Things That Join The Sea and The Sky
Field Notes on Living

Mark Nepo
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Stopping the Noise

When there is silence, one finds the anchor of the Universe within oneself.

Lao Tzu

Often we’re cast about by the noise of the world and the noise in our heads. Often we’re mesmerized by the stunning cacophony that masks itself as excitement. And though there’s much to be gained for being in the world, we can’t make sense of it till we stop the noise, till we go below the noise, till we go below the habit of our own thoughts. But it’s impossible to be still and quiet all the time. As a whale or dolphin must break surface, only to dive back down, only to break surface again, each of us must break surface into the noise of the world, only to rest our way back into the depth of stillness, where we can know ourselves and life more deeply, until we have to break surface again. No one is ever done with this crossover between noise and stillness. Not even those committed to a contemplative life. Not even those who are blind or mute. For the noise of the mind never dies. It can only be put in perspective, quieted until we can hear the more ancient voices that give us life. At every turn, we need to stop the noise, our own and everyone else’s, not to retreat from the world but to live more fully in it.
Today I am sad, or so I thought. But more I am tired of keeping up with all that doesn’t matter. I’m sipping coffee, listening to rain. I like watching the leaves hang in long weather. I like to close my eyes and feel the rain quiet the earth. I welcome that quieting. I like to have my habits of going here and there interrupted. I was caught in the rain when coming here. The cool blotches sink in all over. The many lists I carry in my shirt are wet. I take them out to dry, and all the tasks have blurred. At last. Unreadable. Forgettable. We carry these lists near our heart and finger them like worry beads. It doesn’t matter what is on them. They are the thieves, and it is the insidious virtue to have everything in order before we live that is the greatest thief. I feel the rain drip down my neck. I think I’m becoming unfinished.
When I stop, the smallest things make me weep: the afternoon light dusting our dog’s face, the beads of rain darkening the head of St. Francis in the neglected garden, and my father’s stroke-laden tongue falling through the phone. The ache of being here reveals itself as the heartbeat of Eternity. I hear it in the throng of birds beaten back by wind, in the wall of silence that crumbles between old friends too stubborn to forgive, and in the swollen minds on the train trying to find their way home. The ache of being here undoes my need for fences.
SHORT WISDOM
ON A LONG PLANET

We keep turning one thing into another and calling it progress. We keep machining the beauty off of things as they are, creating more and more things to hide in, as if that will let us live longer. We keep burrowing into everything but ourselves: churning trees into lumber, animals into meat, wind into electricity, vegetables into remedies, and silence into noise; turning the earth, continent by continent, into one giant anthill. We keep eating our way through the arms of the Universe, desperate for something large and quiet to hold us.
SPEECHLESS

I pause under that summer tree, the one that feels like a friend, as my dog wonders why we’ve stopped. She was trotting in such rhythm. But when this still, I wonder what part of me, way down, remains untouched by dream or memory? What drop of being remains out of reach of the opinions of others? When up close, each thing reveals its shimmer. And it’s the unexpected closeness that holds everything together. The light spreads across my dog’s face, her eyes so devoted to wherever I want to go. Can I be this devoted to the pull of life? Last month, I saw a dolphin and her calf slip back into the surf, and the pucker of the sea where they went under said, *This is what it feels like to shimmer and go speechless.* There’s a closeness we recognize in everything simple, as if we knew everything at the moment of our birth, and living is how we remember it all, piece by broken piece. It can happen when I stop to pick up what you drop in the supermarket. As your eyes shimmer, I realize we’ve known each other forever, though we just met.
Our Hands

Sometimes, with no warning, we suffer an earthquake and have to remake the ground beneath us. Someone we love may leave or die or think us cruel when we are kind. Sometimes the tools we need break or are stolen or simply stop working, and we have to invent more. Sometimes it feels like we can’t get through, that the phone won’t get reception, and the computer gets jammed. And sometimes what gets through is partial and misunderstood. It’s then we’re forced to go barefoot and refind our hands. Sometimes we’re asked to drift away from the crowd in order to be found by what we love.
I’m not afraid of dying, but losing those I love. I can’t quite imagine the world without them. Like waking to a rip in the sky through which the sun might leave. The only thing that helps is to go below the noise. There, I listen to the same piece of music day after day. I play it over and over till the squirrel in my head stops chewing and my heart admits it’s tired of why. So many things show their beauty when we go quiet. So many truths are present when we look up from under our trouble. To fall below the world while still living in the world makes us remember that the truth that waits under our opinions is our home. So tell me, am I home? Are you home? When was the last time you looked up from under your trouble? And when will the fugitive we hide inside accept that our self-worth was there all along? What sort of rain will make the seed inside our head grow?

This Is How

When we can open our hearts and work with what we’re given, loving what’s before us, life stays possible. Then, through effort and grace, we do what we can with what we have. And when exhausted by all that’s in the way, we’re faced with the chance to accept and love what’s left, which is everything. This is how we discover that Heaven is on Earth.
I am troubled by my shapeless fears. My God, these anxieties!
Who can live in the modern world without catching his share of them?

VINCENT VAN GOGH

I was born when all I once feared—I could love.

THE FEMALE SUFI SAINT RABIA OF BASRA

Fear has been a great and unasked-for teacher. At every step of my cancer journey, fear was there to greet me like a dark elder, nudging me closer to all I was afraid of. I was continually forced to face what I feared with no instruction. At the bottom of every fear, when I could reach it, was my want not to die. I think all fear unravels to our want to be here. When we can get through the rush of fear, when we can endure its intensity, its real gift shows. For under all fear, no matter how legitimate or inflated, is the shimmer and glow of how precious it is to be alive. If seen all the way through, fear allows us to live as if we mean it. More often, fear hangs around like a nagging cold or toothache we can’t seem to get rid of. It can discolor everything and agitate our soul. An important practice then is how to unravel our fear when it wraps itself around us, which it will.
Oferring

We fist up to weather the days, though no one told us it has to be this way. We just constrict to keep what is tender from being hurt. If blessed, we crack and are pried open anyway, till the heart like an oyster shows its softness. Opened by time, I am more fallible, more humble, able to trip more easily into joy. Who would have guessed that the softness between us glitters like the stardust that it is. Who would have guessed that offering what is tender is what saves us.