

## Receive

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Sometimes the wind catches your sail in a surprising way and off you go! It catches your sail and it pushes you...if you know how to receive the wind. An average sail knows how to receive the wind. What wisdom does it have for us? What is the key to receiving that breath of fresh air that all but knocks us over, that sudden gust that almost knocks us down? In our hymnal, it is written,

From you, I receive  
To you, I give  
Together, we share  
And by this, we live

What does it mean to truly receive?

Once upon a time, I received the perfect gift—the single petal of a yellow rose. It fell from the rest of the flower when the rest of the flower hit the ground. It was all a part of a beautiful dance rehearsal. I did not see the actual performance. I only saw them practicing for a while. I watched as one dancer struggled with the choreography. I watched as she practiced—gently placing her heel on the ground before her, stretching her back and reaching out with her strong arms, as if across a great divide. I watched as the dancer learned where in the flow of movement it was easiest to breathe. I watched as she crouched over—her head facing downward, toward the ground. I watched as she curled herself over the rest herself right there on the dance-floor—her back arching over, her head tucked down, her arms cradled in front as if she were carrying a child. And as all this downward motion was happening, the opposite was happening, too. Somehow, she flung a yellow rose into the air.

Suddenly, all was still. All aspects of her body had been descending but suddenly, all was still. There was no sound and nothing moved...except the yellow flower that first arched up and then fell to the ground, a single petal gently falling away. It left me speechless. It left me breathless. It touched my soul...and I took it all in as if the whole was a prayer. It made me remember the importance of escaping gravity...and receiving grace.

There was a gifted theologian by the name of Simone Weil. In her book entitled *Gravity and Grace*, she writes,

ALL THE natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception.

The dancer had flipped a yellow rose into the air. Every aspect of her body had been descending...except for the flower. That moment was a gift and I took it in in gratitude. I received it. It is now a part of me.

Good morning and good Sunday. I truly hope that this new day finds you well. “What does it mean to receive?” [] I have a practical thought on the subject.

The dance rehearsal that I saw was like a sudden gust of wind. I almost missed it. I was lucky to see what I did. For the short time I spent there watching, it really captivated me—how disciplined the dancer was, how strong, how toned, how trained, how disciplined, how well practiced. I practice music all the time but my art needs different things of me.

It's different for different artists and it's different for different arts. For guitarists, there are no unwritten rules about our bodies—how we eat, what we where...not like there are for dancers. That's for sure. And it's different for painters and it's different for potters and it's different for those who teach these things.

In fact, it had been the practice of this one particular ceramics studio that the potters paced themselves. They were slow and deliberate. They were artful methodically. They were quiet and they worked in deepest peace. It wasn't required of them. It wasn't a law and it wasn't a rule. It was the practice. So, there was no ordinance to obey. There was no order to follow closely. There were no signs. There was no covenant. No behavioral accords to be guided by. In other words, the potters were not governed by an external boundary. They were not forced to conform or obey. They were moved to do so. They were moved beyond their words by something deeper...as if "by the size and silence" of inner peace.

And so, they worked their wheels in hush...and when the clay lost its slip, when it lost its supple quality, when it became to brittle in their hands...in hands all caked and dried with earth...with clay, each potter would reach for help, extending a silent request by raising one's hand and outstretching one's arm for the waters that the teacher provided. And into the palms of their hands was poured the waters, fresh and clear—spilling a little between the fingers and dripping gently down the forearm and running like a thin stream to gather at the elbow and fall to the floor. And the potter's received the gift...with grace and gratitude...with the largesse of that great expanse of spirit within us all.

Imagine a mountain range out west where the land leaps up—sky-bound and weightless, where the land seems free of the heaviness that weighs us down, free of the gravity that the cliff-stone granite and the redwood forest normally use to ground themselves, free of the gravity that white-rush river uses to find it way to the sea. Gravity is the normally rule...but not for this inner largesse, not for the wind that fills our sail unexpectedly.

Gravity isn't a practice. It's not something we choose to do. We don't tend to think about gravity but it's always happening. Generally speaking, it is inescapable. They call it 'the law of gravity' for good reason...and generally speaking, we obey. We conform. We agree. We behave. We let ourselves to be guided. Yet, sometimes, there are exceptions. Sometimes, something moves us. Something removes us from the heaviness and the weight. Sometimes, something lifts us and we defy gravity for a while...without danger and without consequence and without fear and without anxiety. We lift. We float. We buoy. We rise...like moon and morning star...something inside of us does. Something rises and helps us to breathe a little...something puts the wind back in our sails...something restores us and off we go.

What puts the wind back in your sails? What restores you? A place like Big Sur restores me. It can restore you, too, if you're lucky enough to go...and if you like that kind of magnitude and austerity. Not everyone does. Do you know Big Sur, the national park in California? Big Sur will move you to silence, if you like that kind of thing. If you don't, then not so much but if you do, if it doesn't scare you too much, if you're drawn to it, then Big Sur will lend you its wings...with its lore and with its history, with its landscapes and its coastlines, with its vistas and valleys...and with its mountains that fall right into the sea... Something within us rises, when we let it...when we take it all in. We receive it in a holy kind of way.

There is a poem about all of this. There is a poem called Big Sur Country that I would like to share with you.

it is called Big Sur Country where I live<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
and many men of letters have passed<sup>[SEP]</sup> through<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
none have denied its beauty<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
but few have felt at home here

old Henry Miller—city born<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
burned his bald head brown  
trying to catch the color of the sun  
at Partington  
like Icarus he failed and in the end  
retired<sup>[SEP]</sup> to a cement maze south of here<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
more at home in an elevator  
than at those dizzy heights

and Jack Kerouac  
hitched his way along this granite coast<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
with no real sense of belonging  
crawling here like an ant<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
he found the place<sup>[SEP]</sup> a graveyard  
the offshore rocks  
tombstones in a ghostly surf<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
on the road running like a child  
in the dark<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
hearing things in the bushes<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
he hurried north  
to hide in the mulch pits  
of Marin County<sup>[SEP]</sup>

and Richard Brautigan has come and gone  
and others drawn to and driven off<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
by the size and silence of this place  
but Jeffers knew  
that soaring old predator—sharp eyed<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
he knew  
if we could speed time up—fast enough<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
we would see that the mountains  
are<sup>[SEP]</sup> dancing  
and with us

Did you know that about mountains? ...that they are slowly dancing with us all? And when we are wise, we receive this dance. We take the hand of Mountain and we follow its lead. The mountains are dancing...but they don't like disco. They only like music that is really slow.

For millions of years, the ground beneath our feet has been in motion. It moves and it moves us still. It rumbles and shifts and pushes and pulls and crushes and stretches and leaps. When it pushes and crushes and leaps...this is the dancing of mountains. There's a joke about young men in the Midwest. It's hetero-normative but it applies to all of us, regardless of gender. And it's true, this joke. I use to live in Minnesota and I've seen this myself. They're a bit shy out there, very humble. So, the joke goes like this: How do you know when a Midwestern man is sweet on a young woman? He stares incessantly at her shoes instead of staring at his own.

Mountains aren't like Midwesterners. They are gladly asking us to dance. It's just that it takes them a million years to do so. Some of us are like men in the Midwest. Others of us are more like mountains. The lesson here is that if someone or some mountain is asking you to trip the light fantastic, if a dancer's hand is being extended to you, receive it...for the dance of life is fleeting...and it's super fun to boogie. This is what the mountains are telling us.

Sometimes the wind catches your sail in a funny way and off you go! Once, I stood before a mountain that was asking me to dance and when I answered, 'yes,' it was fantastic. Cold but truly fantastic. I learned to sail with my father on a TINY lake in central New Jersey...at a place called Turkey Swamp Park of Elton-Adelphia Road near Howell. I didn't know how much I had learned until that day.

The mountain that asked me to dance was Mount Pilatus in Switzerland. It reaches up 6,983 feet from sea-level. It's stunning. It's beautiful, stationed west of the city of Lucerne. In high school, I was there on a choir trip that was led by Mr. Danielson, our music teacher. He was great and the trip was awesome. Dancing with Pilatus was the best.

I went over there with friends—with Stephanie and Sean and Andrew and Joanna... There were a bunch of us from my high school and 150 singers in all...from high schools from all over the tri-state area. We sang in famous places a little. We travelled around in busses a lot. And we got in to trouble sometimes. The main way we got into trouble was by being late for meals. That was a big no-no.

One day in the late afternoon, Andrew, Sean and I decided to go sailing...on Lake Lucerne...in the shadow of Mount Pilatus. We rented a boat—which was shockingly easy—and we were on the water in no time...which was good because we did not want to be late for dinner! We ambled along the water. There wasn't much wind that day. Midway out on the water, Sean and Andrew decided to go swimming. I thought it was a great idea but I didn't want to go myself.

We weren't prepared in the slightest for swimming. We had no towels. We were casually dressed. No swimsuits. Yet, before I knew it, Sean and Andrew were stripping. We were far enough out so that no one could see us and the water felt warm enough at first...on the surface. I couldn't have talked them out of it if I had

tried and I didn't want to talk them out of it. I wanted them to go swimming in Lake Lucerne in their underwear.

Before I knew it, they were in the water. They both jumped in, one from either side. I must have been looking away at that moment. I heard the splash. I didn't see them jump. I felt the boat moved suddenly as they both jumped from either side and I heard the splash which more than surprised me. What surprised me so much more was the way the sailboat responded. We had been lumbering across the water not simply because there wasn't much wind that day but because there wasn't much wind that day AND because our boat was very heavy. We were dragging between 500 and 600 pounds across the lake. When Sean and Andrew went overboard, all that left was 185-pound me! The sailboat took off like a rocket and I remembered EVERYTHING from Turkey Swamp Park. I grabbed the mainsail line and pulled into proper tension and I synched it down on the nearest cleat I could find. I caught all that wind! I shifted my weight in the boat for balance and I grabbed the tiller so I steer, so I could choose a course in the boat that was off like a rocket.

I did all of those things as quickly as I could. I did them without thinking but by the time I had things under control, I was like a hundred yards away from my friends. I became conscious of them because of their incessant yelling. The water was cold. Really cold. Sean and Andrew needed to get back in the boat. Immediately. I came about. I turned around and had to tack my way back to them.

Lake Lucerne is a glacial lake. It was formed by a slow-moving river of ice and, according to Sean and Andrew, the water was still precisely that cold! I got back to them quickly and they climbed in as fast as they could. Now, we were heavy again and the glacial mishap had made it so that we were short on time. Very short. So, there we were with time running out, completely unable, even with our best telekinesis, to bring the shoreline closer more quickly. Eventually, we made it back to dry land safely but it was almost time to eat! We had only minutes. So, we ran, half-drenched, through the streets of Lucerne—laughing and panting and terrified—and we got to the hotel as the rest of the choir was gathering for dinner. Mr. Danielson, our faithful music teacher, was shocked to see us running through the front door and into the lobby—half-naked and dripping wet and having the absolute time of our lives. I'm sure he was disappointed because we would have to be punished...and he loved us...and he didn't want to yell at us and break us down. I'm also sure that he was relieved and strangely proud of us when, eleven minutes later, we entered the dining hall just as the doors were closing...in our grey pants that were not wrinkled, in shirts and ties, with our blue blazers and even the high school pin they made us to wear. We took our seats uneventfully, as if the whole thing had been planned, as if we had known somehow, as if we had known deeply within us that sometimes the wind catches your sail in a funny way and off you go! It catches your sail in a way that you never expected and it pushes you where you never thought you'd go. The key is to be ready. The key is to be prepared...for the breath of fresh air that surprises us and almost knocks us over.

What fills our sails...? Whatever it is, I hope that we receive it in grace. I pray that we take it in in gratitude for what we receive with grace and gratitude becomes a part of us.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.