

STAR GAZING WITH BIRDS

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Genesis 2:4-9; Romans 8:18-25

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Let us begin with prayer:

Loving God, open our minds and hearts to the movement of your Spirit, that we may be at peace and worship you with a reverent sense of your presence. Amen

Once upon a time, when women were birds, there was a simple understanding that to sing at dawn and to sing at dusk was to heal the world through joy. The birds still remember what we have forgotten, that the world is meant to be celebrated.

This image is the ending meditation in a book by Terry Tempest Williams titled *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-four Variations on Voice*. She wrote this book when she was the age her mother was when she died. If you are familiar with Williams' work, you may know that she writes out of a context in the western United States; she was raised in the Mormon tradition and lives in Utah near the Great Salt Lake. Her writing typically explores nature and relationships, she has written extensively about her relationship to her mother. In this book she invites the reader into a very challenging struggle she experienced after her mother's death. Ms. Williams' mother died young, in her mid-50's, and as she was dying she left her daughter all of her journals. Her one request was that Terry not read them until after her death.

The writer recounts her experience looking at her mother's journals for the first time in the beginning of the story:

On the next full moon I found myself alone in the family home. I kept expecting Mother to appear. Her absence became her presence. It was the right time to read her journals. They were exactly where she said they would be: three shelves of beautiful clothbound books; some floral, some paisley, others in solid colors. The spines of each were perfectly aligned against the lip of the shelves. I opened the first journal. It was empty. I opened the second journal. It was empty. I opened the third. It too, was empty, as was the fourth, fifth, the sixth – shelf after shelf after shelf, all my mother's journals were blank.

What's a child to do with that gift except write? Especially a daughter who is a writer. So write she did. There are many sections of this book I love. One is how she convinced the editor to leave blank pages in the book itself, so you are reading her words and a chapter will end and then the reader confronts, as Williams' did, a series of blank pages, inviting you in. Another part of this book that I love is near the end where she writes almost four pages of double-spaced sentences that say all the things she feels her mother's journals are. Each one a simple sentence.

My Mother's journals are a projection screen.

My Mother's journals are a blinding light.

My Mother's journals are a glaring truth.

These declaratives go on throughout the rest of book, not just in a list but then in italics bridging sections and inviting reflection. The last three such observations are:

My Mother's journals are a disturbance.

My Mother's journals are a surprise.

My Mother's journals are an awakening.

And to this last sentence, the author asks, How shall I live?

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In this day and age, how are we to live as if the world is meant to be celebrated? It is no easy task, and yet, those birds are calling us toward that joy. But it's hard to remember when women were birds. When I read that paragraph, I feel it like muscle memory that runners get, but it's also like that word that you can't quite recall. It's on the tip of my tongue, it's on the lip of my understanding, but as close I can get is getting close to remembering. So I found myself thinking about what gets in the way of healing the world through joy? What in our spiritual lives stops us from celebrating the world? Why can't we faithfully remember when women were birds?

A simpler way to put the question would be, what keeps us from hoping? Paul, in the letter to the Romans that Mark read for us this morning, links present suffering with hope. "The whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains until now. And it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for bodies to be set free" (Romans 8:22-23 CEB) I have a fairly easy time understanding that we are groaning together in labor pains, what I struggle with more is how he is able to see those labor pains as growth and express that the "whole creation waits breathless with anticipation" (Romans 8:19a). Paul is onto something here I suspect, but I can't honestly say that I feel like the groaning I hear in the world around me sounds like breathless anticipation. But maybe I need to listen differently to the birds singing.

I spent quite a bit of time with Genesis 2 this past week. We read the whole chapter at Jazz Vespers last Tuesday. We used it as our main text for the Bible study on Wednesday at lunch time in our earth care conversation study. It's funny, in contrast to Paul's description of what the world is going through, the creation story doesn't have labor pains or groaning. In fact, creation at its beginning seems almost effortless. Creation is not a breathless experience but a breath-ful experience, breath is what God uses to bring humans to life. Perhaps then is when women were birds, but I still can't quite remember.

There is something to not wanting to remember what we have lost and only wanting to remember what we have lost that must be named when we try to figure out hope and joy. Williams

articulates these challenges and moving past them in three words: disturbance, surprise and awakening. She identifies disturbance as something which can't be named. She uses an example of an art exhibit she saw in New Hampshire. The exhibit was by an artist from New Mexico, Julia Barello, and the installation was called Red Swirl. It is a spiral of birds – as Williams describes them the cut-out shapes of swallows and swifts, black, gray-white, black-grey, and red, each with a pin holding it to the wall. Williams comments on how real they look, and yet, something bothers her about their appearance. Then she realizes, the birds are made from X-ray films and MRI films. They are created from scans of people, in her words they are “evidence of people in peril.” The images had been concrete, they were attached to diagnosis, and yet these birds are a disturbance. A wound that cannot be named. The margin space that draws to the edge of the binding. The constant reminder that something is not right. From the ache in our body to the empty chair at the table, to the rhetoric of unkindness that does not cease, there are disturbances all around us.

Those disturbances have the potential to make us callous and numb. They pull us up short, they scare us, they break the certainty of our personal narratives and routines. Somewhere in them is the availability of surprise. How do we move from disturbance to surprise? How do we keep from letting the storms of loss and disturbance relocate us? Surprise goes hand in hand with certainty, for it is when we are able to let certainty go that surprise can enter in. When that little sliver of hope opens, disturbance and surprise meet to awaken us. Williams says it is “the velocity of wings [that] creates the whisper to awaken” (224). That awakening is that breathless anticipation that Paul describes. That awakening is that breath that brings humanity to life in body, and mind and spirit. That awakening is hope. We still get there the long way around; we still get there not quite being able to remember when women were birds, because the birdsong reminds us that even if we can't remember.

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Since reading Williams' book, which draws so richly on our spiritual imagination, I have been thinking more and more about what I do at dawn and what I do at dusk. At dawn, I am usually up. I am a morning person, and I like to watch the sunrise. I watch either from the little terrace attached to my apartment where I look eastward directly along the BQE or even better from my bike at the Bushwick Inlet in Williamsburg. I like coffee at dawn, and I like quiet in the morning. Yoga, reading. I like to listen to the traffic become more and more busy. The day is spread out before me, I would say it is the closest thing to awakening that Williams describes that I feel. I celebrate the world in the morning, I can remember when women were birds.

At dusk, it's harder to remember. I miss dusk sometimes in the city. In my apartment I start working on something and I come back to the living room and dusk has whisked by. I lose track of time at dusk. My favorite day to enjoy dusk lately has been Tuesdays, when the light lingers now a little longer in the Great Hall for Jazz Vespers and we appreciate the twilight that we remember once was darkness at that hour. I encounter disturbance most often at dusk, and yet those beginnings and ends of the day are the most fertile times for healing and joy. I feel it in my bones. On the worst days, I can watch the sunset and feel Paul's breathless anticipation. On the

days when wounds are fresh, I can see the sunrise reflecting off the buildings and know still how to celebrate the world. I can almost stretch my wings and fly.

Where and when we encounter disturbance, surprise and awakening is important. What we encounter at dawn and dusk is important. The world is not groaning in labor pains away from us, we are part of the world and laboring with it. When we hold it at arms-length, or let the disturbances teach us that the world is separate from us, we miss the connectional point dramatically. The world groaning in labor pains, and us with it. The world is waiting in breathless anticipation, and us with it. It was never us against the world, it was always us with the world. And it is that belief that injects us with hope, for if we are part of the world, connecting, living, breathing, we can suddenly remember what the birds tell us everyday, that the world, and us in it, are meant to be celebrated and our joy can heal in ways that we never imagined possible.

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