Finding Beauty in a Broken World
by Terry Tempest Williams

Tami Simon: So you are here at Sounds True, Terry, recording an original audio abridgment of Finding Beauty in a Broken World, and I am curious just to begin, when you approached the book, how did you consider how to abridge it? Your recording here is 1/3 of the book, something like that?

Terry Tempest Williams: Right. I love editing. And I also love reworking material, so it has been a great gift and privilege to be able to take these three sections of Finding Beauty in a Broken World--the mosaic section, the prairie dog section, and the Rwanda section—and condense each section into an hour. So in many ways it has forced me to be much clearer, to be sharper on the connections that are held, and to see how each section speaks to the next.

It is also fascinating to realize that what works on the page with the reading mind is very different from what is articulated verbally and what gets translated and what gets lost. And the ear tells you that. And with Randy Roark, such a great producer, we are constantly in eye contact and we can read each other and slash/burn this and then it is like something else that I didn’t think was strong on the page might be stronger through the voice. So it has been a wonderful re-exploration of the written word to the spoken word.

Tami Simon: I can imagine some writers who might feel, you know, I can’t leave anything out. Are you kidding me? Every word is ceremony or whatever. How am I going to leave this out? But you haven’t had that feeling at all?

Terry Tempest Williams: You know, it can be argued that it is better as an audio book…

Tami Simon: Oh interesting!

Terry Tempest Williams: …than as a physical book. There are 100 pages of prairie dog observations.

Tami Simon: That was a part that I skimmed over a little bit. [laughs]

Terry Tempest Williams: And my father when I gave him this book, I knew he would be honest with me because he is brutal. He was the one who said the dinner table, Terry, I am so glad you have a hobby. And I thought hobby?

Tami Simon: Ouch.

Terry Tempest Williams: I thought croquet, tennis. Oh, writing. He read this and said, "Terry, you know, the prairie dog section is so boring. No one is going to get through it."
And if they do, the rest of the book is such a downer that they'll be sorry they did."

Tami Simon: [laughs]

Terry Tempest Williams: So I am excited to give him the audio version. And I don't think anything is lost by not having those prairie dog notes read. I do think something is gained on the page in that it creates a meditative space for the reader to think about prairie dogs and to slow down the mind. It also opens the mind and heart for what is to come, which is Rwanda. How we do that in the audio form, I think has to do with developing empathy through the voice. So that then will carry the reader into the harrowing aspects of Rwanda.

Tami Simon: What do you mean finding empathy through the voice?

Terry Tempest Williams: We live fast. We speak fast. Oftentimes we don't listen. And I think the gift of working with Sounds True is that there is a sensibility to the realm of the spirit, to the energetic impulse that one has, what is said beyond the words. So I think what is very important to me in the production of Finding Beauty in a Broken World are the silences, the spaces. I think the spaces in between the passages are as important as the words themselves. And I think in those spaces you have contemplation, you have consideration, you have empathy.

Tami Simon: Now can you tell the person who is unfamiliar with Finding Beauty in a Broken World just briefly what each of these three sections are about and how they fit together?

Terry Tempest Williams: That was another criticism my father had, you know, what in the world do prairie dogs have to do with the Rwandan genocide? And in truth, it is also been a criticism. And Finding Beauty in a Broken World really was born out of the heat of September 11th. I was in Washington, DC, I was at the Corcoran Gallery, we were told...I was there for a press conference with seven photographers, eight photographers, and the Nature Conservancy was sponsoring an exhibit called "In Response to Place." To make a long story short, the guard came in, said the Twin Towers had been hit, the Pentagon has been struck; we have reason to believe the White House is next. Run."

And we continued talking. There was nothing in our psyche, imagination, that could accommodate what had just been said. He ran back in, said what didn't you hear? And we ran out into the street. Gridlock. You could see the black plume rising. I couldn't get home to the American West, to Utah. And in those five, six, days that I was wandering the streets of Washington, I saw how quickly the rhetoric in our country changed to one of fear and terror.

And I made a decision, Tami, as a writer and as a citizen, that I would speak out. And I did. And I heard myself saying things like, there are many forms of terror. And terrorism and environmental degradation is among them. I wrote up Op-Ed pieces for the New York Times. I was relentless. I think that was the thing that scared me the most is that my rhetoric had become as hollow and brittle as those I was opposing. I went to Maine; it was almost a year to the date of September 11th. I went down to those blessed blue waters. And call it a prayer or a plea, I said, give me one wild word and I promise I will follow. And the word I heard in my own heart, the word that the sea rolled back to me, was "mosaic."

And so this book became an exploration of mosaic. I thought mosaic was a craft. That was my thought.
Tami Simon: So when you heard the word "mosaic" it didn’t automatically...the whole book didn’t unfold at that point and make sense to you. It was more like a clue that you got.

Terry Tempest Williams: Honestly, I was disappointed. I thought, great, can we not have Mormon culture? I am relegated now to a life of crafts, which I do not do well. And I thought, I will be taking my mother’s dinner plates, breaking them, and making bad picture frames. That was my ignorance.

I took it seriously. It was a vow. And I ended up going to Italy, studying mosaics at what I thought would be a craft course. I walked in and thirty seconds later I realized I was way in over my head. It was a very sophisticated, high-level, mosaic workshop for conservators and mosaicists of...I don’t even have the words. The quality of these individuals. My teacher Luciana recognized me faster than I recognized that I was over my head and relegated me to the corner where I broke stone for the other artists for three weeks. So I learned a lot. I learned there are rules in mosaic; I learned that mosaic is not a craft but an art form, a form of integration. And it changed the way I saw the world. I remember Luciana...her last statement to us after the three weeks, she said, “Mosaics are a way of thinking about the world. Mosaics are created out of community. And when I came home...you know, we live in Castle Valley, Utah, part of the Colorado plateau, the red rock desert of Southern Utah, and I remember driving through the desert and seeing that beautiful horizon line that I have known since birth. Suddenly I saw it as a horizontal line in mosaic, and one of the rules of mosaic is that if you are creating a horizontal line, then place tesserae vertically. And I saw a vertical tesserae, and it was a prairie dog. And suddenly I saw my own ground as an ecological mosaic, broken and beautiful.

How did I get from prairie dogs to Rwanda? And what I would argue, what is the connected, how can you equate the plight of a prairie dog to the Rwandan genocide? And what I would argue, Tami, is that the extermination of a species, the extermination of a people, are predicated on the same impulses. Prejudice, cruelty, arrogance, and ignorance, circling around issues of power and justice. So that is the link. I did not know where I was going. I could never have imagined that in that moment of give me one wild word that it would have led me to Italy, that it would have allowed me to see my home differently with prairie dogs as tesserae. I could never have imagined that mosaic would have led me to create with other barefoot artists under the instruction of someone in a genocide village on the border of Rwanda and Congo. That that one wild word, mosaic, would have led me to work on a genocide memorial, creating mosaics literally out of the rubble of war.

So in many ways it is a book about faith, of following our questions, our desire.

Tami Simon: That is what I was going to ask you, because it brings forth an interesting metaphysics that we pray, we hear something, that is disappointing or incomprehensible or whatever, and I mean, you’ve followed it like this. So what does it bring up for you in terms of how this world works? Like the future was coming to you in a, you know, ten years previously before you went...I mean, how do you understand it?

Terry Tempest Williams: I don’t think I do. I think what I’ve come to appreciate, which maybe leads to understanding, is that it is about presence. It is one step at a time. It is really following that word day by day by day. And in this case of a period of eight years, I never dreamed that those bejeweled ceilings in Ravenna, looking at Apollo the sun god, transformed through time to Jesus Christ the son of god, that then in Rwanda I would be working with mosaics as genocide memorial with Louis Gakumba,
who would become our son. I mean, how can you make any sense of that except for gratitude and trust and faith that we can’t know what our path is. All we can do is make choices as opportunities arise. And initially when a Chinese-American artist, a mosaicist, who lives in Philadelphia, when she asked if I would accompany her to Rwanda, to be her scribe, in this organization called Barefoot Artists, I said no. My brother had just passed away from lymphoma, and our own family was broken. I was broken. The last thing I wanted to do was go to Rwanda, a country so familiar with death.

I also was afraid, to be honest. And I felt complicit in what had occurred. I did nothing, along with many, many other Americans. But this woman never took her eyes off me.

Tami Simon: How interesting.

Terry Tempest Williams: And I heard myself say yes. And I think on some fundamental level I knew that my own sense of humanity depended on that answer.

Tami Simon: Now you mentioned Luis who became your son. What happened there?

Terry Tempest Williams: Louis Gakumba. I met him when he was twenty-two. He was our translator, and I worked very close with him. He was my eyes, my ears, my heart. He told me that he never had met a human being that asked so many questions. I can only imagine. And we were really close. And I remember one day saying, "Louis, what are you learning through translation?" He had never translated before, even though he spoke six languages: English, French, dialects from the Congo Swahili, etc. He was working for a South African mining company, articulating metals through a microscope. And Jean Bosco, who was the coordinator from the Red Cross, knew that Louis spoke English and he said you’ve got to be my translator for these Americans who are coming. And it was amazing to watch him grow into his job as a translator. And he became really, really good. And it was clear that something else was at work then. He was very intuitive and very compassionate.

One day I said, "Louis, what are you learning as a translator?" And he said, "I’ll tell you tomorrow." And he came back the next day, jumped in to the vehicle, sat down and said, "I have my answer." I had almost forgotten the question I had asked. And then he said, "Translation is not about words. It is about hunger. And I am articulating your hunger and translating the hunger of those you are working with." And those shared hungers create an understanding." I love that.

Anyway, Louis never asked for anything. And when I was leaving that first trip, I just said, "Tell me what you desire. What is your dream as a Rwandan?" And he said, "My dream is after I have put my brothers and sisters through school, pay for their school fees, I would love to be able to get my own education." Louis had not been to school since the third grade because of the war. And to make a long story short we were able to find him a scholarship, a sponsor, which I will tell you happens to be my father. We didn’t have enough money to meet the needs of the state department. And that was set. What we couldn’t get was a visa. It is very difficult. And the state department demands that you have money and that you own land. Very few genocide survivors have either. And Louis finally stated his case powerfully what he did have. And we had been working together with the consulate. I finally called and said, "Where are we on Louis Gakumba’s visa?" This was after they said would you put your name down so that if anything goes awry, you are held accountable. I said, "Of course. Where are we on Louis’s visa?" "He picked it up yesterday." We were in Rwanda the next day, we went into the village, and to our great surprise we found ourselves in a ceremony with his
parents. And his mother turned to me and said, "I am Louis'; biological mother. You will now be his developmental mother. Educate him." And we realized we were in a transfer ceremony. And she gave us her son. And at the end I was saying, I kept thinking, maybe this isn't the right thing. How can you let your son go? And she just turned to me with Louis translating, hesitantly and said, "God loves my son more than I do."

Tami Simon: Wow.

Terry Tempest Williams: And he has been here in America for two years. He is graduating in the spring from Salt Lake Community College with an Associate Degree. He wants to go on to international relations at the University of Utah. And what I can tell you, Tami, is on May 16 we are formally adopting him as our won in the state of Wyoming. It has no bearing on his relationship with his parents in Rwanda. But it is a symbolic act, I think for us, as his American family, to recognize what is here. It will help security-wise for him, if he finds himself back in Rwanda during another war. God help us that that won't happen. But we just felt on many levels both, symbolic and spiritual and practical, that this was a wonderful thing to do. A reconfiguration of family. A mosaic. No one could have been surprised than me. We've been childless by choice. And suddenly after thirty-five years of marriage we find ourselves with the most beautiful son imaginable.

Tami Simon: Now you know, finding beauty, of course, I think it is easy for someone to think of how to find beauty in a mosaic created by an artist…but the extinction of prairie dogs and the genocide in Rwanda. I am curious what eyes you had to look through to find beauty in these situations?

Terry Tempest Williams: That is a great question.

You know, a good friend of mine said, "You are married to sorrow." And I looked to him and I said, "I am not married to sorrow. I just choose not to look away." And I think there is deep beauty in not averting our gaze, no matter how hard it is, no matter how heartbreaking it can be. You know, watching prairie dogs shot, standing before the mass grave of 30,000 human beings that were murdered by hand by Hutu extremists with farm tools like machetes and hoes. Again, I think it is about presence, bearing witness. I used to think bearing witness was a passive act. I don't believe that anymore. I think that when we are present, when we bear witness, when we do not divert our gaze, something is revealed. The very marrow of life. We change. A transformation occurs. A consciousness shift.

I think that when we are fully present, we witness something, our consciousness shift, and our actions reflect that shift. And we behave differently. The prairie dogs, when was I was doing observations, my task as a scribe was to write down what I saw in fifteen minute intervals. Something nothing went on for a long, long time. And then suddenly this whole world opened up…and how can you not find beauty when watching what prairie dogs do? We had to watch their home burrows first thing in the morning, so we had to be there probably around 5:30, a half an hour before the sun would rise in the summer. The prairie dogs would come up, they would face the rising son, and for thirty minutes they would press their palms together in utter and absolute stillness. And then they would go on about their day. And then thirty minutes or so before the sun would set, they would return to their home burrows, they would face West, again palms pressed together in utter stillness, and then retreat underground. Beauty. Even in a broken world. The women in Rwanda, eyes turned inward, a suffering so deep and severe I could not comprehend what they still hold having watched their children butchered before them. And yet, those women are caring for other children. Those women are working in the fields. 50 percent of
Parliament in Rwanda is women. Making mosaics. Taking that which is broken and creating something whole. There is such deep beauty in that. Eyes turned inward that suddenly become, or over time I should say, become eyes turned outward.

So I think at the root of any joy, there are those seeds of suffering. It is what makes us human. It is what allows us to fully embrace our lives, share it with other.

Tami Simon: I can imagine though, someone maybe more like me who would look at something like this extinction of the prairie dogs or the genocide in Rwanda or other atrocities and at a certain point go into like a trauma response, if you will. And being like, yeah, I know there is beauty in that, but I am turning away because this hurts too much.

Terry Tempest Williams: And I did. In the sense that when I came home…I mean, I didn’t have the luxury to turn away when we were there because we were there to do work as community. And I think that is the other thing that I learned, is that there is such dignity in work. And really, that is my definition of faith. I remember my great-grandmother, who is Mormon, said to me, "Faith without work is dead." And I think what I learned through working in Rwanda together—Hutu, Tutsi, Rwandans, Americans—is that there is great faith in doing work together. You don’t know what the outcome is going to be, but you are in relationship. And there is something very creative that is happening. When I came home, that is when my trauma emerged. It was almost like delayed PTSD. And I went through nothing. I was a privileged American being there. So it is all relative. But I realized how fully I had changed when I came back to Jackson Hole, my husband and I were asleep in this cabin, it was fall. I had heard elk bugle my entire like as a Westerner, and an elk starting bugling a dawn, and I rose in an absolute sweat thinking it…I heard it as a human scream. That was not in my frame of reference prior to Rwanda.

Tami Simon: So you had a commitment, though, that you were going to go through this process of bearing witness to create something.

Terry Tempest Williams: I went to serve Lily, as her scribe. And I was part of a team. And we were there to help build this genocide memorial, so that was our work. In the meantime, we were working with children. We were painting the houses. You know, we were really, really busy, all the time. But at night, the only thing that separated me from my absolute terror of sensing those ghosts of what had gone on in the very room I was sleeping, you know, we were right next to the prison where the prisoners, the genociders, were walking by every single day in their pink suits. The only thing separating me from me and my own madness and absolute terror was a green mosquito net that was barely hanging. So I am not telling you the truth if I say that I wasn’t scared all the time. And again, we were perfectly safe. There was no war. It was the aftermath of war. The ghosts, the stories, the bones, always the bones, always the bones. You realized in Rwanda that there was no one square inch of that country that had not been bled on or bled over, and you felt that every single minute. Except when you were with the children. And it was Louis who said, "You cannot rob the children of their joy." I mean, they would be singing, they would be dancing, and yet you know that those children are suffering, that they are hungry, that they are sick, that many of them have HIV. So it is this total paradox that you are living with at such a heightened state.

Tami Simon: Now it is interesting to me as you are talking, you are describing that in the midst of terror you were able by not turning away to see the beauty. And yet one of our acquiring editors here at Sounds True, she said to me, I was reading an interview someplace else with Terry Tempest Williams and there is this great quote you should ask
her about, "Beauty is the beginning of terror." So since we are talking about mosaics, I am sure it can go both ways, but looking at it in that direction, here you are looking at something beautiful...and I don't know if you remember saying this...

Terry Tempest Williams: Rilke. It is a quote from Rilke. And I think about that a lot, because there were times...you know how it is, when you are in the midst of such a deep connection or a conversation or whether it is watching the prairie dog pups emerge and suckling from their mother's breasts and you know communal nursing. And you think, this is so exquisite that your heart aches. Or I remember—and again this does not speak well of me—but after I learned how to say "hello" and "thank you" in Rwanda, the next thing I learned was "please move back." I was terrified I was going to get sick. I was terrified I was going to get some horrible disease from the children. I mean, it is the American obsession with hygiene, you know? And by the time I left Rwanda, I did not have enough arms to hold all those children. I mean, what happened? What is that shift? And I think it has to do with beauty, which is love, which is presence, which is seeing the world beyond yourself, beyond yourself and your own selfish concern. I mean, the truth be told, we were the ones that received the gifts, not the village. And in that sense, it is very selfish.

Tami Simon: I guess when I heard that quote—"Beauty is the beginning of terror."—additionally to what you are saying, what I associated with it was some idea that in times of great beauty there is some type of dissolving of our self boundaries in a way.

Terry Tempest Williams: Isn't that interesting.

Tami Simon: You know, the terror of we are not in control anymore, the vastness of the situation, that kind of thing.

Terry Tempest Williams: I love that. You know, you also made me think about there are "terror" and "tear." Beauty is the beginning of tearing the fabric of what you've known. There is a beautiful artist named Margaret Card, and she created this wonderful canvas that she beaded, and this beaded fabric is torn and you see this beautiful galaxy that is exposed. And she calls it "Tasting Stars." And I think there is something to what you are saying about that.

Tami Simon: And in the context of this conversation, in a world where we find the amount of brokenness that we find, what do you think the role of the artist is? And is it different today than maybe it was at a different time in history? Or do you think that the artist always performs this kind of function of showing beauty and brokenness? Or do you think that in our world today there is a kind of special mandate for artists?

Terry Tempest Williams: What a good question. You know, I can only speak personally. I don't know anything, and I have never been more aware of that than in writing this book. And what I realized is that whatever I thought I knew was shattered, whatever I anticipated never happened, and what I never anticipated did, in full range. So again it goes back in very simple terms that it's simply a witnessing. A sharing of what I saw and what I felt and what I learned. And I think what I learned through that one wild word is that finding beauty in a broken world is creating beauty in the world we find. And when Lily and I were standing on the edge of that mass grave and I turned to her and said, "What do we do?" She just looked straight ahead and said, "I don't know, but we will do something."

So in the end it's what is the action, what is our commitment to act, what are we...
going to create both individually and together in the name of community. And I think that is the exploration in this book. Is that the role of the artist? Perhaps. As a writer, it is what you and I were talking about before; it is for me living in the heart of experience. Having the guts the follow where you are led. And being crazy enough to stay, to stay in that level of discomfort and come home. And reflect and pick up your pencil and start moving it across the paper and see what comes.

Tami Simon: Now I read in some of the interviews with you online last night that when you sit at your writing desk that you light a candle, for whatever reason I don’t know how many interviews cites this fact, but part of what I thought was, why is this so remarkable? Why do people think it is so remarkable? Yet here I am talking about it myself. I find it remarkable too.

Terry Tempest Williams: I love about Sounds True that the minute I walked into the studio there were candles lit everywhere. And I said to Randy and Aron, "This is a cared for space." To me when you light a candle, you acknowledge that transformation has occurred. A spark has been lit. And for me when I sit down to write, it is acknowledging that I am now in a different space—both physically and mentally. And I also have a glass or a bowl of water, which I have mentioned. So it can be said that then if the candle falls over on the paper, I can dowse it, but that is not it. It is that how many days, weeks, go by where you are sitting at your desk and nothing happens. Well, something is happening. The water is drawing down in the act of evaporation, and I find that very encouraging.

Tami Simon: So what I am curious about is here you are, you are lighting a candle, you have this water, and you have faith in something or other that is going to happen through you? I mean, how do you understand the process of language and creation coming through you, because you have such a unique way of seeing the world? And I am curious if you turn that unique way of seeing outward onto your actual process as a writer, what that looks like.

Terry Tempest Williams: I mean, on one hand writing is really blue collar work. You show up, it is physical labor; you are working with your hands, certainly in conjunction with your mind. That is part of it. I think writing is about labor. And I often...my father and I and my brothers, we always laugh a lot. And they go, you are not a laborer. Because they work in construction and it is shovel and it is trench and it is dirt. And I think it is similar. You know, they are creating gas lines, you know, water lines.

Tami Simon: You are explaining to me why I don’t like writing that much. [laughs] I would rather speak. It doesn’t seem anywhere like the kind of labor...

Terry Tempest Williams: Writing...you are creating infrastructure. I think for community. So I think it is a very physical act. You show up and you have a task. On the other hand, writing is also a spiritual practice for me. It is how I come to know the world. It is how I make peace with my own contradictory nature. If I am honest, it is about creating community. And it is trying to make sense of the world that at times makes no sense at all. So that is the candle...that I want to attentive to what comes. And I hope as a writer that I have enough courage to write what I may not dare speak. And I love Helene Cixous, she is a French writer, and she says, "As women, we must learn to speak the language women speak when there is no one there to correct us." So that is in my mind. But I think in the end the writing that I admire most has to do with story, being a storyteller. Story bypasses rhetoric and pierces the heart, and you feel it. And again, I think that is most powerfully conveyed through the human voice. And that is one of the privileges and pleasures of working with Sounds True...is you really get to embody the storyteller as you
speak the words rather than just write them on the page.

Tami Simon: Now you said, "If I were honest, writing is about creating community." So I am curious about two parts of that. First of all, how do you see that your writing creates community? And then second, why is that an edgy thing to say?

Terry Tempest Williams: You are such a good listener. I think you have to understand where I come from. I come out of a Mormon community, and in many ways every time I speak I think I am breaking set from the community that I came from, the community that I was a part of, because in my generation in many ways, women, at least as I understood it, women did not speak truth to power. You certainly didn’t question the status quo. And it feels...so often when I am writing I am questioning the status quo. I am addressing an issue that has to do with power and politics, whether it is oil and gas leases in Canyonlands or prairie dogs. So there is that.

Because in writing to create community I am also severing aspects of community. I think the irony as a writer is in order to create community you are pulled out of community to do the writing. Because ultimately writing is a solitary act.

Tami Simon: You are a solitary laborer.

Terry Tempest Williams: And it is presumptuous to think that you can create community. You don’t know. I have never seen anyone read one of my books. I have no idea. But I know the writers who have brought me into a sense of community, that when I am reading them in the margins I write "yes, thank you, exactly." And then there were times when I just thought, is anyone else thinking this? Am I the only one that cares about this idea? So I think writers make us feel less lonely in the world. And I would hope that my writing can do the same for others, as other writers have done for me. Rachel Carson. Virginia Woolf. Denise Levertov. Wallace Stegner. Coetzee. I could go on and one about all the writers who have changed and altered and expanded my life.

Tami Simon: You know, I want to circle back to something. You said, "This friend of mine says I am addicted to sorrow." And you said, "No, that is not true. I am just willing to kind of stick with it." And in the meditation tradition in which I have been trained, there are these three words. Never turn away. Never turn away. And so as you were talking about that, I thought about those three words. Never turn away. And the question that emerged for me is for you, how do you do that?

Terry Tempest Williams: How do you not turn away?

Tami Simon: Yeah.

Terry Tempest Williams: Such a great question. The word that comes back to my mind again and again is being present. If you are present, then there is no past, as you well know. And there is no future. You are there. And whether it is being with a family member who is dying, you are present with them. You are breathing. And in that breathing there is this commitment and communion to that breath. Presence. And you don’t look away. It is this shared gaze. My friend’s dog just passed away on Monday. And she asked if I would come as she was about to put her down, and I walked in and there was
Lynn and there was Kola. And we just knelt down with Kola and we just started breathing. You are present. And I think when you are present, fear is still there, but you are moving with it. You are breathing with it. It is the only way I can describe it. I think we go where we are called. And for one reason or another I was called to Rwanda. I have felt a deep communion with prairie dogs since I have a memory, because my family shot them. And I kept thinking, why? And so there was an affinity there.

So again that word "empathy." And when I think about the times in my life when I have had regrets, it is never when I stayed. It is always when I left. It is never what I did so much as what I didn't do. So I think it that desire to be fully present, and having both the curiosity and the mind to try and understand the mysteries that surround us, that we wear as loose clothing in our lives.

Tami Simon: Now this conversation series that we are having is called Insights at the edge, and the thing I am curious about is, we will start with your work in the world, your writing, what the current edge is for you? This moment?

Terry Tempest Williams: I was nervous for our conversation. You know? That is an edge. I think whenever you enter truth with another person, I hope that I can be present and be honest in that expression. There is an edge to the adult adoption that we are about to enter on April 16. How is that going to change things? You know, to me this is a bigger commitment than my marriage to Brook. We've been married thirty-five years. I always know with Brook that we can get divorced. You know? It is a daily commitment. I can't imagine that with a child, even though Louis is not a child but an adult. But this is a huge commitment, and it scares me. So that is the edge that I am standing on right now. Is...I am about to become a mother, and that has always terrified me. And so it is a legal term. Will he call me mom? I've said, "just call me Terry." So it is these things that I think are the private things that we hold in our hearts and don't really talk about. That's an edge.

I don't know writing wise where I am going next. I never do. I wait for a question that obsesses me and keeps me up at night. I am interested in women. My mother and grandmother have been gone for twenty years, and I think it is time for me to go back into the place of the feminine. And I can feel that...I think that is where I want to go next, I think is really explore what the feminine is. Because I think that we have to go into...I am interested in what we know as women. And I need to go back into that place and rediscover what does it mean to be a mother now. Why have I been afraid of it? And I've always felt, you don't have to give birth physically to children to have them be your children. So there are a lot of questions that I am thinking about personally.

I am interested in texts, the texts that I have been reading by women, and what they hold. I have been reading a lot of Helene Cixous' Promethea about love. And what fuels us. Again, what we turn away from. Again, Julia Kristeva. Powerful women. A book called The Problem with Africa. So I am interested in women's voices right now, and maybe because I want to return to my own deeper feminine.

Tami Simon: And what might that mean to you? Your own deeper feminine?

Terry Tempest Williams: I don't know. I don't know. I think after the Bush and Cheney era, I am just so tired of the politics of oil and gas and I mean how many forests I have killed by what I've written, how many endless reams of paper I have used in polemics. So I want just in the same way that I was desperate to retrieve my poetry, I think now I really want to explore what do we have to give as women to this next
era—both politically as well as spiritually? Climate change? What is our role of women as we think about where we are heading as a people on a planet that is heating up? I am just exploring. So I really don’t know. That is the honest answer. But there are clues when I am thinking about what I am reading and what I am thinking about. I am my own struggle. It is always tied to the questions that keep me up at night.

Tami Simon: Yes.

Terry Tempest Williams: How about you? Do you mind me asking? I mean what edge are you standing on?

Tami Simon: Being fully myself, especially in public, without worrying about the echo.

Terry Tempest Williams: And have you not always been?

Tami Simon: I haven’t been that public. I have sort of hid behind spiritual teachers and people like you. So, coming forward and being able to do it without any concern of that internet echo, any echo, because then I am spending my time looking at myself through other people’s eyes instead of just being.

Terry Tempest Williams: I think that is what is being asked of each of us right now. Don’t you? Of becoming really fully who we are so that we can be of use. And it is scary. But I think the risk is worth it. And what do we lose and what do we sacrifice if we are not fully present, fully engaged, fully embracing who we are.

Tami Simon: Exactly. Thank you, Terry.

Terry Tempest Williams: Thank you so much. It has just been wonderful. Thank you for your capacity to listen so exquisitely.

Tami Simon: Thank you for your capacity to articulate and dream and follow the thread that you receive.