

Lesson in Survival

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I know that there is a place where you walked
A place where love falls from the trees

—A contemporary psalmist

If I could, I would just love you, soul-level deep, for the rest of my life. If I could, I would...and I can. So, I will. There is a love that holds us in this way.

Walking south on Telegraph Avenue out of Berkeley, walking from seminary to my home in Oakland, California...in front of the old movie store and in broad daylight, I was accosted. I was beset. I was sudden put upon and wholly consumed by the spirit of the holy, I'm sure that it was. Spirit had taken form and come down to earth in the form of two, older, African American women on that day. They sprung from their car that was parked near the corner of Alcatraz, in

front of what used to be a Blockbuster Video. It's a big, health food store.

They jumped out of their car. They knew of this love and they wanted to share what they knew. And they were so very happy to see me. Overjoyed and delighted. And they showered me with spiritual affection. Holy love. And I didn't even know them! It was intense. It was a torrent. I was flooded. I was deluged. I was delighted myself. It felt so good. Familiar, even though it had never happened to me before.

They wanted me to join their church. So, I told them that I was on my way home from seminary...and they were impressed by that. As we parted ways, I knew I'd miss them. I knew I'd miss that particular spot, that particular intersection of Telegraph and Alcatraz...that place where I walked...where love fell from the trees that day...that place where the poetry became real for a while, real enough to

touch and to live and to breathe. It was a beautiful poem that we'd shared. I memorized all the words.

“I know that there is a place where you walked where love falls from the trees...” These are the words of a contemporary psalmist—living now, in modern times. The psalmists of old, of course, were the ones whose words populated the Book of Psalms in the Bible. The Book of Psalms is the Bible's largest collection of poetry. It's the holy compendium. The Book of Psalms is spectacular...and it hasn't gotten old. Its verses still inform our world today. We are led by these verses—and I am led by them. We are also led by, drawn to, compelled by the wisdom here and now, the living word that descends upon us as we're walking down the street. We are guided by the wisdom of Ralph Waldo Emerson. He implored us, ‘Experience life directly. See beauty with your own eyes and not only through the eyes of others. He asked us...plainly,

Why should not we...enjoy an original relation to the universe?
...why should we grope among the dry bones of the past...?
The sun shines to-day also.

Emerson saw the beauty of the world with his own eyes.
Shall we do the same? ...or do we prefer the dry bones?
What do you think? It's up to you. It's an honest question.
It's not a trick. And your honest answer will inform the
quality of your life. So, consider the question. Think about
it. Will you choose an original relation to the universe? The
ancient psalmists wrote,

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie
down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He
restores my soul...

These are the words of the psalmists of old, reaching us
from the ages. The more contemporary psalmist writes,

I know that there is a place where you walked
A place where love falls from the trees
In your hands, I am a broken cup
I only feel right on my knees
In prayer, I know I shatter, I stray
Yet, I still receive your kiss

How shall I live this life
After knowing such a love as this?

Such a love is like a lesson, a lesson in survival.

Back in college, I learned a lesson. It weighs on me a little. We played a joke on one of our professors. I don't remember his name but I remember what we did. I remember that he was a nice enough person. He didn't deserve our malarkey but that didn't stop us from giving it to him. It was pretty harmless. So, I'm a little bit surprised. Something about what we did still bothers me...forty years on.

It was in a Psychology class—Psych 101, I'm sure it was, the only Psych course that I took in college. When I signed up for it, I thought that I might go into psychology. I like thinking about how people think. We started with neurons and synapses. It was straight up science at first, straight up biology. In the beginning, I wasn't really that into it. I warmed to it after a while. It liked it more once we started talking

about behavior and conditioning, how we deal with triumph and also with tragedy.

Our teacher paced incessantly. His mind seemed to work better that way. We took advantage of that. We played a little trick on him one day. We were testing our theories about conditioning. We came up with an experiment that was designed to influence our professor's behavior.

Like I said, he was a pacer. He walked and walked and walked...seemingly for miles each week, back and forth across the desert of our young, attention spans...in front of the blackboard...at the front of the class. Our plan was pretty simple...and probably just a little bit cruel. Not mean-spirited, but cruel in a way that, perhaps, we didn't understand. Maybe more callow than cruel. I'm just grateful that he put up with us.

Our plan was to pay close attention...selectively. When our professor had paced to the far side of the room, the

side farthest from the door that led to the hallway, we were all supposed to tune in and heat up and ask questions and take copious notes. We were to express our fascination and our interest (which was genuine). And when our professor had paced to the near side of the room, the side nearest the door to the hallway, we were all supposed to do the opposite—to tune out and cool off, to become distracted and unfocused. We wanted to find out if our chosen behaviors could affect our professor. We wanted to know if we had the psychological power to keep our professor on the far side of the room.

I don't remember if we were successful or not. The story has faded from my memory. I switched out of that major. So, my life soon lacked the social circle that could have preserved the detail. I never participated in that kind of thing again. I didn't feel right. Like I said, it was a lesson in survival.

I was discovering Joni Mitchell in those days. Lesson in Survival was the name of one of the songs that she records on an album called For the Roses.

Lesson in Survival
Spinning out on turns, that gets you tough
Guru books-the Bible
Only a reminder that you're just not good enough
You need to believe in something
Once I could in our love

I was playing piano at that point but I didn't have skills enough to figure that song out...and I didn't have voice enough to sing it.

The song has three, odd-shaped verses—each one, designed to touch the spirit in a different way. My favorite is the third and final verse, even though it breaks my heart a bit and leaves for feeling lonely. Joni Mitchell sings,

I went to see a friend tonight
Was very late when I walked in
My talking as it rambled
Revealed suspicious reasoning
The visit seemed to darken him

I came in as bright as a neon light
And I burned out right there before him
I told him these things I'm telling you now
Watched them buckle up in his brow
When you dig down deep
You lose good sleep
And it makes you heavy company
I will always love you
Hands are like magnet and iron the souls

She just breaks me wide open. Sometimes, I like her and sometimes, I don't like her for the same reason...but I always love her for it.

It was odd, being a young black kid, a boy-child in mostly white, suburban New Jersey and loving Joni Mitchell as much as I did...for lyrical and musical reasons. So much of me was illegible back then. I was well enough adjusted but I hid a lot of things. There were those who could see through my facades, to be sure. Plenty saw through, but few would call me out on it. "Few would call me out..." As if my soul and I didn't already belong to the music. It's a powerful thing, to

be held by an artist...to be held **by a creative soul-force that gets you free...that sets you free...**

That's the way I feel it. That's the way I feel a holy love. So, I'm probably not going to lay in wait like those two black women did in California, on Telegraph Avenue. I'm probably not going to sit in a parked car on the street with my guitar at the ready, prepared to leap out and accost people with Joni Mitchell songs. I will, however, sit by Silver Lake in the mornings. It's warm enough now. I'll sing to the sunrise, my many lessons in survival.

For the Roses was recorded in 1972. It has a number of powerful songs on it. Lesson in Survival is one of them, for sure. But You Turn Me On, I'm a Radio is also on the recording.

If you're driving into town with a dark cloud above you
Dial in the station that's bound to love you
Oh, honey, you turn me on me on
I'm a radio
I'm a country station

I'm a little bit corny

It's easy to get into that one. That one was the hit.

And then, there's Electricity!! Oh, my Lord!!! She is so creative. She was writing about the science of that form of energy.

The Minus is loveless, he talks to the land
And the leaves fall and the pond over-ices
She don't know the system, Plus, she don't understand
She's got all the wrong fuses and splices

The Minus, the male of winter and the Plus, the woman of the warmer months... The negative charge and the positive one...and how they chase each another around the plugged-in world in which we live. It's a technical song, in a sense. It was written with a toolbox near at hand, it seems to me. She sings,

The masking tape tangles, it's sticky and black
And the copper, proud-headed Queen Lizzie,
It conducts little charges that don't get charged back
And the technical manual's busy

She sings,

We once loved-together and we floodlit that time
Input-output-electricity
But the lines overloaded and the sparks started flying
And the loose wires were lashing out at me

We've all known those times...when the bottom falls out a little bit (or when the bottom falls out much more than a little bit) and we are burned and burned out...and burned down and broken by the power that surges and overwhelms us sometimes...and we are shocked and isolated by the blackouts that follow, the losses of power that come when power is precisely what we need.

Those songs touched me deeply back then but the one that touches me still today is called Judgment of the Moon and Stars (or Ludwig's Tune). It was named after Ludwig von Beethoven, the German art music composer of the 19th century.

I love this song but it's impenetrable. It wears a husk. It doesn't let us in right away. It doesn't let us in just because we long to enter and it doesn't let us in just because we knock. It doesn't answer sometimes. This song pretends that it isn't home. It doesn't lay down its armor without a fight.

Are any of you like that? I know that I can be that way sometimes...because of the excellence of my defenses...and because of the depth of the sorrows that course around me self-protectively like a mote surrounding this stony castle of mine. I can be impenetrable, even though what I really want inside is to be free.

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, May 7th and the title of this morning's reflection is A Lesson in Survival. Despite the fact that we've been talking so much of Joni Mitchell, this reflection was inspired by a different artist, a different

contemporary psalmist—Pete Townshend, a man who knows the art of suffering.

In 1978, we was distraught. He tried to hold the lightning and couldn't. He was badly burned. Devastated and angry, he went to a local bar and tried his best to drink away his sorrows. He didn't make it home that night. On his way home, he leaned against an apartment building and he passed out in the doorway. In the morning, he was recognized by a police officer who took pity and led him home. Reflecting on this experience, he had questions that only God could answer. And he sang about it. He sang,

I woke up in a Soho doorway
A policeman knew my name
He said, "You can go sleep at home tonight
If you can get up and walk away"
I staggered back to the underground
And the breeze blew back my hair
I remember throwin' punches around
And preachin' from my chair

“Who are you?” he asked of the holy...with rage and power.
And this what it sounded like when he did.

Pete Townshend found a way through his sea of
sorrow...and so can we. He learned a lesson in survival...and
so can we.

I was profoundly sad this week to learn about the state
of integrity in our Supreme Court—Justice Gorsuch, who
sold property to the head of a major law firm with business
before the court; the wife of Chief Justice Roberts, who
accepted a \$10 million commission for the placement lawyers
at elite firms and Justice Thomas, who has accepted lavish
gifts without disclosing them...it has come out that Leonard
Leo had been using Kellyanne Conway to funnel \$80,000
worth of consulting money to Ginni Thomas, wife of Justice
Thomas, just as the landmark case *Shelby County v. Holder*
was before the Supreme Court. Justice Thomas cast the
deciding vote in a 5-4 ruling that gutted the Voting Rights

Act of 1965. I was profoundly sad and then I remembered the psalmist's poetry...

I know that there is a place where you walked
A place where love falls from the trees
In your hands, I am a broken cup
I only feel right on my knees
In prayer, I know I shatter, I stray
Yet, I still receive your kiss
How shall I live this life
After knowing such a love as this?

Pete Townshend is the contemporary psalmist. This is the third verse of the song that we just heard.

There is a powerful picture on the cover of your Orders of Service. Sixty years ago this week, there was peaceful, children's march for freedom in Birmingham, Alabama. It was the decision of the Birmingham Fire Department (BFD) to disrupt this march with fire hoses. Sixty years ago, the Birmingham Fire Department sprayed peaceful children with fire hoses. The fire that burns within them won't be extinguished.

Those are children in that picture. That was us. We were those children. We still are those children. We are the men of the Birmingham Fire Department as well. Both of those energies reside within us. Both of those charges reside in us—the negative charge and the positive one. They chase each another around this precious world in which we live. As receivers of a holy love, a grace, and as stewards of its spirit, how shall we live our lives?

I may know...and you may know as well...if we have learned our lesson in survival. I think that the third verse of the Joni Mitchell song that I love describes this lesson quite well. I don't know. You will have to tell me what you think.

She sings,

You've got to shake your fists at lightning now
You've got to roar like forest fire
You've got to spread your light like blazes all across the sky
They're going to aim the hoses on you
Show them you won't expire
Not till you burn up every passion, not even when you die

Come on now, you've got to try
If you're feeling contempt, well then you tell it
If you're tired of the silent night, Jesus, well then you yell it
Condemned to wires and hammers
Strike every chord that you feel
That broken trees and elephant ivories conceal

I close this morning with the words of Representative Zooey Zephyr from Montana, Montana's first and only transgender lawmaker. In bold defense of the LGBTQA community of Montana, Zooey broke decorum and state clearly that those who voted against the legislative needs of the transgender community "have blood on their hands." Powerful words.

Ever since, many in Montana have been aiming the hoses at her...and still she burns. Her words are these:

Today I rise in defense of those constituents, of my community and of democracy itself. Last week, I spoke on the governor's amendments to Senate Bill 99, which banned gender-affirming care. This was a bill that was targeting the LGBTQ community in Montana. This Legislature has systematically attacked that community. We have seen bills targeting our art forms, our books, our history and our healthcare. And I rose up in defense of my community that day, speaking to harms that these bills bring and that I have firsthand experience knowing about. I have had

friends who have taken their lives because of these bills. I have fielded calls from families in Montana, including one family whose trans teenager attempted to take her life while watching a hearing on one of the anti-trans bills. ...

So, when I rose up and said, "There is blood on your hands," I was not being hyperbolic. I was speaking to the real consequences of the votes that we, as legislators, take in this body. And when the speaker asks me to apologize on behalf of decorum, what he is really asking me to do is be silent when my community is facing bills that get us killed. He is asking me to be complicit in this Legislature's eradication of our community. And I refuse to do so, and I will always refuse to do so.

Beautifully within us is the power and the freedom of life, the lessons in survival that see us through. May we cherish these in these warming, greening days.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.