

The Next Things After Surrender

A Narrative

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It’s nearly a quarter century now since I began visiting woods.

This statement implies more forethought than I intend, for I believe now that it was not I who chose suddenly to go, but they who demanded I come. The woods willed me away from the familiar lawns and gardens, tempted me away from my small-farmer’s preoccupations with tasks and tools, weeds and productivity as surely as ever a vision of grace wooed a sinner. The summons, my Calling, was that specific and exclusive and it made all the difference.

It was sometime in spring because a male snipe was repeatedly spinning his way into the sky every night and then plummeting to earth on his watery song, hoping to enthrall a female to his singing field, and a symphony of peepers accompanied him from the lowland along the riverbank across our narrow valley. I forget the date, but I remember the sensation. When I looked out my kitchen window then, it was not the scrupulous patterns of the herb garden I saw, or the chicken coop we’d built or the raised beds and orderly rows from the previous year’s vegetable gardens. Rather it was the wild *beyond* our pale that at first my two eyes were drawn to—and then my inner eye. Longing, a faint recollection like a whiff of incense or a snatch of liturgy from a past somehow grander and more true, stole my attention from what I meant it to be given to, nagged at me—then laid siege.

The forest was retrieving my imagination from being centred in my domestic rounds.

At first I only looked into the woods, only stopped by, sniffing the air in the dusky oaken nave, harkening to snuffly leaf sounds like muttered prayer coming from inside the wall of trees. As if the ages were still dark, and not only the woods, I seemed to need to make the forest familiar by transforming it into something human-made. Conveniently, I found several “doors” through the brush at the verge which opened into the woods. But still I waited. I was, I think, as anxious about what might find me as about what I might find.

I am a creature of words and compulsions. Making order, fixing, studying-up on things, taking control, and talking, talking, talking, are my mode. Straight lines of thought and text, straight rows of books and seedlings, and five-year plans are my way of seeming to defeat chaos, the ecstatic running of life at once up *and* down hill, willy-nilly, full-tilt and devil-take-the-hindmost. These habits were unregenerate, unconscious, back then. They made an illusory wall between me and life’s random, sudden embrace and then equally suddenly away again before you can return or trust it. “In the beginning was the Word” meant to me back then exactly that: Before words we weren’t fully human; after words, well . . . They are our constant companions.

It’s what Buddhists call “monkey mind,” and Catholic mystics, sin: my mind was always fully engaged with thoughts, with words about thoughts, with what I perceived to be first things, first. Of course, it was not my mind the Forest beckoned. Rather it was those *habits* of mind that had to be broken in order for my soul’s memory of First Things *also* to be fully engaged.

And so, finally, when the shade trees had thrown their creamy vestment across the upper meadow, and—this seemed essential—when my husband had gone to work, I ceased resisting the call. I tried the portals I’d found, one by one, going into the woods a ways each time, until I perceived within the forest, other rooms and passages between them, and stairs. . . and altars.

Though the precise analogies came later, my sense even at the beginning was of having entered the first church.

For some days I perched reverently on steps of stone listening, looking. As a novice longing to be admitted to the Mystery, I cleaved to the ancient authority of the Word and was ashamed of my ignorance of the names and life-ways of the plants and animals I sat amongst. In truth, I recognized very few. I deemed it a failure on my part to do them the courtesy of offering them the one sure gift of my species, which is to

honour Things (as the poet Rilke designated all that was sacred but not human) by setting them apart, by way of naming, one from the other.

And yet, even that early on in my enchantment, something in me rebelled at catechism. Attempting to name all those explosions of possibility into Life by which I was surrounded there in the Connecticut forest—and giving the attempt my whole attention—felt like . . . well, like ticking off the orders of service on the Call to Worship program rather than attending the service itself.

There I sat on a rock in a beautiful glade in the middle of May, with bronzed and coppered oak leaves and maple leaves in every shade of green opening their profusion of tiny fists overhead, and what I thought about was not that miracle but my ignorance of the names of their parts and species! And what *that* ignorance reminded me of was that at six or seven when I could read the program, though I continued to love to read, I stopped liking church.

I remembered palpably, and for the first time and with something like regret, how church had felt *before* I could read. I remembered dandruff on the collars of the dark jackets and coats in the rows in front of me, the blue hymnals lined up in the rack below; perfumes and colognes dispersed upon the air with every movement around me; rhinestone earrings, necklace pearls with rainbows on them; stained-glass light playing on people's cheeks, marbling the white walls; and the wonderful, terribly sad, wooden face of Christ that looked down on me from the front wall. And dust dancing in shafts of that party-coloured light.

I remembered being made to sit up, when the church was full, rather than lying with my head in my mother's lap. I remembered my feet going to sleep when I sat up because the front of the pew cut into my calves, and my mother's white-gloved hand on my knee when I fidgeted to wake up my feet again; the lacy frills on my white socks and the chandelier light reflecting off my black patent leather shoes; and my father's earnest upturned face, radiant in a singular way, one hand resting on the cover of the thick Concordance that was his key to "the teachings."

And there were the sound and the feeling of the rising up and sitting down of everyone at the same time and their voices speaking in unison—repeating, repeating, putting me almost to sleep. Until—oh!—the organ! That first discordant alarm, and thunderous notes occupying the whole space, driving sleep away, vibrating thrillingly in my stomach and in the pew under me; and then the choir, and the rustling and rising up again of everyone, and that collective voice, singing gloriously now, and a sensation in my chest that was as large and open

as the room—and me rising to stand on the pew tall as my mother and letting light and sound move through me and wishing the huge glorious feeling wouldn't stop. . . . And believing that feeling was God.

Before the words on the program's page and my childish thinking about them replaced the ineffable Word, I had released easily into the colours and movements and music, the repetitions that free the soul to find its own way, to *be* found.

I saw on that May day in the forest that I had lost something dear and essential when I learned to think about church, when I could dissect the service into its sequence of components rather than simply slipping mindlessly, joyously into its flow. I had lost the capacity to come to church, to Christ, truly a little child.

Similarly, I saw that learning, *knowing*, too much about the woods might spoil the joy of immersion. Setting Things apart one from the other, by naming them, might be the bane of Them as they were way unnaturally parted from their context and each other—and from me. Calling them out, when I could—robin, jay, grey squirrel, sparrow, crow, slug, worm—made them feel more distinct from, than kindred with, me. . . . also more contained and more common.

The thought afforded itself to me that it accomplished no earthly good to name the worm or microbe apart from the loam or clay they live in; that the circumstances of the worm and microbe, loam and clay—and I—would be much improved by my having, instead of only a word, an ideogram or active percept, such as Native American word-ways or Chinese characters provide, that could contain at once the worm, the microbe, the loam and the clay—and the music and the ritual of *their* particular orders of service, their shared experience, of ours together.

I catch myself muttering under my breath, reminding myself even now, because the seductive power of information is real, that the names of Things are not primarily what I need to know, as naming saints cannot claim for me the experience of their passion or suffering. Naming, when it is not undergirded by both sorts of apprehension—understanding *and* awe—is a kind of trespass, an appropriation that may cheapen rather than honour.

It was not the names, not the scientists' concordance, but the understandings, awe and experience of the context that I lacked when I began going into the woods. It was those, and abandon of myself—surrender—that I had been summoned to relearn. Learning the names *first*, while it might have signified an honourable intent, would have opened only one pathway to understanding and none at all to awe.

And so I was inclined by that heretical notion to loose, then lose, my mind. I entered the forest thereafter with as little agenda as I could muster. I tried simply to be there, to let my senses take to the woods and, with them, that portion of my mind that exists beneath and existed before reason and naming, that portion of my mind which had responded without question to hymn and organ and repeated prayer.

Enabled by a run of unseasonably balmy weather, I stretched out upon a cathedra of ledge exactly as I had on those pews when I was small, and dangled my hands and feet among ferns. I scrutinized flecks of grey and orange and yellow lichen on the outcrop under my chin as I once had the patterns in the grain of pants-polished wood. The rock and I and everything around us was bedecked with light. Gnats and midges and motes of dust danced in the down-thrown beams that danced on me. Multi-coloured mosses made tapestries of the trunks of trees. When I turned over, I found that burls and witches' brooms and the undersides of birds' nests were as Gothic modillions and vaulting bosses on a leafy ceiling.

For all that I was nearly 30, I began to feel exactly as if I were four again and diminutive in those grown-up pews, watching the adults circle each other in the aisles. As if I were learning instinctively again the stances of hosanna and supplication, the pattern of liturgy and round of sacraments, the lilt and murmur of the choir's preparations, the uses of wine and wafer and bent leg, the tilt of head and cant of spine.

This time it was sugar maples who told their sacred secrets to the virtuous oaks and me. Birches craned their long white necks to retrieve their share of light from St. Boniface's erect and estimable firs. And though it was blue jays and towhees, toadstools and chipmunks I took the text from, everything in the forest seemed as excellent, of-a-piece—and inevitable—as that spell-binding church world had seemed when I was young.

It was evident to me that the woods had summoned me while I was still salvageable, and, through the route of my rejuvenated imagination, had made a cloisters for me so that I would not be afraid but might lurk about, say on a Wednesday, when no one else was there, blithe again as the innocent child for whom everything was as fairly a play-thing as a work of God. Escaped into them from the Calvinist grown-up world of chores, I swung my arms broadly and scuffled my feet and hummed inside my head and let whim, or the will of the woods, direct my way. And sure enough the trees hummed too under their cowls of green, and coaxed me with down-thrown arms from clerestory to clerestory. The woods *knew* me.

Sometimes I felt huge, crawling into crevasses where visitors ever so much smaller than I had left nests or vomited up clumps of bones and fur. Then I made myself frightfully small, the better to eavesdrop on the breezy chatter and blustery quarrels that went on ceaselessly in the verdant dome eighty feet above me. I hoarded reliquiae—tiny knuckles and skulls, seeds and feathers and eggshells—into a shrine in a shelf of stone, and lifted punky torsos of trees to see the noses of worms retreat, and watch ants and stag beetles, sow bugs and millipedes flee Heaven's unwarranted bright.

I climbed what trees I could and put myself in the places of doves and angels. I imagined letting go, considered flinging myself on the air's mercy. The forest had tendered every other grace. Surely there would be wings!

My escape from the secular and mundane did not go unnoticed.

Although he did not chastise me, my husband did wonder aloud at the slowness with which the spring planting was being undertaken, at my evident preoccupation. Where, he asked, was my mind gone to in the middle of sentences and dinner preparations?

"Just thinking," I said aloud, or something like that. *Into the embrace of my wilder faith, into God's very body*, inside I thought.

But at night, sweating in our humid room indoors, no doubt besotted on toadstool spore and the incense of pine, I dreamed. And my dreams were possessed. In them, swaths of inexplicable cool swirled round the feet of trees and around my feet, planted with conviction. Sometimes my dreams were pagan, yet perhaps closer to the true experience of awe than our more pristinely constructed obsequies. In those dreams, the faces I had seen in tree bark came alive and the heart of the oak and my dryad heart beat to the same sap-surging rhythm. Worship turned into something less noble then. The Green Man's face, the sensations I felt upon waking were not always entirely innocent.

I'd waken, shamefaced, to the sound of trees' fingers scratching at the screens. They roused me out to the edge of the night-wood where the moon cast my shadow with theirs across the lawn. There I stood at the edge of the Creation, longing even more elementally than before—wishing for more courage, or abandon. I could feel my husband's eyes on my back. Somehow he knew not to call me in, not to say he'd seen me tempted and had no idea by what or whom.

By mid-summer noon-days, I couldn't resist the Call and made away from the sun-beaten garden for where shade and the Mystery awaited me. All afternoon I plunged through the out-flung threads of borealis

spiders, rubbed my cheeks on puffs of moss, and followed traces of scat as if they were a holy trail, until, wound up as tight as the spiralling snipe, I'd spin myself down into the leaf mulch and lie eyeball to eyeball with a spotted salamander or a maple sprout whose essential fluids and urges I knew by then that I shared—whose Creator was also mine.

Wonder was the next thing after surrender and it put a speedy and necessary end to my giddy illusions of the similarity and sympathy of the forest to me and mine. It overtook me in the season of storms.

My tendency had always been to gloat from behind glass and walls at my safety from the weather's wilder moods. Walls and roofs, like churches, keep us from the more reckless and extravagant experiences of total baptism in God's world. The Immanent is less imminent indoors and in man-shaped landscapes. But the fearless adept I had become by then must know what happened to the feathery hemlocks when the whirlwind tore at their green wings, had to hear the howling of the Arcadian choir, suffer the flagellant rain and watch the iron-willed hornbeam bend.

Rain drenched my hair and poured down my neck, thunder cracked and lightning pulsed demonically inside the roil of charcoal cloud. Still, I breasted through the wind-lashed underbrush toward my cloisters in the lovely dark and deep.

But, hark! My comfortably appointed cell was gone! There where I'd mused in the friendly, domestic wood and meditated reverently in the demure light, was pandemonium! Every limb was wracked, every leaf turned its pale back to the beating. My familiar trees shrieked and contorted, the faces in the bark grimacing. Hordes of brambles ravaged my clothes and creepers snatched angrily at my ankles. Vicious broadcasts of rain skinned my face and pummelled my shoulders; a helter-skelter of litter obscured the familiar ground. Every one of the spires of fir was a lightening rod, its rectitude a dare. There was an explosion of light and sound in the vault overhead! I smelled char, heard wreckage . . . Paradise was lost!

I fled to the granite ledge and huddled beneath a cornice. In a matter of moments I was matured and humbled. I saw that the forest's power was as unconditional as its embrace.

And then the tempest passed. As quickly as it had come, I heard it pass triumphantly down the valley. It departed just before the returning sun, leaving rain drops at the tip of every twice-cut leaf of woodfern to

scatter a covenant of tiny rainbows in my lap. Steam rose off the rumpled mulch. My virtuous forest smelt like a Pentecostal's tent after the evening service. Flattened grasses sprung gamely up again around me, limbs moaned, sighed and disentangled themselves. Then, after what had seemed to me a ravishment, the woods were peaceful once more save for a robin's sultry song. I was a wreck, but my woods lay back luxuriantly and dosed.

At that moment the forest became the Forest, and everything in it brave. As it was for Rilke after his conversion, the closer I got to Things then, the more miraculous they seemed and the less I believed I might *ever* really understand them, or It. No matter how long I might look, how attentively I might pray my way into them, these woods—apart from the presumption of my name on a piece of paper in the courthouse—were in no way “mine.” God's they were, indeed.

For a time, as if I had the choice, I avoided the Forest's discipline. I sat in the evenings on the porch by my husband's side snapping beans and devoted myself again to straight rows and jewel weed and potato beetles—or seemed to. It was a false recanting. The birch and alder at the edge of the garden watched me smugly. Their whispered condemnations traversed the slope. The tame *ping, ping* of beans in the bottom of the pot was a reproach. I lost my appetite. Night after night, ignoring twig-fingers on the sill, I twitched and fidgeted in bed, could scarcely get my breath. My husband despaired of my sanity.

Obsessed by both the fear and joy, I submitted. One oppressively hot afternoon—it was late August by then—I hiked in well beyond where I had ever gone before and high up a ridge to an undomesticated part of the Forest. The woods were uncertain of me, dubious about my return. They neither spoke nor gestured in my direction. I needed to open myself again.

The first voice I heard was water. I searched for the source, careful to tread softly, offend no Thing. I found the stream where it emerged from its occult sojourn beneath me in the rock. Its free-fall over the rubble of well-head was at first as perpetual and methodical as a clepsydra telling time. I moved a stone; the brook shifted, reset itself, and told another time. In part the water was clear, and I could see straight through to the grey-green rock; and in part it frothed white, where it took on air. I followed it downhill a ways to where it sang with an acolyte's bright falsetto over smaller stones. Then it went silent for a time in a deep pool—only its surface moved—before it poured through a narrow gap in the chalice of rock, fell clear, sloughed off its little load of granite dust and light onto a bed of matted leaves, and hid itself again in a ferny

wallow. I went back up to the source and followed it down again several times to see what might be different, what I might have missed. It was not the same twice. Nor, I partly understood, was I.

I took one palmful of the living water, raised it to the trees and drank of it.

Then, feeling that I must yet prove contrition, I part-way shinnied up a birch that had fallen and gotten hung up in the crotch of a young oak on the hill below it that rose above this little stream. I laid myself along the bone-white trunk and draped my hands over the cross-trees on either side, and I waited. I told myself I was prepared to stay as long as I must.

It was warm, even in the mottled shade, and the air was thick with the scent of green and decay. A crow called and then another; and then a hawk, circling high up somewhere above the tree tops when it could not see me, “kireed.” Off to my right and further down, a large branch tore loose, ricocheted off other branches and fell to the ground, making a soft final “thunk” which I felt more than heard. A mosquito buzzed nastily by my ear, but I reminded myself that the ones you hear don’t bite, and forced myself not to swat at it, not to move, finally to ignore it.

I had been primed for the ecstatic moment by weeks of sylvan exercises and wonder, and also by something more like longing. Now I yielded completely to desire, and clasped the whole rising and falling Life of the Forest passionately to me as it was given to me in the body of That One Tree.

Soon a delicious tremor claimed me, carrying me to a place so old and deep, a place of such pure erotic sensation, I could not remember its like. My skin slipped and skipped over my flesh like a purring cat when brushing against my legs. My eyes crossed and all the light-etched shapes around me burred and ran together.

The forest was no longer only “out there,” but also within me, in my ears and nostrils, under my skin, in my imagination, on my tongue. . . . I knew the Forest then, or almost *was* it.

The communion ecstasy passed off quickly. But for a moment—it was the first time I recall this happening to me—*I wasn’t thinking anything*. I was somewhere or in some state more elemental than thought. I was not so much aware of as *part of* the tree beneath me. My spine repeated its spine, my skin grafted to its skin . . . and then, ever so briefly, I wasn’t any more—at least not as “distinct from.” I disappeared into tree and Forest as surely as the novice disappears in prayer into the Creator.

And then I understood that the spiritual event lay *within* the physical event. And I thought: *Just so, smouldering within me, lies an ember of*

soul which Spirit might blow into flame if I were this way hungry and open.

And with that understanding, with that thought, at the *very moment* of that return of self-awareness, the experience of self-disappearance and within-ness passed off.

Though decades of lapses lay ahead, I was converted. I've said that it made all the difference. Certainly apartness, mindlessness, and ignorance have not since been quite so absolute.

I did not leave everything behind for the Forest or for the God within, but I did actively and successfully seek repetitions of that experience of Context, what theologians call "contingency." And though I knew the Forest was not a church, I did not become churched again nor try, at least not then, to assign a cause to what had happened. Yet my life and work did take another path from that time. I did put myself again, often, within the woods, and turn myself over to my senses and as intuitive a reading of them as I could learn.

I have relocated twice, have somewhat learned another kind of forest, a beaver bog, a field Andrew Wyeth might have painted, shingle beaches, clam flats, an island—these in Maine.

I have experienced that self-releasing, self-lessening response also on heaths and barrens and atop coastal cliffs. Such vast spaces seem wider open to God's perusal, more self-exposing than woods. They arouse a latent memory more like temple than church, a responses less intimate but perhaps bone-deeper than my forest retreats. I make time for these experiences—and also for silence. They are Sabbaths of a kind, reminding me that Christ took to the hills and deserts to pray.

I began immediately after my summons by woods to garden somewhat less militantly. I largely gave up monoculture, straight rows and, eventually, mechanical tillage, left some of the prettier, less prolific weeds alone when I realized that for the Forest there are no weeds. I made it a priority to be outside sometimes *without* working, without *doing* something. I swear places whisper to me, crook the finger when I forget to come. I believe that they live, even "know," in some way, that they and the creatures abiding therein communicate, that Spirit moves through and among them as through me.

Arrogance in the presence of the Creation is diminished by awe. Righteous anger, I fear, is not. Certain of our national habits and cultural behaviours are awful rather than awe-filled: the assumption of ownership; unrestricted development, even the ostensibly sustainable

kind; corporate nomadism; ceaseless wetlands filling, crop harvesting, drilling and mining—aspects of the public form of greed called “resource management”; the commodification of every Thing; egregious “takings” by private individuals, corporations and governments; pollution and energy trading; the false communion of consumerism; the specious notion that we know what is “wise use”; the unrepentant beatification of the “economy.” *It’s the Creation, stupid.* Our collective hauteur makes the private and small-group practices of humility difficult, but they are all there is, and difficult is not the same as impossible. There are geniuses and saints among us who point and live the way, apostles whose creed does not leave out the Forest.

Indifference, stemming from forgetfulness and headlongness, is the chief opponent to my effort to remain faithful to and familiar with the ever-emergent life of the woods, fields, hills, and shores, and with the ever-emergent Creator they manifest; hence the importance of regular attendance upon them, of frequent re-tuning and bending of knee.

I allow now that *after* wonder, naming *can* be a gift, a way of riveting attention and memory, and that it is a necessary key to preservation.

It occurred to me some while after my summoning by woods, how the trick was done. How it was the Forest made its demands known: We routinely imagine that God—or however we name That Which Is—summons our souls. In our best moments we trust that the bodies we are in are capable of sensing the sacred summons, as if we were forks tuned to that particular Sound. It seemed no more difficult to imagine that, if we let it, That of God within the manifest Creation might summon That of God within us. The emergent life in Things and in us might well make the same music, speak in similar tongues: of fire, air, earth, and water; and of bone and breath, skin, feather, leaf, fur and blood.

I was given to think how much greater would be our capacity to hear and to respond if we made the effort to rejoin our small bodies with the larger body of Earth, God’s Body if you will, the elements of which Were Made and of which we are made.

Oh, if we could but amplify our separate little human resonance with that One. How holy and reverberant It All would be—we all would be— in that peaceable kingdom which could come *after* surrender.

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