

Bare Branches In Winter

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I was having lunch alone at a local Thai restaurant a couple of weeks ago and spotted a sign on the wall. It appeared to be made of wood and had a bright white ground with black lettering in a font that might have left one wondering if the intended vibe was supposed to be shabby chic or rustic. The words themselves however removed all doubt for the sign read, “Y’all come eat”. Seeing it, I smiled internally and thought to myself, “What a strange little sign to hang in a Thai restaurant.”

I don’t see as many of these kinds of signs around as much anymore, but for a while it seemed they were everywhere from coffee shops to bookstores, which often both displayed and sold them if you didn’t want to buy one at Marshall’s or TJ Maxx. Now, I confess, the Thai restaurant is the first time I ever saw one of these signs that read “Y’all come eat”. More typical, in my memory, are ones that read things like, “Blessed” “Faith and Family”, “Breathe”, “Choose Happy” and the every popular, “Be”.

Whatever your opinion of these signs, which have and continue to both adorn countless places of business and perhaps your own home or office as well as having been mocked as an indication one is becoming one’s parents by a national insurance provider, it is clear they speak to something people feel a need to be reminded of... as if without these signs, we’d forget their message, a message vital to human life.

Or maybe it’s not that we’d forget, but an admission that we’ve already forgotten. Perhaps these signs are echoes of Wordsworth’s lament, “What man has made of man,” painted on wooden signs to match any decor.

Indeed, in an age of unprecedented human productivity, rapid, 24/7 connectivity we confuse for communication, the appeal of signs carrying messages akin to tapping the brakes, spiritually speaking, is not so difficult to understand.

We know something’s amiss.
That we’re not heading in the right direction.
We really want to change course.
But we’re also not sure what the right direction is.

Still, we've all heard, read in books, or seen on bookmarks and bumper stickers those famous words attributed to Gandhi, "Be the change you want to see in the world", which sounds a lot like, "Just do it." And so maybe we move on from hanging cute signs in our home or office to listening to TED talks, scrolling through blogs to teach us time management and how to simplify our lives in 50 easy steps, or to reading the latest biography of a "successful" i.e. rich, CEO. Each an attempt to find out how others approach or have done what Gandhi instructs.

We might instead to look to bare branches in winter.

For what Gandhi actually said was this,

"We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do."

Now, of course, that won't fit on, let alone sell bumper stickers. For, in addition to being too long, it sounds, paradoxically, too passive and like way too much work.

But what Gandhi is essentially saying is the change we wish to see in the world originates within us. So yes, he's talking about inner work. And it's true inner work generally isn't very flashy and doesn't often draw attention to itself. Still, inner work only appears passive to the outside observer. To be the change, we must first learn to be which is in fact no small, nor easy task.

In this nature proves a venerable teacher. As I began, weeks ago, to contemplate this morning's sermon, I found inspiration in the bare branches of the trees outside my window. At first glance, those barren sticks of gray reaching into an often equally gray sky might seem as lifeless as the icy cold light cast by the full moon over the landscape in the dark of winter, but beneath the surface, deep within, spring awaits.

Indeed, the comings and goings of the seasons are the result of long, largely unseen processes rather than sudden outward bursts of action.

We learn and know this from science, but still, how many of us more readily identify with Wordsworth's wistful lament concerning our separation from nature over the stream's surrender to its processes in the Sufi story?

Surrender, which is very close, even synonymous with faith, is a hard concept for the modern adult human mind to accept. We like to be (or think we're) in control. Surrender, we're taught, means defeat and conjures up fears of losing one's self, one's identity, one's individuality and autonomy. The very arguments the stream offers up in our story for all ages this morning.

But, writing on how trees know when to leaf out in spring, forester and freelance writer Michael Snyder observes, "Trees avoid midwinter mishaps (such as leafing too early) not because they are programmed to simply wait a fixed time period until conditions are right. If that were the case, trees would break bud on the same spring day every year....Somehow", he writes, "trees seem to 'know' when true spring arrives and respond by breaking bud. Sure, some forest trees get nipped by last frosts, but generally they get it right."

Snyder then explains this knowing comes from an essential surrender to cold. He writes, "Trees must first go through prolonged exposure to chilling temperatures before subsequent exposure to warmth will force bud break...these trigger physiological responses in trees, altering the balance of hormones and enzymes involved in promoting and inhibiting growth." He further notes, "the exact chilling temperatures and duration of exposure needed to break dormancy vary by species, individual, and geographic location." Trees, it seems, become, not lose what they are by their surrender.

Yet because we are not trees, or a stream, nor birds or flowers, we deceive ourselves into believing we are not a part of nature but instead stand apart from it and its ways. We think we are exceptions to the ancient processes of transformation that have shaped and reshaped the life and landscape of this planet over time. We think we can skip surrender. We think doing is superior to being.

If all this is so, why then the kitschy signs? Reminding, no, warning us to slow down... and "Breathe", "Have Faith", that we're "Blessed", "Y'all come eat" and "Be?"

Socrates famously cautioned, "Beware the barrenness of a busy life."

The frenzied and fragmented state the world, which weighs so heavily on our hearts and minds, is born of increasingly frenzied and fragmented lives. The barrenness of such a life is revealed in the agonies of our age, among which is a pervasive soul sickness. A sickness we attempt to alleviate with cutesy signs, feeble medicine dreamt up by a consumer oriented culture hell bent on giving us more to do, keep us busy and buying signs, anything to keep our attention diverted from the reality that we are human beings not human doings; a delusion

with real consequences we observe in everything from climate change to the rise in “deaths of despair.”

For in the end, what the ancient stories about streams taken up by the wind to become rivers wind and poets pining for the unburdened delight of existence which seems to come so easily to nonhuman life reveal is that to be is not inactivity, but a necessary, faithful surrender to the transformative processes of life. Life we resist, impede, or give away by our constant striving against nature and subsequently against ourselves.

As the Zen teacher Suzuki observed,

“Man is a thinking reed but his great works are done when he is not calculating and thinking. "Childlikeness" has to be restored with long years of training in the art of self-forgetfulness. When this is attained, man thinks like showers coming down from the sky; he thinks like the waves rolling on the ocean; he thinks like the stars illuminating the nightly heavens; he thinks like the green foliage shooting forth in the relaxing spring breeze. Indeed, he is the showers, the ocean, the stars, the foliage.”

We, the thinking reed, have mistaken our uniqueness in nature for independence from it and have brought the world to the brink of destruction. And still we ask, what will we do; what can we do?

Forget doing... Be.

In the words of Kamand Kojouri,

“Forget your voice, sing!
Forget your feet, dance!
Forget your life, live!
Forget yourself and be!”

For if we are to be the change we want to see in the world, we must first learn to be. We must take up our inner work and take it seriously, quieting the calculating mind to re-awaken “childlike” openness. Trust that spring resides within bare branches in winter. And surrender what we know that we might learn to live.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be