

Ways of Seeing (August, 2023)

As I sat down to the task of writing this column, I wondered whether I could write about anything other than water. But there's an old writer's adage that you "write what's in front of you." At the moment, what is in front of me runs (literally) from soaking wet to persistently damp. Regular readers will remember that in my June column I was primarily worried about wildfire smoke and its physical and spiritual effects. Then came July.

The harsh reality is that this summer is emerging as a no-holds-barred Climate Chaos Summer. The rain throughout Vermont is that unwelcome visitor that refuses to leave regardless of invitations that begin with coy politesse and progress to utter desperation. "Who cares what you think?" the rain seems to say, "I'm going to hang around indefinitely. If you ask me to leave one more time, I'll drop six inches of rain over Middlebury in a matter of hours." Yes, friends, it was quite possibly All My Fault.

If I were living in Arizona, however, I would be jumping for joy should something resembling a rain cloud appear in the heavens. Anything to break the relentless heat. By 4 pm today (August 8th) it will be 107 in Phoenix. Believe it or not, that is calm, cooling news. In the month of July, residents of greater Phoenix endured 31 consecutive days of 110 degrees Fahrenheit or higher. Stepping imaginatively into the shoes of my Arizonan brothers and sisters, I can see myself trapped for an excruciatingly long month between two impossible choices: stay inside or venture out into a kind of heat that is not just oppressive, but deadly. It goes without saying that these two choices are only available to those who are privileged enough to have some kind of temperature control in their homes. For some, there is no choice. If I lived in Phoenix, things would not be going well for me, even in the most air-conditioned contexts. By comparison, life in Vermont feels soggily sane.

It is good to start your day in a state of gratitude and I do — and usually in ways that are more creative and affirming than “at least I’m not in Phoenix.” Indeed, the worse things get, the more I tend to up my gratitude practices. I have been well taught by any number of spiritual guides (including my sheep) that beginning one’s day with gratitude is a wonderful way to stay open to the beauty before us, behind us, above us and all around us. Beginning the day with gratitude is a central concept in religious practices from the Navajo/Diné Blessingway Prayer (that I have just evoked) to the ancient Jewish practice of beginning the day by uttering blessings of gratitude. You start by expressing gratefulness that your soul has returned to your body, which is to say: you wake up, you realize that you are not dead, you give thanks. Gratitude begins with the basics and the blessings in the daily prayer book include blessings for the gift of sight, the gift of strength against weariness, even the gift that your basic bodily functions are reasonably intact. Ancient wisdom teaches us not to take anything for granted.

But even with these gratitude practices, I am making my way through the summer in a state of ambient grief. Climate grief is a bit like the many rain clouds of this wet Vermont summer: grey, persistent, sometimes tear-filled, always hovering. While the June wildfire smoke certainly got to me, the heartache amped up in early July. In the midst of our first flood event, I was poised to go to Massachusetts and was already two days late. When I-89 finally opened up and it was deemed safe to travel, I threw a bright yellow life jacket into the back seat of my car. I wryly wondered if this would become a common travel strategy. The sun was out, the valleys shimmered with an iridescent green and the village of Hinesburg looked all shined-up and post-card perfect as I started my journey. Then came Richmond. Where you would normally find the Park and Ride, there was an enormous, brown lake. Cars were scattered everywhere, water rising to the rooflines. Five minutes later, I encountered the Winooski river. Was this wild muddy

torrent even a river? I experienced it as a crazy, high-tide ocean forcing itself through a very narrow flume. Luckily, I saw it from what some highway official had deemed “a safe distance.” My nervous system felt otherwise.

Further down the road, I gazed on houses and fields, all flooded, mostly lost. Home. Food. These are the essentials that keep us warm, healthy and happy. Overnight, they were gone. “This is terrible. This is terrible.” I repeated to myself over and over until I made it past Barre and into New Hampshire, where the sun and some semblance of exterior normalcy returned.

But interior normalcy is another matter. For weeks, I have felt like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, needing to tell and retell the tale of my Massachusetts journey should I encounter someone who maybe wants to hear it (most people don’t). “If I’m feeling this way,” I wonder aloud, “What must it be like for the citizens of Barre whose homes have been entirely decimated?” But the reality is that I have the luxury to feel this grief because I am not pumping water out of my basement and wondering if my home will be condemned or make me sick from mold. In the midst of emergencies, you basically cope and leave the feelings for later.

Am I beyond grateful that my own home and family were unscathed by the first flood, and the second and the third? Absolutely. The Buddhist teacher and activist, Thich Nhat Hanh, was famous for reminding his students to celebrate each day that starts without a toothache. In a similar vein, I daily celebrate the miracle of every ordinary, unflooded summer morning. But when you’ve been working on climate issues since the late 1980’s some days are harder than others. You wonder if you have made a difference. Or enough of one. You wonder what’s around the corner: next week, next summer, in another few years.

What to do? Rise, bless, thank. Help, work, bless and thank again. Rest. Protest. Play.

Hug a sheep. Buy a sump pump. Check on a neighbor. Look for the helpers. Laugh at something.

Repeat. Those are my strategies. And don't forget to vote.