

In Praise of Laze  
May 4, 2008 (Beltane service)  
Ellsworth, Maine

Sometimes  
everything happens at once.  
Sometimes births and deaths  
beginnings and endings  
get entangled on their paths  
and arrive at once  
anxious and busy and full--  
or perhaps it is we  
who are anxious and busy and full--  
and we watch it happen  
and we know it will happen

but no matter what we do  
the moment of impact is still stunning  
because force is force.  
That's just the way it is.

We are here in the impact point  
with Beltane and an installation  
and Frank Pollien's death  
and Irving Forbes' death  
balanced on the one head  
of the one pin  
that is this moment  
that is this day.

We may be a little emotional  
we may be a little unstable  
we may be a little upset  
we may be a little overwhelmed.

...or a lot.

We may be our everything  
with a little more intensity  
as our own heartbeats rise  
to match the pace of the day we've stepped into.

Emotional overwhelm is normal  
and important  
and interesting  
--unless it's your own.

Emotional overwhelm is frightening  
emotional overwhelm is intense.

Emotional overwhelm cracks us wide open  
so then we can be transformed.

We may not be ready  
we might not have chosen change  
but there it is  
waiting on the doorstep  
and it  
will wait  
until  
we come out.

It can wait a very.  
Long.  
Time.

We know this. Deep in our bones we can feel the change coming like a steamroller or a freight train  
and we hope and we pray that it doesn't come today, not now, not please, not like this

--take this cup away--

but it comes  
it comes anyway.

And caught in the teeth of the life that we have  
and the life that we have grown to love  
what can we do?

What can we possibly, possibly do?

Except breathe  
breathe deep.

And decide where the energy leads us.

There's only so much we can see.  
There's only so much we can know.  
There's only so much we can possibly understand.

And when the basket is heaped full it helps to know  
what for us is wheat  
and what is chaff;  
what will blow away in the wind  
and what will fall back  
to the threshing-room floor  
to feed us  
to nourish us  
to move us eventually

from this day forward.

My Indian grandmother began sifting through her life before I really got to know her. Her days and nights followed the same practical pattern, worn into the floor of her Mumbai apartment by her soft slippers over years of practice. Her clothes were basic, her life was basic, but she was happy. She was content. It was enough. I remember it clearly because it's hard for us to embrace "enough".

Abundance and lack do their peculiar tango, but balance, sufficiency, limit, escape us. They escape us even when we should know them so well, as well as we know our own five fingers and toes, as well as we know the face and skin of our lovers and the footfall of our dear ones. They escape us even as we cry out for them, even as we find impossibilities in the dark with our shins and sing for some sweet relief, even as we pile our lives to the brim and then gaze in wonder and dismay as the stack un-forms and slips once more into chaos and we know we need rest.

These are, after all, the major forces of our lives, of all life, chaos and rest.

The whole world tends toward chaos and rest. That's what the scientists say. Order takes energy to maintain. Chaos is easier. Resting is easier.

And whatever is easier is where we humans start. We are built for efficiency. Long, complex series of thoughts about eventual consequences are not our thing. Just ask any high schooler. Sure, we can. But we don't wanna.

And at first we don't. As children we tend to be wiggly creatures, soft and curious and endlessly caught in a state of wonder. If something is interesting, we investigate. If something is appealing, we go to it, taste it, touch it; if something isn't working for us we reject it. We don't worry that Great Aunt Bessie gave us that scratchy sweater that she made with her own hands. We don't worry that dad spent hours making that pizza with the icky mushrooms on it. We know what we like; we know what we don't like; we act accordingly. Following our impulses works.

As we get older we discover, much to our dismay, that there are other considerations. We adjust accordingly. What is easiest becomes a compromise forged between our impulses and what we think we know the world wants. That's a lot of work, figuring out what everyone else wants so we can accommodate it. It certainly keeps us engaged and busy and involved, and for a while that seems important. We set aside impulse so we can grow into adulthood, get a job, have kids, get a permanent address, go back to church. In this stage we often focus on our careers and families and everything else that requires intense and continuous social engagement. The secret to our happiness becomes connected to the secrets of everyone else's happiness. It's a big world out there, but the rewards are fabulous, the connections are rich and rewarding. We feel like there's a place in the world where we fit and where we belong. We feel like there are people we know and systems we are finally familiar with. We have a Spot, and life is pretty good.

And then somewhere in adulthood, many of us look around and notice something. We have all the stuff. We have the accessories, the accompaniments, the gadgets, the dishes, the furniture, everything we thought we were working so hard for. We have the people: we have families and friends and colleagues and bowling leagues. We've had the experiences: traveled places and seen things and tried jobs and cooked exotic foods and repaired sinks.

We've checked it off—the whole list. And now what?

Now what?

The world suddenly seems unaccountably quiet, the air still. The persistent hum of the to-do list fades away with the last child's departure into adulthood or the first friend's death, and the question hangs there, bouncing slowly. Now what?

There are ways in which our lives are very simple—we need food, we need energy, we need passion...and we need growth. If we are not growing we are shrinking; if we are not eating we are wasting away. We have spent a lifetime amassing the pieces of our lives. And at this turning point, whenever it arrives, we realize slowly that we will be perfectly happy to stop--someday. Unlike institutions, we have a short and visible life cycle, and if we live long enough we all eventually decide that the closets are full. We are not inclined to seek out new things, new experiences, new friends. We have enough, we've seen enough, it's enough. And enough is enough—we don't need more. It will just end up in the woodshed or stuffed in the closets behind the kneewalls.

And really, who wants a new friend stuffed in the closet behind the kneewall because we already have too many?

So we start reducing. We start backing off. We start stripping away. And the more we take off, the more we simplify, the more we reduce, the more uncomplicated we try to make things. It's hard to overcome the inertia of so many years of accumulation, but once we get started it snowballs.

In India they have a whole system for understanding it. There is an expectation that the last stage of life is asceticism—a stripped-down version of all the other living we've done. There is an understanding that it is spiritually rich to give up certain foods, to simplify one's dress, to spend more time in prayer. No one expects this of young people. It's a life change that comes naturally with age, so that it is not at all unusual for elders to sit quite still in prayer for long times each day, to eat the same foods for each meal, to have several sets of identical clothes.

But in our fast-paced world this stripping down doesn't have to come from age. In fact, the faster we live the more we cram in. We live longer but we get full at the same rate and at some point we need a break. If we don't take one on our own, we get tired. And the more tired we are, the more streamlined we make our lives.

We stop doing lots of extra things, we stop traveling much, we stop maintaining vast and complex social networks. We also figure out how to take off our clothes near the washing machine, put away the dishes in the dish drainer, and make at most one trip to the grocery store a week. We don't necessarily call it simplicity, although the voluntary simplicity movement is popular for a reason. We probably make excuses and act guilty; we probably blame it on our schedule or on our health. But there's truth that runs deeper. We don't have time for all this. We need more focus, but we also need to do less.

We have a focus-diffusion habit. Focus is scary, because some things are too big and too hard to manage head-on. When the emotion is larger than human capacity, we want to redirect. Henry Nelson Wieman says that art gives us a side door, allowing us oblique access to the massive impact of major events—births and deaths, major triumphs and tragedies—without getting paralyzed. (Source of Human Good p. 156) It's true, a good work of fiction or theater can let people experience just enough grief or joy to cause transformation without being mired by the power of the reality. But art is not the only softener. If we reduce the number of things we're managing and simplify the management itself then we reduce the total stressload on our lives and are more equipped to deal with what remains. There's no shame in knowing limits and there's no shame in acting on that knowledge.

Even if it results in what some people call being lazy.

There is a place where simplicity meets efficiency, where the most direct route is also the shortest and fastest (although not when you're driving in Maine), where what makes sense makes sense all the way around. It's not efficiency at the expense of health; it's not over-mechanization. It's the moment when everything falls into place and we're working in harmony with the rhythms of our environment and our own soft and precious bodies. And we come back to our instincts. We come back to our impulses.

Age brings that more surely than anything else. Not *getting* older, but *being* older—being old enough to have soaked up a lot of life's beauty and pain, being old enough to have seen a lot and survived it, being old enough to have a little poise and a little grace in the face of powerful obstacles...and being old enough to choose whether to use that poise and that grace for others' comfort or for one's own. When we are truly elders we might even do both at once, but the path of least resistance is often the path of most truth, and anytime we speak truth we are bound to make someone uncomfortable.

What's important is that the discomfort is a deliberate choice—that we have selected it because it is important or because it carries a message or because it forges a deeper connection or a better world. Discomfort is only useful when it is a means to an end.

And when it is, it can be our brightest beacon.

Our infants and our pets can educate us. Their unease is what says that they need something—touch, solitude, a diaper change, a walk, a hug—and their first impulse is to get that need met. We are powerfully trained from childhood to override our impulses, to subdue our needs, to set aside our truths. The skills are useful, but they are limited. Eventually--no matter what you do--the bathroom calls more loudly than anything, and it must be answered. The cycles shorten and remind us what is truly important, what cannot be ignored: our bodies. Our spirits. Our self-knowledge. Our intuition. Our wonder.

When my Dadi set aside fancy food and fancy clothing in her 80<sup>th</sup> year she was not doing it for deprivation, she was doing it for simplicity and for depth, for the things that continued to matter. As her flesh and bones continue to force her to choose, she chooses what she loves, what she needs, what fills her spirit, what strengthens her mind. Anything left is left behind. By now it seems she must be floating a bit, skimming above the dust of the Mumbai streets in the dusk which frames her daily shopping. My mother's parents were the same, eating dry toast without butter and having simple conversations at the dining table that now graces my kitchen. They were done with life not fast but slowly, with a measured grace that they strung out as long as they could.

Our elders have this to teach: that what is important does not come from far away. In fact, most times it comes from within our towns, within our walls, within ourselves. What is important is that which we want to do despite the laziness, or because of it. What is important is what we know makes our hearts sing.

For Irving Forbes and Frank Pollien it was music and family and community and hard work and a hundred things we may never know.

For each of us we are still learning, still finding, still listening, still telling the stories and still growing. May we embrace the gifts of community; may we embrace the gifts of connection; may we, in the company of others, become exquisitely lazy, and thus exquisitely ourselves.

Blessed be,  
and amen.