

“Koyaanasqatsi”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
March 16, 2014

Unsettling, splintered, bewildering, jarring, intriguing, dissonant, churning, evocative—but what isn't that calls for even an iota of singular concentrated attention? Sometimes I can read something and it's as if I've experienced it. Don't worry; I can tell the difference; but if we inhabit an essay, a story, a film, a sequence of sounds, we do in a sense live it. And what we live that breaks our hearts is swept into the unending story of life on a planet fragile and resilient, in which humankind sprang long long after earth said Yes to any life form.

Consider three snippets of what I'm talking about.

Have you ever been to a vigil for an entire species on the verge of extinction? Robert Sullivan hadn't either, but he was invited by a small group of colleagues to such a vigil that held a eulogy issued by the very members of the fading species. It was held in a grove of hemlocks populating Harvard Forest, a “research forest,” in Petersham, Massachusetts, less than 100 miles from here.

Some of us may recall the graceful elms lining the streets of this country and wince as we recall also their demise. Some of us may recall the American chestnut trees, once abundant in this country. Thankfully, the resurgence of American chestnuts is hopeful thanks to intensive research-based intervention. The hemlock presents another story, a saga in fact. It arrived on the eastern seaboard of this continent roughly 30 million years ago and has spread into areas as far north as Nova Scotia, as far west as Michigan, and as far south as Alabama. Thanks to the century ago arrival on this continent of the “hemlock wooly adelgid” and the acceleration of global warming inviting the adelgid north into the hemlock forests of New England, this ancient species is on the threshold of extinction.

Hemlocks are not the stuff of handsome woodwork or admired tables, chairs, and cabinets. We don't say: “Come see my new hemlock dining table.” In fact, our minds more readily travel to ancient Greece and the death of Socrates, forced to drink a hemlock-based potion for asking entirely too many questions. Yet this same hemlock protects us from ourselves more than we know. Robert Sullivan reminds us that:

“...when spring comes and the trees in New England burst forth their leaves as part of the larger eastern forest that runs from Canada to the Carolinas, from New York to Ohio, more carbon is sucked out of the forest in and around New England than by the Amazon rainforest.”

As participants in this arboreal eulogy, Sullivan notes the importance of remembering “that a striking characteristic of human civilization is its tendency to discount what is most essential to sustaining its long-term existence.” The lowly hemlock is a workhorse of ecological balance.

Lest we think there is no human hand at work in bidding farewell to the hemlocks, recall that the glut of fossil fuels precipitates global warming, which beckoned the wooly adelgid north, and that this tiny creature may not have to work so hard, for “preemptive logging” of hemlocks is now beating it to the punch.

Listen, listen with Sullivan to the fading sounds; breathe the waning aromas of a forest.

“I’d been to hemlock groves on many occasions, but I’d never really listened to a hemlock forest before. I was amazed, frankly, and I carried what I heard all the way home with me...

I keep listening to what I now understand is not a stream. These are the hemlocks’ final words, the sound of a thousand dying needles falling, a gentle rain, and it is steady. I can record it, memorize it, lock it in, and carry it home.”

How aptly he quotes the words of Robert Frost:

“The tree the tempest with a crash of wood
Throws down in front of us is not to bar
Our passage to our journey’s end for good
But just to ask us who we think we are”

Who do we think we are? Is our hubris such that we are felled by a tree that falls in the forest, whose sound we may not hear but whose presence we cannot deny if it stops us short? What and who exactly crashed? What and who call for a vigil, a eulogy even?

The proverbial Fall...is it catching up with us? I stand in a forest so still I can hear my own heartbeat. And then...I hear, I really hear, the heartbeat of ancients, whose ancestors populated these parts millennia before mine raised their torsos into the vertical, away from the ground, away perhaps from groundedness.

No wonder we speak of Mother Nature. How we all need our Mommy. How we really need the TLC of a loving Mommy when we have lost our way, when our compass renders no direction at all.

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December 14, 2012—Friday to be exact. How could we forget? A young man arose early, walked into his own Mommy’s bedroom, and fired, the burst of soul and psyche spilling out as startling as a tree falling in a forest, heard by some, deaf to most. But what began there was not the end of the chapter. Moments later, he would fire upon 20 innocents, saplings they were, barely four feet tall, not having a chance to stretch their limbs into the almost 6 foot stature of he who fired, and upon six caregiving adults, seven if one counts inclusively. Omigod! It was closer even than that Massachusetts forest where a species is dying. Disbelief! Sobs! Wrenching grief!

How I remember 28 candles lit and placed in our sand bowl. Twenty-eight, though some count only 26 and some, only 27. Why? From whence did such havoc rise? A tiny forest fell and rent our hearts as if an entire species came to a screaming halt.

Life...out of balance.

Imagine, imagine, being the mother who had done what she could, though many disapprove, blame, revile, and say, “Yes, she was the cause.” Imagine, imagine, being the father who had done what he could, though many disapprove, blame, revile, and say, “Yes, he too was the cause.” Parenthood is a story that must be told, most especially parenthood that has survived, more or less, a tragedy encapsulated in a single word, “Newtown.” Parenthood, yes, of the children and teachers and principal; and parenthood, yes, of Adam, not so much older than those he murdered.

Adam, Ryan, Nancy, and Peter—a family as hopeful as yours and mine perhaps. What went awry? The signals came early. Nancy and Peter, Mom and Dad, sought professional help. It wasn’t enough. As told by Andrew Solomon in this week’s issue of *The New Yorker*, it’s a story that rips our hearts in ways that we can’t compare with how our hearts were broken on that not so long ago December day in that town just off I-84. Can any of us pass it without remembering? Peter Lanza, Adam’s father, was ready to tell his story, to begin to tell his story at least, and soon after, to be interviewed by Terry Gross on National Public Radio’s Fresh Air program.

As explicable as the tragedy of the extinction of an entire species in our natural world might be, the tragedy of what happened in the psyche of Adam Lanza remains a mystery. So many have said it was his mother or his father or, as I am tempted to chime in, lame gun control legislation, or insufficient access to mental health care. What we do know is that something went horrifically wrong inside a human being, whom many of us are reluctant to call a fellow human being. Rather, we want to distance ourselves from Adam and his entire family. The epiphanies that rise from Andrew Solomon’s article and from his interview on NPR make it difficult for any of us who read and listen with our hearts to do so.

It is, at the core, “life out of balance.”

Six interviews, some of them lasting seven hours, provided the time needed for Peter Lanza, whom Solomon describes as “an affable man with a poise that often hides his despair,” to build the trust that permitted him to share candidly and poignantly his pain. What we read and hear is not an account of two parents who neglected to see that their child was deeply troubled. They sought professional help; they received multiple diagnoses; they listened to the reports of teachers and were reassured that other young boys have fantasies of violence and mayhem. Adam’s mother especially tended to her son to the extent that she became socially isolated because of his hypersensitivities to external stimuli. But my intent this morning is not to recount the article or the interview, rather to raise the desperation of caring parents to find a solution, to surface the penchant of a shocked public to find a singular cause and cast focused blame, and to illumine the horrific unknowns that precipitated a troubled child—one among many troubled children and youth—to erupt in an outpouring of violence that no one, professional mental health providers included, ever predicted.

Adam severed his relationship with his father and his brother, Ryan, two years before the murders. Peter thought it was for the best and communicated regularly with Adam’s mother about how they might be responsive to their son’s needs. Adam was nine when his parents separated. Peter worked long hours; Nancy tended to Adam and, to a lesser extent, her son Ryan, four years older. It was a classic cause for separation, but Peter and Nancy remained communicative. Peter recounts the research he did for special schools that might draw Adam into a more therapeutic environment. Asperger’s syndrome, obsessive-compulsive disorder, acute depression, all were grasped onto as possible explanations for Adam’s anti-social

hypersensitive behavior. Adam's self-image was below the below. Nancy was swept into the whirlpool of her son's needs. Peter sought to respond at a distance. Andrew Solomon reported to Terry Gross that "[Adam's] obsession with mass murder, the obsession with the use of guns for adverse purposes, remained completely secret, and nobody saw it....They were worried not about his destruction but about his agony."

I recall several years ago attending a workshop at our Unitarian Universalist General Assembly on the death penalty. The parents of a young man who had committed a mass murder in Texas were there, emptying their hearts once again around the crime that had been committed by their son. They were a UU family from Texas. Again and again they had sought mental health care from their son, but couldn't access it—not the same as with the Lanza family, who could and did. These other parents suffered the horror of knowing that their son had murdered a family in cold blood and suffered the additional horror of his execution by the state. Yes, a UU family. Had Adam survived his shootings, is there any doubt that he would have been at the very least committed to life in prison and that thousands, millions perhaps, would have called for the death penalty? Imagine being the parents of a child whom you had witnessed taking his first breath, being the cause of others—endearing lovable others—taking their last.

Solomon had wondered how Peter might feel if he could see his son again. It would be like seeing a stranger, Peter replied. And then...a long pause. He "declared that he wished Adam had never been born, that there could be no remembering who he was outside of who he became." "That didn't come right away. That's not a natural thing, when you're thinking about your kid. But, God, there's no question. There can only be one conclusion, when you finally get there. That's fairly recent, ... but that's totally where I am."

In the NPR interview, Terry Gross asked how Peter looked when he related this. The answer? "Pained...and his voice was quite emotional." Solomon continued:

"What made that statement particularly poignant and powerful is that I believe Peter Lanza still loves Adam Lanza, and loved him all along. I think in some great scale of justice, he's weighed that love against what happened, and feels that what happened vastly outweighs his feelings of love, that when he says he wishes Adam was never born, it's not because he has no emotional relationship to him. It's only because he would've liked to save the world and himself from the horror of what happened."

Chilling and heartfelt is Andrew Solomon's conclusion that this horror "could happen to any of us." How many kids show bizarre behavior and manifest acute depression but never go on to the horror that was Newtown? It remains a mystery why it happened with Adam.

Who was the survivor of such an agonizing mystery? The parents of the children? The families of the teachers and the principal and the psychologist? The brother and father of Adam? What does it mean for those of us who empathize with whomever in whatever niche of this saga? How do we digest it in a way that might prevent whatever?

Life out of balance. In one word, *Koyaanasqatsi*. It's a Hopi word with multiple definitions:

"1. Crazy life. 2. Life in turmoil. 3. Life out of balance. 4. Life disintegrating. 5. A state of life that calls for another way of living."

Godfrey Reggio brought it to the screen as a film in 1982. With music by Philip Glass, a master of dissonance, it begins with images of the earth as it might have been seconds after The Big Bang—with eruptions, upheavals of fire and water and sky; moves into breathtakingly beautiful scenes of sand dunes and meadows and canyons and mountain crests and cloud formations; and accelerates into the global culture so recognizable as today, with crazy traffic jams, polluted cities, burnt out forests, mindless labor, and addiction to technology.

An upper it's not; and yet there is hope in simply bearing witness, just as there is hope in bearing witness to a grove of hemlocks that won't be here in a mere century, just as there is hope in heeding the pain of a parent whose child has precipitated unbearable pain for other parents. There is hope in bearing witness to *Koyaanasqatsi*—life out of balance. When we bear witness, we're not in denial.

This is the common thread of my message. Bear witness, keep vigil, don't run from voices you don't want to hear. The profoundly personal is the profoundly ecological is the profoundly communal. How did the hemlock wooly adelgid come to be in the first place? How is it that part of our human impulse is to use and abuse this earth's resources so that climate change threatens far more than groves of an ancient species? How is it that a child is born with a kernel of possibility that no one could or would want to foretell?

In a veritable scripture trove of poetry and prayer, Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon address what it is to “heal the whole.”

“During this time of great imbalance on planet Earth we may feel ourselves torn between the priorities of healing ourselves—resolving our own inner spiritual or psychological problems—and attempting to cure the social and economic ills that beset our culture. ...if we accept that we are totally part of this living Earth, then we must recognize that isolated health is an illusion. Healing ourselves and working to resolve the contradictions in the human-Earth ecology is the same work.”

However we lose balance, however we become ungrounded, however we precariously and often enthusiastically join the forces that throw life out of balance, our earthling status is a gift of grace, which in spite of ourselves binds us to the reality that we are spiritually embodied in this earth's life and in the lives of each other.

May we, in caring covenanted community, seek to heal from brokenness that may itself hold the seeds of newfound wholeness, a miracle as credible as those mysteries that will forever haunt us.

So may it be. Amen.

Sources:

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