

The background is a detailed oil painting of a landscape. In the foreground, a river flows over a bed of large, light-colored rocks. The banks are lined with tall, golden-brown grasses and some green shrubs. In the middle ground, the river continues to flow through a valley. In the background, a range of rugged, layered mountains rises against a pale sky. The overall style is realistic with visible brushstrokes and a rich color palette.

THE PORCH

ISSUE 14

A slow conversation about beautiful and difficult things

PORCH 14

Liam Neeson and the plank in my eye - Gareth Higgins - 3

The Whispering Gallery - Laura Hope-Gill - 8

Silence - Carl McColman - 15

Chosen - Veronica Zundel - 20

A Re-frame that Matters - Mahan Siler - 25

Floating - Jasmin Pittman Morrell - 29

When is Later? - Steve Daugherty - 34

O Tannendude - David Lynch - 42

LIAM NEESON & THE PLANK IN MY EYE - Gareth Higgins

There are at least four moments in Liam Neeson's on-screen career that stand out for me - helping Jeremy Irons with Daniel Berrigan (of all people), in the powerful drama of heart-spirituality versus powerful religious institutions *The Mission*; sitting and waiting for the wolves at the end of the underseen existential action movie *The Grey*; the despair in his face at the climax of *Lamb*, the almost unbearably sad film about broken attempts at fixing people; and most of all, in *Schindler's List* when he realizes that he "could have done more" to rescue people from the Holocaust. But for the past decade and more, his public persona has been so intertwined with the character he played in the *Taken* series of crash-happy revenge thrillers that it's easy to forget he started as a serious actor, and remains one, in the right projects.

Recently his mainstream reputation may have been replaced, because of something he said to a journalist. As far as I can see, what he said can be roughly paraphrased as the following:

"Four decades ago, something awful was done to someone I cared about; I was primed by my own prejudices to ask her the ethnicity of the person who did it; for a short time thereafter I was consumed with thoughts of revenge, and went looking for someone who reminded me of the person who did this to my friend, ready to hurt or even kill them. After about a week, I thought better of this, and stopped. Subsequently, I reflected on the cycle of tit-for-tat violence in my home country, and felt regret about the futility of it all. I'm ashamed of the way I acted in the past."

This attempt at an emotionally mature and vulnerable statement has been responded to with headlines implying that Liam Neeson harbors racist revenge fantasies. Little nuance is to be found.

Some thoughts:

1: When a white man speaks about such things, he should be mindful of the particular impact. It took Liam Neeson to show me this, and I'm sure I would have made a similar error, or worse. Spike Lee's response summed it up: suggesting that Liam might have been engaging in a form of public confession, but that his words did not acknowledge the reality of how many innocent black men have been targeted because of false allegations and simple prejudice. Confession isn't just good for the soul - when the harm is public, the acknowledgement should be also. But there is a more articulate and conscious way to make such a statement. It might be best to do some inner work and conscious engagement with anti-oppression education, community service, and relationship-building; and to only say publicly what can serve the common good. But I'm not going blame Liam Neeson for stating something as imperfectly as many of us might ourselves, given the same circumstances.

2: When someone acknowledges their shame over past bigotry and vengeful actions, and says that it was awful, and that they learned a lesson from it, and that they see how much pain is caused when people give into their rage even if that acknowledgement is imperfectly articulated ... it's an opportunity to listen.

3: When someone frequently appears in movies whose arc is usually about a white man killing bad guys (often brown ones) to avenge their terrible deeds; and when such violence is played as cathartic, gruesome, and an eye

for an eye (or a few bodies in exchange for one)...it's an opportunity to ask questions about just why such movies are so popular, and what they might be doing to our collective visions of how to resolve conflict, who is good, and the world itself.

4: When such an acknowledgement is made in the course of trying to publicize such a movie, it's an opportunity to stand back, take a good look at both the acknowledgement and the type of movie, and why the acknowledgement is more controversial than the film. In other words, in condemning Liam Neeson for acknowledging his own mistake, but ignoring the possibly far more damaging impact of his (and hundreds of others) producing thoughtless revenge stories, are we punishing the wrong sin? And is our choice to ignore the latter because we are implicated as mass consumers of that revenge fantasy?

5: If I can find within myself the same tendency to revenge, then perhaps it's an opportunity for me to remember that the desire for revenge is a human universal; and that we need new narratives about vengeance, which recognize the natural urge to revenge, but refuse the expression of violence, and work toward responses that restrain and hold accountable the violent, offer the most expansive amends possible to the victims, and allow the possibility of healing for every one. This must include incentives for people to acknowledge our mistakes, make amends, and have at least the possibility of restoration.

This is not naive. It's actually how the world works, at its best. Liam Neeson shouldn't be our scapegoat. His disavowal of revenge in the real world should not become a pretext for his own punishment; his movies that fantasize about revenge in the dream world might deserve some thoughtful interrogation; and maybe most of us could ask ourselves how

we can be better prepared to respond to the bad with doing something better.

Just a thought.

Welcome to Issue 14 of *The Porch* - working with the planks in our eyes, trying to take life seriously without taking ourselves too seriously, and glad to have you with us on the journey.

Gareth Higgins

Editor, *The Porch*

PS: In the spirit of doing something better, here's some movies that handle vengeance with care:

Lizzie, Revanche, The Crossing Guard, Hell in the Pacific, Moby-Dick, The Godfather Part II, The Duellists, Munich, Gandhi, Pride, Selma, The Color Purple, Jesus of Montreal, The Fisher King, Atanarjuat The Fast Runner, Monster's Ball, Blindspotting

And some of Liam Neeson's best work:

Widows, The Ballad of Buster Scruggs, Kinsey, Silence, The Prophet.



The Whispering Gallery - Laura Hope-Gill

I get lost in my deafness. It's like a possession, though gently taken. It belongs to me and I to it, and I often feel that it gives me an invisible shield of privacy. It insulates me from the world. Where it takes me: some world between speech and silence, a place where while time and space cohere, sound does not. Speech is not speech here. Words unwatched as they emerge from the lips sound more like moans, like the low howls of ghosts in a childhood forest, a lost world. Among the non-hearing, I move through their own sonic world so smoothly you could suppose it was strongly attached to the spoken one. But the bond is loose, loose, loose, often just about to break. It is a mitosis always about to occur. Because it no longer works for me, I have moved from speech.

For the spoken world, sound is full of itself. Just as a fingertip tells its owner the stove is hot, the ear reports the word just said. It's a world that fits together neatly along the jigsaw cuts of each of the five senses. I know. I remember how it used to work. How effortlessly. And yet, I missed a lot when I could hear well. Not to say that I don't miss a lot now. But there are unspoken things I used to miss and which now guide me through my interactions with people and with my world at large. They are the other voices people use in communication, the little doors under which their anxieties slip, the speed of their words, the minnow-like dartings of their eyes. And it all brings me back to the question of what talk really is, what listening really is, what does it mean to *hear*?

Return to the dome at St. Pauls Cathedral in London. Lean forward to the brilliance of the marble floor below, look up and see Sir Peter Thornhill's glass mosaic scenes of Creation. Sit still, raise your eyes slightly

and you can see, between the arches of the inner dome, mosaics of prophets and saints as they sit at their desks either engaging or trying to escape from the task of writing down the word of God. Each man takes a varying degree of dislike to the process. John is most disciplined, there with his lion, as angels hold open his book. Not so willing, Isaiah looks about to haul off, punch the angel holding the pen, and ditch the job altogether. Jeremiah must be held down while one angel forces the pen into his closed fist and implores him to take the divine dictation, which he does. It's a scene of violence and trepidation, furor and resistance.

The whispers of the Whispering Gallery, the mosaics suggest, might not be the kind of whispers we long to hear, despite our pleas to hear God's voice. But the name of the gallery only partly refers to the images overhead. On the less celestial plane, the Whispering Gallery is a bit of a sonic playpen. Given the dome's ellipsoidal shape, a person's whispers will echo into the ears of the person seated diametrically across from them, in a few second's delay. The playfulness of sound is made present, current, even palpable. Overhead, it is toyed with by the artist in, to use a term from audiology, profound, the last stop on the audiogram, signifying total deafness, ways.

At some point, the prophets had to let go of the language they normally listened to, thought in, lived through, the language within their own heads. They had to abandon the known to receive the unknown language of God. No wonder they look a little scared. Their faces convey a sense of living in a perpetual state of wonder, wondering if what they heard is what was said, if what was said could possibly be true, if they could possibly do anything to avert a dawning tragedy, change the path of man. And also their faces, in so many shards of glass, convey what weight it is to be able to hear in any sense of the word, what great responsibility it

is to be the receiver of any kind of speech, what an honor it is to listen. It is this listening that intrigues me.

It is why when I went to London shortly after my sensorineural deafness diagnosis, I returned to the dome four times in a week to see them, study them, intermittently turning my hearing aid-filled head to the wall to hear the echoes of whispers of the tourists across from me, who, I learned, would talk if I asked them to. Sitting that way, poised to hear, my fingertips filled the imprints of centuries of fingertips pressed and wearing into stone much in the same way that the right kind of ear can bore into, and borrow from, the silence. Listening.

Throughout the texts of the Bible, references to hearing loss suggest we are all living on the edge of God's language, and countless references to unheard prayers suggest that God lives on the edge of ours. Deafness is as much a spiritual condition as it is an aural one, and overcoming it seems to be the key to our salvation, as well as God's only hope for satisfaction with His creation. In Hebrews 5:11, the language of hearing loss is used to suggest that communion with Yahweh is quite similar to being in an audiometer: "Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing." It would seem that the one "of whom we have many things to say" is having trouble getting through to us because our hearing stinks. And yet what's so wonderful in this passage is that the words themselves can't be formed with the knowledge that they won't be heard. It's an auditory stalemate. In Hebrews 4:2: "For indeed we have had good news preached to us, even as they also did, but the word they heard didn't profit them, because it wasn't mixed with faith by those who heard." The ability to hear is insufficient for knowledge of God. For it isn't merely *what we can hear* that matters but *how we hear it*. If we do not listen "with faith" we may as well be deaf.

“Hold the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.” In the audiometer, my audiologist says things which I must repeat. He gauges my hearing ability by how many words I repeat correctly. This passage from 2 Timothy 1:13 reminds me of being in the glass dark booth. And more intriguing certainly, “sound words” here seem to hold special weight. Are there unsound words? Are these words that are not safe or are these words that make no sound? Is it suggested that God’s words are the only sound words, all else is phantom speech?

Isaiah writes in 49:1, “Listen, islands, to me; and listen, you peoples, from far: Yahweh has called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother has he made mention of my name.” Listening is the means to receiving gossip prophecy as it is passed from prophet to people, and the “islands” ought to listen to be connected. Through listening, we form union. Ephesians 4:21 begins “if indeed you heard him, and were taught in him.” Hearing is a means of receiving instruction, “if indeed” we can hear at all. Deafness or Hardness of Hearing is hinted at by “if indeed.” Perhaps you heard something, but are you sure of what you heard?

Hearing is, again, not enough in Mark 4:24: “He said to them, “Take heed what you hear. With whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you, and more will be given to you who hear.” Hearing, it seems, is here an act of willingness, something beyond chance sense, otherwise all would hear. Hearing loss is diagnosed for all humanity by audiologist Matthew in 13:15: “for this people's heart has grown callous, their ears are dull of hearing, they have closed their eyes.” This suggests to me that whereas I think that my sense of hearing has abandoned me, perhaps we have, to fall upon idiom, abandoned our senses. And perhaps it isn’t merely idiom, metaphorical. Perhaps what we perceive as our literal

senses are our metaphorical ones, particularly given that what we hunger for most is a direct experience with the sacred. Matthew offers hope for our move into the metaphorical (a word that lovingly longs to be mistyped as metamorphical) senses: “or else perhaps they might perceive with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their heart, and should turn again; and I would heal them.” The metaphorical senses are those that we use to perceive the Divine, or tragically fail to, as in Deuteronomy 30:17 they are cut off: “But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but shall be drawn away. . .” They allow us hunger: “My dove in the clefts of the rock, In the hiding places of the mountainside, Let me see your face. Let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely (Song of Solomon 2:14).” They allow us joy, “Those on the rock are they who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; but these have no root, who believe for a while, then fall away in time of temptation (Luke 8:13).” And unused, they render us downright evil as in Jeremiah 13:10, “This evil people, who refuse to hear my words, who walk in the stubbornness of their heart. . .” Yet, it seems that God, Himself, has selective hearing. He hears his servants in Exodus 22:27, “for that is his only covering, it is his garment for his skin. What would he sleep in? It will happen, when he cries to me, that I will hear, for I am gracious.” And yet in Psalm 64:1, “For the Chief Musician” it would seem that God must be called to, does not automatically “hear” unless summoned. This is how it is for the hard-of-hearing. Touch us on the shoulder and we will give your attention, but just start muttering about something near us and we will ignore you. My friend, David, has promised me a t-shirt that read “*I’m not a bitch. I just can’t hear you.*” But that other poet we know as David calls out, taps God’s metaphorical shoulder, “Hear my voice, God, in my complaint. Preserve my life from fear of the enemy.” At times, it would seem God is altogether

profoundly deaf, "And ye returned and wept before Jehovah, but Jehovah would not listen to your voice, nor give ear unto you (Deuteronomy 1:45).

Viewed this way, the Bible is a story of living with hearing loss, only both parties of the relationship suffer it, and the relationship is in dire need of some other language to carry it through on. At the very least, our metaphorical ears need our permission to open, "Today if you will hear his voice, don't harden your hearts (Hebrews 4:7)." Also, they require reminders to "hear this (Isaiah 48:1)," as though we forget at any time to listen intently. And ultimately, metaphorical listening must be a communal act as in Isaiah 48:1: "Come near, you nations, to hear! Listen, you peoples. Let the earth and all it contains hear; the world, and everything that comes from it." And we must "come near. . . to hear," just as the speech-deaf must approach the speaker, be close enough to make words of the sound.

In my heart and mind I have fused the whispers of the wall to the whispers of the mosaic, the words of God that make the prophets want to run, take a nap, do anything but listen. It is a sanctuary of sound, for whatever reason, and being so, it is one of my sacred places. But in a world of whispers, even our sacred places are laden with difficulties. I've recently learned that the speaker and listener in a Whispering Gallery--for the one in St. Paul's is only one of several, the Taj Mahal has another, and there's even one in Grand Central Station in New York--must be diametrically across from one another in order for one's whispers to echo across the ellipse. One inch further along the circumference from a diameter, and the beloved's words will disappear into the stone. And the lover will wait at first, then wonder, if anything was spoken at all.



Silence: A Social History of One of the Least Understood Elements of Our Lives, by Jane Brox - considered by Carl McColman

If silence could tell us a story about itself, what would it say?

Talking (or writing) about silence immediately springs us into the trap of paradox — how can one recount the history of something that cannot be put into words? Perhaps the only truly meaningful way to approach a topic like silence is to ponder how it has been understood, practiced, and contested by different communities at different points of time. Like a subatomic particle, perhaps we can only know silence by considering the impact it has — the trail it leaves behind, so to speak, whether for good or ill.

Such is the approach taken by literary nonfiction writer Jane Brox in *Silence: A Social History of One of the Least Understood Elements in Our Lives* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019). She approaches her elusive topic from three different perspectives. Most of her book consists of a kind of dialectical fugue between the story of how silence inspired two radically different — yet profoundly similar — social institutions: the monastery and the penitentiary. Her exploration begins with the story of Charles Williams, an eighteen-year-old African-American farmer who in 1829 was sentenced to two years of solitary confinement in the silence of the newly built Eastern State Penitentiary outside of Philadelphia.

She contrasts Williams' unhappy encounter of silence with that of Thomas Merton, the renowned Catholic poet/mystic who lived in the austere

silence of a Trappist monastery from 1941 until his death in 1968. Unlike Williams, Merton chose his deep dive into silence; indeed, the first British edition of his bestselling autobiography carried the title *Elected Silence*. As she teases out the differences and uncanny similarities between her two subjects, Brox paints a picture of silence that is nuanced and ambiguous.

Since both of her two main subjects were male, Brox also includes a section she called “The Silence of Women,” considering how gender impacted the experience of silence in both the cloister and the prison cell. Spoiler alert: the politics of gender bring the stories of cloistered nuns and women convicts together in an almost sadly predictable way.

Setting a monk and a convict side by side to explore the multiple meanings of silence may not seem particularly revelatory, but Brox has a keen eye for how surprise and irony erupts into the lives of her subjects — and, by extension, into all our lives. This is particularly illuminated as she details the story of Eastern State, which at the time of its conception in the early nineteenth century was seen as an innovative, perhaps even visionary, approach to punishment and rehabilitation. While the concept of a penitentiary (a place for repentance and, therefore, amendment of life) had been part of ecclesiastical culture since the 1400s, the idea of a secular penitentiary only dates from the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries. So Eastern State, regarded by historians as the first true *penitentiary* (as opposed to simply a jail) was very much a product of a new and presumably enlightened approach to corrections — rather than dismissing convicts as unreformable (and therefore deserving of the strictest possible punishment), this new approach to prisons sought to find rehabilitation

and therefore redemption in the silence and solitude of its controlled environment.

This new /enlightened theory of punishment and correction was championed by thinkers like Benjamin Rush, a philosopher-physician who was a friend of Benjamin Franklin and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Rush, drawing inspiration both from the Quakers who had settled Pennsylvania as well as from monasticism, maintained that solitude and quiet would be conducive to inner conversation of heart — thereby facilitating the rehabilitation of prisoners and preparing them for re-entry into society.

In practice, imposed silence proved to be anything but redemptive — Brox carefully details how the use of solitary confinement has remained a form of extreme punishment in many prisons to this day, and how those who are subjected to such punishment often experience mental distress and illness as a consequence.

If silence is practically a form of torture to the incarcerated, then for monks, at least on the surface, such institutional quiet appears to be an invitation into a life of serenity and prayer. But even this type of silence contains more than meets the eye (or ear). In our time monastic life is entirely a voluntary life choice, but in previous times not all monks or nuns ended up cloistered by their own choice. Monasteries and convents served as repositories for a variety of unwanted persons, from noble-born men who do not stand to inherit anything, to women who needed to be disposed of after having an affair or bearing a child with a priest or some prominent person. But Brox

puts most of her attention on Merton, very much a “modern” monk who entered religious life as a result of how own spiritual searching.

She touches on the question of whether Merton, like many others, embraced the austerities of Trappist life because of some felt need to do penance (in Merton’s case, for a misspent youth filled with alcoholism and a child fathered out of wedlock). But she also considers the promise and potential of monastic life — how those who embrace it do so as a way of seeking God, of seeking through prayer a sense of mystical intimacy or even union with God. The silence of a pre-Vatican II monastery, broken only by the chanting of the daily prayer offices at fixed points during the day, may seem almost alien to us who live in a world blaring with electronic devices and industrial noise, but even in our time the monastery remains an icon of spiritual serenity, enough that at least some religious communities continue to attract vocations, even if in numbers greatly reduced from the past.

What lessons can we carry away from Brox’s quirky survey? She is too good a writer to draw conclusions for her readers, and we are left to marvel at how chameleon-like silence can be, adapting the colors of whatever social location where it might be found. Silence is neither a panacea nor a pestilence, but perhaps in its own quiet way, it is a mirror, reflecting back on us both the promise and terror of the human condition.

A photograph of a building's marquee sign. The sign is rectangular with a dark brown border and a white background with horizontal lines. The text "THIS PLACE MATTERS" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The sign is mounted on a building with a white chimney pipe visible on the roof. The sky is blue with some white clouds. The camera angle is looking up at the sign.

THIS PLACE
MATTERS

Chosen - Veronica Zundel

My neighbour was out working on his bright orange 1960s gas-guzzling pickup the other day (he's a vintage car fanatic). He's also a Christian, and goes to what I like to call the local 'temple of preaching' - an evangelical Anglican church that never tires of getting bigger, or of planting new congregations in its own image, which manage to take over other local, struggling churches (that's not a criticism, clearly it is doing something that works, even if it doesn't work for me).

Any road, as they say where I come from (the West Midlands of the UK), we chatted a little and suddenly for some reason I remembered a conversation we'd had some years ago at a local musical event. I was describing the Mennonite church I was then part of, and confessed that though I totally loved it, we weren't very good at evangelism. 'But isn't that the whole point?' he asked, without any apparent sense of irony. 'Is it?', I thought but didn't say. Surely if the whole point of being a Christian is to recruit others to your faith, it's no more than a rather successful (but waning) pyramid selling scheme?

I could immediately think of several other candidates for 'the whole point'. Some would say the whole point is to believe the right things that will save you from hell and get you to heaven after you die. If that's the case, it certainly lends an urgency to evangelism, and perhaps that's why this simple message works for so many. The late great writer and speaker Mike Yaconelli used to say 'What you win them with, is what you win them to'; and obviously if escape from eternal torment is where your faith begins, it may become (though not always remain) the heart of your faith.

Trouble is, it doesn't seem to me to fit in very well with what Jesus did and said. Like the church's historic creeds, with their 'Jesus-shaped hole' in the middle, it goes straight from Jesus' birth to his death, with nothing in between: no teaching, no healing, no disciples, no new Kingdom community. No Sermon on the Mount, no parables, no radical new way of gathering outcasts into the centre, no challenge to the powers that be, no revolutionary attitude to women and those with disabilities. In fact, apart from perhaps giving up some bad habits, no real impact on the world we live in. What does this version of faith have to say about Brexit, or Trump, or Venezuela, or inequality? Precious little, it seems. We wouldn't want to get political...

I think it was Desmond Tutu who remarked that when people said you shouldn't mix politics with the Bible, he wondered what Bible they were reading. I've written responses to the Bible for over thirty years, and in it I see the story of a small, beleaguered nation strategically set in the middle of a fertile crescent and between rising and falling superpowers, who somehow held on to their God and their way of life through changing alliances, invasion, deportation, attempted genocide, natural disaster. If that's not political, what is? Or is it just because I'm Jewish by birth, the child of Holocaust refugees, that I see it that way?

I will never forget looking at that classic 1960s Reader's Digest atlas that everyone had in my childhood, and studying a map of world religions. Right across the globe there were huge swathes of different styles of cross for Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, plus other swathes of crescents for

Islam and various symbols for Hinduism and a few other faiths. Then right in the middle, there was just space for one single Star of David. How, if it was not God's action, did that tiny handful of tribes survive?

Don't get me wrong. I'm no supporter of Israel's current government or the gross injustices it perpetrates. I sponsored a young Palestinian Christian girl for 13 years (she looked remarkably like one of my Jewish 'honorary cousins'!), so even though I have the right to live in Israel, they probably wouldn't let me in. Nevertheless, if you look at world history and the disproportionate role Jewish people have played in science, culture and politics, the phrase 'chosen people' does start to have an authentic ring about it... And it was from that people that the man approximately one-third of the world's population claim to follow, had his origin – and it was in that context that he preached and taught a different lifestyle, one that reshaped their tradition so that it embraced the whole world and not just a particular ethnic group.

Shouldn't we then be listening a bit harder to the kind of life he called people to, rather than just signing up to a theory about his death that didn't even originate till a thousand years after his life?

So no, dear neighbour, I don't think convincing others of a particular set of beliefs about Jesus is 'the whole point'. I rather suspect 'the whole point' is more like living in this existing, physical world in a way that changes its oppressive power relations, that heals the sick and strengthens the weary and challenges the powerful and disarms the violent and, in the biblical phrase, 'turns the world upside down'? It's a tough call, and we can't do it individually or even in community without calling on a power that is

greater than ourselves. And often it will seem impossible, and there will be huge setbacks, and people will get themselves killed or at least imprisoned – just as they did in the first few centuries before the church got into bed with the state and lost its prophetic edge. But if it's not worth trying, then I can't see much point at all in claiming to be a follower of Jesus, whose subversive life and words got him executed as a political agitator. The good news is, not even that could shut him up. I hope fervently there are enough of us who can still hear him.



A Re-Frame That Matters - Mahan Siler

Once in a while an idea comes along that reframes cherished notions, and ends up making things better for everyone. For me, Michelle Alexander's *New York Times* piece "We Are Not the Resistance" is one of those once in a while...

The frame: resistance to Donald Trumpism (the man, his worldview, spirit and followers).

The re-frame: Donald Trumpism as resistance to the historical, vital and ongoing movement toward justice.

Alexander values the position of resisting the daily crises – "a new jaw-dropping allegation of corruption, a new wave of repression at the border, another nod to white nationalism or blatant misogyny, another attack on basic civil rights, freedom of the press or truth itself." She notes the "wave of courageous activism" including marches and protests alongside the broader resistance taking hold that "seems to include everyone from establishment Democrats like Nancy Pelosi to figures like James Comey, from the Civil Rights legend John Lewis to democratic socialists like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez . . . the only common denominator for 'the resistance' [being] a commitment to resisting Donald Trump."

Yet Alexander points out the limits to this "reactive state of mind." She wonders whether the downsides to the resistance frame outweigh the benefits.

She offers a re-frame. What if Trumpism is the resistance to the "radical evolution of American democracy" with its on-going "struggle for human freedom and dignity [that] extends back centuries and is likely to continue for generations to come." She quotes Civil Rights leader Vincent

Harding. This reaching toward freedom is “like a river, sometimes powerful, tumultuous, and roiling with life; at other times meandering and turgid, covered with the ice and snow of seemingly endless winters, all too often streaked and running with blood.” We can hear echoes of the prophet Amos, “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream.”

This re-positions Donald Trump’s election and his subsequent leadership as a “surge of resistance to this rapidly swelling river, an effort to build not just a wall but a dam. A new nation is struggling to be born a multiracial, multiethnic, multifaith, egalitarian democracy in which every life and every voice truly matters.” Trump and his followers are less the river we must resist and more the resistance to this river of egalitarian striving that pre-dates him and will post-date him. We are not the resistance. Trumpism is.

I find in Alexander’s re-frame a question with an option. Where do I place my energy? I will continue to give myself in conversations, writing and actions that embody resistance. But I will watch for the downside I will. The signal for decisive choice is finding myself in a reactive state of mind, setting up camp in that space, relishing the over-against, blaming, judgmental energy.

At that point a choice is always available. A re-frame is possible. I can turn toward the River of justice, not just noticing it’s flow, not just observing its movement. But I can choose to re-align myself with the River. I can wade into it and allowing myself – once again – to be carried by its energy. This is an old river. Here and there, sometimes noticeable, sometimes not, it’s been under-minding domination-ranking, power-over, privilege systems for a long time. Trumpism, while a huge bolder in the water, will not last. The River will. No stopping this River. It will keep

moving for generations to come. My reactive state of mind can be the very trigger that invites the choice to get back to the River, re-enter its currents, add to its energy and be carried by its hope.

I'm thankful for the re-frame.



***Floating* - Jasmin Pittman Morrell**

The float tank resembled a coffin, oblong, pitch black inside, and tucked into the wall like a closet. My float specialist, soft-spoken and Zen-like, held the door open for me as he explained.

“There’s half a ton of Epsom salts in about a foot of water. It’s kind of freaky at first, but you’ll get used to it. Don’t worry. You’ll float.”

I nodded mutely, my shirt already uncomfortably sticky in the humid air of Still Point Wellness Spa’s private room. I couldn’t seem to remember why I thought this was a good idea. *Floating, or sensory deprivation, can boost immune function, provide pain relief, and lower blood pressure, the website claimed. It can also promote deep states of relaxation and enhance creativity.* I cared about these results the most.

He smiled and gestured to the shower, towels, and hospitality table topped with lotion, cotton swabs, and earplugs. The table sat under a larger-than-life image of Buddha’s head carved into wood, peering benignly at us. A psychedelic, rainbow-colored fractal print hung near the toilet.

This is definitely one of the most “Asheville” things I’ve ever done, I thought.

Once he left, I peeled off my clothes, showered quickly, and gingerly stepped into the tank. The skin temperature water lapped around my ankles like a kitten’s tongue, and I pulled the door closed. Womb-like darkness enveloped me.

To sit down, lean back, and relax into the water’s surface was an act of faith. Lo and behold, he was right. I was a buoy.

The strange thing about utter silence—it wasn’t actually silent. The thump of my own heartbeat soaked the tank. When my to-do list, or any

other number of stress-inducing thoughts erupted, I noticed the way my heart sped up, driven by adrenaline, ready to help me spring into action. With a deep breath, I practiced letting go, and my heartbeat slowed to a soothing rhythm. I eventually fell into dreamily following the skipping stones of more random thoughts and images that surfaced: music as a vehicle of spirit, a sleeping child with her arms stretched overhead, the fertile, earthy perfume of the riverbanks.

I have a friend who believes that everyone has a superpower in life. And your life's work (or mission, or calling) stems from using this superpower in service of the world. I think most of us could benefit from recognizing this—the things that make us unique, or sometimes that we might even try to hide, can be our most powerful allies in shaping what author Charles Eisenstein would call, “the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.”

Until recently, I never would've considered my trait of sensitivity a superpower. I've felt weak, sometimes easily overwhelmed, with difficulty distinguishing my own emotions from the emotions of others. As a child, labeled “quiet” and “shy,” I would've entirely retreated into myself, had I not consistently been well-liked by my peers. This must've had something to do with my ability to instinctively share kindness with everyone, even the class pariahs. In fourth grade, Melanie's dishwater blond hair, chubby cheeks, and faded clothes meant she sat alone at lunch, and she was only picked for teams as a last resort during P.E. and recess. During one such P.E. class, as we all sat on the gym floor waiting to be chosen by team captains, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed her sucking her thumb, refusing to look up, her stringy hair curtained her face. Without much thought, I scooted across the slick floor to sit next to her and held her free hand in mine.

The Washington Post recently published a perspectives piece citing empathy as the key to dismantling white supremacy. Not the only tool, but at least a step to unlock the door toward a “foundation of mutual respect that could reach across racial lines.” The Dalai Lama calls love and compassion human necessities, not luxuries. While some of us seem neurobiologically hardwired for greater empathic capacity than others, love is a source of vitality we can all use to permeate our public, political discourse, as well as our inner dialogues about ourselves and the people we share this earth with. We’re interconnected in ways we’re only beginning to grasp inklings of.

Several years ago, my empathic superpower led me to work in a community for people experiencing homelessness. I would experience some of the holiest, sweetest moments with people that we usually want to turn away from, people that have become invisible. And as life-giving as my time in that community would be, there were other moments I didn’t want to endure: the grief of women living on the streets losing children, the sweat-soaked smell of men who hadn’t showered in weeks, or the rages of opioid addicts who needed to keep numbing their pain. After a particularly hard day at work, I made sure my children were occupied with cartoons so that I could sit in the corner of the cool bathroom floor with the doors locked, in the dark. I could’ve used a sensory deprivation tank then, had I known they even existed.

Now, I know the truth of Audre Lorde’s words; caring for myself isn’t indulgent but an act of preservation she equated with political warfare. To assert that this body, mind, and heart, wrapped in tawny brown skin, is worth treating with infinite kindness, the same kindness I give to others, is a political statement as well as a spiritual practice. Kindness carries

significance. Kindness contains power. Kindness moves like ocean waves crashing against the shore. It's a force of nature.

While I floated in the tank and listened to my heartbeat in the silence, every so often I imagined I heard another heart, beating along with mine. I wondered if this is what we all experienced as babies in utero, this sense of being held in the dark. Of effortless connection. Of knowing we are not alone. If we all started there, isn't it possible we can return?



When is Later? - Steve Daugherty

There I sat, a week before Christmas in a crowded emergency room, a thorn in my flesh.

The thorn wasn't only figurative. I had a nearly inch-long piece of pine buried deep in the meat of my thumb. Wear work gloves, kids.

I thought the splinter would work itself out in time, but after a few days the injury turned breeding ground, and a nasty infection doubled the size of my right hand into an almost comical red balloon.

The pain kept pace with the swelling, going from nuisance, to distraction, to all-consuming.

The others in the waiting room had their problems. One of them coughed like Val Kilmer's Doc Holliday, toward the end, in *Tombstone*. A couple of others had given into sleep, upright in their chairs, arms folded. One woman yelled into her phone about how much longer she was willing to wait before she changed her tune.

A little girl, ten or eleven years old, had created a nest in a chair out of her coat and a dirty blanket. She was wearing mismatched pajamas, which I took to mean she'd left her house in a hurry. She got up from her nest to ask a hospital security guard behind the counter a question.

"Can you check if my mom's ok?"

The guard asked for her name, poked a couple computer keys, and said there was no update.

“When will I know if she’s ok? Because I’m scared. I’m never away from her. We’re always together. Will you know if five minutes? Six minutes?”

The guard was kind, and assured her that when there was news she’d have it. The little girl reiterated her fears and her being totally unaccustomed to not having access to her mom. After finally accepting there was no way to get this guard to know things he didn’t know, she climbed back into her nest, crisscross applesauce.

Ten minutes later, she went back to the counter and repeated every bit of this.

I started to say something to the anxious child, but a thought pushed forward in front of that sentiment: the all-consuming pain of my hand, which I was now holding in front of me like a lobster claw, was all I cared to care about. I didn’t think those words, exactly, but today they reflect the sense of the limited goods which I felt I had. Secondary thoughts about the guard being there and drawing an income helped me rationalize my decision not to act.

But I know this trick. I have written about this trick. I have given presentations about this trick.

The trick is this: we self-prioritize to the degree we suffer, but often we self-prioritize way out of proportion to our suffering. Who am I to judge

another's pain and its proportion, let alone what they do—or *stop doing*—because of it? Please note that I've confessed to the plank in my own hand here already, so understand I offer this while mindful of the very real pain we all experience as human beings. However, I observe that many of us seem to believe all discomfort necessarily disables compassion. We've have lost our faith in the ability to do good even when we're not at peak performance ourselves. My hand *was* bad. The surgery I had later that day was painful enough to make me welp the words "what the hell are you doing in there?" But in that waiting room I was knowingly leaving the little girl less attended to because of what I gently suggest might have been a bit of survivalist bullshit that I felt myself choosing:

If I give you my energy then I won't have it for me, and I need all of it now. You can have some later, when I am comfortable again.

It wasn't just the pain, but I experiencing dread about limited goods in the universe. How can I give away what seemed taken from me as I sat there with my throbbing clown boxing glove hand? A grown man with a splinter and a heavy does of out-of-proportion self-prioritization, I told the voice of compassion within me that it was a liability.

I don't feel shame about this as much as I have a reinforced awareness that many of us might be good people who've reduced our goodness to latency, believing that our lives consist of navigating a perpetual emergency room and we'd do better if *we* were better. True as it is that we're often in real pain, struggling to regain equilibrium and peace, it's also often an unchallenged exaggeration that keeps us cordoned off from one another until some idyllic *other* circumstance arrives where we can finally be there

for each other without any redness or swelling of our own. In other words, we're putting on our oxygen mask first, but waiting til our breathing has been healed before we feel capable of helping anyone else.

But when is this moment exactly?

When will our bodies and our minds and our circumstances be tuned precisely enough for us to be as kind and generous and forgiving and considerate and available and inclusive and dependable as we wish to someday be?

The carrot of our available kindnesses seems for many of us to be stretching further and further away on the stick of eventual relief. The gods of this age do promise us relief in exchange for our devotion. Soon, and very soon. We'll have more time and money and heart, maybe next year! Relief is coming, and *then* you and I will be able to do and be all those things we're letting the security guard handle for now. But the gods of this age don't sit on thrones. They're on our calendars and deadlines and unreachable economic abstractions like *more* and *gain* and *increase* and *next*. And this is key: many of us bear not only real bodily pain, but also the all-consuming pain of disappointing these gods with our failure to be *what* we're expected to be, and *when* we're expected to be there. We are not yet enough. A little more, a little faster, and *then* we'll have arrived, poised for greatness and even goodness. For now we mustn't allow self-de-emphasizing compassion to complicate matters.

Think of what, and who, can be justifiably ignored as we push toward keeping our schedule to ward off the pain of being a pain. Think of the eye

contact we can avert, the conversations we can dodge, *until another time*. I'll get involved meaningfully later. Right now, however, I have to spend me on me.

*

There's an experiment from the early Seventies where students were asked about what their religion meant to their identity. After this questionnaire, now conditioned to be thinking in their highest spiritual gear, they were asked to move to another hall across campus for another project. An actor was staged between halls, huddled in an alley, coughing and moaning. Most of the kids passed by without helping the man, despite their being bludgeoned on the nose with a real life Samaritan* scene. And the less time students were given to get cross campus, the less the number of students who stopped to check on the man or get involved at all. Because not being where you're expected to be, falling behind the momentum of a crowd, or disappointing a professor (manager / boss / investor / constituency / parent / mate...) is a mental thorn that wishes well but can see no options but to keep its own schedule.

*

Compassion is a term comprised of two words; "Hurt" and "With". There's real opportunity in this etymology. Compassion is a way of turning our self-interest into a mobilized others-emphasis. In the very word it promises to make relational use of the very thing that tempts us to think of only me, until *later* of course. Compassion is the wisdom which employs suffering, rather than living trying to eradicate it. I'll repeat an important point: there

is pain in our lives that takes us out of the game. There's no shame in this. Rest up, heal up, you deserve it. The important question is can we tell the difference between the pain that may legitimately exempt us from centering others for a time, and a mistaken habit of waiting until we are relieved of all hardship before we give ourselves away?

Because what if this sort of relief never comes? After all, when our splinters are finally removed, the car will break down, and soon a loved one will say something awful, then one will pass away, the roof will leak, then the parents' divorce from 30 years ago will make a surprise appearance in current relational complexes, then there'll be a pulled hamstring on a morning run, followed by a pay cut, then a lay off.

As my father would say, *it's always something.*

Frankly, I wouldn't recognize human flesh without thorns in it. Being human seems to be in the very least the tacit agreement to have 46 miles of nerves and 1000 fathoms of emotions and to face a million combinations of difficult circumstances while doing good to the humans in front of us as they do their damndest to agree to the same arrangement. To have compassion is to renounce the gods of relief, even while hoping for some, and then go ahead and *hurt with*, opening ourselves to what relief might be had by providing it.

Who has the courage to model what it might mean to have pains that have yet to make contact with a remedy and still be medicine for others? Who might dare to go first in an inescapable cosmic gauntlet to heal while hurting? Who of us is willing to say, with our lives, *in a lot of ways I'm not*

comfortable, but I'm ok with that. How can I help? My sincere hope is that I continue learning how to take good care of myself. I hope that for you too. And, I hope next time I'm in the presence of such need like that little girl in the waiting room, that I better recognize that I have two hands, and a heart capable of more love than I could ever use.



O TANNENDUDE - David Lynch

In 1974, I was opinionated, persistent and volatile. In other words: I was a sixteen-year-old. And although I wasn't fully matured, I was already nostalgic for the past - especially at Christmas time.

I yearned to be 6 years old again - I thought of that Christmas Eve when my mom gave me reindeer pajamas and tucked me in without her usual frown because Dad skipped the bar and came home early. I drifted to sleep watching the twinkling outdoor Christmas lights as they dispatched red and green shafts of color through my window shutters.

But best of all: at age 6, I was dwarfed by our family Christmas tree. My parents chose a Noble Fir from Oregon - the finest tree on the lot. Though it was only 7 feet tall, it towered over me, wreathing me in its sweet fragrance.

I imagined elfin beings hiding in the deepest recesses of the branches, making candy canes that would appear on the tree Christmas morning. It was a magical time, a time before I was aware that characterizations like "severely dysfunctional" aptly defined my family.

During the advent of my 16th Christmas, my mom descended into one of her dark and vicious moods because we weren't behaving like characters in a Hallmark movie. I steered clear of her, focusing on recreating the magic from 10 years before.

I focused on decorations. I knew the people in my life would behave poorly - I couldn't control that. But if I was meticulous, and duplicated every precise detail from years past, maybe I could tune out my family and surround myself with festoonery, making everything merry and bright.

It would be impossible to replicate the past with the sad artificial tree we had been using. But thanks to my incessant grouching, my father promised that this year we would have a *real* tree. This most important detail would be exactly as it was 10 years ago!

So naturally, I bristled when my dad told me to bring in the plastic Christmas tree from the garage.

"You said that this year we could have a *real* tree!" I protested.

"I thought it was going to be a better year," my dad said, staring at his shoes.

"I *hate* that old tree!" I grumped. "It's a plastic abomination! Have we completely abandoned nature in this sterile cracker box of a tract home? We might as well start eating plastic food for dinner! This is so bogus! You are teeming with bogosity, Dad!"

I hated that old tree with the fire of ten thousand C-9 Christmas light bulbs. Modern artificial trees look realistic; in the 1970s, they were poor approximations. Our fake tree was a farg-tangle of poly vinyl chloride that looked like shredded seaweed. Dozens of bare spots exposed tortured wire. The branches sagged like the shoulders of a teenager who had been asked

to take out the trash. The artificial balsam scent installed at the factory had evaporated. The stench of dust and stale cigarettes took its place.

I was both angry and lazy, so instead of using a ladder to retrieve the tree box from the garage rafters, I nudged it forward with a broom handle, harrumphing ire with every nudge. The tattered box split open and the tree fell squarely on my head. The tip of a metal branch scraped my cheek.

I screamed and grappled the tree. My dad rushed into the garage just in time to see me raise the tree overhead and slam it to the ground like a professional wrestler. I kicked it repeatedly until dust wheezed from its core. I could swear it emitted a death rattle.

When I ended my tirade, I had no idea how my dad would react, but I assumed it would involve confinement or chores. To my surprise, he sighed and handed me a twenty-dollar bill.

“Ok, hot shot,” he sighed, “Go find out how much tree twenty dollars buys these days.”

“Twenty bucks!” I rejoiced. “Far out!”

I summoned my friend Pete. We shoehorned ourselves into in my dad’s Opel SportWagen and headed for the Christmas tree lot.

The Scotch Pine section was nearest the parking lot. I didn’t like those bushy Scotch Pines, but I lingered to check the prices. A five-footer cost twenty dollars. This was not a good sign.

A man in a buffalo plaid jacket approached us.

“So, you like the Scotch Pines?” he asked.

“No thanks,” I said. “I’m looking for a Noble Fir!”

“You have good taste in trees!” buffalo plaid man said.

He led me to a stately seven-footer. The price tag was marked \$75.

“I’ve only got twenty bucks,” I moped.

“Ohh,” the man spat. “Then you want a table-top tree. We have some over here.”

The man’s eyes tracked downward to a cluster of twigs that couldn’t be more than 2 1/2 feet tall. Each specimen had 5-6 branches, tops.

“There you go! A Noble Fir for only twenty dollars!”

“C’mon Pete, let’s go,” I glummed. “My dad was right. I have a plastic tree to assemble.”

As we walked toward the car, I heard an odd sound, like a guy imitating a cow: “Uuuuuuuuuuuu!”

We ignored it and kept walking. I heard it again, “Uuuuuuuuuude!”

The third time I heard it, I realized he was saying, "Duuuuuuude!"

Pete and I turned toward the voice and saw a guy our age in a corduroy jacket and wool cap.

"Duuuuuuude!" The guy yelled and waved.

He looked vaguely familiar. I probably knew him from high school. We walked toward him.

"Dude?" I asked.

"Dude!" the guy said. "You're, like, in my homeroom. You draw those cool cartoons of our teacher."

"Ah, Dude!" I managed a more upbeat tone.

"Dude, I work here," the guy said, "Find the tree you want and then, like, come back to me, Dude, because, like, I will, like, totally take care of you, Dude."

"Du-hu-hu-hude!!" I exclaimed.

Pete and I canvassed the lot. I was drawn to a majestic fourteen-foot Noble Fir. I knew it was probably a long shot, but it wouldn't cost me anything to ask.

I found the guy and cocked my head toward the fourteen-footer.

“Dude, how much for this bruiser over here?” I asked.

“For you, Dude...” he said, “twenty bucks!”

“DU-HUU-HUU-HUU-UDE!” I cheered.

The twenty-dollar bill passed hands at the speed of light.

This is a good time to mention that there was nothing sporty about my dad’s Opel SportWagen. This sub-sub-compact car was slightly bigger than a gallon milk jug - and about the same anemic yellow color. When the dude-saying guy lashed the monster tree to the SportWagen, it looked like a huge green javelin with wheels.

The branches blocked the doors, so Pete and I had to enter the vehicle through the rear hatchback. Once behind the wheel, I crawled slowly home, running the windshield wipers to nudge the branches back and forth, affording glimpses of the road.

I pulled into the driveway, and almost impaled the garage door with the tree top. As Pete and I struggled to separate the tree from the car, my dad rushed out of the front door. “What is *this*?!” he asked.

“A Christmas tree, Dad.” I tried to act nonchalant.

“You must have put in some of your own money!” Dad accused.

“No, Duuuu, I mean Dad. Twenty bucks!”

My dad glared at Pete for verification.

“Like he said, Mr. Lynch, twenty dollars. I saw him pay.”

My dad walked away shaking his head as Pete and I hauled the tree into the living room.

We soon realized the tree would only fit in the far corner where the cathedral ceiling was high enough to accommodate it. That meant displacing the sectional sofa my mom had custom-ordered for that spot. We began moving the sections. My mom heard the commotion and dashed in from the kitchen.

“What are you doing to *my* living room!” she demanded.

We froze in place, as if we would perish if we dared make the slightest twitch.

To my shock, my dad backed me up and mumbled, “That’s the only place the tree will fit, Madge.”

My mom snapped her hand towel and stormed back into the kitchen. We stared at each other nervously until my dad signaled with a nod that it was safe to proceed.

I got the 6-foot ladder out of the garage, and discovered that even standing precariously on the uppermost step, I couldn't reach the top of the tree.

My dad sighed again, "I'll go to my storage lot and get a bigger ladder. Maybe scaffolding."

"You'll not bring scaffolding into this house!" my mom bellowed from the kitchen.

"It was a joke, Madge," Dad said.

"Well it wasn't very funny," Mom sneered.

Dad stuffed himself into the SportWagen. An hour later, he returned in his construction truck with a twenty-foot ladder.

We began decorating the tree from the top. When we got nine feet down, we ran out of lights and ornaments. The bottom five feet were bare. It looked like a Christmas tree wearing a green skirt.

"I guess it's a girl tree," I said.

"Or it's a Scottish tree wearing a kilt," Pete said.

Behind my shoulder, my dad sighed yet again. I turned, and he produced another twenty-dollar bill.

“Go get more lights and ornaments,” he said. “And *try* to bring back some change.”

Later that night, I stood in front of the finished tree. The warm lights coaxed a balsamy-vanilla smell from the branches. But the best part was that the tree was more than twice as tall as I was - just like when I was six. I was as happy as a jaded sixteen-year-old could be.

My dad approached and asked, “Did you forget to give me the change?”

I handed him the 28¢, and this time he didn’t sigh.

“Tree looks nice,” he grunted.

My dad grew up in stern-faced Indiana during the Great Depression. Legend has it that my dad began his life as sensitive and curious as I did, but his ten brothers teased him until he was stoic and withdrawn. Then he met my mom (a narcissist with borderline personality disorder and a never-ending supply of amphetamines), who finished off Dad's remaining expressive qualities.

If he had any spirit left, it was hiding miles within him. He laughed on occasion, but even in laughter his eyes looked sad. I had seen him cry and get angry twice each during my entire childhood, and I had *never* heard him express affection.

In a rare moment of self-awareness (ultra-rare for a 16-year-old!), I thought about what a pain in the ass I had been that day. When I raged over the

plastic tree, Dad attempted to give me a lesson in inflation by handing me that twenty-dollar bill. When his lesson backfired, he handled defeat graciously. He didn't have to buy additional decorations for that tree. He could have told me to redo it and spread things out. Instead, he indulged me - and I knew that later he would have to answer to my mother for it.

I beamed as I craned my neck to gaze at the star atop the tree.

I accepted that my dad would never say the three words, and that he would never hug me. But staring at that tree, I knew that my dad loved me. That realization was the best gift I received in the Christmas of 1974.

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