

Sneaking into the Promised Land—Attempt #2
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Mother, I feel you under my feet
Mother, I feel your heart beat...

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. The title of this morning's reflection is Sneaking into the Promised Land—Attempt #2 and here the number "2" is symbolic. It doesn't mean "2" literally. It means that in life, we have try things more than once.

The reflection is inspired by the feeling of being frozen away from those we love and is akin to the story of the Prodigal Son, the one who leaves home with a portion of his father's fortune, squanders it and becomes destitute, returning home disgraced and wondering how—or even, if—he will receive welcome. Musically, we sing,

Would you even know me since I've been away?
I wake with my eyes closed and sleep through the day
But I'll open my heart and I'll learn how to pray
If, Mama, you let me come home

But what mother is this? The Prodigal Son returns home not to his mother but to his estranged father and brother. He freely admits his transgressions. He says,

I broke into Eden in the hours before dawn
I've stolen the apples that dropped on your lawn
My spirit, my pride and my innocence gone
[But please] let me come home

It is the idea of breaking into Eden that is so much fun for me to think about, the idea that we could sneak back into the Promised Land—as if it were way after the time of our curfew and the parents are home, wide awake and waiting...with angry and open arms. This fascinates me. It buoys me when life lays my spirit low. To all souls, I say, "Good morning. It is good to be together."

Three days ago and three nights, I could not lift my weary head from the great, soft pillow of my sorrow. There, I slept and in my dream, I could not let the good light in. I was in darkness. Closed. Sealed. Stowed tightly away. Tucked in. Held off. Secluded. Joy was so nearby but somehow, it eluded me. It slipped right through my grasp. I could not hold on to it. Joy was like water, like wishes, like the white-tailed deer—nearly impossible to catch.

Still, I found myself being faithful...surprisingly. This lifted up my spirits but it did not change my mood. Sorrow takes its time with us. We don't always have to rush it. Sometimes, we can just let it and let God, as they say...just let sorrow do its

work. Marianne Williamson tells a story about a woman who rushed through sorrow. She avoided it...by shopping, actually. She called it "sale-tag therapy." Whenever she was feeling blue, she'd rush out and buy herself something to make her feel a little better. It's not a good idea but the gesture is right, if you step step away from the commerce. When we are feeling blue, it's a good idea to perform a ritual...to exercise and exorcise our demons. It's a good idea to exercise our body and mind—to physically move about, to play and to socialize...and also to be at peace, to be quiet and reflective. It's a good idea to exercise the body/mind in order to exorcise our demons, in order to dislodge, expel, cast out or drive away the demons that cause suffering.

Now, when I talk about demons and exorcism, I'm not talking about a creepy horror show. The demons that I hope to dislodge, expel, cast out and drive away are those of judgment and self-judgment, insecurity and rejection, loss and loneliness...the demons of suffering. Within me, all of these add up to sorrow...and by sorrow, I can be paralyzed. I can get stuck. I can be frozen.

I came across a song the other day, a James Taylor song called The Frozen Man. It's about getting stuck and, effectively, being paralyzed. Taylor sings,
The last thing I remember is the freezing cold, water
reaching up just to swallow me whole
Ice in the rigging and a howling wind
and the shock to my body as we tumbled in, merciful God.
[Singing] My brothers and the others are lost at sea,
I alone am returned to tell thee.
Hidden in ice for a century to walk the world again,
Lord, have mercy on the frozen man.

After a century in the ice, the frozen man came back to life. It's a beautiful song and my favorite verse is the second one, continuing the story. Taylor sings,

Next words that were spoken to me,
The nurse asked me what my name might be.
She was all in white at the foot of my bed,
I said, "Angel of mercy, I'm alive or am I dead?"
I said, "My name is William James McPhee,
I was born in 1843.
Raised in Liverpool by the sea but that's not who I am

And I believe it. Frozen William was right. We are more than our biographies, more than the details of our lives...no matter how challenging they are.

In the first verse had a biblical reference. Did anybody catch it? SPOILER ALERT. This is not a quiz? It's not a test. There is no danger, no jeopardy here. No hellish booby prize awaits us if we don't answer correctly. I was just wondering... Did anybody catch it? I'm glad to just tell you (and I admit that I am terrible at this). The biblical reference is the line when Taylor sings, "I alone am returned to tell thee." This line alludes to the Book of Job and occurs four times in the first chapter. In Job 1:13-5, we learn that...

One day when [Job's] sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine..., a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were feeding beside them [when rival, South Arabians] fell on them and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of a sword: I alone am escaped to tell you." [the messenger said.]

According to the story, Job had been deprived of servants and possessions. In Job 1:16, we learn that second messenger arrived and reported that...

"The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them. I alone am escaped to tell you." [the second messenger said.]

Job 1:17 reads,

While [the second messenger] was still speaking, another came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off and killed the servants with the edge of a sword: I alone am escaped to tell you."

And in Job 1:18-9, we learn that,

While [the third messenger] was still speaking, [a fourth came in] and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine [when] suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on [them]: I alone am escaped to tell you." [the fourth and final messenger said.]

These become "I alone am returned to tell thee" in the song that I listened to this week.

Needless to say, this day was not a good day for Job. It was a terrible day. Yet, not long after this (immediately, in fact), we see Job's resilience, his response to tragedy. It is written:

Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshipped. He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there, the LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD. In all this, Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.

So very humble was his heart. Humility surrenders before the heavens and becomes resilience. The soft and broken parts of us sometimes become our greatest strength.

Three days ago and three nights, I slept on the soft pillow of my sorrow and in my dream, I could not let the good light in. I was in darkness. Closed off. Sealed up and stowed tightly away. Joy was nearby but it eluded me. Tightly grasping, desperately grasping, I could not hold it...and so, I let it go upon its way.

In humility, I surrendered—breathing, moving and becoming healthy. I was unheavy and newly free of the grief and sorrow that weighed me down. I was free of sorrow by way of sorrow. The dream was strange to me.

As I mentioned, Marianne Williamson tells the story of the woman who ran from sorrow by shopping. The woman said, “If I don’t go shopping and distract myself, I will just sit around and cry all day.”

And in response, Marianne Williamson said, “Maybe you need to just sit around and cry all day.” Williamson said, “Maybe, after having yourself a good and healthy cry, you will better know how to exorcize our demons, better know how to dislodge and expel them...how to cast them out and drive them away. Right now (and by your methods), they are only better dressed...because before us, there are only two approaches that lead to good way forward, right? Either we bid sorrow farewell or we make a good room for it. We sing about it bidding sorrow farewell. Kelly Joe Phelps does, at any rate. In a song called Goodbye to Sorrow, he sings,

In the eyes of the Lord, I am redeemed
For He has purified my blood and washed me clean
I have said goodbye to sorrow as I lay upon the cross
His goodness and his mercy saved a child that was lost
In the eyes of the Lord, I am redeemed

Goodbye to Sorrow.

Phelps is Christian-identified. Whether or not we connect with his theology, it is clear that his farewell to sorrow is a healthy farewell. It isn’t spiteful. He holds no pride, no vengeance. The healthy leave-taking serves him well on the journey of life, moving forward.

We bid sorrow farewell or we make a good room for it and we sing about making good room. Joni Mitchell does, at any rate. In a song called Don’t Interrupt the Sorrow, she sings,

I’ve got a head full of quandary and a mighty thirst
Seventeen glasses
Rhine wine
Milk of the Madonna
Clandestine
He [won't] let up the sorrow
He lies and he cheats
It takes a heart like Mary's these days
When your man gets weak

Don’t Interrupt the Sorrow.

Mitchell is Christian-identified. Less emphatically. Yet, the Mary that she references is the mother of Jesus and whether or not we connect with her theology, it is clear that her making room for sorrow is a healthy making room. It isn’t spiteful. She holds no pride, no vengeance. The healthy embrace serves her well on the journey of life, moving forward and the sorrow is a guide, is a teacher, is a set of hazard lights, is a warning sign. The deceitful, unfaithful man in the second example delivers the sorrow that strengthens “Mary” and guides her feet on the good way forward IF and only IF she is paying close attention.

Sorrow can be a good teacher. It isn't always but sometimes, it really can be. Sometimes sorrow is only sorrow but other times (and when we're ready), sorrow can lead to resilience. It can help sneak back into heaven after we have drifted away.

It's so paradoxical when you think about it but sometimes, the heavy things that hold us down, it can be the means by which we rise. When Job said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there," he was not spiteful in any way. He held no pride, no vengeance but was fully present to life, even as sorrows compounded by the moment and followed hard upon themselves.

Life is like that sometimes. We are met with waves of suffering. And how shall we recover from these waves? How shall we draw upon life to find resilience? ...to rise back up when we fall down? By finding courage enough, by finding humility enough, to turn the sea-worthy vessels that carry us through life into its raging waves.

If you have ever sailed through storms at sea, then you know this to be true. When we choose to turn the vessels that carry us into the waves of life—in other words, when we face life's challenges directly...with love and faith, with grace and openness—we are safer than we would be otherwise. We are safer than we would be if, in pride and fear, we had decided to turn away. James Baldwin said it beautifully. He said, "If you are afraid of something, soften your belly and turn toward it." It's so important not to turn away.

Three days ago and three nights, I could not lift my head from sorrow but sorrow slowly led me to a stronger and higher place. It was hard but I am the better for it. And I did not do it alone. I had the help of good and loving souls along the way. And I truly needed them—one and all—and they were there for me—physically, spiritually, passionately lovingly, honestly.

I have the Grove Press version of the books of the Bible and in the Introduction of the Book of Job, Charles Frazier tells an interesting story. He writes,

A number of years ago, I read the account of Black Elk, an old Souix visionary and a friend of Crazy Horse. He lived to see catastrophes to his people at least the like of Job's. They lost as close to everything as you can and not just be extinct. He lived on past his particular apocalypse, to be another exile in the twentieth century. In telling his story, he dwells in great detail on a time in his earlier life when he had become consumed with fear, "afraid of being afraid." He then had a powerful vision that featured the four quarters of the earth, the weathers of the sky, animals and man. In other words, all of Creation. The great lesson of this all-encompassing vision was the conviction that we should not fear the universe.

I always appreciate humble stories about fearlessness, humble stories about hope.

Black Elk Speaks is a lovely book. It is a collaborative effort between John Neihardt and Black Elk that was first published in 1932. Neihardt pursued Black Elk who was understandably resistant. Black Elk Speaks, their distinctly collaborative effort, began as follows:

My friend, I am going to tell you the story of my life, as you wish; and if it were only the story of my life I think I would not tell it; for what is one man

that he should make much of his winters, even when they bend him like a heavy snow. So many [others] have lived and shall live that story, to be grass upon the hills.

It is the story of all life that is holy and is good to tell, and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things; for these are children on one mother...

Black Elks Speaks reminded me of the Book of Job. After receiving calamitous news, after tearing his robe and shaving his head, after falling to the ground and worshipping, Job said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return there” but what “mother” is this? What is the nature of this “mother’s womb” to which Job truly believed he could return? Who is the “mother” for any us...for all of us...if she is not mother earth, the sacred feminine who is, right now, breathing softly beneath our feet?

Mother, I feel you under my feet

Mother, I feel your heart beat

Job says, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return there”...and Black Elk says all living things “are children on one mother.” There is a way in which the Book of Job and Black Elk Speaks flow into and through one another—falling like playful otters over themselves, flowing together like falling waters. There is a way in which Job and Black Elk converge like rivers of waters. Like rivers of time...and become inseparable—wedded, soul-bound and spiritually indivisible, even as they are forcibly divorced from one another by habits of cultural artifice and the negligence of our own forgetting.

Without even knowing, we stray from the Garden and become shattered from ourselves. Sometimes, we fracture from one another but we are so much stronger than this. If we listen to the wind, we will remember...for the answers, my friends, are still blowing in it. If we bend to it (if we bend our ear and bend our soul), if we yield to the wind—humbly, of course—and if we surrender to it, we can hear the answers clearly...no longer stuck, no longer paralyzed and no longer frozen. This is how we sneak back into the Promised Land and if it doesn’t work out the first time, we just have to try again. This is how we break into the Garden.

Maybe we won’t do this. If it scares us too much, maybe we won’t try. Maybe, we’ll allow ourselves to become like William James McPhee—the frozen man, helplessly tossed about by the raging seas of life. Or maybe we will thaw into life’s blessings—great and small. For there are flowers and there is friendship. There are galaxies and there is starlight. Don’t be afraid of the universe.

James Taylor concludes the song he calls The Frozen Man by singing,

I know what it means to freeze to death,
to lose a little life with every breath.

To say goodbye to life on earth and come around again,

To say goodbye and come around again... And herein lay the beauty of the song—its great resilience. The Frozen Man is the story about a ship that was lost at sea. All were lost...except for the one who sang,

[singing], "I alone am returned to tell thee
[speaking] hidden in ice for a century to walk the world again
Lord, have mercy on the Frozen Man

Have you ever felt like this? This is the story of a man who was lost at sea, who was tossed by waves of life, who was frozen in time and in place. Have you ever felt like this? I have. I did three days ago.

Three days ago and three nights, I couldn't lift my head from the pillow of my sorrow. There, I slept and in my dream, I was frozen in the darkness. Light slipped through my fingers. I tried my best but could not grasp it. It was like water, like wishes, like the white-tailed deer—nearly impossible to catch. But then, in my dream, when I let go, the joyful light returned to me and guided me back into the Garden.

When you find yourself feeling frozen inside and tossed by the turning sea, turn the vessel that carries you into the coming waves. Reach out for what help you need but do not grasp and don't be afraid. We are more connected than we realize. After our time adrift or lost or stuck or somehow frozen, there is a thaw. There is a coming home again, just a slight bit better for our travels.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.