone with environmental guilt, there are days when I would like to apologize to the natural world for everything. But my guilt is my ego wanting to be soothed. Mother Nature cannot tell me, "That's OK," when an oil spill happens. She doesn't say, "Just wait until the next storm. I'll get you back," or, "I'll outlast you anyway, even in my changed state." Any apology is insufficient. What's really needed is an amends, a change in understanding and behavior that is not dependent on the response I receive from Mother Nature. Maybe the best apology is to say thank you. Maybe gratitude is the entrance to a universal communication.

\*

In the autumn when the days grow shorter, the air colder, Byrdie and I tromp through the woods in the dusky grey light as the last lonely crickets call hopefully into the void. One evening, I caught the scent of smoke from a wood stove burning in a nearby house, and off in the distance I heard the rush of the world, a train go by, a motorcycle, the regular pattern of evening traffic, but it was far enough away that it sounded like water. Far enough away that the rush couldn't touch me.

Then it started to drizzle. Before long it was a steady rain. I didn't mind and neither did Byrdie. I stopped to watch the raindrops fall on the lake. I listened to the sound of water

hitting water and felt, in that moment, as if the rain were speaking. It was calling to me and at the same time writing the words on the surface of the lake. It seemed to be telling me secrets, was open and forthcoming about all its mysteries, was spelling it out in small patters, and yet I couldn't make out the words. I tried to hear the rhythm of it, decipher the alphabet of each drop on the water. But the words were just beyond my reach. I listened anyhow because some part of it whispered to my soul.

Everything speaks a language. If I listen, if I'm present enough to suspend my knowing and quiet the dialogue inside myself, I might be awed every day, several times a day. The very presence of everything is calling to me: The hollow echo of woodpeckers tapping on tree trunks, the rhythm of their pecks like Morse code; the trees creaking and moaning in the wind; the sound of the sky falling with every plummeting acorn; and overhead, Canadian geese chattering and honking in their shifting V's as they descend on the lake, their instinctual arrows guiding them without hesitancy or doubt in the direction they need to go.

Whether or not I feel it or believe it, I am connected to everything. My intuition, which speaks a larger language, has been leading me, too. In the mornings when I walk Byrdie before work, I look at birds in the sky, envious of their larger view. I envy that they know when it's time to migrate and leave, and that when they leave, they are not alone. Their early morning chatter soothes me, and I am awed by that other language they know, the unspoken one, the one that makes a kettle of birds, a murmuration, suddenly turn and swell and move as a whole, drawing pictures in the sky that spell out grace. What I hear in response is deep, reverberating silence that happens after a branch falls from a tree. I also

hear the rain. I hear the back and forth of my own frustrations. And when I come home from my day, I hear my dog speak to me, spelling out love when she wags her tail.

“There is a passage in the writings of Simone Weil that has long been important to me,” writes Christian Wiman in his beautiful essay, “Gazing Into the Abyss.” “In the passage, Weil describes two prisoners who are in solitary confinement next to each other. Between them is a stone wall. Over a period of time—and I think we have to imagine it as a very long time—they find a way to communicate using taps and scratches. The wall is what separates them, but is also the only means they have of communicating. ‘It is the same with us and God,’ she says. ‘Every separation is a link.’”

It’s the same with us and nature. But the rush and clutter of the world, the hard-stone difficulty of what we face every day makes it challenging for us to hear the natural world around us, inside us. What else can we do? Tap, tap, tap against the wall. Which is to say, listen to the language of everything.