

CHAPTER 1



Creation

*For every wild animal of the
forest is mine, the cattle
on a thousand hills.
I know all the birds of the air,
and all that moves in the
field is mine.*

—PSALM 50:10–11

🌿 One Loud, Heroic Frog 🌿

Of all the (rapidly counting on fingers) eight Internet e-mail lists that I have belonged to, perhaps the most deeply eccentric was the Eastern Ontario Biodiversity Museum (EOBM) mailing list. Its members reported, sometimes a bit obsessively, whatever they were sighting in the neighborhood—which species had been seen doing what comes naturally: reports of deer in a meadow near Spencerville or a mourning cloak butterfly in somebody's backyard; queries about overwintering larvae; stories of an unsuccessful search for pickerel spawning upcreek; sightings of robins or the flight of geese.

There was one post I particularly loved: “Oxford Station, Co. Rd. 20, 3–500 m east of Smith Road turnoff, small pond on north side of county road. One loud, heroic Chorus frog calling.” Now, *that's* a proper valuation. We don't take anywhere near as much delight as we should in the loud heroism of chorus frogs, dammit.

I try to be good and ecologically responsible. At migratory seasons, I still do my best to avoid those roads the frogs have to cross to get to their spawning grounds. There's always a frog massacre along certain stretches of county road when this happens—tiny sickening “thunks” from under the car wheels, and dozens of small, squashed, leg-splayed corpses on the asphalt. But although I try as much as possible to avoid involuntary amphibicide, EOBM members were out there actually counting and measuring the poor flattened bodies (“female, tibia 34.5 mm”), checking what frogs had last eaten, and mourning the deaths. To them, frogs *matter*. They worried about the implications for the future. Will this species still be with us in twenty years' time?

I keep thinking I love Nature, and I do delve into the world around me for material to write about, but I know *real* love when I see it, and I confess that compared to the EOBMers all I could manage for this landscape is a certain mild, ill-informed affection. The EOBM people were true lovers. That's what made their posts, however dotty, such a pleasure: all that love percolating through the electrons on my screen. They'd report in perfectly horrible weather, examining the fields and scrub woods and ditches, looking for things I don't think I could ever begin to notice. They'd scoop up dead fluff from the banks of creeks, probing for tiny land snails (numbers and types). Their care and knowledge gently surrounded the turtles, both painted and snapping. They'd monitor the redwing blackbirds. They'd troll the landscape for larvae and search the authorities for the information to identify their finds. They'd map what had turned up, and where. They'd watch the spread of the new, beautiful, extremely aggressive reeds that now form predatory stands along the superhighway. They'd mourn the roadkill. They'd monitor not just the arrival of the geese—we all do that!—but how many and where they're settling down for the night on their way north. They kept reporting, and every single report reminded me of love.

I don't know if I'm willing to declare absolutely that “all love creates good in some way” or that “real love is in the small stuff” but that's my experience. Maybe these things are universally true; maybe not. Maybe there are naturalists out there who are simply obsessive-compulsive cranks; if so, I haven't met any yet. Obsessive-compulsive crankiness does not leak from that post about that “loud, heroic Chorus frog.” I think naturalists do what I do—which is simply to love Creation because Creation is so very lovable—but they know how to do it properly: in detail, and in knowledge gained from genuine care and deep interest.

Can Creation feel this love, somehow? I can't imagine how it could, but I know that my imagination often falls far short of

possible realities. I gather that at least some of these naturalists don't feel any need to find God in all this, and that's fine with me. But I do believe in a Creator, and I can imagine a Creator who is deeply pleased by the fact that somebody's *noticing* all those land snails. I too create stuff, and I know that having my creations noticed with pleasure is a wonderful feeling. It's not why I do the creating, of course, but it's one of those side-pleasures, like finding a twenty-dollar bill in your raincoat pocket.

I don't think I'd care, honestly, if Creation turns out to be as contingent as some scientists believe—if it's all one big, happy accident. Strangely, it wouldn't bother me one bit to be proved wrong about God's action as Creator, because if I'm wrong there's probably some sort of mystery behind the wrongness, and nothing is more fun, more deeply pleasing, than mystery—the great swirling deep blue shot with silver. God can be whatever God damn well pleases, and Creation is as Creation is. Though most of us do believe that God includes Creator, if we're wrong, we'll get over it. In the meantime, there's still Creation, which is well worth loving for its own sake.

But there is a sort of glory in Creation that I'd sooner ascribe to God than to accident. Not a glory in Neiman Marcus terms; not a matter of Renaissance angels in terribly good taste. You can't live in this landscape, especially in spring mud season, without losing any illusions about the niceness, cuteness, and prettiness of Creation. After all, early spring is the only time of year when we can have both snow *and* the very earliest mosquitoes.

No, if there's any glory around here, it's in the rich abundance and profound relatedness of all sorts of ecosystems great and small, from the senile pine plantings to the cedar swamps, from abandoned meadows succumbing to alder and sumac to the banks of creeks and rivers. There are a gazillion species out there, each with its own particular characteristics and its own particular place

in this small part of the world, and that is indeed enough glory for any reasonable human being. Maybe it's all pure accident, mere coincidence, but some of us do tend to believe that coincidence is God staying anonymous.

What does hold, though, is that if you want to think of God as Creator, if you want to sink your spiritual toes deep into the richness of Incarnation, then reading a whole lot of e-mail reports from rural naturalists in Eastern Ontario in spring mud season is a fruitful use of your time. It keeps you humble, for starters; it keeps you rooted (sorry!). It keeps you from lapsing into besotted musings on the Beeyootiful Rrrromance of Nature. It reminds you that we less-than-angels have been much, much less than angelic in our treatment of the world that sustains and upholds us. It nudges you to recollect that however bleak, sodden, and unlovable this world sometimes looks, there are still any number of fascinating, hopeful details, if you're willing to take a close look at what's right under your foot (not, one hopes, a loud, heroic chorus frog).

What I do believe for myself is that God surrounds each bit of God's Creation with the same detailed, particular, loving attention that the EOBMers have for the creatures they monitor. I believe this love extends from individual ant (or even smaller) to galaxy. It is the warm, delighted look of a mother bending to her newborn child, not because the child has done anything to earn this love, but simply because the child *is*.

I am too painfully aware of the arrogance of humankind to be comfortable saying that we matter more to God than (say) porpoises; I believe that God takes enormous delight in the porpoise-fulness of porpoises. But I also believe that God entered into this Creation in the person of a human being, Jesus the Christ, because we have particular capabilities that are (as best we know) unique to being human. Perhaps God self-manifests to land snails in another dimension; not being a land snail, I have no way of knowing.

But I do know what the scent of true love smells like, and I could feel it coming in from these people, trolling through Creation and noticing it, treasuring it, recording it, in depth and detail—turning Creation over in the palm of the hand as a jeweler examines a prized pearl.

Me, I'm just sitting here, humbly waiting for the herons.

Chocolate

It is February; the days, blessedly, are growing longer, and we have exchanged the brutal, bitter brilliance of high winter for the mush and muddle of low winter. For the last few days, what's been coming down from the sky hasn't been real snow, but something closer to virginal slush—snow so wet and heavy that lifting a shovelful is nearly dangerous. There's been a lot of it, too.

I have to say one thing for a city with a world-class university: you wouldn't believe the sophistication of some of the student-built snowpersons over in the Queen's Ghetto (the student part of town). Male and female they created them, yes indeed, some of them very male and female indeed. I suppose that's the gift of wet snow; you can do real anatomical correctness with this stuff. And then there are the snow forts. One was clearly the work of engineering students. The crenellation was a nice touch.

But even with the milder weather, people hereabouts seem generally fed up with the fact of winter. We are all grouching madly. It has been going on long enough, thank you; we would like it to stop *right now*. This, alas, is rather like a woman trying to take a coffee break while she's in the middle of birthing a baby: "Look, I promise I'll get back to it in ten minutes; I just want a bit of a break." Sorry. No way.

Since a time-out is not possible, I would like to propose an amendment to the laws of nature, as follows:

In all parts of the Northern Hemisphere north of the
forty-fifth parallel,
and in those other parts of the Northern Hemisphere
that might just as well be north of the forty-fifth parallel,
given what winter is like there,
during the month of February
chocolate shall have no calories.

I mean, God knows we *need* chocolate in weather like this; we need it to slog through the endless tail of winter just as Harry Potter needed it as anti-Dementors medication. Since it's a need, not a wish, it shouldn't carry any penalties, like weight gain, should it? Right?

Sigh.

Pure foolishness, of course. No, chocolate is not going to lose its fat-creating calories, even in February when slush is falling from the skies. Winter is going to hang on here until it's ready to go, in six weeks if we're lucky, eight or ten if we aren't. This is February; this is Great-Lake-side southern Canada. What did we expect, feathers?

It's natural, if we believe in an all-powerful God, to imagine that God could rearrange the natural order of things whenever God felt like doing so. If God set the rules, then God gets to bend them, no? That's how we'd operate if we were in control of things. What we'd do is wipe out winter, hunger, pain, oppression, all the discomforts and evils of this world.

So why doesn't God do just that?

The answer, I suppose, is that God doesn't see discomfort quite the way we do. I do not believe for a moment that God wills suffering; what God wills is our ability to bring something meaningful out of suffering. But at the same time, I do believe God does not put a particularly high value on comfort. In fact, discomfort has real grace about it, if we choose to use it creatively. I may

kvetch about late winter, but the fact is that I'm really extremely comfortable by world standards, and I have chosen to live here, in this climate; it's as unreasonable for me to demand that spring come earlier as it is for me to demand that chocolate have no calories.

But I do wonder. I wonder if God, at the outset of creating Creation (however it happened), sent God's imaginative Spirit out to range freely throughout space and time, like a bird over the waters. I remember the Biblical image of the formless void, covered by darkness, over which the wind of God sweeps, searching, probing, considering, trying out possibilities: *What will happen if I do it this way?* Perhaps the mind of God considered the possibility of making sure that no toe got stubbed and no evil occurred, but God realized that this was going to require either a Creation with no real freedom or a Creation in which God would have to micromanage everyone and everything on a scale at once immeasurably grandiose and maddeningly minute. And so, good Creator that God was, God thought: *No, I don't think so.*

Or—daring thought!—it might be that God is still actively creating, because Creation (having a will of its own) doesn't always go the way God wants it to, and God and Creation are working it out together. But there's an element of jury-rigging. It doesn't always go as planned. Not exactly the traditional view, but a notion with which the front-line theologians are fooling around quite happily these days.

The old line about the problem of pain is, "If God is God, he is not good; if God is good, he is not God." That is, we can have a loving God, or we can have an all-powerful God, but we can't have both. Not given the reality of real suffering.

There is another possibility, though. It could be that we have a God who knows how it will all turn out in the very long run, and who knows that in the end (as C. S. Lewis put it in *The Great Divorce*) glory will wash backward into all Creation. This is a God whose time is not an arrow flying only forward, but something far

more mysterious. Is this so difficult to imagine? We humans have time running in only one direction, forward, because that's how we experience life: cradle to grave, no turning back. For us, the angel Time stands with a sword at the gates of Eden, saying "You can't go back." We have only *chronos*, human-type time. But is God's time so necessarily limited? Could God's time, *kairos*, move back and forth freely like a bead on a string—or even perhaps like a bead in a box? If so, then what could this mean for us in Creation?

In the meantime, I cannot expect the Almighty to upset the natural order of things simply because I don't like the way they're going, a point Jesus made very clearly. When the tempter urged him to play fast and loose with the laws of gravity by jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple, Jesus responded, "I'm not going to put God to the test" (Matthew 4:5–7). I have to accept that this is the way the world I live in operates, and I can trust it to go on pretty much as it usually does because this is how my Creator made it.

What we can do, however, is make of late winter what we can, whether it's crenellated snow forts or random acts of kindness. I can haul my own grocery cart back to the store instead of leaving it for the supermarket kids, because pushing those things through slush is brutal. I can giggle over the anatomically correct snowper-sons. I can enjoy the deeply satisfying *thunk* you hear when you succeed in kicking all the built-up snow crud out of your car's wheel wells—ah, poor, deprived non-winter people who don't know that one! I can refuse to be any more grouchy than absolutely necessary. I can remember that it's only February, and I do not live in Iqaluit, where spring arrives very late indeed.

We can get grouchier in late winter, more apt to take offense; we can retire to the TV or hunker down with a stack of mystery novels and let the world go to hell in a handbasket. Or we can make another choice.

We can remember that discomfort never killed a person, and in fact it can be a wonderfully teaching thing, and that discomfort

is not the same as suffering. Yes, walking and driving are quite horrible, given the mushy mess—but it's no longer necessary to put your gloves back on before turning the parking meter handle. The light is growing stronger and longer. *Only six more weeks if we're lucky, ten at the max.*

Homemade bread, toasted, with the merest smear of butter and honey. The smile of a snowsuited baby enthroned in her carrier in the supermarket. Jokes about the weather called out between neighbors. The golden streetlight shining sideways through thick, lazy flakes that you can capture with the tip of your tongue. Small things. As good as chocolate, maybe better.

Leaves

Because of the rather peculiar weather—drought coupled with warmer-than-usual temperatures until last week—leaf season has been less than spectacular this fall. Only in the last couple of days have we seen the usual flame colors, and they're diluted by a lot of dusty green.

But the night before last we had a real, hard frost, with the usual results. My friend Anne's big gingko tree dropped every single one of its leaves in the course of two hours—floomph! The butternut tree on the side street by the supermarket likewise bombed the scenery with its fruit, to the delight of the squirrels. Suddenly there were drifts of dry leaves, unraked and unblown, that a person could scuffle through on her way to and from the store.

So a person did just that, reveling in the color and dry-taffeta rustle of them, kicking them into small showers. To the best of my knowledge—although there are decades I try not to remember in any real detail—I have done this every single year since I was a small child, except for three autumns when I lived downtown in a city, where there were no trees at all. It's going on half a century of

leaf-shuffling by now. I fully intend to keep on with the practice as long as I have access to leaves and the use of my legs, and I plan to get steadily sillier and less inhibited about it in my cranky old age.

Leaf-kicking yesterday, I came away from a conversation with an old friend who confesses that he feels completely unchanged from the person he was when I first met him, when we were both eighteen. I don't feel this way at all; I hardly remember the person I was all those years ago. I'm not sure I'd recognize my old self if I met her on the street now. I am not the same person I was when, as a child, I first discovered the joys of leaf-shuffling, and God. Too much has happened since, for better and worse: I have lost some and gained much. The body turns over completely every seven years or so. Statistically speaking, I don't have a single atom in common with the person I was when I started writing God-Stuff a mere ten years ago, much less the person I was when I met this guy for the first time more than three-times-ten years ago (closer to four-times-ten, horrible thought!) or the person I was when I first learned to kick leaves five-times-ten years ago.

And yet, and yet. I carry on my forehead a scar I got when I was learning to walk. My forearms show, very faintly, the ghosts of the folds of fat on my baby arms. My sister recently gave me a photo of myself at eighteen, and that leggy girl and I use exactly the same gesture to tuck our hair behind our ears. I still shuffle through leaves every fall, without fail.

We tend to think of permanence versus change without remembering that they coexist—that we are, at one and the same time, creatures of change and constancy. I know from having had children that each child is born with a spirit unlike any other spirit, and that although much can dim or warp that spirit, nothing but death can extinguish it—and as a Christian, I'm pretty sure that the spirit survives even death.

I have kicked leaves under the same rich sky—the blue that chocolate would be if chocolate were blue—in two countries, six

states, and two provinces. I have kicked leaves when my spirit bounced in joy and when it dragged as limp as a sack of wet laundry. I have kicked leaves in faith and in disbelief and (most often) in a state painfully dangling somewhere between the two. I have kicked leaves in love and anger and despair and hope. I have taught leaf-kicking to my children—funny, it's one of those things, like slurping spaghetti strands, that they don't know by instinct (or at least mine didn't). I have kicked leaves because it's a joy that I cling to with both hands and two feet, and because I know it's something you have to grab when it comes. You get that chance only once a year, and next year, who knows?

This year I am leaf-kicking with my faith in the deepest disarray. Checking it over, the way a medic might check over a car-crash victim for fractures, I find that my theology is hanging in there and that my down-deep God-certainty is still solid. But my own spirituality, my sense of meaning and trust, is in tatters. Too many Interesting Times, I suppose. Sometimes, the leaf-kicking little kid in me feels that God periodically heaves me overboard and watches me struggle in the water without lifting a finger to make it any easier.

My head and my gut know better, and they are what keep me going, but my faith-heart is so terribly tired and sore. Writing, which used to be such a joy, is somewhere between a burden and an impossibility: I find myself wanting to storm away from it, or simply abandon it as a bad job and find something that pays better and asks less. These days, about all I can do with any sureness, it seems, is simply wait.

There are those, I know, who would see this state as a failure on my part. "You just have to *believe*," they would say. "You just have to pray. Prayer always works." Maybe for them it does. But maybe that's not my vocation here, the place to which I am called. Maybe I'm supposed to be sitting with those who are hurting, who

are doubting, who have tried prayer and fallen back defeated. Maybe there's supposed to be the occasional writer of God-Stuff who has problems with deep-down doubt. Maybe that's what I'm supposed to be writing—because God reaches to us where we are, not where we ought to be.

I was a child in the spirit when I started off on this journey, but I'm older now, and I see through a woman's eyes. I know that this sort of collapse is a normal part of the Great Journey. It's like mud season around here, a necessary time of preparation. These leaves will fall and be blown away, rotting back into the soil, and next spring we'll see the greenish blush high up in the trees as the leaves bud out. I know so with my head and gut, and my heart is just going to have to take it on trust.

At this season, the great Vs of geese gather and head south. I didn't know geese when I was younger; they've been a gift and a discovery of my middle age. I watch as they beat their way south, knowing that we're heading into fall mud season and another Canadian winter. I will see them come back in the spring. I know that if I trust my head and gut, my heart's faith will inevitably follow, just as the geese follow their knowledge of the rivers and landscape. It's just that sometimes it seems to take so long. So many months until the geese and the leaves come back—and of course by then, they won't be exactly the same geese, and certainly not the same leaves, and I won't be exactly who I am now, because all living things must change. The only life form that doesn't change is one that's dead.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. It's raining today, and the leaves will have lost their crispness by now. Maybe I've had all the leaf-kicking I'm going to get this year; maybe I'll luck out and get another chance. I don't know. When this time comes around in another twelve months, I'll grab my chance again. However different things may be, that always stays the same.

❧ Maggie ❧

Magnificat leaps effortlessly up onto my desktop, treads lightly across the keyboard (thereby totally gumming up my onscreen work), and lays one small imperious paw on my left shoulder. The rest follows almost immediately. I curve my arm up to support her, and she gives a good wiggle and settles down, purrbox revving. Ever since she was a baby, Maggie has liked to cuddle up on this particular part of my anatomy, but now that she's a half-grown cat, she occupies a lot more space than she used to.

What's still so young about her is her (apparently absolute) belief that she *owns* my left shoulder—that she's entitled by right to curl up, with my arm underneath, supporting her, whenever the spirit moves her. In fact, sometimes I don't want to hold her. I want to get on with my writing or answer my e-mail, and I am a two-handed typist. So I put her down, and she jumps up again, and I put her down, and she jumps up again. Sometimes we compromise and she curls up between me and the keyboard, which is reasonable. Sometimes she gives up and trots off to make the older cats' lives a little more miserable. But sometimes she's so persistent I have to throw her out of my office and close the door.

A sense of prerogative belongs to the young, I think. Most of us learn sooner or later, more or less painfully, that there will *always* be a pea under the mattress and that the peasantry, instead of piling on the futons to our complete satisfaction, will just stare at us and say "You expected maybe featherbeds?" We learn that life isn't going to revolve around us or give us everything we want, and we'd best get used to it and move on. The role of the princess (Maggie included) isn't to have her every desire catered to. The role of the princess is to grow up. Same goes for princes.

For some of us, it just doesn't happen. I don't know why—whether some failing of early nurturing leaves a person incapable of this sort of maturation, or whether it's the sign of an extremely

strong and determined personality, or maybe both, or something else. But some of us simply refuse to give up our sense of entitlement. It's a very sad way to be, because anyone like this is going to be in for a whole lot of disappointment as the world fails to oblige. The truly determined blame everyone but themselves for this sad state of affairs: *they're* asking only for what's reasonable and for their rights, and what's everybody else's problem? Maggie knows what Maggie wants, and she sees no reason why she shouldn't get it.

Most of us, however, do learn from our disappointments. We discover that we're certainly not always going to get what we want, and sometimes we won't even get what we honestly deserve. Sometimes there ain't no justice. Of course this cuts two ways (sometimes we should be deeply relieved that we don't get what we deserve!), but the injustice, when it's not in our favor, can be very hard to take. We've done such a good job, but the promotion goes to someone else. We worked so hard at the marriage, doing everything the experts said, and it still failed. We tried so hard with the kids, and they went off the rails. We're left holding only a bag of guilt and anger and disappointment, it seems.

It doesn't occur to us that there is an even bigger injustice lurking in life, a huge insult to our sense of natural justice, one that Christ described in the parable of the vineyard workers (Matthew 20:1–16). The landowner hires workers at different times in the day, so that some put in a full day and others only an hour or so—but then he pays them all the same amount. It's a maddening parable, especially because we always figure we'd be the virtuous early birds getting the shaft, not the shiftless late ones getting the bonus. It feels so *unfair*.

The injustice is God's grace. It isn't fair, it isn't reasonable; it is a deep offense to our sense of natural justice. In fact, it sometimes drives us buggy, but there it is. God offers unconditional love and forgiveness to all, even the people we disapprove of. The only thing he asks in exchange is that we accept these gifts of grace and,

by our acceptance, allow him to transform our lives. We can, of course, refuse the gift; God is an insistent lover, but he has excellent manners and doesn't force on us what we don't want to accept. He delights in our *yes* but he will respect our *no*.

The problem with our *no*, however, is that ultimately it leads to hell—not to Dante's Inferno or the younger Brueghel's grotesqueries, but to a private, personal hell of resentment and rage and disappointment as we watch God's apparent injustice unfold. Why doesn't God punish our enemies the way we want? We want them to fry in hell; we want them writhing in the torments; we want them to stand before a God who hates them just as much as we hate them, and we want to be there to watch the expression on their faces as they realize what they're in for. We want God to be just as vindictive as we are, because that would justify our resentment. It makes us the right ones, the winners.

God just won't oblige. Instead, if they want him, he's there for our enemies too, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son—running toward the one who left and then returned in shame with arms outstretched in love and longing, calling for jubilation. It's just not *fair*.

Our sense of outrage goes back to the sense of entitlement we never quite outgrow. I am good and deserving, and I want X and deserve X, and if I don't get X then there's something wrong with the world, not with me. The more we concentrate on our own rights and the other guy's wrongs (in both senses of right and wrong), the deeper we dig ourselves into the combined state of entitlement and disappointment that leads straight into those good old sins of pride and anger.

Why won't God reward us for our righteousness, as we deserve? It doesn't occur to us that maybe God doesn't want our best behavior, much less the mind-set that concentrates on being "righteous." Not one of us is up to God's standards of righteousness, after all. But God still wants *us*—"just as I am, without one

plea” as the old hymn says, and he wants us most when we’re shaky and vulnerable and unsure of ourselves, not when we’re preening ourselves on what good people we are. He wants us in the state of utter emptied-out transparency where we see how broken we truly are, how much we’ve been given, and how little we’ve truly deserved.

Kittens are different. It is in the Magginess of Maggie to grow from the bouncy selfishness of kittenhood to the more serene and dignified selfishness of adult cathood, because that’s what cats are about. The justified cat—the cat who has become all that he or she can be—would still have that sense of entitlement because it’s hardwired into the feline personality, as anyone who lives with a cat knows. It’s not in Maggie’s deck of cards to grow, step by step and often very painfully, into this simultaneous awareness both of our undeserving and of God’s loving mercy. (I suspect that God finds cats extremely restful.)

But we are human, and our best way of being is different from Maggie’s. If we are to become all God designs us to be, we have to let go of that sense of entitlement and injustice, and accept our need for mercy and grace, instead of trying to make sure that our enemies get it in the neck. God’s grace is so deeply unjust it means that sinners don’t get what they deserve. Thank God for that.

Ducks

True, Lake Ontario is the smallest of the Great Lakes, and true, my end of it is comparatively sheltered by a series of good-sized islands, but it is still quite a big body of water. Wind makes all large bodies of water rather restless. This one particular evening was a whippy one—windy enough to make the great blue heron overhead work hard in its flight; windy enough if not to kick up

swells then at least to create quite a respectable chop. I was enjoying the chop as I walked the path by the water's edge, watching it slap, scour, and foam its way over weathered limestone shingle.

A couple of yards offshore, two ducks rode the choppy water serenely, bobbing up and down in perfect unison, looking as completely at home as you might feel in your best-beloved overstuffed armchair with a good book and a cup of coffee at your side. They looked the picture of duckly contentment, perhaps because their ducklings were nowhere in sight: mom and dad taking a break from the nippers. I stopped and watched them for a while, mildly jealous. They looked so quiet, so peaceable.

I had only recently come out of quite choppy waters myself. Frankly, I resented every minute I spent in them. None of this serene wave-riding for me, this contented bobbing up and down as spume foamed up at the water's edge. No, I felt that after all the tumult I'd already dealt with I'd earned a bit of peace and quiet. It's one of the fallacies of life in Interesting Times that you figure you're overdue for the good stuff, that there's some sort of balance to be had. It's the same impulse that caused someone to tack an extra-happy (and palpably made-up) ending onto the Book of Job. At first all the stresses bugged me; then they began to make me frightened and depressed—is life *always* going to be so problematic? Is this just the way it's meant to be?

I don't want to learn to ride the waves. I just want the @#\$! waves to stop, and the wind to calm, and the water to be clear and peaceful with a temperature of about 82°F, give or take half a degree. I want the sun to be fine but not strong; I want a pleasant lake breeze but not too much; I want a bathing suit that looks becoming on the body I ought to have but don't. The culture in which I bob, like the ducks on their waves, tells me that I *should* have all these things—that they are my right.

Removing my gaze from my own navel and looking around, I can't help seeing people—perfectly innocent people—for whom

life is not all right, has never been, probably never will be; people who suffer far more than I ever have and who *have* learned to bob along like those ducks, somehow managing, even with grace, to cope with burdens they have done nothing to deserve. People with MS or major mental illness, people still struggling with childhood abuse, people with intractable pain, people in deep mourning, people living in poverty in a society that views poverty as a moral crime. I live in a city of broken people, and it's an extremely useful corrective to my own self-pity.

I struggle always with the common problem of believers everywhere: Where is the biblical God who always answers prayer, who punishes the wicked and comforts the afflicted and rewards the good? It doesn't compute. My childish heart still demands a God who meets those expectations, even as my somewhat-less-childish head reminds me that the Kingdom hasn't fully happened yet, and it probably won't in my lifetime. This is a world still subject to the three great necessary wild cards of biology, physics, and human free will. Wherever there is greed, dishonesty, and fear (and where isn't there?), there is inevitably trouble.

As a believer, I have to take it on faith that God is working out God's purposes and sometimes, looking around, it's possible to see real progress, real signs of liberation, as we break free of constraints based on fear, prejudice, or the need to control. We are, for example, far more aware now of racism than we were when I was a child, and we see the need not to accept it but to root it out. This *is* progress. We are beginning to be more aware of our responsibilities toward this earth and all who live in it. We've seen progress in the liberation of women, and the confrontation of violence against them and against children. Incomplete as it always is, our knowledge is still deeper and richer by far than the crude old mechanistic models.

I have to remember all this. I have to keep firmly in mind that I know no more of God's purposes than those ducks do of

global politics. I can't take a view as huge in time and space as God can; I can see only my own small patch of water, now ruffled, now smooth, and adapt to whatever conditions life sends me, as best I can. I must trust that, as Dame Julian of Norwich promised, in time "all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well."

OK, God, I'll try to do it your way, and I'll trust you (gulp!) to send me whatever you know I need, even if it's not necessarily what I think I want. I do not believe that you send me suffering. I do believe that you stand with me in suffering, and that you send me the strength I need to run my life as best I can. We've done this a lot before.

It didn't occur to me to wonder, until much later, just how hard those ducks were paddling.

Bonsai

As part of a new phase in my life, I am building up a collection of house plants. I love house plants. Years ago, I tried raising them, but life being as it was back then I rarely remembered to water them and the inevitable transpired.

I managed not to kill a big spider plant—tough old thing! I bought an ivy and a peperomia to dress up the old house for sale. These three plants came with me when I moved, the last things I took out of the house where my family and I had lived for sixteen years. Now, repotted, the spider plant swung in the dining room window, doing gloriously, and I just had to repot the ivy too. They were joined by about a dozen others: a big monstera, a handsome weeping fig, a young but promising rubber plant, a jade plant (now recovering from my having left it out in bright sun for too many days), a really beautiful variegated pothos, and so forth and

so on. They now get watered regularly, fed routinely, and misted daily, so they're all doing well.

Now, whenever I go to Home Depot or the grocery store, I do a small tour of the house plant section, looking for something to grab my fancy. I don't let myself get carried away; I have only two good south-facing windows and not all the space in the world. Just the other day, I managed to say no to a huge and beautiful silver-spotted dieffenbachia, with difficulty.

But what really grabs my eye at the moment is bonsai. Not for the predictable reasons, though.

I understand the appeal of bonsai trees: how they reflect, in miniature, the crabbed beauty of trees that survive against all the odds—pines that grow on rocky crests exposed to the worst of winter. Where I live, the landscape is dominated by the Canadian Shield, an immense and ancient rocky apron surrounding Hudson's Bay and stretching far down toward the Great Lakes. Our country's first modern painters fell in love with the harsh, spectacular landscape of the Shield and painted trees bent and shaped by the power of adversity. You can't help but admire trees like that, holding on, living sometimes hundreds of years, twisted and gnarled by the weather into a superb, compelling elegance—just as my deepest admiration goes to those who, in unbearable circumstances, manage to scrape together kindness, compassion and love while they are themselves suffering. It happens. This is where the beauty of poverty lies, and it is real.

Bonsai, on the other hand, don't get that way because of nature; they grow into this harsh beauty because we've chosen to do it to them. We take normal seedlings and by dint of the most skilled, meticulous artfulness shape them into something (let's face it) tiny and stunted. We do so lovingly, using the most careful pruning of leaf, twig and root, softening copper wire to reshape a branch in precisely the right direction. We force growth into the

trunk, making it woody and giving it the odd artistic twist. We bend a branch to reroot to the soil. We train the whole plant to cascade like water over the side of its pot.

But is that what's right for the plant? Is this what it's intended to do? Or have we forced it to be something other than what it should be?

This greatly bothers me, not because bonsai are so important in and of themselves but because of what we do to each other. As a mother, I found I had to distinguish carefully (and didn't always manage it) between setting necessary standards and limits with my kids, on the one hand, and trying to make them into what I wanted them to be, on the other. Kids do need rules; they do need standards of appropriate conduct; they do need to have expectations made of them. No quarrel with that.

But what happens when we try to shape the child in ways that aren't right for him? What if what I think is best for her really isn't best at all? At the moment, we (well, some of us—not I, for one) are bent on forcing children, like bonsai, into a sort of hyper-competitive gotta-do-it-all, racing from piano lessons to math coach to chess tutor to competitive swimming. It's the old “bend the twig” bit—but what kind of tree are we envisaging? Do we leave room for less obviously essential purposes—play, dreaming, imagination?

I remember all too well what it's like to have your natural shape pruned and bound into something that pleases another person, whose vision of you isn't you at all, but something very different. “I love you so much that I'm going to correct everything that's wrong about you, so you'll look the way I think you should look and make me proud of you”—what does that say, really? It is at best an equivocal sort of “love”; at worst, it saws off the beloved at the ankles.

What is God's intent for us, trees or children? I used to buy into the notion of suffering as formational or ennobling—that the

potter had to get rough with the clay. Now I'm not so sure. I've seen and experienced too much suffering that I cannot view as justified in any way, and I see the ensuing damage—not the beauty, but real damage. My theology is going through any number of tiny bumps and shifts these days. I am beginning to believe in a God who wants us to flourish, to grow to our greatest potential, freely, but in community—to be not bonsai but trees of the fullest, most magnificent habit. I'm still thinking about this.

I have the strangest impulse now, when I see a bonsai in Home Depot. I want to buy the plant, bring it home, strip off any wiring, pot it up into rich, light soil, keep it carefully watered and misted daily, set by a south-facing window, and see how it grows. A bonsai could never grow into the tree it might have been, not after all that pruning and wiring, but it might grow into a new beauty all its own.

I'll think about it.

Tree and Fence

The neighborhood where I now live is full of chain-linked fences, put up when the houses were brand new, about thirty years ago. At a guess, I'd say the fences were intended to keep kids from cutting across people's backyards to take the shortest route from A to B, as kids always will. Over time, the fences and the neighborhood have worked out certain accommodations. It's really pretty silly (pedestrians think) to have to walk three blocks out of your way when, with a stout pair of wire cutters, you could arrange things quite differently. Pragmatically, someone has put metal bars across the gaps cut in the fences so that you can't take a bicycle or motor bike through. There are only a few gaps, all of them very well used. But the fences remain.

Out walking, I noted one odd spot where a young weed tree of some sort—can't tell what type without the leaves being

out—had grown up through a bit of fence. It must have started small, a seedling, then a foot-high sapling, weaving its way by accident through the steel meshes, uncorrected. Then, as its branches started to form, they too twined themselves into the fence, and the branches' branches too. Now the tree is several feet taller than the fence and inextricably woven into it. The tree's bole is now three or four inches across, and bole and branches have hardened. In some places they've grown around the wire, wrapping it into the wood. There is no way the tree and the fence can now be parted. Even if you cut down the tree, you couldn't cut the wood out of the mesh without a huge amount of work, and it just wouldn't be worth it. The only hope for the tree in this situation is that, in the long struggle between wood and wire, the tree may actually take the fence apart before someone notices, takes the tree down, and rebuilds the fence.

Sometimes it feels as though people are in the same predicament. Some accidents of nature, a few bad choices, a failure of love, and we feel as though we're as trapped in the unyielding mesh of our lives as that tree is in the fence, and with no more hope of setting things right. All we can do (we think) is carry on carrying on, doing the best we can, wrapping ourselves around each new piece of damage as the tree has wrapped itself around wire, and accepting it as patiently as we can. Our only hope is that in the fullness of time the fence into which we've grown will somehow take itself away, or that we'll grow so accustomed to it that we won't notice it anymore. But things never seem to go that way, or not predictably enough for us to have trust. We seem to be trapped, living either in pain and anger, or in the numbness and anxiety that replace pain and anger when we refuse to entertain them.

Yes, sometimes we *are* confined by chance or choice that we can't change. A diagnosis of schizophrenia, a genetic disorder, cultural expectations that we have no ability to escape, systematic

poverty: these are things we may have to find a way of living with. We can struggle against them; we can understand what they mean for us, and we must certainly learn to manage as best we can. I can't look at what's happening in the Sudan in this time and speak about people making free choices; it would be an insult to those trapped by civil war.

But for most of us in our ordinary lives, the traps are different; they are things we can become conscious of, and at least potentially change.

What, in the tree and fence, could the Gospel message be? I wrote this question, and the word *repent* promptly popped into my mind. It's a loaded and deeply unpopular word, for excellent reasons. We tend to see *repent* as meaning "stop doing all that bad stuff and straighten up and fly right." But maybe it could mean something else; maybe it means something more like "it doesn't have to be like this." Maybe it is a word against entrapment and rigidity, a word about the soul's ability to soften, bend, and flow into new ways of being. Maybe it's a word about choosing plasticity over rigidity, movement over stasis.

Isn't this what Easter is about, in some way? Can there be anything more rigid and unbending than death, any situation a more certain trap than the Crucifixion? But Christ slips through death's clutching fingers, freed, shaking off the shackles and turning back into the brightness of life, as though somehow the wood of the trapped tree has turned soft again and can be teased free of the metal and set free—set to rights. God votes, it seems, for plasticity.

God votes for plasticity—but we vote for rigidity. We stay trapped in patterns that we put there in the first place (often for good reason) but retain even after they've turned destructive. Why? Often for fear or sheer habit, or a failure of hope and imagination, or anger we haven't dealt with—oh, that's a fine bit of fencing, that one! Changing how we operate looks like such hard work, and it's

not what we learned in school or at home, and it's just easier to go on this way. Or we see rigidity as a good thing in and of itself, not seeing how it can trap us, not wanting to hear about the problems it causes others: "I am firm, you are stubborn, he is a pig-headed fool."

Maybe sometimes the fence is real and we truly are stuck with the thing. But looking around my personal landscape, I can't think of an example, although I can see any number of people who have chosen to freeze into patterns of rigidity that leave them trapped. Even for those whose lives are dreadfully limited by circumstances they really can't alter, there's still the choice to turn themselves Godward or turn away.

For myself, I'll vote for plasticity, for the possibility of real change—for hope, even. I will trust that wherever and whenever I feel myself trapped, I may find my way to freedom if I'm willing to choose to be soft instead of strong and to trust God instead of doing it my way. I will trust that however hard it is to see beyond my own entrapments, God has things up God's sleeve that I cannot begin to ask or imagine. I will trust that I am not like the tree in the fence; I may choose to flow in new directions, freely.

That's my choice, and I'll stick with it.

Milkweed

The park lies just the other side of the city's small airport, a promontory jutting out into the lake and catching the westerly wind. A good deal of it used to be farmland—usually a mistake in these parts, where the limestone lies inches beneath the soil surface. Some of it is now under maturing forest; other parts have young trees planted. It's a conservation area now, rich in birds and much loved by the people who live here.

I don't know it at all well. I think I've walked here maybe four or five times in the year or so I've lived in this city—not enough to be familiar with the trails, although I'm learning. I'm having trouble rooting myself in this landscape, probably because I sank my roots so deep into the landscape around my former home that it's going to take a while to recover.

But you don't make a place home without putting some effort into it. This isn't a landscape for mad infatuation; it's a landscape you learn to love. So I took myself out on Tuesday morning for a walk in the park.

The morning wasn't auspicious, overcast with a threat of rain, and the wind off the lake was strong and crisp. But it was still worth a try; besides, I have to learn this park before I can begin to love it, and the only way to do so is practice.

Overcast or not, I had it in mind to find joy there. In general, I figure if I look around the landscape with due attention joy is probably lurking somewhere: in the dodging and diving of swallows by the water's edge, in the marvelously complicated song of a red-breasted grosbeak (identified for me by a birder), in the accomplished soaring of gulls. I thought I'd skim the landscape, find a bit of joy, bring it home, and write it up, to round off a section of this book and (I hoped) balance out the darkness.

Of course, it didn't work that way. Does it ever? No matter how careful I was to deposit my personal baggage at the gate into the park, no matter how open I kept my eyes and ears and mind and heart, joy wasn't having any part of it. Not joy's problem; mine. I felt in the deep gut places of my soul the voice—the one that calls me “child”—whispering, *It's too soon. You aren't ready.*

OK, I can buy that. I'm no more ready for joy than someone a week out of major surgery is up for a nice long hike. There is such a thing as convalescence, and it takes time. I hadn't had anywhere near enough time yet.

Accepting where I was left me free to receive the gift, for of course there was a gift in the landscape; it just wasn't the gift I was looking for. (Which is par for the course.)

Milkweed. Specifically, milkweed in flower.

Now, milkweed—although it's invaluable, especially for monarch butterflies—is not an attractive plant at the best of times, and its flowers are not outstanding. They aren't the sort of blooms you'd break stride for. They're a sort of dull mauve, ball-shaped cluster atop the plant's broad, unimpressive leaves, no big deal.

But even though they are not present joy or beauty, they are a promise.

No, that's the wrong word. (That was the next gift.) Not a promise, a certainty.

Milkweed is never attractive, from seedling to gawky senescence, but it produces a yearly miracle: pods full of the most exquisite seeds, beautiful as the best brocade, lying close-lapped in the pod and topped by creamy, gleaming silk. Each fall, I look for pods of exactly the right ripeness, split them open in my hands, and spend a moment, lasting into eternity, re-entering into wonder.

I knew for absolutely certain that come the right day in October, a day when the sun is strong in a sky of the richest blue and we're still warm with the last touch of summer, I can come here and—again, for absolutely certain—find milkweed pods and their miraculous beauty.

Now, for me, this is major. I have had enough of promises. Promises are human; sometimes they work out and sometimes they don't. I had just come through a time of promises betrayed—more by mishap than by any bad intention, but that doesn't make it hurt any the less. I'd done some betraying of promises myself, which didn't help any. If anyone were to promise me that joy was on the way, I would probably smile politely and snort inwardly. *Yeah. Sure.*

But this certainty of milkweed goes beyond promises. This cannot be betrayed, because it's not of our making. It is on its own schedule. It doesn't rise in the human heart, and therefore it can't fail there.

Here was the joy in the landscape: an understanding, a grasp of something I don't think I'd ever properly grasped before. God does not make promises to us. Instead, God makes a covenant, and the covenant is not up for renegotiation or amendment. This goes far deeper than promises, right into the same certainty I had about the milkweed. I can count on God's love as I can count on the seasons cycling, the turn of the earth on its axis, the swing of the earth round the sun. Whatever befalls, God will be there: love to me, and in time that will be joy. It's just a matter of time.

I walked slowly back to the car, quiet in heart and listening to the birds, knowing I can wait, and mend, and learn to trust again.

