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This is an interpretation of Psalm 119:129-136 by Nan Merrill.

The witness of our Life is my model; therefore my soul yearns for You.

The unfolding of your Way gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.

My mouth pours forth praise continually, for I am ever grateful for your Promises.

You come to me and are gracious to me, as You are to all who open their heart's door.

Guide my steps according to your Wisdom, and show me how to lovingly co-create with You.

Let me not be lured by the world's values, that I may walk the path of wholeness.

May your face shine upon your friend, as You teach me of Love.

I weep over our wounded world, our earth ravaged by greedy, insensitive hands.

“All spiritual life begins with a sense of wonder, and nature is a window into that wonder.”

This is a quote from Richard Louv, co-founder of the Children & Nature Network. While nursing Joel as a newborn, I read Louv's book, The Last Child in the Woods and it's had a huge impact on our parenting. Louv explains that while children possess a biologically innate affinity for the natural world, in our modern,

hurried and primarily indoor lives it's crucial we help them cultivate this sense of wonder.

We prioritized hikes and outdoor playtime, purchased a family Audubon membership and made sure the kids participated in their summer camps. We rearranged our backyard for natural play areas including lots of rocks to climb on, a sand pond, and rain barrels so they could build streams and have lots of access to mud!

Beyond our backyard we caravanned on the towpath with our bikes, kayaked on the Potomac, and RVed across the county twice, hiking in roughly twenty of our National Parks.

Most importantly, beyond providing access to nature, we've intentionally worked to cultivate a sense of wonder in these experiences by taking moments to slow down and practice the art of "noticing." Being present to and noticing the sounds, the air on our skin, the colors, the smells and anchoring those experiences in our souls.

Just a few days ago, this past Wednesday, we returned from a trip to Alaska where we had many opportunities to practice this art of "noticing."

One night Joel was sleeping with his window open and heard some grunting noises outside. He peered through the window and saw a large moose. With

Christmas morning like excitement, he woke us all up to see. Kneeling off the back of the living room couch we peered out the window and in the midnight sun **and were delighted** as one calf emerged from the woods to **join their mother**. Moments later a second calf wandered out, and then finally a **third energetically bolted** onto the lawn! Triplets! This is a very rare sight! We ran through the house to follow their movements through the windows. Hours past our bedtime we watched them snack on vegetation, playfully chase each other, and finally nod off to sleep about **ten** feet away from our bedroom window!

On our first day in Denali, we rode the hop on/hop off bus to explore the East Fork's braided riverbed. This area was formed by massive ancient glaciers that ground through bedrock over tens of thousands of years. That one sentence, alone, can be hard to wrap your head around. On the way back into town Eli, Jillian, and I decided to hop off to explore another riverbed and then we walked back along the road through the vast glacial valley floor to catch the next bus. Here we paused to fill our senses... the only three people as far as the eye could see... feeling the smallness of ourselves and letting the wonder and awe wash over us. Needless to say, high on the mountain air, we didn't get much sleep that night either.

Maybe you've **felt a similar transcendent** smallness before – a spiritual awakening and realization you are but a tiny part of something full of greatness

and beauty and wonder? Where you find yourself surrendering to the beauty of the moment which is, in turn, surrendering itself to you. While nature can be a window for some, others might feel fear or overwhelm from the mosquitoes, or the rain, or the cold to allow themselves to open up and really see and experience the moment.

Maybe a more accessible window for you is music, or poetry, or community.

Whatever the window, we learn overtime that transcendent experiences like these can't be forced. As James Finely (who also has had a profound impact not only on my parenting, but on my life) says, "We cannot make the awakening happen," but we can cultivate an interior stance that offers the least resistance to it through practice. That practice can start with exploring an ant hill in your backyard, noticing a unique crimson colored leaf at the water's edge, or marveling as a spider spins her web for the night in a corner of your porch.

And yet, as Louv puts it, "Nature is **imperfectly perfect**, filled with loose parts and possibilities, with mud and dust, nettles and sky, transcendent hands-on moments and skinned knees."

Those same calm beautifully vast spaces were once filled with avalanches, earthquakes, and floods which destroy lives and permanently alter landscapes. The moose that brings us wonder in one moment delivers fear in another when it chases

us on the trail. An ant colony, disturbed, swarms its way across the back porch and onto your kitchen counter. Nature is imperfectly perfect.

The psalmist echoes the imperfectly perfect quality of our own existence as they “weep over our wounded world, our earth ravaged by greedy, insensitive hands.” Here’s a glimpse of the news in the two weeks we were in Alaska – during that time:

- Record-breaking floods uprooted communities and took lives, including here in West Virginia, while hundreds of wild fires burned across Canada.
- ICE agents were responsible for three deaths of innocents in Texas, Maine and Florida.
- Wars continued to rage on, including our own illegal war with Iran where more lives were lost.
- These are just some of the events that added to the already low rumble of environmental protection rollbacks, economic insecurities, social injustices, and political polarization.

We might have been on vacation, but the world was not!

When caught in overwhelm, I’ve heard my children say this and at times have felt it myself – “What is the point in all this?” Paralyzed by the weight of the wounded world and greedy, insensitive hands, I’m often drawn to turn my back on

the ugliness and bury myself under the covers, getting swallowed by spiritual flatness. It's fascinating to me because a similar sense of smallness arises... not one of transcendent beauty and awe, but of trauma-induced fear and helplessness. These are two parts of a whole.

Finely explains, "The secret opening through which we pass into wholeness is hidden in the center of those wounds we are most afraid to approach."

The challenge for ourselves, our children, and our community how do we bring presence to these wounded, ravaged, and insensitive truths? How do we move through the mud and dust to find the loose parts and possibilities for greater healing, wholeness, and Life?

In my experience, learning to live in greater presence to the wounded world is also a cultivated practice and not something that can be forced or willed into being.

Parker Palmer in Healing the Heart of Democracy, explains, "If you hold your knowledge of self and world wholeheartedly, your heart will at times get broken by loss, failure, defeat, betrayal, or death. What happens next in you and the world around you depends on how your heart breaks. If it breaks apart into a thousand pieces, the result may be anger, depression, and disengagement. If it breaks open into greater capacity to hold the complexities and contradictions of human experience, the result may be new life."

About a decade ago when my heart was breaking apart into a thousand pieces after my father's death I was introduced to *tonglen* meditation by a teacher as a way to cultivate a **breaking open** of my heart. *Tonglen* is a mediation practice that invites us to turn to face suffering instead of running away from it, by training us to meet it head-on with courage and love.

At the core of the practice, you are asked to breathe in suffering and breathe out your heart-felt compassion. You generally start with your own suffering and negative emotions, breathing them in, metabolizing them in your belly, and then breathing out compassion to yourself. Gradually you expand the practice to others, maybe to someone you love or a person who has hurt you. Eventually you are asked to breathe in the suffering of the whole world and breathe out all the compassion your heart can muster to send healing back into it.

Initially it took me some time to find a guided *tonglen* meditation I could even tolerate. Many moved too fast from working with the suffering of myself to the suffering of others. When asked to breathe in the suffering of the world, repeatedly I felt a visceral resistance rise in me and had to pause. It took roughly six months of practice, and a lot of tears shed until I could bear to sit wholeheartedly in the full practice. What I realized is that prior to this work I was stuck on the surface of my suffering, noticing the anger I was feeling and then rationalizing it away (with statements like 'holding this anger just poisons me' and 'wounded people wound

others’). The tonglen mediation guided me past these mental gymnastics and supported me in dropping deeper into my emotions, **fully welcoming them** in, and then inviting compassion not only for myself but the entirety of the situation.

This Practice of intentionally turning towards our pain, and inviting in the pain of others, is a way of cultivating presence to our collective wounded, ravaged, and insensitive truths. It is a path towards allowing our hearts to break open (rather than apart) into the deeper realities of our interconnectedness, overtime metabolizing fear and helplessness into compassion and acceptance.

Do I practice this everyday – uh no. I fully embrace that I’m also imperfectly perfect and often find myself “lured by the world’s values,” and losing my way. I weep for that too. And that’s ok. Cycles of forgetting and remembering are part of every spiritual practice and coming back to breath gifts you the sweet opportunity to once again cloak yourself in loving compassion. As Finley offers: “The willingness to perpetually gather up all that is lost and broken with compassion is, itself, the path.”

I’d like close with an excerpt of Brian Lewis’s poem, “To Remain Human”

The nervous system
was never designed
to carry the grief
of an entire planet

Yet here we are

A child starving
crosses our screen
between weather reports
and advertisements

Forests burn beside stock prices

Wars arrive
in the same hand
that holds photographs
of our grandchildren

And somewhere inside us
something ancient
keeps trying
to respond

This is the exhaustion
few know how to name

Not simply stress

Not simply fear

But the unbearable collision
between the human heart
and the scale
of modern awareness

We were meant
to know the sorrow
of the village

Now we are asked
to metabolize
the suffering
of civilizations

And many are drowning

...

The world keeps shouting

Choose a side
Move faster
Consume more
Outrage harder
Win

But the soul
does not speak
in that language
The soul speaks
through silence
through grief
through awe
through the sudden trembling
that arrives
when one human being
finally feels
the reality
of another

...

And perhaps
the task before us now
is not merely
to save the world
but to become
the kind of people
capable
of inhabiting it together