

“Detectives of Divinity”

October 7, 2018

Early October

Headlines roll in—the Kavanaugh nomination hearings, the debates, votes and more votes, sexual abuse survivors speaking out—tension escalates, pain seems to be everywhere--

My heart grows baffled, heavy

I go outside.

These lines of Shakespeare keep running through my head:

“That time of year thou mayst in me behold

When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang

Upon these boughs which shake against the cold

Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.”

“That time of year”

I suppose Shakespeare was speaking about a season of our lives—the autumn

But I’m thinking more literally now,

Thinking of that image of the trees without their leaves

“Bare ruined choirs”

As the world swirls around me

Flooding in and sometimes threatening to shake me at my core

A simple intention forms inside of me--

.....

That before the trees lie bare this year

I'll try to notice--

Just stop and try to really *see* them

I'll try to really look at them

Stop and truly see

.....  
"Are there trees near you?" asks the poet Mary Oliver,

"And does your own soul need comforting?

Quick, then—open the door and fly on your heavy feet; the song

May already be drifting away."

.....  
That is what is on my heart as I write this week

As I sit here and write in a world where news is constantly breaking

And sometimes a bit of my heart with it

It is important

This news of the world

So important, yet I confess, part of me wants to run,

Run with the poet Mary Oliver to the world outside

That world where she is always wandering in a kind of fever of praise

A trance

A meditation that never stops

"I don't know exactly what a prayer is," she writes

“I do know how to pay attention  
 How to fall down into the grass  
 How to kneel down in the grass  
 How to be idle and blessed  
 How to stroll through the fields  
 Which is what I have been doing all day.”

\*\*\*\*\*

I drive to work from Concord where I live  
 Past Walden Pond on 126 then turning right on Baker Bridge Road  
 I relish this turn, wait for it--  
 Love the way the fields unfurl before my eyes  
 These days I watch the trees at the edge of the road  
 On the watch for color  
 For that split second of time when the leaves change and then,  
 In the blink of an eye, it seems, overnight in a rainstorm,  
 They're gone.

This week I drove out to Fruitlands in Harvard with my daughter  
 She is grown now and lives away from home.  
 We walked through the meadow in the sun  
 Then stood, as Thoreau once did when he walked to Wachuset  
 Looking out over the wide vista, distant hills rimming the horizon.

Then we went apple picking as we used to do when she was seven  
 And we would go with her friends.  
 It was a weekday and the orchard was empty  
 And we strolled up and down the wide aisles  
 Just us and the dog  
 The trees lined up in rows, basking in the sun--  
 The names almost a chant on our tongues  
 Macoun, Cortland, Johnny Gold, Gala, honeycrisp, empire, Macintosh  
 “I don’t always know how to pray  
 I do know how to pay attention.”  
 And so I try—in these days—during this “time of year”  
 That Shakespeare found so golden, so haunting  
 During this “time of year” whose beauty can  
 Catch at the breath in my chest  
 At the ache in my heart.  
 I try to look. I try to see. I try to pay attention. I try to pray.

\*\*\*\*\*

I think of Henry David Thoreau and his love for trees  
 Thoreau who lived just a few miles away  
 Who needed a walk every day, four hours if he could get it--  
 Four hours outside in the wind, rain, sun,  
 Whatever weather the day brought to him,

Thoreau who walked the land where we walk now

Who rambled these same woods and fields

Who knew these rivers and ponds as we do.

He walked for hours and then went home and wrote down what he had seen

His journal entries are precise, descriptive, meticulous. But they are also passionate.

His notes reveal the mind of a naturalist but the heart and soul of a mystic.

What a simple thing it was that he did--

He went out--

He walked--

He noticed--

He wrote.

In the end, millions of words strung together—there, in all the volumes of his journal--

A record of his days

A record of his soul.

A soul in a fever of praise

A soul in love with the world.

Thoreau had a special love of trees

They were companions for him, they were guides. Comforters and protectors.

Some trees he knew as friends and would walk out to see them

Visiting a tree the way he would a friend.

At this time of year he watched them religiously for signs of color.

On a day in early October in 1858 Thoreau stood on the cliffs on the top of Fair Haven hill and toward Lincoln

In *Autumnal Tints* he wrote

“As I sit on a cliff

In the southwest part of our town,

The sun is now getting low,

And the woods in Lincoln, south and east of me,

Are lit up by its more level rays

And in the scarlet oaks

Scattered so equally over the forest

There is brought out a more brilliant redness than I had believed

Was in them.”<sup>1</sup>

He was mesmerized by a stand of brilliant scarlet oaks he could see

They glowed so vivaciously, he wrote, ‘you see a redder tree than exists.’<sup>2</sup>

Thoreau railed against the religion of his day

But he was a deeply religious man

“A palpable sense of the holy suffuses much of his writing about nature,” writes Richard Higgins in his book, *Thoreau and the Language of Trees*.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Thoreau’s essay, “Autumnal Tints,” quoted in Richard Higgins, *Thoreau and the Language of Trees*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

“He rejected the meetinghouse, not because it stood for religion

But because it did not, as he saw it.

It killed a true religious impulse.”<sup>4</sup>

Formal religion with its creeds did not do it for him

For him, religion was not to be found in a meetinghouse

But in the forest

In his own personal experience in nature.

Trees renewed his soul and so Thoreau spent time with them.

They were his ‘shrines’ and ‘burning bushes.”

The forest was his cathedral.

Its spires inspired him more than the village steeple.

He called the woods his ‘sanctum sanctorum,’ a place where he got ‘what others get from churchgoing.”<sup>5</sup>

Trees were almost a tonic for Thoreau

A kind of spiritual elixir --

The aromatic smell of the pine restored him

The wind in the trees made his heart leap

“I suddenly recover my spirits, my spirituality, through my hearing.”<sup>6</sup>

“When I would recreate myself,’ he wrote, ‘I seek the darkest wood,

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Higgins, p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 97.

And enter it as a sacred place.”<sup>7</sup>

I think of Thoreau and his love of trees

His knowledge that looking at trees was not just about having a keen eye

It was a matter of the soul as well

“Without the soul, the eye cannot see it,” writes Higgins.

In “Autumnal Hints” Thoreau tells us that in order to see beauty when we go out for a walk, it must be on our minds. We must be on the hunt for it.

“We cannot see anything until we are possessed with the idea of it, take it into our heads.”<sup>8</sup>

.....  
I remembered a story that Barbara Brown Taylor told—

Taylor, an Episcopal priest and a nationally renowned preacher

Remembers going to church with her parents when she was a little girl--

A white frame church in the Ohio countryside with apple trees in the yard and a parsonage next door.

The minister was young and single and soon became a regular guest at their dinner table.

“He was vital and fun and could catch an airborne fly with one hand,” Taylor writes.

“He listened to me when I talked and let me lead him on tours of my projects around the house.

He seemed able, when he looked at me, to see a person

And not only a child, and I loved him for it.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Thoreau, “Autumnal Tints”

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, (Boston, MA: Cowley, 1993), p. 15.



One Sunday he asked me to sit up close to the pulpit. He wanted me to hear his sermon, he said,

And as I listened to him talk about the beauty of God's creation and our duty to be awed by it, all of a sudden I heard him telling the congregation about a little girl who kept tadpoles in a birdbath

So that she could watch over them as they turned into frogs

And how her care for those creatures

Was part of God's care for the whole world.

It was as if someone had turned on all the lights--

Not only to hear myself spoken of in church,

But to hear that my life was part of God's life

And that something as ordinary as a tadpole connected the two."

Taylor went on to say:

"My friend's words changed everything for me.

When the service was over that day

I walked out of it into a God-enchanted world,

Where I could not wait to find further clues

To heaven on earth."

And so Barbara Brown Taylor writes "I became a detective of divinity"

"Every leaf, every ant, every shiny rock called out to me,

Begging to be watched, to be listened to, to be handled and examined.”

A detective of divinity—she hunted for evidence--

In the locusts who shed their hard bodies

In the milkweed pods that spilled its silky white hair

In the lightning that spun webs of cold fire in the sky.”<sup>10</sup>

“My friend taught me to believe

That these were all words in the language of god,

Hieroglyphs given to puzzle and delight me

Even if I never cracked the code.”<sup>11</sup>

A detective of divinity.

I like that.

As Transcendentalist preacher turned poet Christopher Cranch wrote in 1841

“Nature is but a scroll—God's hand-writing thereon.”

I spoke last week of Emerson’s hope

That people sitting in a church on a Sunday

Would feel that they were “drinking forever the soul of God”

Well I don’t know if we will feel it in here but what about out there?

---

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

If we look out the windows of this church  
Into the fields and woods of Lincoln  
We see the land where our Transcendentalist ancestors walked  
It is the same land we walk today  
I wonder, can we take into our everyday excursions this month some of their  
instinct for beauty  
Some of their spiritual way of seeing  
What Wordsworth said “to see into the life of things”  
Some of the poet’s inclination towards praise  
Can we take with us on our walks  
On our everyday rambles, our daily excursions  
Walking the dog, driving to the supermarket for milk  
Can we take a second look at the trees  
Scan the sky for clouds  
Watch the colors change at the field near the farm  
Is it possible that at “this time of year” this precious time of year  
We might become “detectives for divinity” too?  
  
So that we become like the poet Edna St Vincent Millay  
“Thou’st made the world too beautiful this year;  
My soul is all but out of me---“  
Perhaps drenched in the color and beauty of autumn  
We will feel, not that our soul is *out* of us,

But that it is finally well and truly *in us*.

And we are drenched,

And we are drinking forever

The soul of God.

Copyright@JennyRankin2018.