

Wild Faith by Geneen Marie Haugen

At winter twilight in canyon country, deer materialize and vanish at dusk and dawn, as if they step through a lavender veil between worlds. One moment, the field reveals only dark boulders and shadowed clumps of chamisa; the next moment, the shadows move, shape-shifting into leggy, soft-lipped foragers. And then, they shape-shift again and are gone, invisible, as if traveling an unseen bridge from one dimension to another. Are they embodied? Are they ghosts? Are they pale unicorns reminding us of an older world? A musky scent lingers in the air, along with a faint sound of hooves clambering up the nearby slickrock.

It is a magical, marvel-filled time of day and season, when what we regard as reality seems to quiver, and unknown possibilities open like unexplored canyons.

Sometimes the nearly unbearable beauty of the world overwhelms me. I tremble with a felt-sense that the magnificence that saturates the cosmos surely reflects the possibility, even now, of human magnificence. And then, as if I've crossed an invisible bridge to a waypoint of despair, I wonder how the mysterious, self-organizing wild Earth can peacefully co-exist with the absurdities and catastrophes of human invention.

How do we hold both the magnificence and tragedy of the world, as if we stand at a threshold with Janus, the Roman god of beginnings and endings, looking in two directions? But our opposing directions are not simply the beginnings and endings—or past and future—that are familiar to Janus, but rather, seemingly oppositional realities, like a uranium mine juxtaposed with an Edenic pool beneath a waterfall.

Recently, the Washington Post ran an opinion piece entitled, “We don’t need to save endangered species. Extinction is part of evolution.” The writer earnestly presents the view that life will continue to evolve and maybe even flourish despite human-assisted extinctions of other species. Sometime later, I received an email about a “Remembrance Day for Lost Species” from a decidedly different publication, the Dark Mountain blog. I am all for remembering lost ones, like vanished ancestors I never knew. But it is abstract, not embodied, remembering. It’s an idea of grief more than lived grief, the kind that wracks the body and leaves indelible scars.

The pair of essays conjure up spectral images of creatures coming and going (mostly going), back and forth across Rumi’s “doorsill where the two worlds touch”—or moving in and out of what evolutionary cosmologist Brian Swimme calls the “all-nourishing abyss” where generative possibilities are both constantly emerging and being re-absorbed.

My own imagination and psycho-spiritual well-being are sometimes bolstered by

big-picture glimpses of the emergence and continual unfolding of the universe. In our time of turbulence and uncertainty, pondering the cosmic flow somehow cools my burning mind and heart, at least for moments. But what about us fragile-bodied human beings, here and now, in our moment? What of the future for our grandchildren, and their grandchildren when everything we were taught to trust is seemingly falling apart around us? Our democracy, our alleged moral compass, and inculcated values. Our often cranky but generally reliable weather. How does a big picture view comfort us when so much seems in peril? How do we allow ourselves to feel the enormity of our time without cracking up?

I live at the edge of the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument in Utah, which was recently desecrated on paper by an Executive Order to shrink the boundaries, reducing the size of the monument by about half, along with an even more radical shrinkage of Bears Ears National Monument a hundred miles or so to the east. After following the despair-and anger-inducing news via the internet, I went out for a small pilgrimage on the land, toward a place where spring waters run against the temple walls of the monument. Singing the names of ponderosa and basalt, I padded along a small wash, praising the wild ones of the holy Earth in a spontaneous, off key, free-voiced love song to the place where I find solace and sustenance, inspiration and undomesticated beauty.

I confess to having a kind of wild faith in the cosmic experiment that brought forth the universe, the Earth, biosphere, human beings, violins, and Hubble from our origins in the dark heart of stars. Yet, in these unstable and challenging times, sometimes I feel entirely lost, without my usual psycho-spiritual compass. I can't find the mythos, can't find the cosmic joke. Then, sometimes with great effort, I remind myself of the tremendous shape-shifting moments of the universe, when stress reigned and life took a new direction. My particular go-to is our old friend and ancestor, the prokaryote.

Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme tell us that, in the earliest stages of life on Earth, the micro-organisms called prokaryotes flourished by feeding on the chemical soup of the super-heated, turbulent Earth. As the turbulence slowed, an expanding population of prokaryotes faced a mass starvation. Mutations occurred, and some prokaryotes learned to feast on the dead bodies of their kin.

Then, in what Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry call "one of the greatest acts of creativity in the four billion years of the living Earth," prokaryotes learned to capture photons of light from the sun. In other words, they learned to use their own bodies to create photosynthesis, to feed on the light of the nearest star. The prokaryotes accomplished this, write Swimme and Berry, "without a brain, without eyes, without hands, without blueprints, without foresight, without reflexive consciousness."

Our own moment in the unfolding story of life may or may not be as extreme as the near-extinction of prokaryotes, but certainly we are a species in great stress—stress that sends shockwaves out to all other earthly life. Stress, or disequilibrium, is a necessary prelude to change. Unlike prokaryotes, we have brains, eyes, hands, reflexive consciousness and forward-seeing imagination. Human beings have the extraordinary—and apparently unique to our species—capacity to envision and create radically alternate futures.

Stories about the possibilities of human transformation or the potential of species-wide change or evolution are not stories we encounter in the daily media. Even the tiniest seed of an idea that human beings might not be finished with our own evolution is sorely missing from public discourse, and not only because of evolution-deniers. It's tacitly assumed that human beings have already achieved the pinnacle of our evolutionary and developmental possibilities, even as we continue to discover the world changing "around" us. If it is true that we have topped out on our possibilities for greater consciousness of who we are and what our place is in the larger Earth community (and cosmos), it's a wonder we are not all throwing ourselves off of cliffs and bridges, or numbing ourselves with opioids and alcohol.

But if stress is a necessary prelude to individual or collective change, it is noteworthy that so many people feel disoriented, anxious, or troubled, some to the point of outrage, many to despair. Would we be so disturbed if we could not imagine alternatives to our moment? There is a significant difference, for many thoughtful people, between where we find ourselves and what we can imagine, however faintly.

Einstein is thought to have said something to the effect that a problem cannot be solved in the same level of consciousness that created it. He once wrote that "a new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive and move toward higher levels."

In our tumultuous time, what evidence do we have that the consciousness or worldview that underlies our unraveling world is in any process of change? Does the sixth mass extinction include an extinction of paradigms or beliefs? Is the new world that Arundhati Roy hears coming already so close that we, like Roy, could "hear her breathing" if we listen on a quiet day?

Is there a new mode of consciousness growing through the outworn husk of the old? I don't know. But I note with gratitude and fascination some dramatic changes in our culture in recent years:

- Greater acceptance and support of LGBTIQ people and gender issues, as seen in marriage equality and the stunning collective awakening about sexual power dynamics and abuse.
- Advocacy for those who have been historically marginalized as expressed in the Black Lives Matter movement, the push for immigration law reform, and the Women's March.
- Acceptance of consciousness exploration via legalization of cannabis (medical and recreational) and tremendous interest in "plant allies" like ayahuasca.
- The support for wild public lands and wild creatures, as seen in the outpouring of support in the mid-90s for the re-introduction of wolves into Yellowstone, and now, with the millions of people who have taken some action in support of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and other endangered public lands.
- Other movements, such as the "purpose movement," re-wilding, permaculture, food forests, carbon farming, and many more hints of possibilities emerging like tender new growth in the collective human psyche.

Some years ago, in a canyon not far from where I write, I heard or sensed an invitation—a directive—which was something like “occupy imagination,” and which accompanied a strong image of thousands, or million, or billions of intelligent creatures intentionally envisioning and participating in what Thomas Berry calls “the dream of the Earth.” As if our world is shaped not only by our physical interventions and industry, but also by how we (including the other-than-human beings) imagine, dream, and think.

In these days that feel similar to running an unexplored river through a canyon with continual rapids and spectacular betrayals, staying mindful of the thoughts and images that I am contributing to the noosphere is a bumpy, wild task. No doubt it’s essential to feel and respond to the full catastrophe of our time, yet how do we navigate if we endlessly repeat the unfolding disasters in our minds, and only see the potential disasters ahead? How do we find the way if we can’t see around the bend?

The Spanish poet Antonio Machado may be a useful guide for us in these times: “Traveler, there is no path. / The path is made by walking.” Or, depending on translation, “Walker, there is no road. You make the road by walking.” And, “There is no trail, only foam trails on the sea.”

In the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument not far from my home, the pale, sandstone domes and mesas were shaped by unfathomable, ancient winds. There are no trails, no roadside signs, no trail signs, just unmarked routes that one would generally move across in relationship to the geological forms: wash, ridge, gentle slope, ragged steps, slot canyon, or stone bridge. When the way is somewhat hazardous, rather than concentrate on the obstacles, my body focuses on the route through. Maybe I leave a kind of wake in the imaginal field as I wander, singing praise to bitterbrush and basalt. Maybe everything we do initiates a wave in the sea of psyche, moving beyond our own moment and time. Maybe an aspect of the great work of our time is to cultivate the capacities of our forward-seeing imagination in coherence with the rest of life.

My letters, phone calls, and modest support of particular environmental organizations will continue, but the most intimate, meaning-saturated action I take on behalf the wild Earth is to engage as if stone, lizard, yucca, lichen, and cloud are intelligent, ensouled beings, with their own longings, and as if the land and creatures are sacred presences and as if acknowledgement of their subjectivity and nobility encourages them to reveal more of their animate nature. I know for sure that I come more alive with such enactments, shiver with a sense of participating with sentient presences, and with life’s great intelligence.

In our time of disturbance and radical change, we are crossing a threshold, a portal, or an unseen bridge from one world to another. It could be said that the bridge is either collapsing beneath us, or being made as we walk together, in the long twilight hours when one civilization gives way to another.