

Living In Balance
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reading: retelling of *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein

That story,
the one about the boy?
This is not how we want our lives to go,
the persistent discontent
but too often we learn that giving
until we are nothing but stumps
is the only way to be;
too often we learn that to be truly useful
we must be used up,
and so we try to give
until we are empty.
There is no balance in that,
except the giant balance that is the relatively closed system
of this planet of ours,
where almost nothing is created or destroyed,
but where transformation is the word of the day
every day
and has been for nearly 5 billion years,
and where occasionally visitors from outer space
drop something we can use
(like amino acids. or water.)
But our daily balance is not served by our extermination;
we are not like the insect females who
eat their partners
recycle the now-spent parts
into the next generation.

Parents should not be consumed by their children,
nor children by their parents,
nor friends or relatives or perfect strangers
by each other.

We are not meant to be cannibals,
but you couldn't tell it by the way we often are with each other,
our desperation overriding our sense of community and our sense of self
until we have completely absorbed each other.

What a way to live!

We have choices,
we know we have choices,
the wheeling of life and of time through eternity takes the shape of balance
and we know we have choices.

And this week the equinox comes again
to remind us again
of our choices,
that we are not meant to suck each other dry,
that morning and evening are two equal parts
of one day,
the unity of time from Aristotle's dramas
and from our own sleeping and waking.

Imagine a life where we slept and woke with the sun and you will still see balance,
even here in the north where we have such nights in winter, such long slumbers,
and such days in summer that we would barely touch the pillow—

even here we would even out
it would all even out
in a full year of days we would get the same sleep
as someone whose bed was on the equator,
perfectly twelve of each
every day
and every night the same.

The universe is given to balance.

We are products of the universe,

given to balance.

We are neither meant to stay up all the time

nor to sleep forever;

Sleeping Beauty was an anomaly

not a role model,

although we all have our days when her 100 years

look pretty good.

Ecclesiastes said it, too:

To everything there is a season

and a time for every purpose under heaven.

Every thing has its paired thing,

its equal and opposite

its balance.

And as there is time for one

so there is time for the other.

Even the hard

even the sad

even the impossible.

There are disappointments and there are triumphs;

the temple falls but Esther prevails,

and through it all the world keeps turning

we keep sleeping and waking

and sleeping and waking,

and it looks like that's it.

It looks like that's the whole story.

But it's not

of course,

because you knew there would be more.

Because any time we talk about balance

about give and take,

about equal and opposite forces,

it sets up a binary.

Remember the seesaw? It's a useful image,

two people sitting at opposite ends of a 2x12,
which is propped up in the middle.

As each person falls, they push off the ground and they go skyward,
sending the other person down;

back and forth

back and forth

it's one of those perfect childhood pictures

since no one can lose

and no one can win

and the only way you can do this

is if you have no ulterior motive

or nagging to-do list.

Up.

Down

Up

Down.

As adults we have to pay someone to make sure we do 100 ups
and 100 downs

and then we can call it a workout.

But as children it is just the thing to do

because the grass is green and the skies are perfectly clear and bright

and because it feels like it gives you choices: you can walk or you can fly.

Now occasionally the seesaw gets becalmed.

Not very often,

but enough that we've all seen it.

The two people are so perfectly matched

and so utterly absorbed in other things

that they forget to push

and little

by

little

they

slow

and
slow
until
they
stop.

At balance.

Not up enough to fly

and too far from the ground to walk.

The seesaw takes advantage of levers
to make the whole game possible

because a small force at the end of a long lever becomes a large force.

This is not a new idea;

It was Archimedes who said

give me a long enough lever

and a fulcrum on which to place it

and I shall move the world.

So these small forces on the ends of a ten foot lever with a fulcrum in the middle
are strong enough

if only they have something to push on.

But they are not stuck.

They have less force as they move toward the pivot point;

if they edge toward the center they will unbalance the lever

and the other person will land on the ground.

We fear this,

that if we move toward our opposite we will give them some of our power
and a head start.

And besides, balance is the way of the world,

so why should we blink first?

But that kind of balance is wasted potential;

we could both creep toward the center;

we could both get help;

We have choices.

And in most situations the middle of the seesaw isn't empty at all;

there are more massive objects closer to the center—
the majority is not out at the edges, but toward the middle.
And that majority has less force because it isn't at the end of a lever.
A majority at the end of a lever gets a LOT done.
Anyone at the end of a lever gets a LOT done.
So when balance is not the order of the day,
or when a small number of people have a lot to do,
the working place is at the edges.
But when balance is the order of the day,
we need to remember that there are lots of people who are practically standing on the fulcrum,
standing on the balance point;
we are probably standing there, too,
wondering why we are outweighed by a tiny little group at the other end.
They are at the end, that's why.
But the real problem is that we all think we're standing on a seesaw. That's the picture in our
heads.
It has two ends.
If we're lucky, we remember that we can sit along its full length.
But we tend to forget that our world is not two dimensional.
When we say *balance* in this world,
when we say *equal*
we cannot think for a moment that we mean balance or equality
between two opposing things.
For one thing, they are not usually actually opposed to each other.
But the greater mistake is that there are many more than two things,
strung out along an infinite number of planes and continua
running every which way through this time and space.
When the sun rises and sets
on a twelve hour day
it is pulled along a vast number of possibilities
and it pulls a vast number of possibilities
seasons and circadian rhythms and planting cycles and birthing and growing and warmth and
rain and life,

and all the infinity of life,
riding the comet tail
of the circle of the sun.
We seek balance
and we have balance
but it is not balance for a life walked on a high wire.
It is balance for an orb
balanced on the tips of our fingers,
which only deigns to stay there
because of its spinning.

○ **interlude: circle round for freedom**

The sun will rise
The moon will rise
The earth will flower
And all people will be well.

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There are old rituals
As old as the hills
About planting
About life
About balance.
But the wisdom is older than that
As old as the sun
As old as the stars.
Since the very beginnings of this world
motion and balance have sung siren songs
at the hub of rotations
on the axis of revolutions.
The predators and prey have only kept company
under ancient rules
from ancient skies.
Anything we see twice
is booked for repeat engagements

by disinterest and attraction
playing tug-o-war with the calendar.
The amazing part is
that we fool ourselves into thinking
there is anything new under the sun.
We are all, after all,
turning together;
our lives and the seasons
even air and water and earth
are cycle-driven. Just because we cannot see the edge of the wheel
doesn't mean it doesn't turn.
An assortment of seafarers
over an assortment of years
taught us that.
But it somehow seems
we have not been paying attention
because we seem to think
that balance
is hard.
We seem to think that balance must be struggle
that balance must be strife,
that getting there is hard,
that falling off is easy.
I could blame it on the balance beam
in grade three gym class
but that would be unfair
to anyone who was ever a child.
Because when we learn things in school
that don't hold up in real life,
we don't even take them through the doors
marked reality.
Children know
adults forget,

but children do start out by knowing.

In *The little Prince*

the narrator is a grown-up
who meets a strange little man in a desert.

They have both crash-landed;
one from an airplane
one from another planet.

The little man demands a drawing of a sheep
and no drawing is good enough
until the drawing is of a sheep in a box,
where all that is visible is the box.

Perfection is only available
in the mind,
and we all have different visions of perfect.

But once he figured it out
balance was easy;
goldilocks found balance
in the third bowl of porridge
and the third chair
and the third bed,

so easy:

why do we forget?

We forget because of fear.

It is not lack of skill but hesitation most often
that makes us wobbly.

I never teetered at the edges of cliffs
until I believed I might fall;
I no longer dare to peer into the abysses of canyons
without a railing
or a very low center of gravity.

What a loss.

It's a tragedy,
this losing our balance,

this ongoing battle
between the real and the sensible.
Like driving
we must keep our eyes on the big picture
to stay on track
otherwise we make minute,
exhausting
continuous
adjustments
waste our energy
get nowhere
and eventually crash,
having hated the whole journey.

When a pendulum swings
it eventually rests
in the middle of its arc.
When two containers of water are connected
they will seek the same level.
Animals who eat and animals who are eaten
will live by each other's successes and failures
and the air and water we have
cycles endlessly between earth and sky.
This is the way of our world,
which itself turns on an axis
revolves around the sun
and holds the moon in orbit
--at least for now.
We are always building a new balance,
always working toward something stronger,
more stable,
less ultimately chaotic.
Whether it looks like chaos to us,

sand grains on an endless beach,
is entirely without consequence.
As the universe bends toward chaos
it bends toward balance
toward an order that stretches
beyond horizons
into galaxies;
when the pushing forces
and the pulling forces
are perfectly matched,
there is balance.
Chaos is just a latticework too big to see;
all order looks like chaos if you get close enough.
This is what makes perspective important,
because at just the right distance
anything can look random
or anything can look planned.
The arguments for intelligent design
are funny like that;
they say that we and the world
are too well-planned
for a series of happy accidents.
Whether there is or there isn't
a god,
I think figuring it out
based on what we can see
is incredibly presumptuous.
Whatever is at work--
random chance or a giant watchmaker—
has a system so vast
of which we are such a tiny part
that any perspective we bring to the table
is entirely self-centered

no matter how far our telescopes can reach.
Which is not to say that we will ever stop trying
but really
we can only guess from here.

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Krishna is the god
that the Puritans would have loved to hate
if they had been paying that kind of attention.
The eighth incarnation
of the middle god
of Hinduism's trinity
he comes to earth to help out,
floats down the river in a basket
and gets picked up by ranchers.
That's the short form.
His basic task is to keep the world together—
he arises from Vishnu, who preserves—and his tactics
are as playful as possible.
My family god is Kali
but it is Krishna's playful creativity
that carries my name.
Luckily Hindu gods aren't quite as jealous
as their western counterparts
and I keep both idols in my house
one for power
one for play
but of course, the power of play is some of the strongest in the world.

We've come unbalanced here,
despite the twice-annual reminder of the sun
in its race across space,
creating time.
We have misnamed a desperate grab for control

a *power play* as if there's something
powerful about control wrested instead of earned;
as if there is anything playful about any of it.
We've lost the balance in our race for order,
for a carefully controlled reality
where everything can be predicted
and nothing is out of line.
We lose that at our peril.
Even the sun, carefully ordered,
doesn't stay quite on the clock.
The world is more chaotic
than previously thought;
perhaps more beautiful, too.
Looking at a reproduction
is not like looking at an original Monet;
there is something wonderful
about those brush strokes
by that artist,
and the equinox
is one of those brushstrokes
you could stare at for hours,
this moment
when night and day
tip evenly toward each other
and make the isosoles triangle
that they reach for 363 nights
of the year
and miss.

On these two days
on these two nights
we get a brief glimpse
of the grace and ease

of natural balance
that we have managed to leave alone
all these years.
We have not yet found a way
to alter the course of the sun
and that may be our saving grace.
Twice a year the sun pauses in the skies
and twice a year it balances in motion.

More often than not, our human imbalance
comes from fear
of lack;
or fear of desire.
Now the Buddha taught that desire
was to be released,
but I don't think he meant
by having everything you ever wanted.
And lack,
beyond food,
water,
shelter,
is relative.
We would have those same fears
as itinerant hunters,
but we would not keep more than we could carry;
we would not eat more than we could hold.
This settling down habit
is a powerful force for hoarding
because you never know
and all objects have inertia—
once acquired they become very heavy
and hard to release again.
Ever tried to walk a tightrope carrying a full set of luggage?

We make our lives
and our balancing
harder than they need to be.
Balance is easy
as long as you just have yourself.
Now most of us
over time
get used to carrying stuff
when I was in school
I carried a backpack everywhere
and without it I was missing a limb.
When we put down our bags
we feel unbalanced
we feel off-kilter
we feel empty
we feel odd
we want to feel normal
so we pick them up again.
But we took years
to learn to carry that suitcase;
it will take us years to walk upright again.
And that means it takes faith.
None of us can get away with
an ongoing skepticism
and expect transformation.
Ongoing skepticism is just exhausting
and leaves us wondering what happened
while we were looking for loopholes.
Well-chosen skepticism has its place;
perpetual picking away serves no one,
and we are not transformed
although we want desperately to be transformed
because even in the face of a mounting body of evidence

or a tiny miracle
we only see the places
where human force
has not yet been brought to bear,
and which we therefore mistrust
despite the persistent unreliability of humans
in the vastness of the world.

What we need to know more than anything
is how much we already know
and how little we have to try
take up your mat and walk;
put down your burdens and fly.