

The eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time.

When I started ninth grade, a wonderful thing happened. We were no longer given tests in English and History; instead, we graduated to something I found deliciously adult: essay exams. For the first time, I was being graded, not on the correctness of my answers, but the way in which I examined a question. There were no “right” answers in essay exams; only a skillful encounter with the material.

I remember the substance, if not the exact words, of the exam question we got for Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, probably because after sixty years I’m still working on it. We were asked to look at haste as the driving force of tragedy. Although I agreed that Romeo and others acted impulsively, I was less sure about haste. In a society as fast moving as ours, and it was already fast moving in 1964 when I wrote the exam, haste is not necessarily a tragic emotion or condition. It is a fact of life. We live in a fast-paced world which values racecars and innovation. I remember writing that it was not haste per se, but miscommunication that led to Romeo and Juliet’s end, and as I recall, I got a good grade for my thought piece. Still, I have yet to make my peace with haste. Although I cannot move as fast as once I could, I still find myself jumping to conclusions too quickly and reacting to things I don’t like with too much passion, especially when I’m tired. Discernment and patience, the ability to move through a situation with attentiveness and mindfulness is hard, and easily lost on a bad day. We talk about “powering through.” But I’m not sure “powering through” helps anything but my pride.

The fact is, haste did contribute to the deaths of Romeo and Juliet. Lack of discernment only made it worse. Single right answers are rarely true in the world of essay writing.

Terry Tempest Williams wrote “Wild Mercy” in the aftermath of 911. Like Romeo and Juliet, 911 was a time of haste, tragedy, heroism, and not-knowing. Or as Terry herself describes it, a “Seismic shift. A shift in consciousness. [HASTE] Is this too much to imagine? Do we have the strength to see this wave of destruction as a wave of renewal? [DISCERNMENT]”

Jesus says to Peter, “Get thee behind me, Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

And so it is with nature. Those disasters we humans call “natural evil” may only be the earth renewing its soil, its rivers, its life. Nature can, at times, be harsh, but rarely I have found her evil.

Or to put it another way: Can I see the inner meaning of what lies right before my eyes?

There’s a passage about that in the Gospel of Thomas:

If those who guide you say: Look,
the kingdom is in the sky,
then the birds are closer than you.
If they say: Look,
it is in the sea,
then the fish already know it.

Oddly, a very similar teaching exists in a much later Zen Buddhist teaching called “Genjo Koan,” or “Realizing the Fundamental Point:” “A fish swims in the ocean, and no matter how far it swims there is no end to the water. A bird flies in the sky, and no matter how far it flies, there is no end to the air. However, the fish and the bird have never left their elements.”

So what is this human element, which is to say, what is the kingdom?

Thomas says that the kingdom is both within and without you. The Genjo Koan is more provocative: “If the bird leaves the air it will die at once. If the fish leaves the water it will die at once.”

What is it that when a human leaves it, the person will die at once?

The answer, of course, is Time. The human medium is time. Our lives begin and end in time. We organize our lives along timelines. Haste and patience are both subsets of time. For humans, time is linear and irrevocable and when it ends for us, we are dead. But for God, all time can happen at once and of time, there is no end.

At the center of Zen is simply sitting still in the eternal Now.

Jesus had little time to sit still. He had to give us everything in a very short time, amid the noise and the haste of the world in which he lived. Moses got a whole desert in which to teach, and Buddha went into a forest. Jesus, on the other hand, spent most of his time in cities. Moses taught the Israelites for forty years; Buddha nurtured his community of disciples for fifty. Muhammad taught for twenty-three years. It takes a long time to absorb spiritual truths into the soft tissue of one's life and practice. It takes a long time to deal with fear, with conventional attitudes we receive from our families, which they assure us is the truth. It takes a long time to deal with our emotions, our relationships, our true strengths and weaknesses. Jesus had only three years to guide us through all these things; then he died a violent, terrifying death, confirming the true nature of empire. Stop and think about that. The true nature of empire is violent and terrifying.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Jesus probably didn't say it that way, but he was clear that the world he lived in was a dangerous place. He encouraged his disciples to trust the Holy Spirit when that world went after them, for Jesus knew that there is nothing that a society driven by violence dislikes more than truth.

If ever there was a story of violence and haste, it's Holy Week, when three years are compressed into three days, a teaching of everlasting life in a whirlwind of fear: betrayal, mob arrest, trial by night, torture, a second trial, crucifixion the very next day, agony, burial, an empty tomb. If you're not exhausted on Easter morning, you haven't done Holy Week.

³⁴He ...said to them, "³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?"

In the spirit of curiosity and wonder, I've found myself wondering whether our great global culture moves so quickly because it's caught in the space between fear and faith, trying to run away from what it doesn't want to see. We're always in a race against time. Never enough time. I need time. Stress as a battle against time. Maybe if I run fast enough, time won't be able to catch me.

In his sermon on the mount, Jesus tells us not to resist an evildoer. (Matt 5:39)

You know that I am trying to figure out this whole experience and conundrum of growing old. Sometimes I think old age might be the time we're supposed to lose ourselves, our sight, our hearing, our memory, our strength, our health. But the moment I think I've got it down, I realize that I don't. I'm fighting the process as much as anyone. And what makes it worse, I'm a smooth talker. I'm very good at convincing myself that I'm not in denial.

But when I'm caught trying to outwit my aging process, I hear Jesus. "For those who want to save their lives will lose them, but those who lose their lives for my sake will find them."

On Thursday, when I was exploring Bouverie preserve, I saw life and death coexisting in the same tree.

The eyes of the future are looking back at us. Stop thinking about yourself, they seem to be saying. Look at those whose lives will depend on you. Dare to fall apart. Dare to sit still. Dare to be a tree that holds 10,000 things in its branches.

That's how most people interpret today's gospel: Losing oneself means losing one's Ego and becoming selfless.

But I think there's more. The one who clings to their own habits of security usually does so at the expense of others. Or as Richard Rohr said synchronistically in this morning's meditation: "The ego seems to find its energy precisely by having something to oppose, fix, or change. When the mind can judge something to be inferior, we feel superior. We must recognize our constant tendency toward negating reality, resisting it, opposing it, and attacking it on the level of our mind. This is the universal addiction."

To let go is to live in the world that is. To work with it rather than against it. To see things as they are rather than what I want them to be. To see myself as I am.

That said, I cannot lose a self I have not found. I cannot give away what I do not have. Or as the Taoists teach, there can be no birth without death, no reconciliation without dissent, no day without night. We walk through all these seeming opposites to bring them together. If we don't the division leaves us restless and shattered like an egg cracked open before it is ready to hatch.

Childhood is about growing. Adolescence is about falling apart. Maturity is about attaining. Aging is about losing. These are not oppositions; they are the pillars of humanity.

The early church spent a lot of time studying itself, discovering how the teachings of Jesus show us the way of the fully realized human being. It's why I love the Gospel of Thomas

and Terry Tempest's writings as she works to reconcile nature and technology at the heart of life.

Lose it, she says. Live in the wild mercy. Or Thomas:

Where the beginning is, the end will be also be.
Blessed are those who abide in the beginning,
for they will know the end and will not taste death.

Or me: God, give me the answer.

God: Lose it, Carol. Amen