

Lightning Bugs, Crickets and Thunderstorms

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I always look forward to going home, I yearn to return home, but somehow Home keeps shifting. Or maybe it's that the true home I really long for is not around these parts at all. At any rate, mid-summer while visiting in Washington DC I borrowed a car to drive to North Carolina, which I called my home for 35 years. I've almost my whole life been an East Coaster so I was looking forward to lightning bugs twinkling in the backyard just after twilight, the hum of crickets from early in the morning. Hearing them singing as I open the door, I can almost hear my mother say, "Yep, it's going to be another scorcher." And, I was hoping for a really good thunderstorm. A great, dramatic storm where the sky turns oddly yellow and then very dark with clouds roiling before lightning shoots out, followed in a few seconds by that startling crack and boom. With a happy convergence of conditions, we had such a storm many afternoons.

One of the things I know from previous experience about going home or going to a class reunion or visiting really long-time friends, is that one of the things we long for is a glimpse of ourselves from another time in our lives, and to have something about that memory be good. To have something about ourselves recognized and affirmed. We hope to have our memories enlivened and to recapture, if only for a moment, something sweet and precious from our past.

So I did go back, and it was wonderful. Really wonderful. So many cherished faces. So many familiar things. The dense green woods, so different than the gray-green California evergreens. There were some glorious moments, a sense of welcome and comfort, love that is still the same across 3000 miles and nine years. But it is no longer home. It is now a place that I visit.

I know that one reason the connection was a bit off could be that so often a part of me is too excited to settle in and fully arrive. I'm there but I'm still too wound up to be present. And being present is where the magic happens. It is not about arriving in space and time; it is about being in this one very particular moment.

Do you know the distinction between "everlasting" and "eternal"? Something that lasts forever, that never dies or wears out is everlasting. Everlasting is about space and time. Eternity is outside of space and time. When we really arrive in a moment, that experience that we have dropped into peace is a taste of eternity.

I spent hours this summer listening to recordings made by poet David Whyte. "Think," he says, "of that old sepia picture of your grandparents standing on the shore, a whole future radiating out from them there on that day. With that particular complexion of the sky, the breeze from the sea, the particularity of their clothes, their obvious fragility in time and the absolute truth of their being there at that moment in history."

Every day is that precious. Every day. How do we live without taking such a day for granted? How do we live so that each day, our child is seen and cherished? How will you cherish your partner on this day? How do you keep noticing the sunlight streaming through the kitchen window?

"Home," Whyte says, "is so close to us. Just through the mist, in the greeting our child gives us, in the first gray tendrils of light coming into the room at morning." Home, that place or that time where we do feel arrival and belonging and peace is so close to us.

Do you know what I mean when I talk about life at such a frontier? The frontier of the numinous when our whole attention is right here in this present, one-of-a-kind, absolutely unique moment?

Every time I speak about mystical experiences, several of you ask for me to say more. I am trying. It is difficult. These experiences do not live in space and time. They cannot be captured in language. All we have to convey them is something like sighing and pointing to the moon.

We all have them. Every one of us. It is exactly the moment when hiking a steep trail you look off into an open view with sunlight streaming through the trees. It is exactly like looking into a new grandchild's eyes and seeing something there in the intensity of their gaze that leaves us feeling that they know something more than we do.

When it happens and if we take notice of that drop into fullness and peace, we crave more. That's what practice is about. Clearing out the busy stuff to have more of these moments which become more important to us than all of those ordinary moments of life until we learn to be awake to everything, and even the ordinary moments are radiant.

See?

We talked last spring about these experiences of the sacred. Some of you were not confident about discerning what those moments are. Is it what you feel sometimes walking in the woods? Yes. And sometimes crossing a parking lot, and doing the dishes. It is about waking up in astonishment to what is right here, right now, with all of its unique beauty and grace. When we can do that, just show up fully, there is something that enchants us. In that moment, although our thinking mind is quiet, it is clear that we have everything we need. In that moment we feel no desire for anything more. It is enough and the absolute fulfillment of everything we desire.

It is hard to get "thinking mind" to be quiet and just be. That is the root reason for meditation as spiritual practice. Practicing is about getting our minds to quiet down and let us be.

I was explaining this to my daughter Susan many years ago and using the Buddhist metaphor of "monkey mind." That chattering, busy, chaotic state that is ordinary to us. Susan was having a tough time sitting still for even a couple of minutes. So I suggested that she imagine a room with lots of little monkeys. One by one, I said, she should invite them to sit in little chairs and until finally the room would get quiet.

I thought that she understood until I noticed her twitching. Seems that she was inviting each little monkey to a chair and asking it to sit and then taking the hand of another monkey and inviting them to sit but by then the first little monkey would have leaped from its chair and begun screeching around the room again. So she was grabbing that monkey and hurling it back into its chair. Hurling. Somehow I couldn't imagine that she was ever going to get that room into a quiet, peaceful state if she was yelling at and slamming the monkeys. If you have such bad monkeys inside your head, the only way to get them quiet is to return them gently to their chairs. Over and over and over again. Quietly. Smiling. Gently. Over and over.

How do we learn to see what is right here? That's the whole challenge in living a rich life. Here in church we use the language of "spiritual life." Busyness is not alive-ness, no matter how productive. Touching the quiet where we can be outside of time is what offers us the experience of aliveness we yearn for. It is in those moments that we arrive at home.

This is the frontier of the numinous. Our felt human experience that there is something more to life than we understand. We all have those mysterious synchronicities. Moments of revelation. Times when we break out of our own familiar patterns and experience something as familiar which we have never done before. Times when we announce something to the world, something that we ourselves did not know was coming.

I heard David Whyte explicate this poem by Yeats. See if this sets up some kind of harmonic response in you. Something rather like half-remembered music. A piece of a dream that evades recall. See if it calls forth some kind of remembered magic that suggests that we know something that we just can't quite remember, something important and absolutely true.

From the "Song of the Wondering Angus:"

*I went into the hazelwood because a fire was in my head.
And cut and peeled a hazel wand and hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing, and moth like stars were flickering out,
I dropped a berry in a stream and caught a little silver trout.*

*When I had laid it on the floor and gone to blow the fire aflame,
Something rustled by the door, and something called me my name.*

Something called me by my name.

Do you feel something vague and yet familiar in that? Some invitation to a larger knowing?
Some echo of connection to the mystery itself?

David offers some observations about the poem that piqued some additional thoughts for me. The speaker goes into the shadows of a forest, into the hazelwood. Hazelwood was used by the Druids for making staffs. Perhaps what he picks up is not an ordinary inert piece of wood, but something with access to power. He calls it a wand. The forest always holds the possibility of some kind of encounter with wildness.

The speaker has gone into the forest because there was a fire in his head. He was not wandering lonely as a cloud but profoundly stirred up. Seeking. Perhaps quite deliberately trying to see through his longing.

White moths add a layer of lyric gracefulness and ordinary magic and the heavens echo this as moth like stars flicker out.

Then our speaker does a common thing, not an extraordinary thing. He catches a little fish and brings it home for dinner. Well, perhaps I should say it was not so common because anything we do while we are present in the moment is more than ordinary. Anything, no matter how ordinary it seems, is laden with possibility when we are fully present. He caught something from the depth of the river and brought it home to feed

himself. And now, having been present to all of these things, something calls him . . . by his name.

Please listen again:

*I went into the hazelwood because a fire was in my head.
And cut and peeled a hazel wand and hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing, and moth like stars were flickering out,
I dropped a berry in a stream and caught a little silver trout.*

*When I had laid it on the floor and gone to blow the fire aflame,
Something rustled by the door, and something called me by my name.*

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When something calls us by our name, we know we are close to home. There is something close to certainty that suffuses our choice about what to do next. We know the path to take. We know we are on the right path. Things seem to fall into place. The moment seems apart from the ordinary and quite timeless.

I know that this happens to us all though sometimes we are more awake to it than others

Please consider the words of Annie Dillard: Annie Dillard is a wonderfully mystical writer. She finds the spiritual in everything around her, though most often in nature. She says in her book Teaching a Stone to Talk:

*At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world,
Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and
wait, listening. After a time you hear it: there is nothing there. There is nothing
but those things only, those created objects, discrete, growing or holding or
swaying, being rained on or raining, held, flooding or ebbing, standing, or spread.
You feel the world's word as a tension, a hum, a single chorused note everywhere
the same. This is it: this hum is the silence....*

The silence is all there is. It is the alpha and the omega. It is God's brooding over the face of the waters; it is the blended note of the ten thousand things, the whine of wings. You take a step in the right direction to pray to this silence, and even to address the prayer to "World." Distinctions blur. Quit your tents. Pray without ceasing.

Don't you think church should be a place where we travel together on the path toward home? A place where we practice together and encourage one another to touch the timeless? I know many of you attend meditation at the Insight Center. Frankly, one of the reasons that I was drawn to Redwood City was that it was here and I expected that I could use that to strengthen my own practice of going into the quiet. But there are all those meetings. And the daily tasks of ministry and I am just so glad to get through each week with most of those tasks accomplished. Going to meditation just does not happen very often.

So as I thought about this year and what I wanted to be deliberate about, this is one of the things that showed up as important for us as a community. Providing opportunities to practice together.

We have to stop and step out of the rushing, frantic current. And it is hard to do. It is odd to step out into the quiet. It requires effort to stay with it. After swimming with and against the roar of that current, finding ourselves standing in the same spot with nothing to push against does not feel so good. It feels odd and unbalanced and "isn't there anything to do here?"

When I was applying for internships I had an interview with Rev. Nick Ristad up at Napa Hospital. If I were a Hindu, I would call him my guru. I think he would not be pleased, but I believe he has been one of my most important teachers, ever. During that first interview, which I have mentioned to you before, I asked him what he did during the day and he said that he spent some time each day just looking out of the window. He looks out of the window because he loves looking out the window and the first task of ministry is to lead a life that you love.

How are you going to find what you love if you don't make time to show up in the moment?
How are you going to practice getting all of those monkeys to be quiet so that you can see
that right here in your own heart is a message from home?

Last week we talked about Walden being on fire and the imperative to take responsible action. We talked about the need to stand up for our moral values in the commons of this country and about how we might learn to speak with greater clarity and power and step out into the work together. We talked about Peninsula Interfaith Action and how it has the potential for transforming us.

I believe that our other axis needs to be a commitment to spiritual deepening from which our work can be generated, and, because it comes from our true hearts, will not be merely strident and fueled by the negative.

I am proposing offering group meditation 6-7 p.m. on Tuesdays as an extension of my office hours. I invite your feedback. I hope we can explore spiritual practice throughout the year. The work is always on ourselves first so that who we are in the world demonstrates what we long for. If we long for peace, we have to find peace in ourselves.

May we cross that mysterious and ordinary threshold and touch the numinous.

May we find that place of peace in ourselves and be comforted.

May we each and all bring healing to our world.

Blessed be.