

“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

The late Dr. Oliver Sacks, who had a knack for turning case histories into parables, told the following story in a letter to a friend, “Everything we build is an allegory of ourselves: the whole human world a metaphor of the human state. My own love is for city walls...those high stone walls which enclose, defend, and unify a city, as we wall off the citadel of ourselves.”<sup>1</sup>

He wrote those words in May 1969, at the height of the Vietnam War. As community was falling apart yet again and it was every man for himself. Like all good parables, Sack’s citadel has settled into our souls, setting us apart, but revealing us as the constructed beings we really are. There’s something unnatural about being a person. We are the creations of our own heads, formed in a glorious, oppositional relationship with the families which gave us life, the earth which gives us life.

I felt all those things, but couldn’t yet name them when, with the help of you who had been there and knew what it was like to say this kind of good-bye, I finally returned my restless and troublesome family to ground and felt a peace and love I had rarely known with them in life.

On this, the last formal Sunday in the Season of Creation, I want to ask a question for which I have yet to find a convincing answer. And it is this: What is humanity’s true place in the world? Is it to wall ourselves off from the world and supervise it, or is it to give ourselves to the world and be the ones who articulate its own wild heart? Or is it something else we have yet to imagine? Can we really, as our intelligence tempts us to do, choose the kind of beings we are?

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<sup>1</sup> From “Coming Alive,” *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2024.

Metaphors mean different things to different people. Sacks, the brilliant and troubled physician with a schizophrenic brother, sought refuge in an understanding of the mind.

But when I look up to a citadel, I see a prison.

We have known for a very long time, since 1856 to be precise, that we were doing things to the planet which would rise to haunt us. The American suffragist Eunice Foote made calculations showing what would happen when too many greenhouse gases were trapped in the atmosphere. There were moments, such as the early 1970's, when people rallied to the cause of conservation, but it was easily cast aside by the next fad, which promised bigger cars and more fun. Off roading and cruise ships rather than the patient work of learning and caring for the land.

I have read book after book detailing our spiritual malaise. I have walked the Golden Gate Bridge protesting the petroleum wars in the middle east (they were never religious wars, no matter what you might have heard.) Too much money in defense contracts to worry about theology. I have poured myself heart and soul into the earth.

And today, I come before you to say, "I give up." I give up the fight. I have laid my troubled past to rest. The only way to peace is through peace. It is taking down the defensive citadel stone by stone and discovering the magnificent view of a fully open mind.

Last Sunday after I had written one more sermon praising life, peace, and nature, I picked up a book I had not read since I was in my thirties: Paul Shepard's landmark 1982 study of human disconnection: *Nature and Madness*. *Nature and Madness* begins with a question: why do human beings persist in destroying the world which gives us life? Biologists have shown that only a creature who is dying will foul its own nest.

Dying is a deceptive and dangerous thing. Remember Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' five stages of death and dying? The first, not surprisingly, is denial. *This couldn't possibly be happening to*

*me. We don't have cancer in our family. Nice people don't let filthy cells invade their bodies. Something as necessary as oil can't possibly be bad for us.* Unlike Kubler-Ross' other stages, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, denial is easy to name, but very hard to pin down. It's rarely as clear as the afternoon I made a pastoral visit to a family caring for a mother who was dying of cancer, and they said, "Excuse me. Cancer is not a word that is spoken in this house." Denial is like a door closing on a very messy room. It's like sweeping dust under the rug. It's like putting this behind us to get on with our life. It may be a component of the overused word "normalcy."

The Chinese sage Mencius, a follower of Confucius, had his own metaphor of the human condition. He wrote:

"What is done to wild earth is done to us. The ten thousand things are all there in me. And there is no joy greater than looking within and finding myself faithful to them."

Which is to say, faith and joy are essential if we wish to be human. Faith and joy help mend our sense of separateness and direct our intelligence to listening to what God, the birds, the wind, the fire and the rain are trying to tell us. The answer is not to practice analysis or problem solving. The answer is to love. Even when being salted by fire, to be at peace with one another.

Our story from Esther touches on that theme. King Ahasuerus lived in a world that was dangerous with intrigue. The people closest to him plotted to take him down and were it not for a kindly Jew named Mordecai, he would not have survived. Then unbeknownst to him, he takes Mordecai's cousin and adopted daughter Esther, to be his queen. The plot thickens. Believing that no one deserves to be worshipped but God, Mordecai refuses to bow down before the king's new steward Haman, and his ego outraged, Haman vows to destroy not only Mordecai, but all the Jews, for their quiet and persistent loyalty to a God above all human aspirations and

projections. Mordecai tells Esther of this and asks her to speak to the king, but even a wife cannot ask favors of her king. Instead, she does what women have done for thousands of years. She gives a dinner party.

Last year at about this very time, we heard Dakota Borgfeldt speak of Esther as the savior of her people.

It is the perfect story of nonviolent action.

Because the possibility of violence always hovers somewhere. Returning to *Nature and Madness*, we see Shepard speculate that war is not a grand, national project, but is in fact the result of restlessness and boredom, a need for action, like the Knights of King Arthur's Round Table, a legend which rose to paradoxical heights during the 1960's, who decided peace was not at all it was cracked up to be and as they lumbered forth on one last quest ended up bringing down the very thing they had worked so hard to achieve. Or a recent article in which a Western philosopher said we'd all die of boredom if we lived in a stable society.

Wild turkeys are never bored. Deer are never bored. Even I'm never bored in the woods or by the sea or when I'm walking my dog.

Action, when not grounded in a life of prayer, has a way of turning on one, just as the tables turned on Mordecai in today's reading from Esther. What we think we are doing to others, we end up doing to ourselves.

Which is why, though I will always take pleasure in reading people's ideas, I've given up trusting that ideas can save us. We don't listen to philosophers. We listen to the rumblings of our hearts. We feel the heat when salted with fire. We seek revenge for what others have done to us without recognizing it's been done to everyone. Like a motley band of fallen angels, we are here to find our way back to God and as Augustine said, will remain restless until we find him. We

are here to discover our own true nature, and in that true nature to heal the ten-thousand things because they are us and we are them just as Jesus was God and Jesus was us and being one of us could still the storm at sea and sing the demons from our troubled souls. Here is where our activism, or restless quest needs the leaven of contemplation; the chance to simply be and let the mind of God open our hearts like the door which denial told us to close and see within, not chaos, but the banquet table of wisdom, which will love the world back to wholeness and leave all our mistakes, like Haman, simply hanging there. This is my body. This is my blood.

As I said, I give up. God is much smarter than I'll ever be. Praise God. Amen.