

A Beautiful and Strange Otherness

On those nights when skies are clear, I sit outside and let my eyes fall into the bowl of darkness. Wrapped in the blanket of night, I take in the beauty of Andromeda, Cassiopeia, and Orion, feeling the larger home to which we all belong. To come home is to remember our birthright. It is to recall that we are all indigenous to this stunning world with its rumbling storms and lapis seas. Whatever the fiction we ingested from a society that says we are separate from this animate world, we are, in fact, completely entangled with the beautiful and strange otherness. Our home is here, nestled in pine boughs and crows' wings, rambunctious otters and rolling waves. Becoming attuned to this way of perceiving the earth is at the heart of what we are called to remember.

To notice these bonds of connection, we need to be moving in a way that accords to the rhythm of the soul. We need to move at what my mentor, Jungian analyst Clarke Berry, called "geologic speed." To restore our connection with the animate world is to recall the soul's primal rhythm. This rhythm was established over thousands of years as we walked the earth; our senses and minds syncopated to streams and starry skies; to fellowship around the fire; to the long, patient waiting of the hunter; and to the pace of stories told by elders. We moved slowly, and through our bodies, drank in the entire spectrum of life.

The simple act of slowing down offers us an opportunity to establish bonds of intimacy with those around us - partners, children, relatives, friends - and to venture into the wider terrain of the beautiful and strange otherness. Imagine a friendship with a birch, a raven, or a stone. Imagine something in the natural landscape capturing your attention, calling to you and engaging you in an extended conversation until you and other become entangled. Friendship is rooted in the practice of familiarity and repetition. It takes time and repeated exposure to know another. I know when I walk through certain woods, how good it feels to come upon a familiar tree that I immediately recognize as an old friend; we step into one another's embrace and sit for awhile in a restful silence, falling deeper into conversation.

How can we fail to fall in love with this achingly beautiful world when we are so completely jumbled together with it all? It is our myopia, our species-centric blindness that cuts us off from the actual world. To love this world, however, is also to know sorrow. The grief of earth is registered in our bodies and noted in our psyches. We are inseparable from the living systems of the earth, having evolved over thousands of generations within her embrace. We feel her losses as our own: the disappearance of languages, the extinction of species, the thinning of the multi-textured sensuous world as song birds fall silent and the thrum of bees is muted. We must let our hearts break and let the great ocean of sorrow as it fills our world.

Our grief is intimately connected to how far we allow our love to fall into the world. Think of those indigenous tribes willing to fight to the death to protect their homelands from being destroyed by mining or oil companies. They know their lives are inseparable from the animals, plants, rivers, spirits and ancestors of their lands. Our love was meant to spill out into the world, into the forests, the rivers and cloudbanks. It was not meant to congeal in a single person or even a single species. As eco-theologian Thomas Berry has said, “We have become a singular species talking only to itself.” When this happens -- when the arc between our bodies and the great body of the earth breaks -- we fall into an attachment disorder of epic proportions and everything suffers. Grief work is a way to restore the bond with the world we inhabit.

We are supremely crafted to feel kinship with this breathing world. We are elegant receptor sites for the blue of the sky, the taste of honey, the caress of a lover, the scent of rain. Human biologist, Paul Shepard says we are more like the surface of a pond than a closed system. We are permeable, open to the vibrancy of wind, pollen, color and fragrance. Life moves through us like a breeze, affecting us and shaping us into part of the terrain. We are inseparable from all that surrounds us. To mend the attachment disorder, we must step out of our isolated room of self and into the wider embrace that awaits each of us. When we do, something magical happens. As we build our capacity for transparency and allow the world to enter us, our feelings of love blossom and an erotic leap occurs, bringing everything closer to our hearts.

Excerpt by Francis Weller

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