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Arlington Street Church
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One Wild Word

On the morning of September 11th, 2001, American writer and environmental activist Terry Tempest Williams was at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, where the Nature Conservancy was sponsoring an exhibit called *In Response to Place*. She was there for a press conference, she says, with seven or eight photographers, when a guard came in to say that the Twin Towers and the Pentagon had been attacked and that there was reason to believe that the next target was the White House. He said, “Run!”

“And,” Terry says, “we continued to talk. There was nothing in our psyche, [our] imagination, that could accommodate what had just been said.”

The guard returned and implored them to run.

And so they ran. They ran into the streets, where they could see the traffic completely stalled out in gridlock and the black plume rising.

For five or six days, unable to return to her native Utah, Terry Tempest Williams wandered the streets of Washington. When I heard her tell this story, she described the year that followed as being marked by that same sense of being unhoused and lost. She felt, she said, “hollow and brittle.”

Some of us remember that time, those days. And for those of us who are too young to remember 9/11, you will remember with the rest of us another time of terror and uncertainty, days of feeling, perhaps, at least occasionally disoriented and afraid: I am speaking of these pandemic days.

In March of 2020, a guest at Canyon Ranch in Tucson was speaking to Kem and me about a talk I had given earlier that day when she interrupted herself to read a text from her son. “He works for the National Health Service,” she said. “He’s saying that the country is shutting down and that I have to leave for home, now.”

I remember thinking, This is the United States of America. We don't shut down.

In these ensuing 18 months, we have done so many things that we “don't do,” and not done so many things we do ... or did. In the earliest days, we thought it would be just for a few weeks, and then we would return to “normal” — whatever that meant. As the pandemic deepened, Rev. Beth introduced us to the idea of the Great Pause, and invited us to imagine what it might mean to receive its hidden gifts. We shouldered on ... and on and on. Four and a half million people died: an unimaginable number. Some were loved by some of us; our own John Battiste was loved by all. The scale of this grief is also unimaginable. And slowly but surely, it has become apparent that some of this new normal is not going away. Kem says to me, “We are going to have to learn to live with this.”

What does that mean? None of us who doesn't have to wear a mask on the front line all day, every day, should be complaining about masking. But physical distancing? Eyeing everyone as suspect, the possible vector for a deadly virus? Even the most intrepid introvert is not made for this.

Provincetown poet Stanley Kunitz wrote,
 In a murderous time
 the heart breaks and breaks
 and lives by breaking.
 It is necessary to go
 through dark and deeper dark
 and not to turn.
 I am looking for the trail.¹

I am looking for the trail, and so I turn again to Terry Tempest Williams, who, on September 11th, 2002, bereft of how to pick up the pieces of her shattered heart, went at dusk and stood on a rocky point in Maine, facing the ocean. The tide was out, the mudflats exposed; Terry looked east to the horizon. And she spoke to Whom it May Concern. “Call it a prayer or a plea,” she says, “I said,
Give me one wild word, and I promise I will follow.”

One wild word.

¹ Stanley Kunitz, from *The Testing-Tree*

“And the word I heard in my own heart, the word that the sea rolled back to me, was *mosaic*.” Mosaic: “a conversation between what is broken;” “the art of taking that which is broken and creating something whole.” Mosaic: “celebrating brokenness and the beauty of being brought together.”

Give me one wild word, and I promise I will follow.

She kept her promise by taking the message of that word, literally, traveled to Ravenna, Italy, and signed up for an apprenticeship in the ancient art of mosaic. Ravenna: the capital of the Holy Roman Empire,² where lavish tales of the intersection of paganism and Christianity are written in jeweled ceilings, “a dazzling narrative of cut stones and glass.”

Terry met mosaicist Marco De Luca, who told her, “Our eyes are convex, not flat, so curved surfaces like a niche in a church provide ‘a place to rest our eyes.’” He pauses. “I call this an embrace. In mosaics, it is in the curve that light is reflected. For me, this translates into a spiritual space. When my eyes are turned outward and inward at the same time, this is where I find my depth.... Mosaic is a metaphor for my language of desire.”³

Terry’s teacher was Luciana. “Her work,” she says, “is unsigned; anonymous. She has no belief in invention or innovation. ‘It has all been done before,’ says Luciana. ‘There are rules.’” There are rules — a way to understand the fragmented world — which begin and end with a single truth: light, the play of light, is everything. In addition, there is a perfection in imperfection: the gaps between the tiles have their own truths to share.

Luciana goes on to teach that only after you have learned the rules of ancient mosaics can you break them. “She places a gold piece of glass between her finger and thumb on the hardie and holds the hammer at the base of its wooden handle. *Ting!* She sticks the gold smalti into the exact shape she desires. ‘You can learn this technique in fifteen minutes,’ she says. ‘It will take you a lifetime to master it.’”

She continues, “Mosaic is a way to organize your life. Making mosaics is a way of thinking about the world. Mosaics are created out of community.”

² 406 CE

³ Please see Terry Tempest Williams, *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*

Terry learned the art of mosaic making. “Shards,” she says, “can cut and wound or magnify a vision.” More importantly, she came to “believe in the beauty of all things broken.”

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Today, riding the crest of the new church year in these extraordinary times, now, more than ever, what does it mean for us to “insist on beauty, even as others try to destroy it?” “Beauty is not a luxury,” says Terry Tempest Williams, but a struggle for survival.” What courage do we need to call down — individually and as a spiritual community — to “assemble and reassemble the broken pieces?”⁴

I want to invite you to join me in the spiritual practice of asking for one wild word. I met a woman who, at the winter solstice, chooses a word for the year to come, and seeks to live into that word. I love the idea, but when I asked her how her word comes to her, she described a long, intellectual exercise. I want something deeper for us. I want *spiritual* discernment.

What is your one wild word?

What word do you need now

to lead you and carry you

through these difficult days?

I will tell you my word, and how it came to me, and I’m going to ask you to find your word, welcome it and embrace it, and tell me yours.

This summer, one of Kem’s and my closest friends was grieving three family deaths to the point of madness. We all know the helplessness of wanting so much to take away another’s suffering when there is nothing to do but stand by, empty-handed. I kept saying, “I want to help,” but there was no help to be had; there was nothing I could do, save to bear witness. I will tell you that it got to me. I could feel a lazy edge of listlessness, which was surely masking sadness and anger.

And then I began to notice that the times my heart would rally — when I would experience intimations of joy, and then real joy — were when I landed for a moment in the grace of acceptance, and found other ways to serve. We spent hours in the Audubon wildlife sanctuary, protecting the nests of Diamondback Terrapin turtles and then, weeks later, in releasing the hatchlings back to the marsh. Walking the wild paths, I was bathed in healing beauty. We spent whole days at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, working with the rescuers of sixteen hundred abused and abandoned animals. One wet dog nose in the palm of my hand melted

⁴ Thanks to Susan Salter Reynolds, “A Mosaic from Shattered Pieces,” *LA Times*, 11/30/08

10,000 sadnesses. We spent days helping our friend empty her mother's home — three thousand square feet packed floor to ceiling with a hoarder's terrible cache. It was hard, physical labor; we were filthy at day's end. If it had been ours to call, we would have walked every armload to a dumpster, but this was an exercise in saying goodbye to a complicated relationship, and we did as we were told. Sometimes we sorted mother's possessions at a level of granularity I could hardly imagine, only to be told, hours later, that it was all right to throw everything away.

And somewhere along the way, I remembered that helping is not necessarily the right way to approach something like this; help is not always what I think it is, but, instead, what the person being helped says it is. Many of us learned this in New Orleans, when Arlington Street answered the call to help rebuild there after hurricane Katrina. If someone whose house had been destroyed wanted us to put a new coat of paint on the fence — the only thing remaining after the flood waters receded— then paint we did. Perhaps this is the difference between helping and serving. Service is a spiritual practice; it comes from an open mind, open heart, open hands.

And then our friend Trudy's husband was felled by an untreated infection and medevacked to Boston. Trudy owns and manages one of the local breakfast cafés — a kind of groovy, hipster place we all love. After so many months of being closed by the pandemic, she was finally open, but keeping her ICU vigil over Scot, it seemed pretty obvious she'd have to shut down again and lay off her staff. But our friend Kristen — a public health nurse who is an excellent cook but who has never worked in a restaurant — said, *We can do this*, and stepped in, and invited me, also having never worked in a restaurant, to step in with her.

And so I found myself in a tiny side kitchen at some dark hour of the morning, baking coffee cake and lemon squares. Lots and lots and lots of coffee cakes and lemon squares. On the first morning — maybe two hours after, somehow, astonishingly, the restaurant opened — the head cook poked his head in to tell me — because, really, who else was he going to tell? — that the dishwasher hadn't shown up and no one knew where he was.

Well, I know how to wash dishes. For those of you who have washed dishes in the church kitchen after a big event, I appreciate you more than you can know, and thank you again. I took up my post at the triple sink for hours at a time, up to my elbows in soapy water and who knows what, joking with the staff, all of whom were young enough to be my grandchildren, all from Puebla, Mexico, scrubbing away, singing along to Latin music, and learning new words in Spanish, such as

delantal, meaning apron, and some that I can't repeat here. Along the way, one of them called me Dish Dog, then worried he had offended me when someone else scolded him, telling him I was a volunteer and a minister, for gods' sake. I loved it. The baking room became the Dish Dog bakery and everyone called me Dish Dog. *And I was happy.*

I didn't heal Scot. I couldn't allay Trudy's terror. I didn't ease our friend's terrible grief. All I did was serve and, in some tiny way, helped make their days, and mine, just a little easier. And so my word — my one wild word — surfaced like a lily from the muddy depths. I might have predicted love, kindness, presence, or generosity. They are all good words, and I'll take them, too. But the word I got was serve. And it has served me far more than I have served.

Beloved spiritual companions,

What courage do we need to call down
— individually
and as a spiritual community —
to “go through dark and deeper dark
and not to turn?”

“Shards ... can cut and wound
or magnify a vision.”
Let us assemble and reassemble
the broken pieces,
insisting on beauty.

Seek your one wild word —
seek it and find it and promise to follow it.
And tell me: What is it?

I close with the words of Chilean poet and diplomat Pablo Neruda:⁵

The time is difficult. Wait for me.
We will live it out vividly.
Give me your small hand:
we will rise and suffer,
we will feel, we will rejoice.

⁵ Pablo Neruda, from the opening of the poem, *With Her*.