

The Shift That Has To Happen Sometimes
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Certain things that we encounter are just unbelievable...but we hold on to them anyway...like in the movies. Do you know what I mean? We have no trouble journeying to the center of the earth even though that's impossible and we can get ourselves lost in space without leaving the comforts of our living rooms. We can all become Wonder Woman and we can all become Superman but we had to give our consent before any of that happens. We had to agree to suspend our disbelief but something shifted. It's different now. It's like we've crossed some kind of threshold without knowing it somehow. A gentle boundary...like the one between late summer and early autumn.

"It is now life and not art that requires the willing suspension of disbelief." Lionel Trilling said that once and I believe him. A shift that has happened... The way things used to be, they are no more.

I liked it better when the need for change was obvious and clear, when it reached right out and hit me over the head. "There is a shift that needs to happen sometimes," I heard my father saying to me many years ago...when I was seventeen...as the engine of the car I was driving was revving far too high...my right foot, too heavy on the gas pedal, pushing too hard and too fast in second gear. "I said, 'There is a shift that needs to happen sometimes' and I think that time is right about now!" He repeated himself. I heard him better the second time. So, I eased up on the gas with my right foot and pushed the clutch down with my left. I shifted up into third and things got easier.

Shifting was obvious and clear when I was learning how to drive a car. It's less clear now in life and in spirit as we figure out where we're going, as we grow in spiritual maturity...something that writer James Baldwin once called "the rarest of human endeavors."

What do you think? Are we up for it? Shall we make a bold attempt? Would you like to explore what Baldwin thought is nearly impossible?

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well.

What did you think of the Stone Soup story? Have you heard the tale before? I love how Chloe lays it out, the 'old tale' by Marcia Brown. It was written back in 1947 and the original, opening words were these.

Three soldiers trudged down a road in a strange country. They were on their way home from the wars. Besides being tired, they were hungry. In fact, they had eaten nothing for two days.

"How I would like a good dinner tonight," said the first.

"And a bed to sleep in," said the second.

"But all that is impossible," said the third. "We must march on."

And that, they did. They marched on. They marched all day and night. They marched until they reached a town where all of the people were afraid. The people of the

town feared strangers. “They all had good reasons,” as the story explained. The people of the town were frightened because their hearts had been broken before. The brokenness had not healed. The people of the town needed healing.

Have you ever been in a town that was like the one in the Stone Soup story? Was that town very different than the one in which we live?

The people were all afraid but something shifted within them. Do you know what it was? Do you remember from the story? The idea of stone soup was the turning point—not the soup itself but the idea of it, the making of it. It was the idea of generosity and openness. It was the hope of true community.

Fear closed the hearts of the people of the town. It made them hide their possessions and it made them close their doors. “They all had good reasons,” to be sure but something within them shifted. The idea of stone soup was just like magic for them. It was a new idea. It was a novel thought. It delighted the people of the town and it ignited something within them, a fire that was able to warm the soul.

What delighted and ignited the people was a costless idea, a precious and priceless idea we call trust. The soldiers returning from war did not teach the art of soup-making. They taught about something more beautiful. They taught about true community. The soldiers taught about a nutritious means of overcoming fear. They taught about the unhealthy habits of closing in and of shutting down. It’s something that happens sometimes in the face of adversity. The soldiers taught the people about the soul-engines that lead us forward in life. They taught about fearlessness and hope.

When I look at the news these days, I don’t see a lot of this. I don’t see a lot of fearlessness and hope. I see the opposite. I see a lot of bitterness and rage. It makes me turn to the sports page as quickly as I can. It’s nice to have a place where I can get away. So, there’s a shift that needs to happen—a shift in how we talk about front-page politics and power, a shift in how we cultivate community.

When I look at the news these days, I see a lot of shaming going on. I see a lot of righteousness. Are you seeing that as well? I see a lot of people pointing fingers and assigning blame. It makes me wonder about what’s really happening. It feels like something is shifting and making us a little anxious...making us a little fearful, like the people in the Stone Soup story who hid their food and closed their doors.

It’s hard when things shift. It’s really hard. We like to hold on to things...even when we know that we can’t. You know, you hold on to something your whole life long and then, suddenly, it changes. Something shifts and we have to let go...and then, the unimaginable happens, the unimaginable thing called life. We float. We fly. We feather and fall our ways down to the ground—tossing and twisting, tumbling and turning...to touch down on the earth with both feet, as if for the very first time.

It’s hard when things shift, sometimes. I watched the recent Bill Cosby documentary online last month. It was the one that openly talks about his many transgressions over so many years. My God! All of the women that he took advantage! All of the things he took without their consent! Talk about the shifts that need to happen...

What he did to all those women—physically, sexually and emotionally—was just heartbreaking. And what Bill Cosby did to me—because of what he did to

them—was heartbreaking too...because I had to give up on something that believed in. I lost something that was precious to me and that is always painful. It is nothing like the pain that those women endured but it's painful nevertheless.

I grew up believing in Bill Cosby with my whole heart. I wasn't alone. Cosby was a hero to me, a real-life hero. He was hilarious and he represented for me back then—for that young and naïve, black boy-child—he represented an example of what black success looked like in American society...true, smart, witty, non-athletic, black, male success. There were myriad signposts saying that kind of thing was impossible (and far too many of those signposts still exist today). Cosby shattered all of that. He broke free of it and never even broke a sweat. I respected that. It gave me a sense of hope and possibility. So, he was a real hero to me...and he was almost a role model.

I was lucky with my childhood. I was spectacularly lucky. You know, in our hymnal, these words appear: "Seek not afar for beauty. Lo, it glows in dew wet grasses all about your feet." I think it's hymn #77. Well, I was never tempted to seek afar for beauty when I was young. Beauty was always so very near at hand. My father was my role model. So, I was lucky, really lucky. So, I didn't need Bill Cosby in that way...but my father may have. He might have needed Cosby as a role model.

I imagine how my father might have felt after taking in the news, the news about Cosby and the ritual of his sexual misconduct. I say, 'after taking in the news' and not after hearing about it for the first time. I'm pretty sure that my father would have dismissed that news the first time that he heard it. It would not have been believable to him...and not because the women who came forward were unbelievable. Not at all. They were all so very brave. That would have troubled him. Yet, he still might have dismissed the news because he would not have wanted to lose a role model. He would have resisted having to give up on his hero.

No one wants to give up on the hero. Such loss presents itself as devastating experience. So, we steer clear, avoiding what we can until, alas, we have to turn and face it. I understand this now—I do—and this new understanding makes me wonder about people like Ashli Babbitt. You remember her. She was the 35-year-old, Air Force veteran who was shot and killed by security forces in Washington, D.C. after she and others breached the Capitol on the 6th of January last year. I think differently now. Now, I wonder how much Ashli Babbitt was actually like my dad—unwilling to give up on the hero.

I think differently now. I think differently about Ginny Thomas, the wife of Justice Clarence Thomas. She just testified before the J6 Committee, before Bennie Thompson from Mississippi and before Liz Cheney from Wyoming. Ginny Thomas told that committee—she told them proudly, for some reason—that she believed two years ago and that she still believes today that the presidential election was, in her words, "stolen." After more than 60 court cases and after more than 60 legal defeats, Ginny Thomas is unmoved. She still can't give up on her hero. So, there's a shift that needs to happen sometimes...and it's hard to do.

I am not comfortable with these thoughts. They are not sexy to my ego. I don't like sharing them with you but my spirit cannot escape them. So, my soul must take them on. I must take them seriously—maybe people like Ashli Babbitt and Ginny Thomas are just like my dad, not yet ready to take in the news upon

hearing it for first time (or for the fifth time...or for the forty-fifth time, as it turns out)—still unable to give up on the hero. So, there's a shift that needs to happen. A pretty big one, in fact.

It's really hard to make big shifts in life. No one does this well. It turns your world upside-down. It changes everything you know. You lose so much. You have to give up so much and so much falls away. I get that now. Babbitt and Thomas are losing a hero. They will have to give him up just like I had give up Cosby when he fell and that was just as obvious. I had trouble giving up on him but when I did, something inside shifted...and there were real consequences of that shift. That happens sometimes.

"I was situated at that moment in the turning of the northern year," a beautiful author named Russell Banks writes. Banks wrote a book called *Cloudsplitter* in 1998. He wrote about life in the shoulder season. He wrote, I was situated at that moment in the turning of the northern year, when the end of winter and the start of spring overlap like shingles on a roof and the natural world seems doubled in thickness and density. A shift in the direction of the wind cools the air a single degree, and suddenly a puddle of standing water is covered with a skin of ice that, seconds later, as the same wind parts the clouds and opens the sky, melts in the sunlight. At this moment, all in change. Transformation seems permanent.

This passage describes a moment of the shoulder season that is on the other side of winter. It places us precariously on the cusp of change, at the threshold of transformation, where slight shift carries meaning, where subtle change has consequence. This is as true of the world around us and it's true within us as well. What small shifts in the lives you lead lead to transformation? What can we let go of in order to begin anew?

We all have different heroes. This is a pluralistic society. Yet and still, our journeys are the same. We all have to let go of that which no longer serves us. We all have to give up what is not true. So, the lonesome valley is a challenge for all of us. Spiritual maturity is hard for all of us but we need it to become our truest selves.

You've got to walk that lonesome valley
You've got to walk it for yourself
Nobody here can walk it for you...

This is part of what it means to grow in spirit. This is part of what it means to nurture the soul.

You hold on to something your whole life long and then, somehow, you let it go. Then, you float...or you fly. You feather...or you fall your way down to the ground. Tossing and twisting, tumbling and turning, we touch down gently with both feet. It's just a part of living in the world. In a poem called *In Blackwater Woods*, Mary Oliver reminds us that,

To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;

to hold it against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go

We do this every autumn. It happens deciduous leaves these days, as near and as far as the eye can see. We hold on for our whole lives and then, something shifts and it's time to let go. We fall, float, fly, feather. The time of holding on is through.

In every deciduous leaf, each year, there's a shift that happens. The leaves change from green to auburn, russet and orange. They turn yellow and gold. Then, when they're ready, they let go. They fall. They autumn down to the ground. They fall to earth beautifully.

Autumn is a time of change. This is obviously true. So many of the trees are telling us...each tree that isn't evergreen. They're changing now and we are changing, too. Let go of fear and foreclosure and grab hold of something to contribute. Bring to the center of town and become a living part of the larger community. When the trust is there to hold you, give of your time and treasure. Give of your talents and bring to the table something that brings meaning to your life. And share it freely and unabashedly. Don't hold back. Let go with your whole heart.

I know it's hard. It's really hard to be that open. It's hard to make ourselves vulnerable, especially after we've been hurt. We tend to protect ourselves. We fill with fear, like the people of the town in the Stone Soup story. It's hard to open up sometimes but the benefit is clear. We can build a better community—and a richer stock—by starting out with fearlessness and hope...no matter what might be falling down around us.

The best thing that heroes do is remind us of how beautiful we are, of how powerful and how just, of how compassionate and how brave. When heroes falter, it feels like we are losing that is precious. *Corruptio optimi pessima*—the corruption of the best is worst of all. When heroes fall, it feels like we are losing what is best in us somehow. We're really not but we defend ourselves as if we were. We are losing only the symbol of that which is best in us. We conflate the two and we have trouble letting go. We hold on to the fallen symbol because it's hard to become the hero...because it's hard to pick up that mantle...because we don't want to fall down ourselves.

It's hard to be the hero all of the time. Maybe what this season is trying to tell us is that it's ok to let go of that. It's ok to let the symbol fall away. It's ok to let it tumble down and topple like the temple long ago.

I'm quoting an old song here. It was written by James Taylor. It's called Let It Fall Down...strangely appropriate for autumn.

Sing a song for the wrong and the wicked
And the strong and the sick, as thick as thieves
For the faceless fear that was never so near
Too clear to misbelieve

The passage that is most useful for us as we close this morning is this.

You know, it ain't nobody's fault but our own
Still, at least we might-could show the good sense
To know when we've been wrong
And it's already taken too long
So, we bring things to a stop
Then we take it from the top
We let it settle on down softly
Like your gently falling snow
Or let it tumble down and topple
Like the temple long ago
Let it fall down, let it fall down, let it all fall down
Keep hollerin' timber, timber, I hope it don't fall on me

Well, I really hope that it does. I pray that it falls down on us, actually. I pray that they temple of our familiar habits falls down all around us until we left only with that which is honest and is true. Then, the words from hymn #77 would be make sense:

Seek not afar for beauty.
Lo, it glows in dew wet grasses
all about your feet.

There's a shift that needs to happen.

And Al Gore agrees. In An Inconvenient Truth, his documentary film of 2006, former Vice President invited us all to remember what truly important. He said, You look at that river gently flowing by. You notice the leaves rustling with the wind. You hear the birds. You hear the tree frogs. In the distance, you hear a cow. You feel the grass. The mud gives a little bit on the riverbank. It's quiet. It's peaceful. And all of a sudden, it's a gearshift inside of you. And it's like taking a deep breath and going, "Oh, yeah. I forgot about this."

'Maybe,' the hero within me says, 'maybe it is time for us to remember...time to remember the peace that lives between us, time to reflect on the colors that fall and the beauty that lives within.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.