

Making Peace with Feminine Power

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Throughout my life, I have been a lover of animals. Out of this affection for animals, when I needed a little extra income, I have worked as a house-sitter, caring for people's homes and pets while they travel. One could say that my first ministry was a domestic one, my first parishioners a number of cats and dogs.

My favorite client was a woman named Beth, who lived in the upscale neighborhood of Brookline, Massachusetts. Nestled among other gracious houses, in the curve of a gently winding road, her home was like a museum, large but understated and filled with colorful paintings and objects from her trips around the world. When Beth traveled, she went away for long periods of time and insisted on paying me more than my going rate. In exchange for caring for her four charming cats—all named for prophets in the Hebrew bible—I got to live in her home and make a tidy profit. It was so luxurious I often felt like I should be the one paying her.

It was during Beth's month-long trip to Turkey that it happened. One morning, I woke and found a number of red welts along one half of my body. They were painfully itchy. I had never experienced something like this before so I turned to our culture's trusted source for medical information—the internet. Because the marks were on one half of my body, I concluded that I must have shingles, a recurrence of the chicken pox virus. I called my doctor immediately.

On the examination table, Doctor Benton looked at these terrible welts and told me that I did not have shingles, as a couple of the welts were on the other side of my body. "It looks like you have been bitten by some sort of arthropod," she said.

This didn't make any sense. I rarely saw bugs of any kind in Beth's house. With no answer to my medical mystery, I went back to Brookline.

Over the next two days, my symptoms became much worse. I noticed that all of my welts were below the sleeve line of my night shirt. Co-workers, who hadn't noticed anything when I first went to the doctor, saw the growing patch of angry welts and began asking questions like, "Heather, have you been...camping?" The itching was maddening.

After much pleading and cajoling and a special call from Doctor Benton, I was able to secure an appointment with a dermatologist. It took Doctor Lee all of two minutes to conclude that my welts were "from some sort of arthropod." Bed bugs, to be exact.

I couldn't believe that Beth's immaculate home housed a colony of bed bugs. When Beth called to see how things were going, she couldn't believe it either. But it was only when I began sleeping on the couch that the welts went away.

The shock of this event was more than the surprise of finding unpleasant, bloodsucking bugs in paradise. Somehow, I had lost sight of my place in the order of things. Through my growth and spiritual development, I had come to understand myself and my fellow human beings as vessels of the divine, beloved children of the universe. But I had lost sight of the fact that along with being a child of God, I was also some creature's dinner. Despite my love of animals, I assumed safety and superiority over the natural world. My experience with the bedbugs taught me I would much rather learn to pray than come to terms with the fact that *I* too, was prey.

In the book of Genesis, after God created the earth, light and dark, the water, the sky, the plants, the sun, moon and seasons and sea creatures God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth... And it was so... Then God said, let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”¹

One does not need to be a biblical believer to assume that humankind has dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and the wild animals of the earth. But my encounter with bedbugs reminded me that I don’t have dominion “over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” And, if we are to be honest with ourselves, we are called to question the belief that we have authority over the earth and any of it’s creatures. This recognition of our vulnerability in the web of life is called “humility,” a word that derives from the word “humus,” a word meaning “earth.”²

As we begin to face the impending disaster of climate change; live in a world of polluted water, eroding soil, poisoned air; and as countless species face a holocaust due to destroyed habitat, increased temperatures and disappearing sustenance; we are in danger of recognizing our place in the order of things too late. And, so, we are also called to consider what stands in the way of our awareness, of what prevents us from becoming awake to our true place in the web of life.

Our relationship to the earth has a parallel in the human community. Each Spring, in the midst of the tremendous suffering

¹ Genesis 1:24-26 (Abridged,) New Revised Standard Version

² Meister Eckhart, cited in *Original Blessing* by Matthew Fox, 59

of the earth, we celebrate Earth Day. Each Spring, in the midst of world-wide suffering of women, we celebrate Mothers’ Day. Amnesty International, a human rights organization, describes the treatment of women as a “human rights scandal.” In the words of their leaders, “the...threat of violence affects the lives of women everywhere, cutting across boundaries of wealth, race and culture. In the home and in the community, in times of war and peace, women are beaten, raped, mutilated, and killed with impunity.”¹ Whether it is mother or it is earth, humanity’s belief in “dominion over” has brutal and deadly effects.

At the heart of this suffering, there is a spiritual understanding: That which has the power to create also has the power to destroy. I believe we degrade sources of life in fear of our own death, in fear of humility and vulnerability. On some primal level, we know that what has called us into being also renders us vulnerable to annihilation. We try to have “dominion over” these threats and, in so doing, further endanger our mere existence and the integrity of the human spirit.

I have come to see this connection between our regard towards creation and our vulnerability within it through experience in my own life. So often from the pulpit, I share memories about the lakeside cabin where I spent my summers with my grandparents and my cousins. More so than any other place in the world, this is the place I consider home.

The cabin rests where the lake water meets the shore, the lake surrounded by low, gray mountains and hills thick with pine and birch. The lake is almost silent, a place where you rise to the sound of mourning doves singing or the eerie call of a loon across the water—no car alarms, no traffic, no alarm clock. The water is teeming with life; generations of ducks swim past the shore, rings

¹ http://www.amnestyusa.org/Our_Issues/Womens_Human_Rights/page.do?id=1011012&n1=3&n2=39

ripple on the surface as fish feed on bugs. Natural springs flow with clear, cold water, spilling freely onto rocks, draining and running down into the lake. It is a beautiful place.

But, if I am to be truthful when I illustrate this place, this is not all I know of the landscape. Along with the sight of moose tracks and the call of birds is the whine of boat motors and chainsaws. Recalling the lake also means recalling the beautiful but disturbing sight of gasoline floating on the water's surface when someone's motor leaked its toxic fuel into the lake. I must also note that, for a long time, the primary town entertainment was driving to the landfill at night and, like a drive-in movie, shining headlights into the mountains of trash so we could watch the bears feed on our garbage.

Part of this story of human destruction also includes the destructive power of nature. In every family of ducks that swam past our point on the shore, I knew that only a few birds would survive, the others killed by disease or eaten by foxes. Then there was the tornado that knocked down all the trees between the cabin and the lake, the lake bursting through the plate glass window and filling the living-room with mud and debris. I don't remember this traumatic event as I was only a baby then—my family put me under a bed, in the arms of my cousin while the wind and wilderness assailed the tiny cabin. Remembering the people of Greensburg, Kansas, I know I am lucky to be alive to hear and tell you this story, lucky that the forces of nature did not destroy us.

I doubt there is any conscious decision to exploit the earth because our lives are so fragile within it. Yet, there is likely a primal connection between our recognition of the power of creation and our attempts to keep this power under our "dominion."

In Western culture, this emphasis on destruction, our affirmation of death over life, is also driven by belief in original sin. Mystical Christian Matthew Fox reminds us that belief in our inherent

wickedness is not true to biblical scripture and is more an invention of St. Augustine than what lives at the core of Judeo-Christian traditions. Such a deviation from the earliest writings of Judaism and Christianity and the will of the divine, in Fox's words, "plays kindly into the hands of empire-builders, slavemasters and patriarchal society...[Belief in original sin] divides and thereby conquers, pitting one's thoughts against one's feelings, one's body against one's spirit...people against earth, animals and nature... [D]eeper questions about community, justice and celebration never come...Blessing is politically dangerous; the art of savoring is politically suspect."¹

If there is truth to the spiritual understanding that we oppress the vessels of feminine power out of fear of our own vulnerability, there is also spiritual hope. Present in our own beings, in the Earth we call home, in our Western religious traditions, in other faiths rooted in the rhythms of the earth, are sources of resilience and new life. While life is forever entwined with the real risk of annihilation, these sources offer healing, creativity and this-life redemption for our environment and the women of our world. Matthew Fox calls these sources of life—this "spirit of life," if you will—"original blessing." Fox affirms that "a theology of blessing is a theology about a different kind of power. Not the power of control or the power of being over or being under but the power of fertility."²

I close with another story about the danger and promise inherent in creation, a modern parable about a theology of feminine power and "original blessing."

Before his death, Rabbi Edwin Friedman served congregations in the Washington D.C. area. Friedman was also a pioneer in family systems thinking as it applies to religious life. His students, who

¹ Fox, 54-55.

² Fox, 53.

carry on his work through the Center for Family Process, quote Friedman as saying that he would not want to bring his congregation to Mt. Sinai but would rather bring them to Mt. St. Helens—the volcano in Oregon that erupted in May of 1980—so they may bear witness to the forces of creation in the midst of destruction. ¹

When Mt. St. Helens blew, the impact was catastrophic: the explosion destroyed the top of the mountain, leaving a mile-wide crater in its wake, and sparked a massive avalanche. Hundreds of acres of forest were scorched and burned, leaving behind a dead and desolate landscape. In the end, fifty-seven people died and 250 houses, 47 bridges, 15 miles of railroad track and 185 miles of highway were destroyed.² Lakes at the base of the mountain were filled with debris, depleting oxygen from the water, killing the fish and other animals. Ecologists predicted that it would take decades, maybe even centuries, for the lakes to recover, if they recovered at all.

Five years after the explosion, the water in these lakes was clear and able to sustain life. In 1993, fish were found in Spirit Lake; their origins were mysterious as no fish were stocked in the lake and no fish were believed to survive the effects of the eruption. The few lupine flowers that endured the blast have been a source of new nutrients for the mountainside, creating thousands more lupines to continue this renewal. It didn't take long for us humans to realize that “many organisms survived in, what initially appeared to be, a lifeless landscape.” Even in the face of complete destruction, the forces of life prevailed. ³

¹ Dr. Myrna Carpenter, Center for Family Process, Clergy Track I lecture, April 24, 2007.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_St._Helens

³ <http://www.fs.fed.us/gpnf/mshnvm/education/teachers-corner/library/life-returns01.shtml#05>

Earth, our well of “original blessing,” will prevail. The question before us is whether we will be among earth’s creatures and this question hinges on how much we can make peace with the truth about our place in the order of things, our humility about our “role in the humus.” Our survival as a species and the safety of the women of our world hinge on exchanging investment in “dominion over” for reverence in fertility and creation, for different sources of inspiration to guide our relationship with the earth

That which has the power to create does have the power to destroy. Yet, each one of us possesses that creative resilience that can be applied to a practice of blessing. And bless we must for our world is heavy with oppression and “blessing is politically dangerous.” This Mothers’ Day, amid the vibrant beauty of the Spring season, let it begin with us.