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“Lessons from a Blackberry Bush”

If you are a conscientious, caring person in this world, you likely feel that being a responsible adult includes keeping up with with local and national news and events. If you are at all like me (and I’ve seen your KQED bumper stickers), much of your life you have enjoyed the practice of staying informed; like brushing your teeth or taking a walk, it has long been a healthy part of your daily routine.

Here is something I have noticed over the past couple of years, what once felt like responsible civic engagement has disturbingly morphed into something quite unrecognizable. Keeping up with the news these days feels dreadful. I feel quiet literally filled with dread each time I turn on the news, hear about the latest twitter feed, or glance at the updates that flash on my phone.

Our dailiness is marked by the latest tragedy; mass shootings, sex scandal, Nixel alert, or devastating EPA finding. Our headlines, our “news flashpoints” are violent and terrifying-if it bleeds it leads, I’ve heard some journalists refer to the phenomena as trauma porn. And that seems accurate, we are living in a collective state of heightened arousal coupled with a heightened state of perpetual distress and it is doing damage to nervous systems.

We are spending more time than is natural engaging the reptilian (fight/flight) portion of our brains and less and less time engaging the limbic (feeling) and neocortex (thinking) portions of the brains. To scientists, our brains look like those of people living in a war zone, across the nation doctors are seeing a radical increase in stress related illness.

It’s embarrassing to admit, but inadvertently, stress and reactivity have become the norm rather than the exception and it is common for well-meaning and civic minded folk- to confuse a sense of worth with a frequency of moral outrage. If we aren’t frantically trying to make a difference with all that is wrong around us, active participants in dismantling the evils of empire, we are left to feel of little or no societal value.

This is where Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. arrives as a superhero for our time. Holmes lived from 1841-1935 and he is known as one of the most clearheaded and influential US Supreme Court justices of all time, retiring from service at the court at age ninety.

One might imagine in the work of being a Supreme Court Justice few skills are more relevant than the ability to track “true north” despite a great many competing realities. Throughout his long tenor, Holmes seems to have maintained his gift of cutting to the truth in any and all circumstances. He is best known for the turn of phrase, “a clear and present danger,” but of equal import is his lesser known statement;

“I would not give a fig for the **simplicity** this **side of complexity**, but I would give my life for the **simplicity** on the **other side of complexity**.”

Friends, we are in desperate need of role models such as Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., for without them it is so easy to get lost in all the false truths and trumped up artifice.

Now, long deceased, Holmes is no less a superhero for our times. He was equipped not with the ability to cripple the purveyors of moral decrepitude, nor the magic to re-instate sanity to a corrupt political stratosphere, no his super power was far more subtle and much more important to the healing of our time.

Holmes words carry the imperative to quiet the external noise of chaos by commanding our attention to the stillness that is crucial if we are to regain some sort of spiritual stability in the face of such grotesque instability.

Also, today we turn to the wisdom of scripture and find that whomever is responsible for writing the book of Hebrews, most often attributed to the Apostle Paul, they trying to making a similar point to that of brother Holmes. Hebrews is the book in the biblical cannon that Christians return to time and again to be reminded of the centrality of hospitality, loyalty and compassionate service to others.

Hebrews 13:1-8 excerpted

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can say with confidence,

"God is my helper;
I will not be afraid.
What can anyone do to me?"

Piloxenia is the Greek word for hospitality, quiet literally it means “love of the strange.” There was and is great value in the ancient tradition of opening one’s doors to those who come from the “outside”

In the ancient world the unknown seekers of hospitality also brought news of the wider world and broke open one’s little provincial way of thinking. Like the great peace and climate summits of today, when strangers pause from their busy lives to gather and break bread together, there is such potential for communal truth.

Is it so hard to conceive that the key to restoring peace and stability to our world rests in the act of providing hospitality to the “strange”. Perhaps if we could get past all the noise, we might remember our primary obligation to each other; Ubuntu- I am, because you are.

I have always loved that phrase entertaining “angels without knowing it.” Of course, it makes deep references to stories found throughout scripture both in the Hebrew and Christian context, but ultimately it stands as a reminder that were all once and are still strangers in a strange land. The ground beneath our feet is everchanging, the political powers around us ever evolving, devolving, and revolving. The one constant we can count on in the lifetimes is change.

So, rather than hitch our emotional wagons to every side show that rolls through town, perhaps we would do well to remember that even though we are daily confronted with frightening events, facts and dire predictions- as one people we can also say with confidence, "God is my helper; I will not be afraid." **Hebrews 13:1-8**

I took my greatest lessons from a blackberry bush this summer. More mornings than I can count I hastened to a patch of brambles just up from St. Leo’s Catholic church- a sanctified patch- I think.

The early morning fog rose up from the wet brown grasses that stretch as far as the eye can see and if I got there early enough the turkeys were enjoying their breakfast of wet dew and fat grubs.

I learned more that I can know because I suspect blackberry bushes, and indeed most of earth's creatures, know more than I can ever learn; but I cherish these few memories and hope to will carry them with me into the school year.

To pick blackberries on a summer morning in a wide-open field of beauty is to know the **simplicity** on the **other side of complexity** and there is nothing more important than that knowing, but it is helpful to remember that the sweetest berries are not always within reach and the prettiest berries aren't always the sweetest.

It is important to dress appropriately- flip flops are no match for blackberry thorns. I mention this because tender hearts need protection from the thorns of this world and we need to make sure we are outfitted for the tasks we endure, literally and metaphorically.

Lastly, no matter how much we might will it to be different, time is the only and the best determinant of ripeness. Remember that tune by the Birds...to every thing turn, turn, turn. There is a season, turn, turn, turn and a time to every season under heaven.

It is not our work to carry every burden, for that's God-size work and we are not God. The only way we can know what burdens belong to us, is to move far enough away from the noise so as to be able to hear the clear voice of truth. If we listen closely enough, the problems that are ours to solve will speak our names. And just like the blackberry bush they will beckon us to tread lightly, step carefully and stop to taste the sweetness along the way.

Amen