

## THE NEST IN THE STREAM



Wolf and Lisa smudged us down with the smoke from a smoldering stem of dried white sage and gave each of us a glass of water and a pinch of tobacco to take with us. They instructed us to go silently out onto the land and to walk about looking for a place where we would like to spend some time. I made my way down to a creek on the Eastern edge of the property. I found a spot that was secluded and accessible, and with some awkwardness, because of having no free hands to steady myself, descended the steep, dry, leaf-covered creek side to the water's edge.

At first I just stood there, looking at the rocks in the creek bed upstream and watching and listening to the water flowing around them. I was standing at a place where the creek broadens into a pool. Looking down I noticed that the water at my feet was utterly still and clear, reflecting sky and the leaves of the overhead trees - but there was something else. There was something unusual partially submerged in the water. Small branches, twigs in a swirl... It was a nest, a large bird's nest in the stream. I instinctively looked up into the branches of the large elm tree overhead.

When I found a spot where I could safely leave the tobacco and water, I walked downstream to where there were some rocks like stepping stones going across the creek. I was able to squat down on one of these and look back into the pool. I was directly downstream of the nest. As I looked more closely I saw that it was perfectly intact. It cannot have been in the water very long as there were still pieces of wool and what looked like animal hair interwoven with twigs and bits of grass. The weave of the nest appeared loose yet solid. There were spaces between some of the coiled twigs and I could tell the water was flowing through as fine threads of wool and hair were waving lazily at its downstream edge.

I sat there for some time looking at the nest with the water flowing through. As I did I found myself identifying with the weave of the nest. I noticed a loosening in my torso and limbs. I imagined the water flowing through me. It felt like I was letting go of something heavy that I had been carrying around for a long time; as though I was being washed clean.

Before I left, I poured the glass of water on the ground and dropped the tobacco in the stream in gratitude. When I returned, Wolf and Lisa and everyone else were already sitting in a circle under the oaks sharing their stories of what had happened. The image of the nest in the stream, with the water flowing through it, and the phrase, “The loose and open weave of the heart,” stayed with me all through that night.

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The nest in the stream speaks to me of a way of being that is deeply receptive. Our hearts pump, but only after they have opened their atria wide to receive the body’s blood. Receptivity is neither a feminine nor a masculine quality. It is how our heart is in its most relaxed state. Our hearts are designed to receive before they pump, and our lives depend on this happening.

It is important to distinguish between receptivity and passivity. Passivity suggests defeat and may have negative connotations, especially to those who have been on the receiving end of abusive power relationships. Receptivity, on the other hand, implies a conscious choice. Choosing an attitude of receptivity, choosing to open our hearts wide, and to keep them open, even in the face of suffering, is a courageous and powerful way of meeting the world.

John Moriarty speaks eloquently about this. He describes this stance as, “A new kind of heroism.” He writes, “A hero like Cuchulainn isn’t what we need. We need another kind of hero altogether... A hero now isn’t someone who goes out and fights the sea... The hero now isn’t

someone who wields a sword – it’s someone who puts down his sword and lets nature happen to him.” The new kind of hero is one who faces life with an open and receptive heart.

While the nest was receptive *to* the flow, the nest was also *in* the flow. The nest and the stream as two separate entities come together as one as the nest in the stream. It is not about what the nest was being receptive to, nor is it about where the stream was flowing to; it is about the stream flowing through the nest; the nest as flow-thought. Receptivity is what allows this to happen.

In watching the nest in the stream, I began to understand the relationship between receptivity and compassionate action. As the heart opens, receives and swells, and then pumps, so the impulse to act is born in receptivity. When we come into the state of being that is deep receptivity, the impulse for compassionate action emerges, spontaneously. Bernie Glassman, author and founder of Zen Peacemakers, writes, “When we bear witness, when we become the situation – homelessness, poverty, illness, violence, death – the right action arises by itself. We don’t have to worry about what to do. We don’t have to figure out solutions ahead of time. Peacemaking is the function of bearing witness. Once we listen with our entire body and mind, loving action arises.” I am reminded of a teaching from my root tradition that continues to be deeply meaningful for me. The angel Gabriel has just announced to the Virgin Mary that she is to give birth to a child who will be the messiah that Israel is waiting for. I imagine her pausing. I imagine her head saying, “That’s impossible!” and her heart saying, “What if?” I imagine her confusion. And I imagine the moment that she choose to trust as she opens to the silence between the words, and I hear her reply, “Let what you have said be done unto me.” In consciously aligning ourselves with the flow of what is, the miraculous may happen.

The nest in the stream brings me into a new sense of self. I had always considered myself to have substance, and solidity, and, despite the changes that came with time, a certain continuity and permanence. Now, as I watched the water flowing through the nest, I began to understand that this is not how it is. On their own the nest is just a nest and the stream is just a stream. Together, they form an image of particularity in fluidity. I realized that I too am a transient pattern in change, and I wondered if this is what the Buddha meant when he spoke of “no-self” and “impermanence”; that there is “no-*separate-solid-permanent*-self”; that the closest thing there is to a self is self-as-change, self-as-relationship; self-as flow-thought.

The nest in the stream offers me a new way of being with pain; my own, other’s, our world’s. The two ways of working with pain that I was already familiar with, the medical model, where pain is a problem to be solved through skillful intervention, and the wounded healer model, where pain can

be transformed by holding and staying with it, did little to help me with my own pain and suffering. In the nest in the stream, I saw the suggestion of a different way of being with pain that included elements of the wounded healer model while offering something new.

The nest in the stream way involves honoring our pain, letting it be what it is, not trying to change it in any way. We breathe in the pain we are experiencing for ourselves, for others, for our world; we allow ourselves to actually experience it, to linger with the felt-sense of what is. We literally “suffer our suffering,” and then, and this is what was new, and challenging, for me, *we unconditionally let it go*.

The other day I sat with a young woman, Jo, who is dying of ovarian cancer. She was feeling very fatigued and was frustrated by this and her lack of independence. As I was sitting by her bedside in the hospice, I looked out the window at the coastal oaks, and the humming birds coming to drink at the fountain, and the juncos picking on the ground nearby, and between the branches of the oak, the blue sky in all its vibrant aliveness. I mused out loud how wonderful it would be if we could just plug into this incredibly creative, interflowing, co-arising energy that is nature. I told Jo how I found that sometimes the simple act of paying attention to other-than-human nature with all my senses enabled me to do this. When I finished speaking she looked at me in silence for a few seconds. Then she said, “No offence, but I think that’s bullshit.”

I smarted at this, and pulled back into myself. I struggled to find my feet, and my voice. I acknowledged to Jo that I understood that this may not be her way. I asked her what energized her, what restored her spirit. She began to talk about her family, and in particular her daughter with whom she was very close. “If only she would spend more time with me. It seems to be too hard for her. I guess she’s doing the best she can,” she said. As I listened, I felt for her in her loneliness and grief. And I was aware that I still had some hurt feelings from being rebuffed in my earlier attempt to help. With the next exhale I allowed myself to drop into my pain. For a moment or two, I felt how this was. Then, with the next inhale, I opened to the breath stream and consciously let it in, and, with the exhale, I let it go. I continued to open with each inhale, and let go with each exhale. Jo was quietly weeping now. I reached out with my left hand and placed it on her left foot. For a little while, we sat there like that in silence; two people alone together.

I realize how frightened I have been of pain and how I have done all that I could to avoid it. My career of “managing pain,” has allowed me to come close to the suffering of others but always from a position of power and expertise. And I see how, over time, I have paid a price for such defensive behaviors. The short-term comfort of being cocooned from what was messy and painful

gave way to a pervasive sense of disconnection and isolation; the low-grade burnout that I became accustomed to and assumed to be how it felt to be getting older.

The nest in the stream offers a radically different teaching. It suggests that I do not need to be so defended any more. It offers me a way of holding my pain that is not so self-protective. “Let suffering happen to you,” it whispers, “Allow it in. Feel it as it washes through. And let it go to the deeper flow of life. This will bring you out of isolation and into connection.”

When we are in pain we tend to pull back, to contract, to cut off, to curl up in a ball and separate ourselves from others. But pain in isolation is the definition of suffering. Pain that is trapped in an isolated system perpetuates itself, as when we ruminate on our hurt feelings and, like a snake biting its own tail, only make things worse. The paradoxical teaching of the nest in the stream is that turning towards, opening to, feeling with, and then letting go of our pain, brings us back into connection, back into relationship, back into an open living system; and this changes everything. While the pain may still be there, and still be experienced as uncomfortable, like a pinch of salt in a great river, it has now lost its potency. If we stay present to the pain we are feeling, if we breathe it through in this way, we release it from its self-reinforcing loop. What was painful is now available as energy to support life, others’ and ours, in all its diversity.

I can see how the nest in the stream could at first glance appear to be the wrong medicine for someone who already feels overwhelmed by pain. After all, the prescription is to open, to allow in and to be with what already feels like “too much.” But pain that we resist, or that we try to contain with our own effort, intensifies and becomes an even greater threat. The key is in our capacity to choose. Jung says, “Don’t drown. Dive!” By choosing to open to and experience our pain, and by choosing to surrender all to the flowing through, we paradoxically find ourselves empowered rather than weakened. Yes, for a time we feel the pain more acutely than we did before, but it seems to have lost its sting, and we are more awake, more alive, and more connected.

I woke the other night in the early hours with an ache in my heart as I thought of Matt, who is just twenty-seven years old and in great pain from advanced testicular cancer that has spread to his bones causing a number of them to fracture, and that has not, so far, responded to treatment. I cannot help thinking that Matt’s agony is being exacerbated by his insistence that we only talk about his pain in physical terms and not discuss his feelings about what is happening. But how can a twenty-seven year old be expected to open to the feelings that would come were he to allow that there is little anyone can do to put out the raging fire that is tearing through his body? I am so worried about Matt and do not know what else I can do to help him. I have done all I know to treat

his physical pain and while this may have helped, a little, I know that it has not addressed the deeper layers of suffering that are there.

I cannot and do not expect Matt to do it any differently. I see that how he is living with humor and dignity is in itself extraordinary. And yet, as I remember the nest in the stream, I know that I still have a choice about how I hold my sadness, and the feelings of failure and impotence that I carry in the face of his pain and suffering. As I let the breath stream flow in and flow through, I realize that it is awareness that allows me to be present; and that being present is what I can do when there is nothing else for me to do in the face of suffering that I cannot fix. Being present, being fully present to suffering, is an act of radical compassion.

There is something “light” about being a flow-through. In the medical model the other’s pain is my responsibility. I feel the weight of this every day in my work with each new pain consult I go to see. As a wounded healer, my suffering in the face of another’s pain is also my responsibility, and this can feel burdensome also. In the flowing-through of the nest in the stream, while it is still my responsibility to do what I can to help and hold the other’s pain, I now allow that pain to wash through me, knowing that this is my even greater responsibility. In releasing the pain I am abandoning all to the deeper currents of life that flow through and beyond our individual pain and suffering. There is lightness in this. I still do all I can to ease the other’s pain. I still suffer my suffering in the face of the other’s pain, but it does not end there. I do what I do in the spirit and practice of letting be and letting go to the flow-through that is happening naturally, and without any volition on my part.

This morning as I was out running, I noticed how much harder it was to run uphill than it was to run downhill. Then I thought, “This is because, when I’m running downhill, I’m running with gravity - that’s what makes it easier.” With this thought I flashed back to the nest in the stream, and saw that the water would not be flowing through the nest in the stream without gravity; that gravity is the invisible dynamic of the nest in the stream.

Surrendering to gravity is what makes us flow-throughs. At the deepest level we don’t have to do anything. The water is already flowing through, *all by itself*. The flowing through is how it is, how we are, in our deepest nature. What we have to do is to wake up to this, to remember this, and, with our great YES, align ourselves with what is already happening. If and as we do this, we too become nests in the stream.

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In the weeks after this encounter, I had gone back occasionally to visit the creek and to check and see if the nest was still there. Each time I did I found it more waterlogged and worn. It had by then sunk to the bottom of the pool and all the hair and little pieces of wool and finer twigs had gone. Eventually the few remaining bigger weaves began to loosen and fall apart until one day when I visited I found the pool empty. By then the water level in the pool had dropped quite low but I could still hear the sound of water flowing.