
Paying Attention: Notes on not knowing enough to come in out of the rain

From Finding One's Voice Wednesday Night Class

Early this morning I ran on the trails in a steady, blessedly bountiful rain. Those who know me well will not be surprised by this. I especially love taking long runs in the winter woods in the rain, when the sky threatens at any moment to turn icy, and transform the world, and sometimes me in it.

When I was growing up down south, my great-elders could sometimes be heard to say something like this; "That boy doesn't know enough to come in out of the rain." This was typically reserved for one whose feeble-minded behavior was a mystery, and often a violation of cultural norms. For someone, that is, whose life choices often led to chaos and, occasionally, to embarrassment. For most of my life, in most ways, I have striven to be the opposite of this kind of person-to be, that is, someone of whom my elders would heartily approve. For many years, I have tried to be among those who know to come in out of the rain. This has sometimes led to what family therapists have called "over-functioning." Increasingly, I find this scary. And here's an even more frightening thought: this way of being in the world so often proscribes and limits wonder and astonishment that it can limit our being, as Winnicott said, "fully alive." It can limit our ways of paying attention.

I wonder what God thinks about this? In both the western and eastern spiritual traditions we find what is called "apophatic" spirituality, or "not knowing" as a way of being. So, perhaps "not knowing" enough is not always a bad thing. On my morning run today, there were many birds out enjoying the rain. I saw and heard crows, a kingfisher ("*As Kingfisher's catch fire, dragonflies draw flame ...*" G.M. Hopkins), and geese, and I had a brief encounter with a hawk who was hunting along the trail. I've had a number of hawk encounters recently during my trail-running sojourns in the woods, and I admire their hunting skills, and their fierceness-their ability to be present, and to pay attention. They also call to something in me-perhaps it's a "wildness" too seldom accessed in my unwillingness to stretch the boundaries of my safe and domesticated world. I think this is captured well in a lovely poem by Lynn Unger:

Hawks

Surely, you too have longed for this --
to pour yourself out
on the rising circles of the air
to ride, unthinking,
on the flesh of emptiness.
Can you claim, in your civilized life,
that you have never leaned toward
the headlong dive, the snap of bones,
the chance to be so terrible,
so free from evil, beyond choice?
The air that they are riding
is the same breath as your own.

How could you not remember?
That same swift stillness binds
your cells in balance, rushes
through the pulsing circles of your blood.
Each breath proclaims it --
the flash of feathers, the chance to rest
on such a muscled quietness,
to be in that fierce presence,
wholly wind, wholly wild.
~ Lynn Ungar ~
(*Blessing the Bread*)

In similar fashion, last week we heard Mary Oliver ask us, "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" Having spent all day roaming the fields, paying attention, she wondered aloud "what else she should have been doing?" In another poem, Oliver suggests that we, too, have something to contribute, to use our imaginations in response to our awareness of being alive. Perhaps this is our gift to God, and to one another.

Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.
~ Mary Oliver ~
(*Dream Work*)

Martha and I are so very grateful for your willingness to participate in this offering. We hope you will do so in any and all ways your imagination calls to you. As we co-create sacred space, play with your willingness to stretch outside of your typical boundaries, into the liminal spaces where we encounter God, and ourselves, transformed by the winds of the Spirit. Send us your "paying attentions" this week, and bring items you want to share to place on the altar. And, consider your own equivalent of not knowing enough to come in out of the rain. Perhaps not knowing, and being willing to risk this, is one beginning to wonder, and astonishment, and to knowing God and ourselves in new, transformative ways. Come on out-the water's fine!