

Dear friends,

December is the month I start cleaning, sorting, throwing away, organizing. This year I even started to move the furniture around (what there is, which isn't much) to make a new beginning.

Today is one of those that we have every "winter" here, pouring, pounding, incredibly noisy rain that goes on and on for a day or sometimes more. I'm not good at numbers but from a simple gauge, I would guess maybe an inch of rain an hour, probably 13 or more inches in 24 hours. Very wet. The kind of day when the power may go out so am cleaning up my computer, "saving" every minute.

It occurred to me that it would be fun to send you some pieces of writing -- mine and other people's -- that I came across these last days, before blindly sliding into 2009.

No particular order. Pick and choose. Skip or copy.

"In an individual selfishness uglyfies the soul;
for the human species, selfishness is extinction."

David Mitchell, CLOUD ATLAS, © 2004

All my relations is a Native American expression: "all in my environment that I relate to." My family (all family), friends, my boss, the people I work with, the company I work for, my house and my pets, my car — but also the trees, the sun, the moon in all its phases, water in all its forms, so essential to Life, the earth itself, our mother, all animals all around, tiny or big, the six directions (north, east, south, west, up and down), all plants wild and those we eat. And a hundred more. To remind us that we are a part of all my relations, part of All That Is. Humans, are not "better than," any of our relations. We are not the boss, nor the owner of the real estate of this planet. We are not even the managers of the Biosphere, that thin layer around the planet in which all Life plays, interacts, and interdepends, to coin a new verb.

The Invitation, May 1994, Oriah Mountain Dreamer, Indian Elder

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living.

I want to know what you ache for, and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are.

I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love, for your dreams, for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon.

I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow, if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have become shriveled and closed from fear of further pain!

I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own, without moving to hide it or fade it or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with JOY, mine or your own: if you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes without cautioning us to be careful, be realistic, or to remember the limitations of being a human.

It doesn't interest me if the story you're telling me is true.

I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself; If you can bear the accusation of betrayal and not betray your own soul, I want to know if YOU can be FAITHFUL and therefore be trustworthy.

I want to know if you can see beauty even when it is not pretty every day, and if you can source your life from ITS presence.

I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine, and still stand on the edge of a lake and shout to the silver of the full moon, "YES!"

It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have.

I want to know if you can get up after a night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone, and do what needs to be done for the children.

It doesn't interest me who you are, how you came to be here.

I want to know if you will stand in the center of the fire with me and not shrink back.

It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied.

I want to know what sustains you from the inside when all else falls away.

I want to know if you can be alone with yourself, and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments.

(2002) When I hear what happens all over the world, I cringe. What has happened to us humans? Where does this obsession with changing the earth come from? When did we get the idea that we own this planet? Why must we change it and shape it to conform to some idea in our heads? How can we think ourselves above, and different from What Is?

Some people say we are different from the rest of creation because we have intelligence. Oh yeah? If we were intelligent would we poison the very ground we stand on? Would we kill each other, would we eradicate a thousand species of living beings each day? Would we, living in supposedly the richest country in the world, allow millions of our neighbors to have no job, no shelter, no income, no food? Would we change the very climate of our planet by polluting the air and the water we must rely on to survive?

It is not that we are ignorant of all these facts, we know the statistics, but we seem to be powerless to stop our — let's be honest — stupidity!

Other people say we are different because we have a soul, we are spiritual beings, because we know God. There are as many Gods as there are religions. In fact, there are as many Gods as there are people!. For a few thousand years, we have fought ever more gruesome wars because we believed that our God was better or bigger or truer than their God. Is that what makes us special?

“ IF WE WERE ON THE RIGHT ROAD, HAVING TO LEAVE IT WOULD MEAN ENDLESS DESPAIR.

BUT WE ARE ON A ROAD THAT ONLY LEADS TO A SECOND ONE, AND THEN TO A THIRD ONE, AND SO FORTH, AND THE REAL HIGHWAY WILL NOT BE SIGHTED FOR A LONG TIME - PERHAPS NEVER- AND WE DRIFT IN DOUBT. BUT ALSO IN AN INCONCEIVABLY BEAUTIFUL DIVERSITY; SO THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF HOPES REMAINS AN ALWAYS UNEXPECTED MIRACLE, BUT IN COMPENSATION, THE MIRACLE REMAINS FOREVER POSSIBLE.”

FRANZ KAFKA

I planted a lemon tree a week or so ago. it loves the wet, I can sense that she is happy and content to be here (I have no idea why this lemon tree is a she ☐ it is a grafted tree, and the she comes from the root stock, I think).

This place is dancing with the complex energies of life in its many forms, and it is all so young, so new, that it has not learned to evolve slowly. And in just a few square miles we have two very different ecosystems. A desert where if something grows at all it is slowly — being overtaken by imported plants that had years of experience coping with lava deserts. And a few miles from there, at higher altitude, a peculiar alpine ecology on thin soil but with lots of moisture: a magical world of green mists sliding through grey veils, and an abundance of life force bursting in all dimensions, undisciplined as yet.

The world is a magical place! (Volcano, HI, 1992)

“I long for answers. How can individuals stop the actions that are degrading the quality of life, closing doors not only for future generations, but also for those now alive?

“... Thousands of once and nevermore species are rendered extinct each year, perhaps as many as four a minute, through rainforest destruction and loss of other unique ecosystems. With brazen indifference to world opinion and international agreements, some nations still dump highly toxic materials into the sea and sky; a deadly legacy for the future, with immediate consequences for those around here and now. Despite clear evidence that ocean ecosystems are collapsing and fish populations cannot sustain commercial taking, huge nets, trawlers, and factory ships are still being deployed, and more are being built.”

Sylvia A. Earle, SEA CHANGE; A Message of The Oceans, © 1995

(1998) As anyone who lives in America, and who is reaching a certain age, i have often thought about and worried about the confrontation between modern technology and economics and values. I had expected the confrontation to happen in the medical arena, so i was ill-prepared to deal with it in the arena of teeth.

In America, at the end of the twentieth century, medical (and dental) technology is advanced, sophisticated, extreme - doctors and dentists have learned to do the most amazing things with bodies. They can remove, replace, patch, borrow from others .. organs, arms and legs probably. They have drugs and treatments that do all kind of things to the body.

It is very clear that all these treatments are only designed to prolong the existence of the physical body. In fact my fear has always been that under the present system a sickness, almost any sickness, puts one in the hands of physicians, who then - under the laws of this country, apparently - can do with one's body as they deem fit, without necessarily respecting the wishes of the patient. There have been enough

law suits in the past few years to convince me that once in the hands of a doctor, the patient loses most of his or her rights to her/his own body.

The statistics of the economical cost of all that treatment are by now well known. An enormous proportion of all medical costs (80% or more) is spent on patients who are known to be terminally ill. Patients who are so unlucky as to fall in the hands of a doctor in a hospital toward the end of their life, can expect to be stripped of all their wealth and then die.

I have written in my will that I do not want any of those extreme measures at the end. I do not want "heroic measures" to keep me alive. I do not want to die with tubes in me, I do not want my life prolonged simply because it is technically possible to keep a heart beating, to oxygenate and circulate blood. The economic costs of such measures are staggering, the indignity is awesome. To some extent the same conflict between technology and economics and values is also true in non-life-threatening diseases. There are many chronic conditions for which relief can be obtained through medical technology and a great deal of money. In a real sense it is true that in America being healthy has much to do with how much money one has to spend on doctors, medicines, treatments.

I have been quite obsessed with these issues for some years now. I do not want to spend what money I have to prolong my life with the latest in medical technology. I have lived well beyond the time span allotted to most of my fellow men in the human population of the world at the end of the twentieth century. There is something extremely wrong about the unequal distribution of wealth in the world, which is evident not only in how much people consume in different parts of the world, but primarily in how long they live.

Now I am faced with a similar choice, when I must choose between accepting the consequences of my past (the war years, for instance, when for more than six months all we had to eat was sugar beets, a diet designed to rot teeth - hence the many gold fillings that were put into my teeth right after the war) or to devote a considerable amount of money and time and agony on restoring and reconstructing my "natural teeth". The choice is the more difficult because I may have the money, and the time, and (maybe?) can put up with the agony.

All this made me think about the changes we all must live with in this century. The cost of the repair of each of the two teeth I am having work done on now, is the same as the cost of a new VCR. (note, Dec 26, 2008--I could not remember what a VCR was, and why I might want one) Which made me think of the complex calculations people used to make to find a sort of universal standard of living. When comparing nations, for instance, it does not really tell one very much to know that in a certain country the average income is \$600- a year. It is far more important to know how much that \$600- buys.

There are still areas of the world where money is not really used for the daily needs of a family. Houses are built on the spot by the villagers, clothing is minimal and cheap, medical services - if they are available at all - are free (as they are in many parts of the world). I do not know how much it costs to live in the United States, but it seems certain that quite a few people "live" on a few hundred dollars a month, others cannot make it on one hundred thousand dollars a year. The difference is in the quality of life, and to an ever larger extent in the length of life, survival. In the United States life extension is bought and sold.

It is the middle classes in the United States who experience this dilemma most acutely, because they cannot afford life extension, but because of the laws of this country at this time in history it is forced upon them.

When I had a young family, in the 1950's and 60's, budgeting meant planning for the purchase of necessary goods. Things. Now in the eighties budgeting means planning for services, because goods - things - have become so cheap, comparatively speaking, and services have become so expensive, that there has been a real reversal.

If the repair of one tooth costs the price of a new VCR, and if I have thirty teeth in my mouth, the restoration of my mouth will cost as much as a car. But I can buy a car on time, I can pay so much a month for so many years, until the car is paid off. Can one do the same with a mouth? Can I buy a new set of teeth on time payments? Do I want to?

(note: 10 years later, December 26, 2008: -- No, I did not want to, and didn't)

57 Being Simple

Run the country by doing what's expected.
Win the war by doing the unexpected.
Control the world by doing nothing.
How do I know that?
By this.

The more restrictions and prohibitions in the world,
the poorer people get.
The more experts the country has
the more of a mess it's in.
The more ingenious the skillful are,
the more monstrous their inventions.
The louder the call for law and order,
the more the thieves and con men multiply.

So a wise leader might say:
I practice inaction, and the people look after themselves.
I love to be quiet, and the people themselves find justice.
I don't do business, and the people prosper on their own.
I don't have wants, and the people themselves are uncut wood.

Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching, A book about the way and the power of the way. A new English version by Ursula
k. Le Guin, © 1997

Author's note: "uncut wood" — here likened to the human soul: the uncut, uncarved, unshaped,
unpolished, native, natural stuff is better than anything that can be made of it. Anything done to it
deforms and lessens it.
Its potentiality is infinite. Its uses are trivial.

Maybe I should apologize before I even begin this...
No, I won't.

This month, for some reason, have been reading three books of french writers, one after another, all of
them about what for me is "the" war. The writing of Mr. le Clézio, who won the Nobel Prize this year, is
exquisite, even in translation. Clear as crystal, a straight path to the depths of my heart and head. He
writes the thoughts and observations of a girl, twelve, thirteen at the beginning of the book. The story
begins in a very small village, high in the Alps between France and Italy, which, toward the end of the
war, has become a sort of last but temporary refuge for Jews from all over Europe.

People who have not experienced war cannot imagine -- and do not want to know -- the kinds of
suffering humans can go through. And, yes, survive. The scars never heal.

The girl, Esther - but that is a Jewish name, so she was called Héléne -- hears and sees Jews from
Poland and Russia read from "the Book of the Beginning." She cannot understand the words, yet they
touch her deeply. Later in the book, a Palestinian girl, same age, in a refugee camp in Israel, is moved by
the Muslim prayers of a Bedouin boy and an old woman who is dying.

That brought back a memory of my childhood. Every day at noon the siren would wail, once.
Everyone and everything stopped. People on bicycle got off their bikes, people got out of their cart or car.
Muslims spread their prayer mat on the street facing Mecca, kneeling, then touching forehead to the
ground. The noon prayer is fairly short. After a few minutes, the mats get rolled up, people get on their

bikes, in their carts; the world goes on. On days that I came home from school early (Saturdays, probably) I too got off my bike, and stood still in the utter silence that had dropped over the little town. Our driver, Udin, who was my friend, explained that it was proper to stand still and pay attention. I did. Those few minutes of total silence I felt a oneness with people of all ages, races, men, women, children... Even the animals were quiet. Something happened to me inside.

Reading about how Jews pray, and remembering Muslim prayer, it occurred to me that many people must have forgotten how to pray. How can you pray sitting in a chair, or even on a bench in church, reading from a book? Prayer must involve the whole body; the whole self must be prayer. Not just mouth and brain, but hands, eyes, the long muscles of the legs and the back.

Perhaps ceremonial acts get stale and lose heart?

My walks here are prayer: my eyes caress, my hands encourage, my whole being reaches out to a spider, a wild weed with a tiny flower, the blue of sky. Life eats Life, of course. And I breathe in Life. I take a little from the air that is intimately shared by humans and animals, plants and trees, and give back a slightly changed breath of Life to all life forms everywhere. To me it is the mysticism of the chaos that is Life that I connect with, in me and all around. I feel the "holiness" of that intense attention as a mantle around me. I've seen a feral cat sit and watch, then follow me.

My kind of prayer does not ask favors; it affirms what I know with my entire being: that I, we, are tiny molecules in an immense and awesome whole -- probably wholes within wholes within wholes.

That's all.

Wishing you courage and an open heart to experience the year 2009.

robert