DAILYGOOD
News that Inspires

In the Midst of Winter, an Invincible Summer
by Tracy Cochran

Photograph by Benjamin Baláz
My daughter Alex once put her bike out on our Brooklyn street for any stranger to take. She made a sign saying “Free bike! Please enjoy!” in purple crayon, adding a bold smiley face. I helped her carry the bike down the steep steps of our brownstone and place it under the streetlight, the sign taped to the seat.

Lying in bed that night, her face shone with happy anticipation. Things appeared and disappeared on the street all the time, but it was different being part of it. In a way, this was what I wanted her to understand: meaning is an action; we make meaning through our actions. You exist in a web of life: this was the message. You are part of nature and part of the human community. And when you give, you receive something.

A good friend of mine once told me that her father took her and the other kids in the family to Coney Island to look at the rides through a fence. To an adult, observing other people riding the Cyclone or the Wonder Wheel may have seemed a clever money-saving move, almost as good as the real thing, even preferable: people don’t die watching roller coasters. To the children, of course, it wasn’t even close.

Some truths must be lived. I knew this, even though I spent a lot of time reading and thinking about life. The aspiration, beyond recycling a little purple bike with training wheels that was outgrown, was to kindle something in Alex: an interest in the great exchange that is always happening in life, a sense of being part of it. I could barely find words for it, and I was far from being a role model of engagement. I was an over-thinker, an observer. The hope was that if all the elements came together, the action in the street, the larger idea, there might be fire.

The next morning Alex clambered down the steps from her loft bed and flung open the drapes of the big windows in the living room. She whirled around, her face as radiant as if it was Christmas morning. The bike was gone! We marveled together, although we were marveling at different things. I was marveling at having given birth to a child who seemed to take joy in giving without knowing who might benefit, who seemed to delight in being part of the dance of life. Incredibly, in spite of own doubts and major flaws, I seemed to have pulled off something amazing.

“Now, when do I get something back?” she asked, her big eyes without guile. I had no answer. It was as if a curtain was drawn back, revealing a blank wall. Alex was asking profound questions, and I shared them: is the universe benevolent? How can we begin to understand our relationship to this life?

“Be patient with all that is unsolved in your heart,” writes Rilke. “And try to love the

questions themselves. Do not seek the answers, which cannot be given to you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions."

The thinking mind hates this kind of suggestion. It wants to know. It wants to lift itself up above our flowing, changing, moment-by-moment experience, the world of the body and its perceptions and feelings. It wants us to be someone, and it wants life to be predictable and within our control. But our Brooklyn neighborhood gentrified, and our brownstone sold to a Wall Street investor and his young wife, who brought an architect into our apartment to discuss massive renovations as I sat at my desk, trying to work.

Photograph by Susornpol Joe Watanachote

We moved to northern Westchester. Alexandra grieved for the life and diversity of Brooklyn, withdrawing into the world of Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings, spending hours online with friends who shared her interests. I made a stab at gardening, hoping to soothe and ground us in our new life, to bring a happy little kid back to me by bringing her in touch with the earth.

Stab is the correct word for the effort I made, brief and blunt. Only if a person were blind and drunk and working without tools could they get muddier than I even when I was just transplanting a few flowers. Reluctantly, Alex joined me a few times, wandering outside wearing rubber boots and pajama bottoms, trailing a trowel as if she were joining a chain gang.

Alex complained that everything about the digging and the planting went slowly. I told her that the work and the pace were the same for our earliest ancestors, but I knew this couldn't be true. They would have starved if they had farmed this way. Alex said she didn't like pretending we were "back in ancestral times." I didn't blame her. We were not our ancestors and we couldn't know what they knew. There are truths that cannot be known by outside observation, by superficial efforts, by quick stabs. What drove me to keep trying to teach what I didn't understand? I wanted Alex to feel welcome on the earth. I wanted to teach her to be strong and have hope, but it seemed we were all being swept along passively by time and circumstance.

"Hope is not a form of guarantee," writes the critic John Berger. "It's a form of energy, and very frequently that energy is strongest in circumstances that are very dark."

Within the year, a super storm flooded the downstairs and washed the garden beds away. I ran around the house in the middle of the night, on my way to the basement to save boxes of pictures and diplomas and other items. The seemingly solid ground turned to liquid mud. Some truths can only be experienced: the ground giving way beneath our feet is one.

Newgrange. Photograph by young shanahan

Life is always in movement and always uncertain. Yet deeper truths are revealed when we need them; doors open from the inside. I learned this one December, in the international arrival terminal of JFK airport in New York. It had been a long and difficult trip, and I pictured snuggling safely into the car and soon my own warm bed, a returning warrior, battered but enriched by my experiences. I reached my hand into the bag and that bubble

burst. Somewhere between the baggage claim and the car, my wallet had disappeared.

I took everything out of my bag and examined the interior, and then I did it again, unwilling to accept the gaping absence of something that felt so essential to my sense of security. I cycled through the expected reactions: panic and disbelief, the desperate hope that some honest citizen had turned the wallet in, then rage and self-blame about little things, that psychic cutting technique we use to ward off the greater pain of feeling vulnerable. I picked on little details. Why did I stand in such a crowded place to retrieve my suitcase? Why didn't I wait?

Home from the airport, after a flurry of phone calls, I lay in bed in the dark, wrestling with the dark angel of the deeper why. Why was I so careless? A chorus of witch-like voices chimed in: you've always been this way. I felt like a blind and wounded giant lurching around breaking things inside. Why hadn't I gone ahead and bought that ridiculously expensive sweater or that expensive scotch or that age-reversing face cream I saw in the duty-free shop? It would have been better than just losing all that money to dark unseen forces, wouldn't it? I was in no state to remember the night I had urged Alex to give her little purple bike to the universe, but the contrast was crazy. How could I trust in the goodness of life?

In spite of all of our care and precaution, life is unpredictable and subject to change. Our sense of security and control is mostly an illusion. No matter how hard we try to be safe and achieve and become someone in this world, life is uncertainty, and we are wavering creatures. There will be unexpected changes at the last moment. There will be loss.

"Security is mostly a superstition," writes Helen Keller. "It does not exist in nature nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing."

I lost the wallet during the darkest time of year in the Northern Hemisphere, days before the Winter Solstice, the day when the North Pole is tilted farthest from the sun. Our ancient ancestors noted that darkest day, watching the stars and noticing the shortening days, patiently abiding until one day, they noticed a shift: the darkest day was followed by a little more light.

In Newgrange, in the east of Ireland, there is a mysterious Neolithic monument, a huge circular mound with a passageway and interior chambers. Tests reveal that it was built in 3200 B.C.E., which makes it older than the pyramids in Giza and older than Stonehenge. No one can say exactly what it is for, a tomb, a place of rituals. But here is where it gets extraordinary: it was built so that the light of the rising sun on the Winter Solstice, on December 21, floods the chamber. Just as the sun rises, sunlight pours through an opening above the main entrance, shining along the passage and illuminating a carving of a triple spiral on the front wall.

I have often imagined how it must have been to gather in that chamber five thousand years ago, how dark it must have been before dawn in a world lit only by fire. Why did these ancient ancestors undertake such a vast and exacting project? Some researchers speculate that they were ritually capturing the sun on the shortest day, as if they were children capable of little more than magical thinking. But the engineering and astronomy required to build Newgrange refutes this. It is a monument to attention and faith.

Lying in bed the night of the wallet, finally exhausted from all my thinking, I thought about this extraordinary feat. It seemed amazing to me that these ancient people could stay

open and observing that way in all weather, going on being with life without rushing to conclusion. Left to its own devices, the ordinary thinking mind tends towards pessimism. The light will never return, it tells us; it is always darkest before it is pitch black: that kind of grim prediction.

A shift occurs when the thinking mind emerges from its self-enclosed isolation and re-enters the world through the perceptions and feelings of the body. Most of the time we modern people treat the body as if it is little more than a mute animal that carries us around. We dress it and feed it and sometimes buy expensive moisturizer for the poor thing but mostly it disappoints us, even as it tries to serve us as loyally as a good dog.

The trip that landed me in JFK had been a visit to my now grown daughter Alex, educated, married, and living in England. How do these changes happen? Often during the trip, I looked at my jet-lagged face in the mirror, bewildered by what I saw: who was this older-looking woman with the vaguely worried look in her eyes? Most of us feel we are not enough somehow, not quick enough or somehow substantial enough. Life sweeps us along, and it often seems there is no solid ground.
In Buddhism, a definition of faith is the ability to keep our hearts open in the darkness of the unknown. The root of the word patience is a Latin verb for “suffer,” which in the ancient sense meant to hold, not to grasp but to bear, to tolerate without pushing away. Being patient doesn’t mean being passive. It means being attentive, willing to be available to what is happening, going on seeing, noticing how things change. When we aren’t wishing for something to be over, or when we aren’t freezing around an idea about what it is we are seeing, we see and hear more. We notice that nature has cycles, that each day is not the same length and quality, and that darkness passes.

We don’t have the same close connection to nature that our ancient ancestors had but we have the same bodies and hearts and minds, the same capacity for attention with faith. The Buddha described the experience of enlightenment in many different ways, including being forgiven our debts and experiencing the breaking of a fever. A Zen master once explained that enlightenment happens in small moments, many times. These moments tend to come when we stop fighting reality, when we relax and open. This state of opening is also called liberation, and it often comes in the midst of what we think of as failure and crushing disappointment.

We each find the deeper truths in our time and own way. We find them as we learn to observe from the inside. In England, my daughter and her husband drove me to visit the sets of the Harry Potter films. It was a pilgrimage to a modern Newgrange, a monument to the work that showed young Alex the magical potential of life, the way the light gets in no matter how dark. J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, once told a graduating class of Harvard that failure was the bedrock upon which she built her real life. Failing utterly by worldly standards granted her the freedom to strip her life down to the essentials, to tell the story of a lonely boy who, unknown to himself, was really a wizard.

Lying in bed that night, I remembered that the Buddha also believed he was a failure. Alone on a riverbank, split off from his yogi brothers, he broke his vows and took food offered by a young woman. Nourished by this simple act of kindness, he remembered a simple time from childhood. He had sat alone under a rose apple tree, watching his father and other men from his village plow the fields for spring planting. Peaceful and happy, with no adults bothering him, he could be open and attentive to life as it flowed around him.

“Heaven and Earth give themselves,” teaches the twentieth-century Japanese Zen master Kodo Sawaki. “Air, water, plants, animals, and humans give themselves to each other. It is in this giving-themselves-to each-other that we actually live.”

The boy Buddha also saw insect families tossed about by the plowing and felt a pang of compassion. He took this impression of equanimity, of being open to the flow of life, to joy and sorrow and all that arises, under the Bodhi tree. This memory of being kind and humble and selfless, just a little kid sitting under a tree, became the bedrock of his enlightenment.

At about 1 a.m. on the night I lost my wallet, the iPhone on the bedside table lit up. A band of light flashed across the screen in the dark, a message from my daughter in England. Mom, I’m so sorry this happened to you. In the light of day and in smooth times, such a message would be no big deal, nice words. But that night it was a candle in the darkness. The eye barely registers the light of a candle in broad daylight but on a dark night it can be seen a long way, shining out as a reminder that there was still warmth and benevolence in the world, the possibility of companionship and kindness here in the midst of it all.

I felt a little blip of love and gratitude. I thanked her and another little message flashed back. It was a trifling exchange, complete with emoticons, yet it felt wiser and more alive than the dire and dramatic racket in my head. Once when she was younger, I told my daughter that it was more important to be kind than to be right. Now I realized that kindness is also wise.

Lying in bed in the dark, watching my iPhone light up, it dawned on me that the meaning of life, the real purpose of our presence here, is being attentive, being willing to go on seeing and keeping our hearts open—not just for our sake but for the sake of others. We make ourselves available to life, opening our hearts to the passing flow of it, knowing we will blunder and get it wrong but sometimes right. We do this even knowing that those hearts will inevitably break because life is uncertainty and change and loss. But sometimes when we are open, light floods the darkest chamber.

“In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there’s something stronger, something better, pushing right back.” – Albert Camus ♦