HOW DOES RAVEN KNOW?
ENTERING SACRED WORLD | A MEDITATIVE MEMOIR

MARGARET WHEATLEY
to see the ordinary as the extraordinary, the familiar as strange, the mundane as sacred, the finite as infinite.

Novalis
German philosopher, late 1700s
opening
Listen close.
Something other than
the human mind
is at play here.

David Abram
Cultural ecologist
I tread so delicately in the world these days
balancing between commitment and despair
commitment to support those
holding up the failing structures of institutions
doing good and just work
in the midst of disintegration
despair a too familiar companion
whose triggers are everywhere
so plentiful they cannot be avoided
news reports
friends falling ill
refugee photos
outrages against good people
frightened angry protestors
and our silence
I am not interested in being hopeful or optimistic or working diligently to reverse the patterned path of history we tread so reliably toward collapse.

I am interested in being able to stay in the midst of this terrible travesty that degrades the human spirit or denies we have one caught on the balance beam of meaningful work and terrifying times.

I want to walk steady in the world learning what balance feels like blessed by the active presence of companions in sacred world.
Just now the leaves with new rain
shimmer a greeting to me
and birds not seen this summer
come sit with me
just for a moment
in recognition
as a slug moves majestically
on the wooden deck

eya continue their greeting
tell of us
tell the whole story
return
rediscover
we have never left you
The power of ravens to console
with their presence
has astonished me into a world
that is not new
only forgotten
lost in separation and domination
as now we sit in ravaged relationship
with the living world

it was never this way
in any other time
with any other people
a world focused only on us
full of manipulation
creating extremes of
isolation
loneliness
grief
terror

we are driving ourselves crazy
how am I so visible to you raven
at different times with different needs
that in a moment of acute distress
you ride the wind above my head
hovering to teach me that
to be stable in a violent wind
is possible

how do you know to fly so near
arching your back to the wind
just for a moment
so that I learn
strong back
facing gale
gives power to my heart

and then you soar
out of sight to a distant cliff
giving what I needed
gone
We were together. I forget the rest.
aspen
aspens are graceful messengers
for how to endure
for how to persevere no matter what

they are called quaking aspens because
their heart shaped leaves rustle
when the wind blows gently
and they call out their invitation
come be present

the oldest living organism on Earth
is a large grove of aspen in Utah
about two hours from where I live
on Aspen Way

it is said to be 80,000 years old
which may be a conservative estimate

before humans were ever on this continent
aspens were flourishing here
they survive underground
as root systems bound together that ignore
superficial calamities
the many trees are just one organism
many shoots connected as one root system
individual trees emerge from underground
when conditions are hospitable
we can’t see the tree for the forest

ey they travel through their root system
a new tree appearing 100 feet from home
by root they travel underground
ancient aspen roots still dug up by farmers
from their migration westward very long ago

in large groves nourishment is moved from
where it is to where it is needed
sharing without question
they are all in this together

a green layer just below the white bark
acts like leaves photosynthesizing
even in winter
elk deer moose who browse
in shade in summer
feed on this inner bark in the cold times

individual trees die and
the absence of their hormones
communicates their death
the root system responds by generating
far more trees than were lost
aspens crave instability
they need fire to thrive
after the old has been swept away
and the ground is cleared
by fire flood avalanche
when the light returns to empty ground
so do they

aspens are called a pioneering species
I am in a grove of aspens
in the midst of hundreds of trees that
wander all over the mountain
I take strength from being among them
straight standing trees seeking sky

many groves I once walked in
are now dying or so it appears
I look for the young shoots so as not to grieve

I don’t remember when I first learned of aspens
but I fell in love with them when
I knew to look below ground for guidance

rustling leaves invite me to be present and ask

how does it feel to be this rooted in community?
what stability what confidence what strength
is drawn from knowing your roots?
what does it feel like not to be consumed by worry
for individual existence?
what does it feel like to live in community
where one does not fear
living alone
or dying alone

many indigenous people knew this well
whatever their grief and loss
they are connected

severing their communities
moving them from ancient lands
has caused deadly harm

in all human history
exile has always been a terrifying punishment
What do you say in Athabascan when you leave each other? What is the word for goodbye? . . .

She looked at me close. We just say, Ttaa. That means, See you.

We never leave each other. When does your hand say goodbye to your heart?

Mary TallMountain
Koyukon Athabascan
I should like to think that prehistoric man’s first invention, the first condition for his survival, was a sense of humor.

Andre Leroi-Gourhan
Paleoanthropologist
human
it is not known how many years ago we humans set out to occupy Earth if we include Neanderthals who 150,000 years ago were caring for their sick and burying their dead with flowers and ritual

perhaps we as Homo sapiens sapiens our formal name says we are doubly wise left our African homeland 90,000 years ago it is not precisely known when we left but we journeyed forth as other hominids had done one to two million years earlier

we settled every continent except Antarctica surviving setbacks and natural catastrophes that nearly extinguished everyone about 40,000 years ago our Neanderthal cousins disappeared perhaps because of us and we took over Earth sapiens sapiens?
this is not to romanticize our species
which merits no current honor
but to notice who we’ve been
and what we hominids did
in deep history

I was introduced to this ancient world
in a local museum in Tuscany
here there was a case of implements
500,000 years old
I stared down into this display
willing my imagination to take me there

Homo erectus began using fire
for warmth then cooking
at least 800,000 years ago
fire hearths still visible today from
ancient ancestors who sat in circle round the fire
so that no one was left out in the cold

I cherish this image as now we sit in circle
regaining ancient intimacy
If there is no sense of rejoicing and magical practice, you find yourself simply driving into the high wall of insanity.

Chögyam Trungpa
Buddhist teacher
magic
all living beings through all time
have needed to know the world well
knowing life depends on this

most peoples throughout time
have seen beyond the visible world
they and still we rely on
symbols objects rituals
to summon forces of protection and plenty
knowing to respect and evoke
the unseen world with offerings

modern culture is an anomaly
to the pattern of human cultures
withdrawing from everything
except our five material senses
arrogant with vision that sees
about 1 percent of what
the light spectrum reveals

seeing so little we grow more
frantic to know what is out there
yet push aside those who see

no wonder we are fearful of
being harmed as we harm the world
scared humans scarring sacred world
many years ago when studying  
A Course in Miracles  
I was puzzled by the teaching  
there is no order of difficulty in miracles  
I remained perplexed until  
my Tibetan teacher explained  

those who perform miracles  
are those who know the  
true nature of reality  
all miracles display that knowledge  
offering a glimpse into  
the inner workings of this world  
and what’s possible here  

stories of miracles are venerated  
in all cultures  
except ours  
yet we are the champion purveyors of  
magical thinking  
believing we can be saved  
by the very thinking that created  
all this destruction denying  
the way things truly work denying  
the fact that nature demands obedience denying  
she has well-functioning laws  

magical thinking is to believe  
we’re going to get away with this
we are told how wrong it is to impute
our intelligence to animals
building them up raising their ranking
attributing behaviors meant only for us
but what if we were as intelligent as animals?
if we had their intelligence
we would not push away
what we don’t want to know
we’d know denial is a form of suicide
if we had their intelligence
we would notice who’s around us
no longer duped into thinking
we can make it on our own
if we had their intelligence
we would engage with everything
mindfulness not a fad knowing
staying awake means staying alive
we are a young species
we would be wiser if we
recognized our immaturity
and used our intelligence
to take our right place on the planet
when I first moved to the mountains
a home of peace and plenty
what I wish for everyone
I remember sitting in an alpine meadow
overwhelmed with gratitude
that soon deformed to guilt

as an activist I lectured myself
you should be living in the real world
not hiding away here
a crowded city somewhere
coping with pollution fear and violence

from the grasses of the meadow and
the quaking leaves of aspens
a voice sounded silent and clear

what makes you think this is not the real world?
the other world is painfully distorted
this is what life is
peace that pervades through the cycles of
creation and destruction
harmony maintained
as great change happens
relationships recognized as
the life force of creation
this is the real world

others have told me of receiving a similar message
I am standing by a window in what seems my darkest hour
my teacher standing with me as we gaze through trees
to see the sea that turned to ice this winter

she and I are well-cared for by raven
we have often shared stories of their presence and how in turn we care for our trustworthy totem

she has come to help me walk through my despair
to the unshakable confidence revealed the other side of darkness
but here at the window with her I have yet to know the good that awaits from my dark descent

and then the ravens appear all seven that have hovered round this winter in past years there had been more but this year only seven and here they all are settling in the trees a raven circle of comfort

my teacher touches my back tenderly saying this is a good sign isn’t it and I can only ask

how does raven know
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