

Ticks and Brown Tail Moths
August 21, 2016

Thought to ponder at the beginning: You can plan all you want to. You can lie in your morning bed and fill whole notebooks with schemes and intentions. But within a single afternoon, within hours or minutes, everything you plan and everything you have fought to make yourself can be undone as a slug is undone when salt is poured on him. --
Wallace Stegner

Opening Words and Chalice Lighting

Words of Orlanda Brugnola

Flame, friend of our most ancient ancestors,
we kindle you now to make you visible in this time.

Yes, in truth, you burn always,
in the unique worth of each person,
in the imagination,
in the turning of of the heart to sorrow or joy,
in the call to hope,
in the call to justice.

Burn bright before us.

Burn bright within us.

Responsive Reading *Morning Poem*, by Mary Oliver
In: *Service of the Living Tradition*

Every morning the world is created.

Under the orange sticks of the sun the heaped ashes of the night turn into leaves again

And fasten themselves to the high branches – and the ponds appear like black cloth on which are painted the islands of summer lilies.

If it is your nature to be happy you will swim away along the soft trails for hours, your imagination alighting everywhere.

And if your spirit carries within it the thorn that is heavier than lead – if it's all you can do to keep on trudging –

There is still somewhere deep within you a beast shouting that the earth is exactly what it wanted –

Each pond with its blazing lilies is a prayer heard and answered lavishly, every morning.

Whether or not you have ever dared to be happy, whether or not you have ever dared to pray.

Sermon: “Ticks and Brown Tail Moths” (c) Rev. Sylvia Stocker

The most famous statue in the world, Michelangelo's David, is in trouble.¹ Specifically,

¹ All information about the David statue comes from Sam Anderson, “David's Ankles: How Imperfections Could Bring Down the World's Most Perfect Statue.” *NYT*, August 17, 2016.

according to Sam Anderson of the *New York Times*, David has serious ankle trouble.

As far back as the 19th century, people began to notice cracks in the David's ankles. But only recently, in 2014, did the world come to understand just how serious the David's ankle imperfections are. That's when a team of Italian geoscientists published the results of an experiment in which they spun tiny David replicas in a centrifuge, altering the angles and, thus, the stress on the statues. The finding? The David's ankles would fail if he were to be tilted as little as 15 degrees, and the statue would come crashing down in a pile of catastrophe. Most of the time, that's not an issue. But there are those pesky earthquakes that strike the David's hometown of Florence with discomfiting irregularity.

According to Sam Anderson, the David's problem is one of design. That is to say, the center of gravity for the statue's base does not line up with the David's center of gravity. Anderson says the scientists described the design flaw as “an eccentricity of the loads.”

I love that: “An eccentricity of the loads.” I suspect most if not all of us suffer from “an eccentricity of loads,” where center of gravity for our base doesn't exactly align with the center of gravity for the rest of us. If we were truly perfect creatures, just as if the David were truly a perfect statue, our centers of gravity would align. But, alas, most humans I know are imperfect, off kilter to at least some degree. Most of the time, that's not a problem. But there are those pesky earthquakes that shake up our lives, rearranging our landscape, and sometimes shattering us.

Human beings are not perfect. They are inconsistent, suffer from blind spots, vulnerable in infinite arrangements of ways, and prone to failings of all kinds: failures of ability, of will, of nerve, of heart. Even if human beings *were* perfect, life itself is imperfect, containing the seeds of disappointment, sadness, anger, and, ultimately, even death.

No amount of spinning little models of us in centrifuges can predict what would make us shatter. We simply live with the imperfections deep in our minds, bodies, and hearts, and somehow we make the best of things. When we do shatter from time to time, we usually

pick ourselves up again, dust ourselves off, rub salve into our bruises, and continue along our way. So we stumble along knowing that someday our ankles will cease to hold us up and we will fall to the floor in a calamitous heap.

What Anderson writes about great works of art applies to us as well:

“We are conditioned to believe that art is safe, beyond the reach of the grimy world. We don't hang the Mona Lisa next to an archery range. We put her in a fortress: walls, checkpoints, lasers, guards, bulletproof glass.

There are scholars, textbooks, posters – a whole collective mythology suggesting that the work will live forever. But safety is largely an illusion, and permanence a fiction. Empires hemorrhage wealth, bombs fall on cities, religious radicals decimate ancient temples. Destruction happens in any number of ways, for any number of reasons, at any number of speeds – and it will happen, and no amount of reverence will stop it.”
(Sam Anderson, “David's Ankles: How Imperfections Could Bring Down the World's Most Perfect Statue.” *NYT*, August 17, 2016)

Ever tried to plan the perfect wedding? Most people want their wedding or their child's wedding to be perfect. What makes weddings most memorable are the things that go wrong. Ministers have lots of wedding stories. Like my colleague whose wedding couple consulted the astrological charts to plan the exact, right, most auspicious date and time for their wedding. The wedding was to be held at 5 a.m. Well, my colleague overslept.

Or the minister who got lost on the way to my brother's wedding and arrived an hour late.

Or the very first wedding I ever did. When I asked the best man to place the rings onto my book, the rings slid to the center of the book, then on down the binding and onto the floor.

Or one of the weddings I did in my former church. The couple had chosen to unroll one of those white runners for the bride's entrance. Adhesive attached the runner to the wall-to-wall carpeting in the sanctuary. In addition, I had added a couple of common pins, just to secure it even more. I know how easily those things can get dislodged. When I explained to the groomsmen that they had to *gently* unroll the runner, they said, "Oh, yeah. We know, we know. We've done this before." But they obviously didn't listen to a word I said. When the dramatic moment came, the groomsmen yanked the runner with such force that it left its mooring, and a white cloud of runner went sailing across the sanctuary.

Life isn't perfect.

I had plenty of time to think about imperfection during my sabbatical. A few years ago, in the very final moments before I left for vacation, a member of the congregation said to me, "This is when vacation is the absolute best: Just before you leave, and it stretches out ahead of you." I've thought about the truth in that statement ever since, whenever I have taken a vacation. Last April 14, the day before I left for sabbatical, was no exception. As I stood on the top of the mountain surveying four whole months off, with the right mix of planned and unplanned activities and times, well, my sabbatical was perfect, just perfect.

That was before I got the brown tail moth rash (twice), rendering me a bundle of itching misery. That was before I got Lyme disease, which, until it was discovered and treated, made every muscle and bone in my body scream with pain. Life's imperfections stared me right in the face.

It was also before I didn't use every moment wisely. Before I didn't follow through with every intention. Before I didn't practice the banjo or dulcimer as much as I could have and, thus, didn't make the progress I had hoped to make. Before I didn't see all the people I meant to see or do all the things I meant to do. My own imperfections stared me

right in the face as well.

What does it mean to be imperfect beings living in an imperfect world? I suppose the most obvious lesson for me is one of appreciation, one of gratitude. If we never experienced the pain of failure or the vicissitudes of life, how would we ever know to be grateful for the good that comes our way?

I surely was grateful for brown tick spray and salve that eased my itching, and even more grateful for the doxycycline that helped my body go to bat against Lyme disease. I was grateful for neighbors who brought over a delicious meal one night, in the early days of Lyme disease.

As you may know, when you are taking doxycycline, you have to stay out of the sun – or cover up with long sleeves and long pants, hats, sunglasses and gobs of sunscreen. So I was also grateful for that hot mid-July day when the medication cycle was over and I could finally shed the long sleeves and long pants.

I was also grateful for humor. A few weeks ago, our neighborhood planned a block party. On one of my early morning walks, some of my walking companions and I hatched a plan to start a band that would play a couple of songs at the party. We called ourselves “The Brown Tail Moths,” and we rewrote the words to Johnny Cash's “Ring of Fire.” We wrote lyrics about ticks and brown tail moths and all the invasive species in our neighborhood, and we got to ‘throw them into the burning ring of fire; down, down, down while the flames go higher. Burn, burn, burn, the ring of fire, the ring of fire.’ Well that wouldn't have been so fun or funny without miserable prior experience of ticks and moths.

Of course, I was most grateful when my good health was restored.

So, gratitude. But there is something else. Our imperfections, our hardships, the many ways life doesn't go according to our plans, the ways we have to alter our courses and

recalibrate our hearts – those are the best opportunities we have to make meaning out of life. It's what Martin Luther King, Jr., described when he talked about 'hewing out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.'

Actually, I wonder if we would ever bother to make meaning in a perfect world. I actually have trouble even imagining it. I think it's life's imperfections that make us ask deep questions and send us searching for answers. At least that feels true to my life.

And sometimes some of the most beautiful things emerge from cracks, flaws, imperfections, and the broken places. Take Michelangelo's statue of David. According to Sam Anderson, the stone itself was flawed. The 18-foot, 25,000 ton stone was quarried in Carrara in 1464, before Michelangelo was even born. The stone was intended for another artist, Augustino di Duccio, who had been commissioned by the city of Florence to carve a statue of David.

After the many months it took just to quarry the stone, it took another two years to ferry the stone from Carrara to Florence. Once the stone reached Florence, the people were dismayed to discover it was pock-marked with little holes and filled with veins of color that marred the pure, milky white marble color favored by sculptors. The stone was also oddly narrow in shape.

Even more disappointing, Augustino di Duccio's first attempts at roughing out the statue demonstrated just how far out of his league he was. He was fired from the job, and the block sat abandoned for over 30 years, drying out in the sun, before Michelangelo entered the stage.

Sam Anderson reminds us that marble is best cut right when it is hewn from the mountain. Drying makes marble brittle. But, nearly 40 years after the stone was quarried, and roughly two years after Michelangelo began to work, he produced a masterpiece from a dried out, oddly shaped, flawed piece of stone.

Would the sculpture have been any better if Michelangelo had had a perfect piece of stone? We'll never know, of course, for Michelangelo is long gone. But I would venture to say there is no perfect piece of stone. There is no perfect sculptor. There is only who we are and what we have and making the best of that.

Anderson says, *“The young sculptor had not run from the odd dimensions of the block; he embraced them, turning them into his figure's signature elements. The block's narrowness yielded the lean, twisting body (as opposed to an overmuscled superman), with its huge head and hands.”*

In my lifetime, and probably in yours, too, I have had the opportunity to watch people recover from catastrophic losses, from situations that seem to have all but crushed them. I have watched people being handed a pathetic piece of marble from which to hew a life of meaning and beauty. Losses and painful events of every kind may appear to mar our building materials.

Not every time, but more often than not, working through those losses and painful events tends to bring people closer to their hearts, closer to the wellspring of love and compassion, closer to wisdom and understanding, closer to the most deep-down bedrock anchors of their existence, closer to God some would say. Not every time, but most of the time, people chisel meaning and beauty from the stone they've been handed.

Certainly that has been true in my life. When things are percolating along the way I think they are supposed to go, I don't tend to question things. I just go along for the ride. But when my own particular “eccentricity of load” sends me off balance, shattering in pieces on the ground – that's when my real growing begins.

Tallied up, roughly one month of my sabbatical contained the imperfections of itchy rashes, pain, fever, and the inconveniences of long sleeves, long pants, hats, sunglasses, and gobs of sun screen in the height of summer. Well, that's too bad, but oh, how much more of a gift the other 75% of the time then seemed!

Making meaning out of life imperfections – most especially out of loss – has taught me more about love than anything else. Loss has made me a better wife, a better mother, a better friend, and a better minister. In fact, working through a particularly devastating decade of my life is what propelled me into seminary. Facing and coping with life's imperfections, including my own vast array of imperfections, has helped me to dip into a wellspring of compassion and forgiveness, making peace with my own imperfections and space for the imperfections of others.

“The heart that breaks open,” Joanna Macy reminds us, “can contain the whole universe.”

Don't get me wrong: I don't want the David to ever fall and shatter. I don't want any of us ever to have our lives torn apart. But I am realistic, and I see how the world works. I know the eccentricity of loads we all carry. So I want us to remember and appreciate that life's imperfections contain the seeds of metamorphosis, renewal, and growth.

Mary Oliver tells us that “Every morning the world is created. Under the orange sticks of the sun, heaped ashes of the night turn into leaves again.” It's good for us to remember that such a transformation, from heaped ashes into leaves, is only possible if night falls, allowing daybreak to appear once again.

Closing Words

This I would give you for the journey:
Hearts filled with courage,
Hands put to work,
Senses that face life's imperfections,
and the willingness to set chisel to stone.