

Preparing for the Unpredictable

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Wisdom Nuggets from the World's Treasury

From Irma Zaleski

I must have been five or six when, one night, I was awakened by my grandmother leaning over my bed. There was a noise as if a great storm outside. Grandmother picked me up and carried me out onto a big veranda which ran all along the front of the house.

"Look!" she said, and turned my face toward the mountains. "Look! This is too beautiful to sleep through."

I saw black sky, torn apart every few seconds by lightning, mountains emerging out of darkness, immense, powerful, and so *real*. Thunder rolled among the peaks.

I was not frightened—how could I be?—I was awed. I looked up at my grandmother's face and, in a flash of light, I saw it flooded with wonder and joy. I did not realize it then, of course, but now I do. That what I saw was ecstasy. My grandmother was the first to point out to me a door to joy....

Over time, I began to realize that to be touched by beauty, to search for it in all things and rejoice in it, even amid the ugliness and sorrow of life, was to be for me a path of prayer and a way to God.

But such moments of insight are rare. They pass and one forgets. It has been so in my life, at least. But I have never ceased to search.... I studied different religions and read books. I talked to priests, Zen masters, monks. I joined meditation groups and investigated every spiritual path I came across, but still I was never satisfied, never at peace.

A friend who knew me well used to become exasperated with what he called my "running into caves...."

"You might be right," I responded, but I want God.

"Well, you won't find God in books or by running after gurus," he admonished.

"How shall I find him, then?" I asked.

"By standing still," he replied.

From Sylvia Boorstein

Annie Dillard was a major influence on my early meditation life, and I read her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* many times. Clearly, her mind was very steady, her attention focused, and she was liv-

ing in a state of heightened awe about the interrelationship of all living things. Certainly, this was a mind state conducive to extraordinary realizations.

She described walking home one day, and seeing a cedar tree aflame. I understood that it was not literally burning up, but had a kind of luminescent or shimmering quality because Dillard was seeing it with extraordinary eyes. She describes the moment as a transforming one and writes that "she lives for such visions."

So I wanted my own private version of the cedar tree, my own personal vision of a burning bush. I had the idea that if *my* mind were steady enough, it would burst out into a kind of Fourth of July fireworks celebration internally, regardless of what was outside....

It never happened. Then one day, in the middle of a meditation retreat, I walked outside the retreat center and sat down to wait the few minutes that remained till lunch time. It was a foggy, gray day.... The bench was cold, and in front of me stood a tree, still bare because its buds hadn't started to open yet. I thought to myself, "I wonder if this tree could be my cedar tree."

I closed my eyes and paid attention to my breathing. I felt my body sitting on the cold bench; I felt the moist air around me. I felt very relaxed. I began to enjoy the cold bench ... I enjoyed the sense of the cool fog around me.... By and by, the bell rang for lunch. I heard it, and I enjoyed the sound, but no impulse arose in me to get up from the bench and join the lunch line. I kept sitting.

Suddenly, I realized this was an odd experience, and the fact that no impulse arose in me to do something else was extraordinary. Here was a bell calling me to a potentially pleasant activity indoors in a more pleasant setting, and yet no desire had arisen in the mind to change my situation. I was content.

"Far out," I thought to myself. "Contentment is the most exotic mind state of all. It's so unusual."

Slyly and shyly I opened my eyes. The tree was exactly the same, plain as ever. I was really happy....

Burning bushes are few and far between. Contented moments are the potential of every moment. Actually, all moments are contented. When they're not, it's because the mind has made a mess of them.

“Awake” by Linda Hogan

Waking today
Just before winter
When I try to name the color of grasses,
How I feel of their beauty,
There is no word.
I think of the time before there were words,
When you would know morning mist by the feel
Of your loved one’s skin and hair,
And when someone came from the forest of dry
 leaves
You would know by their scent
Even if they carried no wood.
Or the heat of their body skin in summer.
Or if they came the winding way
Down from the mountains
They would be covered in cloud
Returning to the fold;
Or if they had gone farther, to the ocean,
You’d know them by their far-seeing eyes,
And when some travelers return
And are shining with light
And you know, without saying, that they have been
In touch with other worlds.
I have no wealth to speak of other than this,
All this, just to praise the dry grasses
And their color, that can’t be spoken in words.

Reflections

Last Wednesday evening, amidst freezing drizzle and in defiance of even worse predicted weather, Trina and I drove cautiously to Covenant Presbyterian Church for the Fall Assembly of Dane County United.

Others trickled in, and eventually representatives from as many as fifteen community and faith-based organizations were present for what turned out to be an informative and uplifting evening. Land use, worker’s rights, early childhood education, and the local Spring elections were discussed, and task groups organized around each of these issues.

So the evening was productive, but otherwise not all that different from any number of other community meetings I’ve attended through the years—more efficient and action-oriented than most, but otherwise fairly predictable.

What made it a little out-of-the-ordinary, however, was the inclusion of a “relational meeting” in the night’s agenda. A “relational meeting” is a prescribed one-on-one encounter with someone else at the gathering who is, to us, a stranger. So in the mid-

dle of the business session we were all instructed to sit down for ten minutes with someone we didn’t know and discuss an issue or cause in Dane County about which we felt some real passion, in which we were emotionally and morally invested.

Sounds like a scary assignment for an initial encounter, but everybody complied, and everybody seemed to enjoy the experience—myself included. I sat down with a woman I didn’t recognize, but who knew me—she was the wife of a local Christian minister with whom I *was* familiar, and before long we realized we had a good deal in common.

Like all broad-based organizations, Dane County United operates on the principle of “relational power.” The better people know and the more they trust each other, the easier it is for them to identify common interests and strive together for their accomplishment. Relational meetings assist that process. Such brief encounters acquaint us with aspects of a person we’d not suspected; suddenly they become much more relevant to our own dreams and aspirations and we begin to see them not as strangers but as allies.

What’s surprising to me is how rarely such contacts occur in our lives, which is why they have to be orchestrated. After an informal introduction and a few warm-up phrases, we pose a simple question: What is it you really care about, that touches your heart and moves you to action? It’s amazing how eager people are to answer that question and how measurably the ensuing discussion enriches both parties.

So why don’t we invite encounters like this on a more regular basis? I suspect it’s because over time the way we interact with others becomes increasingly cautious and perfunctory. Our looking and listening becomes less attentive, and we take less initiative. We don’t leave much space anymore for the surprising, the unexpected. “Too often,” William Segal laments,

a person is unable to disengage himself from himself. He is unable to move outside of the two-dimensional bondage of this twenty-four hour conditioning into a freer world of joy and ecstasy.

Whether we admit it or not, boredom is a major affliction for folks living in the modern age. Not the sort of adolescent boredom that complains, “there’s nothing to do around here;” but rather, a certain weariness borne of years of repetition—of living and looking at life in the same way for so long that the pattern begins to feel fixed and immutable.

It's not a matter of keeping ourselves well and productively occupied. If anything, most of us are *too* occupied—the world is indeed “too much with us, near and soon,” as the poet put it. But that does not mean that we aren't bored and that our days haven't become all too predictable. “Life, my friends, is boring,” the late John Berryman wrote.

We must *not* say so.

After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
We ourselves flash and yearn,
And moreover, my mother told me as a boy
(repeatedly) “Ever to confess you're bored
Means you have no Inner Resources.”
I conclude now that I have no inner resources,
Because I am heavy bored....

Now, we may not identify with the intensity of Berryman's boredom, which conveys a sense not only of weariness but futility. But there is something universal about his complaint. “The sky flashes, the great sea yearns,” but we remain unmoved. Irma Zaleski's grandmother, not John Berryman, is the exceptional one, moved as she is to ecstasy by a raging thunderstorm—so impressed that she must awaken her granddaughter to share the experience. It was an experience the young girl never forgot, the storm itself and, more importantly, her grandmother's enraptured expression.

Are we more like Berryman or more like that grandmother, conscious of the many “doorways to joy” scattered liberally throughout the world?

“We thrive,” Wendy Lustbader observes, “on *discontinuity*.” The interruptions of our schedule, the infractions in our otherwise lawfully arranged

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patterns of behavior are what arouse us from mental lethargy and elevate our spirits.

Lustbader says that boredom and those enervating sensations of staleness and superfluity arise because we don't quite know how to steer out of old, no longer fruitful

channels of satisfaction into new ones. “When we learn to let go of the familiar, fresh life can come in and revive us,” she advises. This is what happens in a “relational meeting” when we are challenged to move quickly from the superficial to the essential in a conversation with a stranger.

Preparing ourselves for the fresh, the new, the

enchanted moment or the redeeming experience doesn't require extraordinary measures or really take much effort. According to Thomas Moore, it is really just a matter of “dulling the mind and sharpening the perception.” And, as Irma Zaleski's friend told her, it also requires us to stand still—to stop “doing” and rest for a time in “being.”

Dulling the mind means not making assumptions, forgetting what we know, or *think* we know, so that we don't unintentionally disenchant, and thereby degrade what the world and our fellow human beings might reveal to us. In order to reacquire our natural sense of wonder, Sam Keene says, we must assume an attitude of “receptive passivity” by which we “evade the tyranny of the ‘already known.’” That's “dulling the mind.”

Dr. Joel Fleishman, a central character in the thoughtful TV series *Northern Exposure* affords an excellent example of an intelligent person—a highly skilled professional—who has trouble doing this. Thrust against his will into a quaint Alaskan town filled with fascinating people, surrounded by some of the most spectacular vistas and impressive wildlife on the continent, Joel is the picture of discontent. Harboring all sorts of false assumptions about his neighbors and the Alaskan wilderness, he clings fiercely to the East Coast urban ideals that he had previously acquired. Thus, Joel misses all sorts of opportunities for pleasure and meaningful human connection.

For instance, in one episode Joel treats in a professional but condescending manner an old man—Joel calls him a “geezer”—with a broken hip. People in town know him as “Soapy” and he lives off-road in a small cabin, his only companions a pack of frisky husky dogs. To Joel he is completely uninteresting—an inoffensive Alaskan hermit with a generic medical problem.

After Soapy dies, Joel learns that he had once been a highly regarded professor at a prestigious college. Everyone in town knew the man's background, and Joel complains that no one bothered to tell him. “Well,” replies Maggie O'Connell, the town pilot, “you never bothered to ask.”

You see, Joel's mind is too sharp. If it were a little duller, he might be more curious about, and perhaps more enchanted by these “predictable” Alaskans.

Dulling the mind and sharpening the perception are very much the focus of a book provocatively entitled *How to Be a Bad Birdwatcher* by the English journalist Simon Barnes. Although it ostensibly describes the author's approach to bird-watch-

ing, the book is really a “how-to” manual for experiencing greater delight in daily life. Early in the book, Barnes writes:

I am always looking at birds not for reasons of science, or in hopes of a fabulous rarity, or to make careful observations of seasonal behavior. Just because looking at birds is one of life’s greatest pleasures. Looking at birds is a key: it opens all doors.

I found it hard at first to accept that comment at face value, but two hundred pages later Simon Barnes had successfully made his point: birding opens doors—not *literal* doors, but the doors of our own perception.

Now, a “good” birdwatcher possesses specific skills, good equipment, and a considerable amount of hard-won expertise. To be a “bad” birdwatcher, on the other hand, requires nothing more than a willingness to look, to listen, and to “stand still”—meaning to be fully present, unperturbed, and attentive. The reason for *becoming* a bad birdwatcher, Barnes says, is not to acquire a specialist’s knowledge of the avian kingdom, but to experience wonder—the “calm delight of the utterly normal and the rare and sudden delight of the utterly unexpected.”

As an example of the latter—sudden delight in the unexpected—the author relates a trip to Tampa, Florida on a journalism assignment. Having asked a local birder for directions to a prime site to view native species, he finds himself at the edge of a lagoon on Tampa Bay. It was, Barnes writes

... a vile industrial landscape with the flame of a garbage incinerator licking dismally at the sky. It might have seemed a god-forsaken place ... yet the shallow waters of the bay were crowded with birds, including, outrageously and magnificently, roseate spoonbills.... A pair of huge, pink birds with beaks like ladles, contentedly sieving the water of the oily bay as if they were in heaven.

This was one of those moments of “discontinuity” that causes us to rejoice in and celebrate life. Truly exceptional birds in an unlikely place.

But then there is that second source of delight—the wonder we feel at the utterly normal when we dull our mind and rest our attention upon it. Most of the birds you and I will encounter on a typical day, Barnes notes, are “LBJ’s”—which is an acronym for “little brown jobs.” This includes all those run-of-the-mill sparrows, towhees, wrens, and siskins.

LBJ’s aren’t very impressive unless, like Barnes, we have learned how to look and to listen.

He reports coming into his study on a frosty January day illumined by a feeble winter sun. “The sun didn’t do much to inspire me,” Barnes writes, but then he heard outside the high notes of a single dunnock, or hedge sparrow. Now, “the dunnock is perhaps the drabest bird in Britain,” he observes,

the LBJ of all LBJ’s.... A dullish, brownish, smallish, skulking little thing that is altogether common.

But common or not, Barnes took an extra moment that morning to stand still and attend.

Ignoring the cold, that small bird was filled with excitement about the coming of the warmer weather. In that iron frost, he felt the tug of spring; and he sang his heart out as a result. It’s not a great song, compared with the nightingale ... and it’s not a special bird.... But there he was against the cold blue sky, every feather picked out by the low winter sun as he sang his song of spring and gave it absolutely everything. It was a song that made the whole day better. A common bird; a rare moment.

To experience wonder doesn’t require an epiphany. Our culture seduces us into thinking that life’s tedium can be relieved only by a “rush” of adrenalin, an experience that stops us dead in our tracks, makes our heart flutter and our speech stutter. But the “calm delight of the utterly normal” is also noteworthy and well-worth savoring: a homely LBJ offering his canticle to the sun; a cold bench, cool fog, and the distant invitation of the dinner bell—these, too, afford genuine moments of enchantment. They unexpectedly and serendipitously give life greater density and deeper meaning.

Such experiences are always ready at hand if we lift up our eyes to look, perk up our ears to listen, forgetting about what we *expect* to see and rejoicing in what we *do* see.

What we are striving for, really, is the re-enchantment of the world—which is a matter of perception more than anything else. The beauty is here, if we know how to make the connection. A beauty which is, as Linda Hogan says, our real wealth, but for which there really is no adequate word.

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