

## CONTEMPLATION, FOOD, AND FASTING

### The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.  
— Wendell Berry

Berry's poem invites a very practical response to fear and despair, which I cherish in my spiritual journey of daily entrusting myself to God. Equally rich, this poem croons a spirituality that embraces humans as part of Nature. Lying down to rest in the grace of the world—deeply experiencing our embodied selves as human nature and inhabiting this ancient universe we call home—births a transforming freedom.

Contemporary physical cosmology and evolutionary biology narrate our human heritage as Nature, in ways that can support our lying down to rest. Our family tree extends 13.7 billion years back to our universe's beginnings, when God's love and desire to share love overflowed, resulting in what scientists call the Big Bang, or what we might call the Impulse to Embody. With galactic patience, God's lure of matter toward life 30,000 to 50,000 years ago evolved into our species with the particular capacities for self-consciousness and free choice. Those are the capacities that direct us toward the peace of wild things and enable us to place our bodies there to bask in freedom. Having self-consciousness and freedom means we can choose the worldview through which we experience and explore life. Knowing ourselves as part of Nature invites us into a communion and companionship with our embodied selves, the rest of the embodied universe, and the One whose love is Incarnate. It resigns the lie of our separation from the Earth matrix and replaces it with a deep, bodily knowing of our interconnection and interdependence.

Nuancing, the colloquial phrase that we are made of stardust, scientist and theologian, Ian Barbour describes humanity as having enormous continuity with the rest of the universe. "We are part of an ongoing community of being; we are kin to all creatures, past and present. . . The cosmos is all of a piece."<sup>1</sup> The stunning diversity that makes up our unified cosmos involves startling complexity in the arrangement of that stardust. "The greatest complexity [in the universe] has apparently been achieved in the middle range of size, not at atomic or galactic dimensions. There are a thousand billion synapses in a human brain; the number of possible

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<sup>1</sup>Ian Barbour, "Creation and Cosmology." In *Cosmos as Creation: Theology and Science in Consonance*, ed. Ted Peters, 147. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989.

ways of connecting them is greater than the number of atoms in the universe. There is a high level of organization and a greater richness of experience in a human being than in a thousand lifeless galaxies.”<sup>2</sup> This richness of experience enables the human part of Nature to encounter the Mystery we call God in the presence of still water beneath the day-blind stars.

To be someone who lives wholeheartedly, who lives into contemplative embodiment day to day, is deeply supported by adopting this worldview that we are Nature. Often it brings a delight and joy beyond measure to lie on the Earth and gaze at the stars or to witness daffodils pushing through winter soil with their sunshine beauty. Dancing in our laughter and praise often results. At the same time, our whole-being-connection with Nature rouses unspeakable grief and despair when walking through a Colorado forest decimated by the pine beetle or watching Gulf of Mexico seabirds stagger under oil-blackened feathers. When we breathe the truth that we share one body, we lament the places of loss and betrayal. Just as falling in love with God is not a one-way ticket to delight, knowing ourselves as Nature is not all spring and bunnies. As with every other step in response to God’s luring love, it calls on our deepest contemplative selves to take in the whole of the life-death-decay cycle with a long, loving look.

One life-giving way to live wholeheartedly is to attend to how our embodied selves interface with non-human nature. One way to do that is through the spiritual practice of conscious engagement with food. (If your body just registered some version of “Oh, no!” I invite you to breathe a bit to come home to your embodied self. No traditionally-ascetical deprivation coming your way, you can trust.) Food is one frequently experienced place where we intimately receive the Earth, opening ourselves to be penetrated by what brings life and pleasure, communion and conviviality. Too often, though, the quality, setting, and pace of our eating can bend sacred nourishment toward mindless consumption. Conscious engagement of food invites attention to both our eating and our abstaining.

One of the most effective ways to engage food (and thus nature) mindfully is to fast. Fasting can help us notice how deeply we depend on God to sustain us through the Earth’s bounty. It highlights how our emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing is tied to the Earth’s nourishment. Also, a fast can help us detach from using food to meet emotional needs. In so doing, it parallels the way that becoming detached from something helps us to love it more fully, and an interior freedom results. There is a fallacy that in both fasting and detaching we have less vitality and life, left only with the emptiness of hunger and apathy. Rather, with a consciously-chosen fast, a freedom around food can flourish. In this way, fasting can support liberation across our lives and ripple out into the world.

I invite you now to watch the video, Contemplative Embodiment, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEEaTl4whYE>), which was created for an Abbey of the Arts retreat on being a Monk in the World (<http://abbeyofthearts.com/about/monk-manifesto/>). Consider if God is inviting you into a fast from food or something else that will nurture freedom in yourself and thus overflow into the world.

Emergence Initiatives

Feel free to share with attribution, Nancy S. Wiens, M.Div., Ph. D.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.