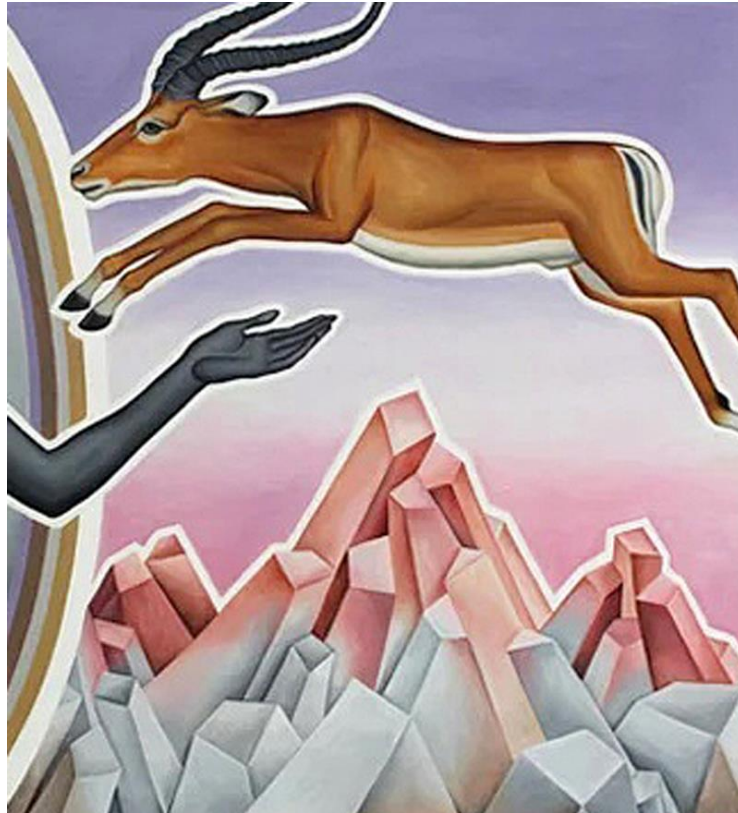


Heart Swell



Like a Deer Leaping Mountains by Peter Koenig¹

How to begin when it seems there is more to say without speaking, and we realize our hearts are moving? We could pause right now, letting our feelings rise up. Isn't this the most natural and powerful thing to do: to be still and allow our hearts to move together as we bear witness to our world:

- A soldier reaching for a child across a fence of wire.
- An airplane taking off from a dangerous and hostile place, offering a narrow escape for a few, and leaving behind so many with no escape at all.

- A hurricane, powerful, record-setting, spinning and accelerating across the ocean, approaching land at this very moment; a land unprepared for the devastating changes of a warming global climate caused by us; with some who will find refuge in time and some who will not.
- Across our country, in our own homes, the tragic reality of the continuing pandemic and the tender issue of vaccination, families and friends divided, hearts breaking.

And in all of these human moments, the Earth is still turning, this precious living planet is still moving around the sun, our sun is still swept up in the swirling galaxy, without pause, blazing for us our tiny trail through the darkness. Wherever we find ourselves in this moment of cosmic becoming, both shadow and light fall upon us, sunshine and wind surround us and touch us, all at once.

And so we hear this morning the beautiful Song of Solomon about the tenderness of the spring and our human-divine love, when things are so good and right and mutual. This poem seems out of place with where we are.² “The flowers appear on the earth,” the poet proclaims, and yet we are at the end of summer, in the morning chill, with the flowers fading and the leaves just about to blow off the birch trees. “The time of singing has come,” we hear, and yet we are approaching another terrible season of pandemic as the light recedes. “The vines are in blossom and they give forth fragrance,” and yet we hear the cry of human anguish and share a palpable sense of fear.

There is, as Sharon Salzberg describes it, a kind of “suffering with nowhere to go...”.³ What is this suffering with nowhere to go, this restless humanity, when some are rescued and some are not? When some live in safety and others live in terror? When some are privileged and comfortable in their dominant culture and others are oppressed and marginalized and traumatized across generations?

In the Gospel story, we hear the voice of Jesus telling us that the source of our troubles lies in the heart: “For it is from within, from the human heart” that these intentions come. (Mark 7:21) I prefer to think of the heart as the space in which we uncover our compassion and radiate this to the world. I am uncomfortable, as usual, with Jesus, his words and his rebuke, when he says that the inner life is the source of the messy, destructive world around us. The inner world determining the outer one, and the outer world unveiling what lies within. Jesus is so good at making us so uncomfortable, directing us to the plain and simple truth: where else but in the human heart do we find and root

out the injustices of our world? Even if we always think of the world as “out-there” it is always a world that emanates from “in here,” from within.⁴

It is in the heart that we discover how embedded we are in global systems of injustice and ignorance. This is where bias and blame and judgment find their home, keeping us and others from flourishing.⁵

And, yet, the heart is also where we can be bold, the place in which we confront ourselves; where we sometimes get it right, where we can break through the laws and structures and oppressive legacies and inequalities that keep us from the fullness of our humanity and the love that binds us.⁶

Paul Tillich describes how our lives unfold when we find our center and move from this center, in freedom and courage, coming back again and again to this heart-center with ever more strength.⁷ The inner life and the outer life moving and transforming together. And Jesus, as Howard Thurman reminds us, is always pointing us to the heart, our “inward center,” as this crucial arena that determines the destiny of our humanity.⁸

Whether what we face is big or small, visible or invisible, known or unknown, we walk along a narrow precipice, trying to keep our balance, falling one way or the other. We wobble, we fall, we stand up again, we see, then we don't see, or someone sees for us or we see for them. We are caught in between the old and the new, with God, this divine mystery, never letting us rest from the push and pull, the nudge, the call, the little voice, the inner movements of our troubled world heart.

In a time of tremendous and rapid change, what is obvious when we connect with one another in our little constellation of heart space, is that we matter. Our struggle matters. Our struggle matters together. We are healing a tear in the fabric of the universe. This is happening through our gathering and our shared consciousness. In the work of the heart, even when we mess up, and perhaps especially then, we take part in the transformation of the world.

As Sharon Salzberg puts it, it is about being able to hold the dark and the light together, to have the mind and heart big enough, spacious enough to hold it all.⁹

In the Song of Solomon, animals, humans, the trees and the natural world all share in the joy of life.¹⁰ Love breaks through in little moments and opens us to the hearts and minds of others, and we fall into moments of solidarity, and we glimpse eternity.¹¹

We glimpse this eternity especially when we pause and hold still; when we hold still enough to watch the glacier advance or retreat, the flower petals open or close, the tiniest of life forms rise or burrow in the soil, or watch for the moment the needles on the spruce trees just behind me, slowly turn to rust.

In a world in crisis, all things bear witness to one another.

Perhaps when we are up against the impossible, it's not really a step into the darkness or the unknown, but, rather, as one of you said to me recently, a step from the known to the yet unformed.¹²

When we come to the edge of what we know, may our hearts become a resting place for love, may we grow into the fullness of who we are in our inmost being, through the One in whom we discover the abundance of new life, in Christ Jesus.

Amen.



The rusting of a spruce tree on the campus of St Mary's.
Photo by Catherine Amy Kropp, August 28, 2021.

When we walk to the edge
of all the light we have
and take the step into the
darkness of the unknown,
we must believe one of
two things will happen,
there will be something
solid to stand on or we
will be taught how to fly.

Paul Overton

READINGS

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

The voice of my beloved!
Look, he comes,
leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills.
My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag.
Look, there he stands
behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows,
looking through the lattice.
My beloved speaks and says to me:
"Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away."

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

When the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

'This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

¹ Koenig, Peter. "Like a Deer Leaping Mountains," from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=58495> [retrieved August 28, 2021]. Original source: <https://www.pwkoenig.co.uk/>.

² "The passage for this Sunday from the Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon, with its language of leaping gazelles and sprouting fig trees, seems rather out of place in Scripture and therefore a bit of a misfit for the lectionary." Song-Mi Suzie Park, writing in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3* (p. 265). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

³ "Sharon Salzberg — The Healing Is In The Return," The On Being Project, accessed August 28, 2021, <https://onbeing.org/programs/sharon-salzberg-the-healing-is-in-the-return/>.

⁴ "Jesus made clear in this story that what alienates people from God are the murky and tangled motivations of the heart. These motivations, in political discourse, can include bias, ignorance, judgment, and blame. They can include racism, sexism, and national chauvinism. They can include hatred and revenge. These are the heart diseases that defile us, disable our ministries, and undermine human flourishing." Leanne Van Dyk, in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3* (p. 280). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

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⁶ "Our challenge today is to recognize how we, like the Pharisees, misinterpret what is important to God." Amy C. Howe, in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3* (Location 859). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

⁷ "One of the towering theologians of the twentieth century, Paul Tillich (1886–1965), described self-integration as one of the three basic functions of life (with self-creativity and

self-transformation being the other two). What he meant was that, in order for life to be actualized from its potential being, it has to unfold in a process of finding our center, moving out from it in freedom and courage, and returning to it again enriched and deepened. This is how he described self-integration. The center is the core of the self; it cannot be divided, but it can be strengthened. To move out from our center is to exercise our freedom, to risk disintegration, and this act is essentially a moral act, a function of the realm of the spirit.” Loye Bradley Ashton, in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3* (Location 808). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

⁸ “With increasing insight and startling accuracy he placed his finger on the “inward center” as the crucial arena where the issues would determine the destiny of his people.” Howard Thurman. *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Beacon Press. Kindle Edition, Location 281, page 21.

⁹ “Sharon Salzberg — The Healing Is In The Return,” The On Being Project, accessed August 28, 2021, <https://onbeing.org/programs/sharon-salzberg-the-healing-is-in-the-return/>.

¹⁰ “This world has transformative power in relationships, in nature, and in creation. However grim things may have been in seasons past, winter will yield to spring. The rain will go, flowers will appear, and the season of glad songs will arrive at last.” Susan T. Henry-Crowe, writing in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3* (p. 255). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

¹¹ Susan T. Henry-Crowe, in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3* (Location 272). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

¹² Personal communication, August 19, 2021.