

On Being Frederick

David R. Weiss – July 19, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #34 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

No, not *that* Frederick. (As some of you know, my father is named Frederick, but this post is *not* about finding myself becoming my dad.) I'm thinking about Frederick, the field mouse, in Leo Lionni's simple picture book, *Frederick*.¹⁰⁸ It's a sweetly told fable that reminds us the value of persons and their work is not always immediately apparent.

In the story a family of field mice are busily preparing for the coming winter: gathering bits of food and bedding. They are nonstop activity. But Frederick, who spends his days staring across the meadow, seems to be doing nothing. When the other mice scold him for not working, Frederick replies that he *is* working: gathering sun rays, meadow colors, and words. The other mice, dedicated to more practical preparations, are skeptical.

Winter arrives and so long as the food is plentiful and the bedding plump the new season feels festive despite the barren fields outside. But as the winter drags on, the nuts and seeds grow scarce and the soft straw no longer buffers the cold. Spirits waver. Finally, the mice turn to Frederick and ask, "What about *your* supplies, Frederick?" And he delivers. Using his words to summon memories of the warm sun and the colorful meadow and the very rhythm of their lives, he weaves meaning back into the long bitter winter. For all of them. The worth of Frederick's "work," hard to see during the summer or fall, reveals itself in the moment most needed.

Thank goodness (for the sake of all the mice) that Frederick persisted in his own harvest activity even under the reproachful glances of his fellow mice. That's a sense of vocation.

So, on being Frederick.

I've actually been Frederick for some time. A misfit in both the academy and the church, for decades now I've known the questioning glances of those who wonder why I'm not doing more "real" work. I have great respect for college and university professors who do their work well. That *might* have been my work had things played out differently earlier in my life, but at this point—relegated to the ranks of adjunct faculty—that work cannot be mine any longer. It offers a mere pittance for the knowledge and experience I have. Worse, it directly distracts with the pretense of respect and purpose, from the work that my "inner Frederick" feels called to do.

Similarly, I have great respect for pastors who do their work well. But it isn't my work. (Although I would welcome a church that offered to "host" me as public theologian, providing a tiny bit of support, measure of collegiality, and the mutual embrace of community. I think my work could find a welcome home in the right parish—where we might make a learning lab for public faith in the face of climate crisis. But I have yet to find a "vocational dating site" for folks like me.)

Today, this year, these weekly essays—plus the background reading, listening, thinking, anguishing and imagining that I do alongside them—*are* my harvest activity. I'm NOT a climate scientist, but I read widely and deeply enough and take science seriously enough to sense what comes next for us. And even apart from the misplaced temperature reference, that long bitter winter the mice faced is *nothing* compared to what's headed our way. No mere season of heat, but *generations* of disruption and collapse. How will we navigate those days—those decades, maybe centuries—ahead?

We *already* feel the upsurge in anxiety over extreme weather events—especially those that touch our country directly. Many coastlines—east, west, south—*already* show signs of sea level rise and erosion. Many farmers *already* wrestle with the way floods, drought, and a changing climate make

¹⁰⁸ Leo Lionni, *Frederick* (New York: dragonfly Books/Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1967).

farming an even more tenuous affair. And we *already* see the rise of refugees from famine and unrest around the world—including at our southern border.¹⁰⁹ This is climate crisis unfolding across our lands and our lives already now.

Meanwhile, political leaders in Washington and elsewhere prey on the anxiety creeping into our psyches and use it to fashion every “other” into a threat and an enemy. Before long we’ll be hemmed in by fear and mistrust on all sides. Just waiting for someone with twisted charisma to tell us whom to hate next. The anxiety fraying our social fabric is rooted in a multitude of things, but its taproot runs to the gnawing intuition that the lives we’ve built for ourselves by exploiting both people and planet (and everything in between) are wholly unsustainable. Those lives are starting to collapse—and as they do, they may well take us down with them. *That anxiety is real.* Something MUCH more challenging than winter is on the horizon.

Stoking xenophobia in response to this anxiety is one navigation strategy. It is utterly unchristian, inhumane, and will prove deadly even to most of those drawn in by it. But it has undeniable appeal because, for many, *it is more palatable to raise our hate for others than to acknowledge how far we have travelled in the wrong direction ...* economically, industrially, ecologically, socially, culturally. Let that sink it: it’s easier to raise the level of hate than to consider correcting our course. This is *the* story of our politics across much of the world today—especially here at home.

Nonetheless, I’m working daily to harvest supplies for a different strategy. One that can re-tether us to the deepest life-giving roots of our past while responding to the life-altering needs of the present. I’m listening to biblical passages and liturgical seasons for ancient memories that offer fresh wisdom today. And I’m reading the latest news headlines with the Bible, theology, and the church year all percolating in the background, just waiting for touch points to emerge. I’ve “gathered” thirty-three essays of supplies so far, and there is much more yet to do.

Still, by most standards on most days, it looks like I’m not doing much of anything. Truthfully, some days I *feel* that way. But then I think of Frederick.

I believe my work—my gifts as writer, teacher, theologian, poet—can play an important role in aiding faith communities as they face the climate crisis. Unlike the field mice in the story, we won’t move into our “winter” with the same certainty of a changing season. Climate crisis will lurch across our planet unevenly—*it already is.* And my gifts are already useful. But in the days ahead they may become even more needed as other sources of meaning and security become strained to the breaking point. I believe there is meaning to be had no matter what. And I’m determined to do my own peculiar work, my unique gathering, even as some people wonder whether I’m doing any “real” work at all.

I am, after all, Frederick. (But you can call me David. Thanks.)

PS: I’ve set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you’ll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait

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¹⁰⁹ A recent study, analyzing migration data from 198 countries, found that the impacts of climate change are now *the leading cause* of migration, higher than either economic inequality or conflict. www.scidev.net/global/climate-change/news/climate-now-biggest-driver-of-migration-study-finds.html

Bumbling Toward an Earth Ethic here at Home

David R. Weiss – July 31, 2019

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It began with a Spanish swear word, I'm sure, but I'll skip that part. Last Thursday after supper two of our grandkids were playing baseball in our side yard. "Baseball" is overstatement; they were taking turns swinging at an assortment of tennis balls and light plastic baseballs pitched to them underhanded by their dad, Will. "Side yard" is also overstatement; this thin strip of yard is only 15 feet wide—and interrupted by a tiny porch, two window wells, a sandbox, a bird feeder, and a small flower bed. It hardly counts as "yard" and only manages to make a very makeshift baseball field because John (5½) and Benjamin (3) are equally small.

When Will, who'd been pitching while barefoot, slipped his feet back into his sandals—that's when the swear word slipped out. Even if his English were stronger (it isn't), in moments of existential crisis you naturally fall back on your mother tongue. And this was such a moment, so it was Nicaraguan Spanish that whistled its way through the pain. While Will's sandals were sitting on the lawn a large bumble bee was nosing its way through one of them—and found itself suddenly trapped between leather thong and Nicaraguan foot. One of the bumble bees unique "features" is its *barbless* stinger. Which means these bees can sting without dying ... again and again. But I don't think it took more than one plunge of the stinger into the soft flesh between Will's first two toes for all debate over current occupancy to be decided. The sandal belonged to the bee.

On Friday night two other grandchildren, Nora (7) and Gretchen (6½), were here and had high hopes of playing in the sandbox after supper. But as we prepared to uncover it we noticed a small flurry of bumble bees nearby. There aren't any flowers right here—not even any real clover in the grass to speak of—so why so many bees? It didn't take long to trace their meandering paths to a common point: entrance to an abandoned rodent burrow now clearly repurposed as a long-stay bumble bee bed and breakfast. Oops.

My first instinct—duly accompanied by twin pangs of tragedy and vengeance—was to ask myself, "*How do I kill them all?*" My first internet search was "exterminating bumble bees." That's how far sin—brokenness from (and toward!) the web of life—has crept its way into my impulses.

Soon I noticed a clear parting of ways in the narratives told about bumble bees. Every site that profited from extermination services amplified the threat. They sting. And it hurts. And they can sting repeatedly. And they will aggressively defend their nests. Damn villains. But there was another story told. Less often to be sure, but there *are* those who champion the bumble bee, who speak of it with wistful wonder (even if also with healthy respect for its personal space).¹¹⁰

Did you know, the bumble bee is the only social bee native to North America? Honey bees were brought here from Europe. All the other bees native to this continent are solitary. Bumble bee nests, started early each spring from scratch by a single queen, only hold 50-200 bees; maybe 500 max—compared to honey bee nests with 10,000-50,000 bees. Bumble bees are thus "small town" bees.

But big time pollinators. They actually pollinate more effectively than honey bees. Their wings beat about 130 times each second (which is par for honey bees, too), but their size sets them apart. They actually generate heat as they bumble about, meaning they can start their flights earlier in the morning and continue into the cool of the evening. It also means they're among the first pollinators to be out and about in the spring ... and among the last still buzzing about in the fall. Speaking of that buzz, and owing again to the combination of wing beats and body size, bumble bees can cause "buzz pollination"—they actually ... I might say *erotically* (See GIT #32) ... vibrate plants into releasing pollen.

¹¹⁰ My bumble bee background comes from: www.bumblebeeconservation.org, www.buzzaboutbees.net, www.bumblebee.org, and www.blog.nwf.org/2014/04/5-facts-about-bumble-bees-and-how-to-help-them.

Their fuzzy bodies carry more pollen from plant to plant. And some bumble bees have such long tongues they can feed at (and thus pollinate) flowers that other bees just can't effectively flirt with.

Unlike honey bees, whose hives might endure for years, bumble bees hold more modest expectations; their nests just last a single season. Each spring a queen emerges from her winter hibernating place (usually a tiny hole in the ground, or a nook under some tree bark), goes on a flower feast to restore her energy, and then scouts out a spot for to start her nest. Once settled, she lays eggs—all female. None will become queens—these are all workers, and all summer (living just 4-8 weeks each) they collect nectar and pollen, pollinate plants, clean and protect the nest. By late summer the queen starts laying eggs to produce male bees (drones) and new queens. Besides eating, the male bees have just one job: mate with a new queen. Most don't even manage to do that before they die. The new queens, once "satisfied," bulk up on food and find a safe solitary place to over-winter and start the whole cycle again next spring.

All in all, they're pretty amazing little creatures. And, all in all, under rising threat from habitat loss, pesticide use, and a changing climate. Suddenly extermination seemed barbaric. Surely I could hire someone to relocate the bees without killing them. (In fact, I did find such a person.) But those bee-friendly websites practically *plead* with people to leave the nests *undisturbed*. Since only the new queens survive from one year to the next, even trying to safely relocate the live bees right now would risk damaging the as yet un-hatched (likely un-laid) new queen and drone eggs. Every future generation of this nest—and the untold millions of flowers, fruits, and vegetables the bees will pollinate—rests on my next move. So what do I do with the bumble bees nesting in our side yard?

All ethics is finally household ethics. I've often urged my readers to imagine a wider sense of community: to entertain *the truth* that we are interwoven in creation itself. Not apart from, not above, but entirely *in, with, and under it*. (Which is, ironically—maybe appropriately—exactly how Luther describes the mystical-real presence of Christ in the Sacrament.)

So I've roped off the nest area with yellow caution tape and posted signs offering both a word of caution and a few "fun facts"—why not take a little educational delight in these bumbling sojourners? Our swing set is several yards away; no worries there. The sand box is closer than I wish, though with a watchful adult nearby, toddlers ought to be fine playing in the sand while bees hover above the entrance to their home just a few feet away. As for baseball, given John's growing savvy as a slugger, it was probably time to take those games up to the park anyway.

Ideal? I'm tempted to say very quickly, "Of course not." But, wait. Our entire ecological crisis—from overheating climate to chemically wounded ecosystems, from badly polluted land, air, and water, to countless species pushed to the brink (nest by nest by nest!)—stems from our presumption *that we come first*. And these nests (we eventually found *two* entrances, likely to two nests) actually invite us, from grandparents to grandchildren, to remember that we come ... always ... *together*.

Preserving a pair of bumble bee nests in our yard will not stop climate crisis. But among all the choices we face on a daily basis, re-thinking the ones closest at hand—the ones right at home—is how we build the resolve to do face the even bigger challenges ahead. So along with the bees, we are bumbling toward an Earth ethic that includes all of us.

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What's on Your Plate?

David R. Weiss – August 12, 2019

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I think I surprised myself as much as anyone in the room—which would mean *everyone* was caught off guard by the uncompromising tone of my voice. I'm usually a pretty soft-spoken person, retiring even around groups. And this voice was neither soft nor retiring.

We were discussing my step-daughter Megan's electric stove, which was hers not by choice but because it came with the house they bought a little over a year ago. And because when she checked the cost to put in a gas line to connect to a gas stove it seemed exorbitant, so she's begrudgingly getting used to cooking on electric. I told her she was ahead of the curve, and that we'd be looking at electric next time our stove needed replacing. To which Margaret responded, "Um, No, why would we do that?" And that's when I mildly exploded, "WE'D DO IT FOR THE FUTURE, FOR GOSH SAKES!"

Okay, everyone calm down. First, our gas stove isn't all that old and it still works fine. We're not in a position to just scrap it and replace it with electric. So Margaret and I have several years to sort out our feelings about this. And the amount of gas we use in food preparation is not huge. But, like Megan, I'm not indifferent to exorbitant costs—and, for me, the exorbitant ecological cost *to my grandchildren* of buying a new gas oven is one I will not bear.¹¹¹ But honestly even I was surprised by the demanding urgency in my voice.

Maybe it's the timing of that conversation. This past week the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report declared unambiguously that what we put on our plate today—from the food we choose, to the way it gets produced (and transported) at every step along the way to our dining room table—will directly impact the climate our grandchildren inherit tomorrow.¹¹² And right now we're *literally* eating their future.

The report details the way that land degradation (much of it from ill-conceived food production practices) contributes to the climate crisis ... while the climate crisis also drives extreme weather that can irreparably damage the ability of ecosystems to produce food. Additionally, new studies reveal that food produced with higher CO2 rates in the atmosphere becomes less nutritious—both rice and wheat have lower protein and vitamin content. And while a few areas will see better food production as a result of a changing climate, *most* will see production fall—and in countries already food insecure, declining production will have cascading health, social, and political effects ... that will inevitably cross borders. Rising threats to food security anywhere will become threats to national security everywhere.

More bluntly rising threats to food security pose threats to *human* security globally. This isn't an argument for secure borders; it's an argument for wiser and more equitable choices about how we produce (and transport and prepare) our food and the land we grow it on. The IPCC report notes that empowering women farmers and strengthening the land-security of small-scale farms is an evidence-based way to support the health of the land. And relentless deforestation must be checked or we will mortally wound the planet's ability to store carbon at a level that conducive to human society (and to many creatures besides us).

¹¹¹ A recent NPR story discussed natural gas and climate: www.npr.org/2019/08/05/745051104/give-up-your-gas-stove-to-save-the-planet-banning-gas-is-the-next-climate-push

¹¹² The data I cite from the IPCC report comes from these articles:
www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/aug/03/ipcc-land-use-food-production-key-to-climate-crisis-leaked-report
www.cnn.com/2019/08/08/world/ipcc-report-land-climate-crisis-sci-intl/index.html
www.cnn.com/2019/08/09/health/ipcc-report-food-security-climate-scen/index.html
www.vox.com/2019/8/8/20758461/climate-change-report-2019-un-ipcc-land-food

The report criticizes an “extractive industrial system” that secures food for us in ways that *fail to secure* the soil’s integrity—either as a supplier of nutrients or a keeper of carbon. Tim Crews, one of the authors, commented, “We’re not thinking holistically from an ecological point of view. We’re not thinking of our food producing farms as being ecosystems themselves. The natural systems that existed before agriculture have a lot of the answers. We should really start paying attention to that.”¹¹³ That’s a pretty direct shout out to permaculture. (See [GITs #26-32.](#))

Meanwhile, Eric Holthaus, author of the *Rolling Stone* piece, echoes this sentiment and goes one step further: “In speaking with a half a dozen authors of the report, there was a single transformational thought that underpinned the urgency of their findings: Until we realize that we exist as part of an ecosystem, that we are part of a living planet, we will continue to destroy the soil that makes our existence possible.” And that, in large part, is the task of cosmology: having a grand story (religious or otherwise) of who we are that places us wholly within the web of this world.

The IPCC report describes a food production system that is wildly out of touch with a finite planet and a sustainable society ... and one that operates (mostly) beyond the reach of actual food eaters. But not entirely. The report does make this much clear: *we will not stave off climate catastrophe without slashing the amount of red meat we consume. This is non-negotiable for a livable future.* Hence, in the U.S. in particular, we must make a real—population-wide—shift toward plant-based, vegetarian, and vegan diets. Or we must at least acknowledge we are damning our grandchildren to a bleak and dreadfully over-heated future because we’d rather eat as much meat as we wish today.

If enough of us rethink our meal choices we will reshape food production priorities. And, if we don’t, our grandchildren will perish. And if not ours, someone else’s—I’m not trying to melodramatic, I’m trying to be emotionally and unmistakably concrete. We can eat exactly the way we’ve been raised to eat ... exactly the way we prefer to eat ... and it will kill future generations. It’s time to stop pretending that personal diet choices remain personal. They are choices with cross-generational consequences, which makes them political. They reflect how people choose to share (or withhold) power in a community—including communities stretched across time.

So, maybe having all that on my mind explains the edginess in my voice in discussing oven choices. I’m largely vegetarian (occasionally eating sustainable seafood). But I have plenty of areas of choice in my own life to press myself on. One is eating “closer to harvest,”: lessening my consumption of processed food. Another is continuing to increase my consumption of (and support for) organic produce. Another is becoming more savvy about growing and preserving foods myself. And, yes, one more, is being willing to question the way I heat the food I prepare in my own home.

Jim Skea, one of the lead authors of the IPCC reports states, “We know about the huge challenges of climate change, but I don’t think we want to get across a message of despair. We want to get across a message that *all actions make a difference.*” That’s worth remembering as we choose what to put on our dinner plate today. Because whatever choices we make, our plate also holds one more thing besides the food: *tomorrow.*

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¹¹³ www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/ipcc-land-report-climate-change-869466

Okay, it's NOT about the Beef

David R. Weiss – August 14, 2019

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It's not really about eating beef—or using natural gas to cook with. (But, of course, at some level *it is*. I'll come back to that.) If [my last post](#) felt a bit heavy on its handedness and light on its theology, I suppose it was. Anybody can have a long week that leaves them short on patience. It was my turn. So let me clarify a couple things and then get on with my point.

First, beef. Feeding America's appetite for red meat *is* a threat to our future.¹¹⁴ Livestock production drives deforestation across the globe, decisively weakening the planet's capacity to capture and hold carbon. It also diverts cropland into growing livestock feed rather than raising food to support plant-based human diets—a woefully inefficient tradeoff, because if we weren't raising so much damn cattle feed some land being used for livestock production could be used for carbon capture, and we could feed all of humanity on the rest. And, of course, the methane produced by cows is far a more potent greenhouse gas than CO₂. Clearly, beef is a bad deal for the planet today and a (much!) worse deal for those who inhabit the planet tomorrow.

That doesn't mean that anyone who cares about the planet has to give up red meat. But it does mean—if they care about the planet and its inhabitants (human and more), they need to exercise real, tangible restraint in their meat-eating.

Second, natural gas. Yes, natural gas is a “cleaner” fuel source than coal or oil. And, unlike beef consumption, which, for nearly all of us *is* a matter of choice, meal by meal, most of us “inherit” our utility choices with the homes we buy. So the dimension of personal choice can be far less immediate, far more costly, and, in the case of home-heating, a real challenge in colder climes. Still, as demand for natural gas increases (precisely because it's “cleaner”) *so does its downside*. In particular, as we exhaust the easiest access to natural gas and turn more and more to fracking, a whole unhappy host of health and geophysical risks arise, as well as the inevitable leakage of natural gas¹¹⁵ (mostly methane, a greenhouse gas that is 30 times more powerful in its contribution to global heating as CO₂).¹¹⁶

Natural gas is no innocent choice. The challenge *has* to be to reduce our fossil fuel use to a bare minimum as rapidly as possible. There is *no other way* to a tomorrow that does not willfully char Earth's ecosystem than to get out of fossil fuels today. So, even as they are built into our structured homes and lives, as swiftly as we can make legitimate choices to move away from them, we should.

And *choice* is the doorway through which both ethics and theology enter. We face many choices as we navigate our personal and communal lives in response to global heating. I am *not* your expert on dietary decisions or utility option; I'm often not even my own. I muddle through those areas—and [bumble bees, too!](#)—as best I can for myself and/or with Margaret. But I *am* committed to making my own choices. And while one part of that is gaining the knowledge so I can make an informed choice, *the bigger part is cultivating within myself* (or within my marriage, or any other widening circle) *the moral restlessness that makes choosing possible*.

Cultivating this restlessness is a fundamentally *human* endeavor; I happen to believe that faith traditions (of many kinds) can assist in sowing and sustaining moral restlessness. But I also must admit that many religions harbor expressions (frequently among their most dominant/“successful”

¹¹⁴ www.climatecentral.org/news/studies-link-red-meat-and-climate-change-20264

¹¹⁵ On fracking and natural gas: www.commondreams.org/news/2019/06/05/not-freedom-gas-failure-gas-first-its-kind-report-details-planetary-perils-us, www.commondreams.org/views/2019/06/23/growing-case-ban-fracking, www.commondreams.org/views/2019/07/31/research-stop-fracking-asap,

¹¹⁶ Methane is 86 times more potent than CO₂ in trapping the sun's heat, but it stays in the atmosphere a shorter length of time before breaking down. The “30 times more powerful” is the official measure of its “global warming potential” over a 100-year window: www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/understanding-global-warming-potentials

expressions—shit!) that promote a sense of morality that is primarily private (between me and God, or me and my immediate family and friends) and committed to simplistic certainty (a short list of rights and wrongs). In these instances the genuine moral restlessness that is the measure of authentic humanity is reached (if at all) in spite of, not because of religious faith.

Moral restlessness approaches the choices we face with a “hermeneutic of suspicion.” That’s “big-talk” for saying we should instinctively *interrogate* the choices we’re presented with by asking, “Who benefits if I choose this or that?—and who loses?” Without actively distrusting the world, moral restlessness takes very seriously the distortions (theologically, we might say, “sin”) present in both the people and (especially!) the systems around us. In a consumer capitalist society, where money speaks loudest—and where advertising money plays directly to our insecurities and deceptively to our deepest hungers—we need to be especially ... *suspicious* ... of who benefits and who loses in the choices we’re encouraged to make as consumers.

In fact, consumer capitalism, built on limitless choice of (endlessly cheaper) stuff and limitless economic growth, is wholly invested in *eliminating* moral restlessness—from every corner of our consciousness. The market works relentlessly to narrow the context in which we perceive ourselves until it’s simply me and mine, here and now. It wants us to measure the exhilarating range of our choices by our freedom to be indifferent to the consequences those choices have on other persons, other creatures, other places, even the entire planet and future generations. Our sense of choice becomes as big as our “moral community” is small: the fewer persons/creatures/ecosystems that really “matter” to us, the freer we are.

Within that shrunken moral community, not much beyond taste, allergy, convenience and price shape the choices I make about food ... or oven. Across the entire range of household choices in front of me, the market says that only me and mine, here and now, matter. And that’s called freedom. No. *This is the very antithesis of being human.*

We *are* through others. Every deep faith tradition has a way of offering this truth. Non-theistic Buddhism asserts it no less than monotheistic Christianity. Most situate that “we” in a web that comprises an entire world of flora, fauna, and fellow beings—and stretching across time and place. It’s an ecological truth framed long before science conceived the field of ecology.

To be fully human is to act with moral responsibility in *this* context. When we fail to embrace the moral restlessness that considers this wider community we risk ... being inhuman. That’s sounds like harsh moral judgment, but it’s more *a profound existential lament*. We’re so entangled in the cultural lie of individualism, that we hardly recognize the full interwoven dignity of which we are capable. To make our choices with care and concern for the whole web of life is *not* a “limit” to our freedom; *it is, rather the very condition in which we discover it.*

Finally, it’s not about the beef (or the gas oven) or any of the specific choices we make. It’s about making those choices—which may well differ from one person to the next—with moral intention and from a place of genuine moral restlessness. And—because the *web* of life *is* the context for that restlessness—it means making those choices in the generous company of the communities to which we belong. More than a matter of what’s on your plate, it truly a matter of who you recognize that you’re making the meal with. *Our kitchens include the world.*

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Moral Restlessness and the God Who is ... Not Yet

David R. Weiss – August 24, 2019

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There may be no more essential “growing edge” in Christian faith than to embrace a theology of moral restlessness. To be sure, I am fully convinced that nonreligious persons can hold (and ought to cultivate) a posture of moral restlessness as well. But as I’m writing these pieces foremost for persons of religious faith,¹¹⁷ for *these* persons, the way we imagine God (often at a level deeper than words and creeds) is the foundation of our moral vision.

In response to the climate emergency (have you been following the news this past week ... month ... year?!) I say we need to find a deep well of moral restlessness within us. By moral restlessness I mean that we need to be “on our toes,” ready to shift both the impulses and the long-standing habits of our lives (think beef, gas stoves, and air flight—for God’s sakes!—among other things) if we wish to have any chance of preserving a future for those we love. And yet we seem to find this so difficult. It’s only one steak—how could that make a difference? Gas cooks so much nicer than electric—why would I want to change? And Sun Country just announced \$79 fares from the Twin Cities to Florida this winter—who could resist that?

It’s true that the scope—and the roots—of the climate crisis are such that only structural change will make much of a difference. Those corporations and individuals with the most money have the loudest voices in shaping public policy and they have clearly rigged the system to benefit their interests. And their interests are driven by a genocidal addiction to profit, power, wealth, status, and privilege. They will threaten *everything*—that’s us, animals, eco-systems, and the entire planet’s stability—in order to satisfy their genocidal urges. And they will buy influence to game the system to prevent change for as long as possible. That’s the stark truth.

Although it’s possible that political campaigns and grassroots efforts *can* make a difference. We see instances of that in the twentieth century (civil rights, women’s rights, apartheid, same-sex marriage, etc.), although we also see how fragile those gains can be. I’m *not* arguing for social-political indifference; from city and town to state and nation, we *need* to be engaged.

But there is also an *inner engagement* we must make. It is essential for the sense of integrity and personal empowerment that can not only fuel our social-political work, but can also undergird the quality of inner calm that will be in short supply as the climate crisis deepens. That inner engagement is most lively when supported by moral restlessness, which for Christians, might be defined as *faith leaning into the life of God*.

Moral restlessness is the persistent hunger to foster wholeness in the world. It is the readiness, not simply to rearrange the furniture but to remake the entire home if needed to ensure the flourishing of all. Of course, our moral choices are framed by the bounds of our moral community. To whom are we accountable? For whom will we exercise restraint? Upon whom will we lavish our care? With whom will we share our joy? And whose sorrows, joys, needs do we embrace without hesitation? The challenge of moral restlessness—even in a finite world where conflicting values are inevitable—is to refuse to make firm boundaries about our moral community. Ever ... *restless*, it should be ever-widening, ever-extending itself one ring further. Ever listening for the voiced and unvoiced aspirations of the others with whom we share this planet.

¹¹⁷ “Faith” itself is its own type of complicated. To the extent that “faith” names the “gut disposition/frame of meaning” that *all of us* hold toward life, every human being is a person of faith (except perhaps those who are simply pathological or nihilist in their worldview). For nearly all of human history our frames of meaning have used religious/sacred language, but there is nothing intrinsically religious about faith. It is the innate human response to finding-fashioning-living-in-accord-with meaning in our lives.

Thus, moral restlessness regards the grandeur of mountains, prairies, wetlands, and such as partners in a whispered dialogue of awe. It regards the intricacies of microbes, the inner lives of plants, and the beyond-our-ken cultures of our fellow creatures as invitations to community. Moral restlessness underlies the viewpoint Henry Beston (naturalist, 1888-1968) so hauntingly offered:

We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. ... We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate for having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein do we err. For the animal shall not be measured by the human. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with the extension of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. Neither siblings nor underlings: they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, bound up in the splendor and travail of the earth. (*The Outermost House*, 1928)

That viewpoint—whether sparked by profoundly human awe or religious faith—might be sufficient to check the impulses and re-fashion the habits that presently threaten all that moves on this awe-full orb. We *must choose* to press ourselves uncomfortably at the level of personal choice, individual habit, and communal/cultural presumption. We *must choose* vastly different lives—and starting *now*—if we wish to leave anything other than a smoldering wasteland for those who come next.

For Christians (and Jews) that viewpoint has ancient seeds in the Exodus narrative. In the famous scene at the burning bush, Moses hears a voice commissioning him to assist in liberating the children of Israel from their bondage to Egypt. Moses is understandably intimidated by the task and he wants to know just WHO he's supposed to be representing. So he asks God for a name. God responds with a self-declaration that claims a form of the verb "to be" as the way to name this Holy Presence. Some scholars have regarded this as an evasion of a name—a roundabout way of saying "none-of-your-business," but this fails to plumb the depth of the exchange.

In Hebraic culture names establish the ground of relationship. So when God tells Moses (as it's often translated), "I am That I am," God sets the terms of the relationship as these: "I will burst every box you seek to contain me in. I will defy every limiting definition you devise for me. I will imagine possibilities for you—for us together—beyond your wildest dreams. Whatever *you* choose to think of me, *I* will be who I will be. I am freedom." Well.

But there is a yet more evocative angle here. Hebrew has no distinct future tense; context determines when to cast a verb as future. And the context here (Exodus 3:13-22) calls for future tense. *As though God's very divinity rests on fulfilling the liberatory promises to free the people from their oppression and establish them in a place they can flourish.* Liberation theologians have made this argument in regard to this very passage: that God is so wholly committed to the full flourishing of all as to make the proof—the truth—of God contingent on the promise of liberation.

From this radically evocative perspective, God, eternally and infinitely yearning to consummate liberation, justice, and flourishing ... *is not yet*, pending our response, like Moses, to join in God's holy work. Moral restlessness, then—*faith leaning into the life of God*—is the very womb of God. In the determination to alter our impulses and habits for the well-being of all—this is where Holy Presence begins.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait

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Making Love as the World Ends: on Joy During an Apocalypse

David R. Weiss – August 29, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #39 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Today's post is dedicated to M, a young friend and former student of mine. I've been thinking about writing on these thoughts for some time now—they speak to the pitched tension in my own life, too. But the final push was M's recent lament: "How do I keep working towards seemingly pointless goals like career and marriage when the earth is dying and my lifetime will probably see an apocalyptic world?"

To some of you, M's mini-existential crisis might seem like mere young adult drama. But I assure you, it's your misplaced sense of security that makes M's anguish seem over the top. If you ask me, *she's named all too pointedly the path we're ALL on*. She simply has the (dis)advantage of seeing-feeling this more clearly than most of us. In part because she's young enough to have not yet fully found her place in the world; and having not yet landed on her feet as an adult means it's a bit easier to call "Bullshit" on the increasingly empty presumptions of that adult world.

Besides this, M is inwardly home to a perfect storm of intelligence, empathy, creativity, curiosity, playful spirit, and wounded soul. She feels life—including at times *the absence of feeling*—with an immediacy that would be refreshing were it not just as often overwhelming.

Her question is really OUR question. (Even if we haven't asked it yet—though if you know me, you know my own versions of her question have chased me relentlessly the past few years.) And I want to share some thoughts on it—for M, of course. But also for the rest of you. And for me, too.

Our worlds—both the physical biosphere and the constructed social-cultural sphere—are *not* on the verge of collapse. *That collapse is already underway*. The fabric of our common life—flora, fauna, ecosystems, and societies—is a single garment, and it is actively fraying right now, though often beyond our line of vision. There are certainly things we can do to lessen the speed and the scope of that collapse—though it is an open question (really, a doubtful prospect) as to whether we muster the resolve to do those things. But the idea that we can somehow sidestep the coming collapse, that's the type of wishful delusion that M is unwilling—in the immediacy of her perception, *unable*—to swallow.

And I'm with her.

But if this is our real situation—if we truly face the end of the world (at least the world as we know it), how dare we spend our time making love? How dare we pursue joy while an apocalypse arrives? I say: *HOW DARE WE NOT?* Even—maybe especially—in a world fast unraveling, *the invocation of joy is a deep good*. Indeed, revelatory.

Let me explain. I suspect I'm actually both *less hopeful* AND *more hopeful* than most of my readers. *Less hopeful*, because I'm persuaded that over the next five decades (maybe sooner) our world will be *unmade* by the choices we've made over the past several centuries. Mad Max? No, probably not (but maybe). But the worst problems we face here and there today will be amplified ... and everywhere. Ecological, social, political, relational. When I say "collapse," I don't choose the word for effect but for accuracy.

And yet, *more hopeful* as well. For two reasons. First, because life on the far side of collapse may actually come to embrace practices that are more sustainable and regenerative, more in sync with our place on the planet. Collapse may do for our society what our political-cultural-moral will seems roundly incapable of: reigning in the egos and addictions that are deadly to life itself. It may not, of course. In which case, Mad Max may yet have his day. But it just might. Secondly, though, I'm more hopeful than most of you because even in the midst of collapse, I believe human dignity, compassion, meaning, and beauty *can* survive. Here, too, it's possible they won't. But they may—and I hope they do.

Which means that career and marriage—meaningful work and chosen companionship—still matter. *And, if anything, they matter all the more, because such things as these will be among the first notes in any halting symphony that sounds forth beauty in the midst of chaos.* Which is why I might argue that we have a *human moral duty* to make love as the world ends. “Duty” is a strange word to apply to intimate ecstasy, so I use it advisedly—more to make a point about how important it is, than to turn joy into obligation.

Our capacity to make love—to cultivate profoundly tactile joy with another—as the world ends, is one measure of our commitment to make sure that such intimacy carries forward on the far side of that ending. Our quiet persistent intention to choose simple joy and vocational purpose and authentic companionship matters, even as the unraveling world tries to tell us they don’t. It’s capitalism and consumerism and corporate power that don’t matter. It’s these forces (and more) that underwrote this unraveling. And while they might want to take every last vestige of humanity out with them, we *can* claim the best of who are as worth saving. *We must.*

Something does come next. And what we value in this moment will indelibly mark the next one.

So, M, this is my counsel to you. I can’t pretend it’s perfect or wise. It’s just my own heartfelt intuition. But I trust it. And I think you will be able to hear it right now. Others may need to tuck it away until the day comes when they have nothing left to hang onto except crumpled words like these.

Trust the grief that calls your name. It is real, and deep, and overwhelming. It is the world’s wound asking to be known. It is, if you like, God crying out in this corner of the cosmos. No mere babe in a manger, but *every* babe ... and every creature ... and even whole ecosystems creaking under the strain of human folly. And if we cannot heal the earth, we might at least cradle it in our heart.

And while I do not think Earth’s anguish wishes to undo you, it still might, if you do not tether yourself also to joy.

This, then, is the deep paradox, the peril-promise of this fraught moment. Seek to find work with humble purpose, because by doing mundane good day by day by day, you will also discover that Earth’s pain can be borne only the same way: day by day by day. Treasure the trusted and tender companions you’ve made, because in their company the infinite weight of Earth’s wounds will press you low, but not too low. And make sweet love (or bake bread, or paint pictures, or walk in the woods—however you find your simple ecstasy)—yes, make sweet love as the world ends, so that Earth’s heartbreak is somehow held within your joy.

If you do these things—even imperfectly—it *will* be enough.

The seed cannot predict the soil or the weather, its whole purpose is to be ready to do its small part to carry one more generation forward. You are that seed of compassion and curiosity, of searing sorrow and giggling joy. You are enough.

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