

As the trail dipped down into a familiar valley of a wandering stream, I thought, "It's been a while." This formerly frequent haunt had become a luxury location, one to which I retreated when I needed respite. Here I could settle into the solitude of just being, feel the sense of connection to the trees and the ground, and let my mind wander away from e-mail messages and meetings and schedules. Here I could have those encounters with deep magic that flowed through the branches of the trees as it did through my own limbs.

The January day was calm, cool yet sunny. Snow crunching underfoot provided the rhythm for my steps. As I tried to let my thoughts be present with the dog at the end of his leash and the feeling of the air on my cheek, I felt a whisper of wind cross my face and seemingly circle around behind me. The self-possessed breeze gathered up refuse strewn across the path—dried leaves and twigs, bits of shells and acorns. Then I had that familiar feeling that I wasn't alone. Seamus, my trusty Gordon Setter, gave a friendly whimper and a quick wag of his tail then returned his nose to the ground for more-interesting quarry. There next to me walked a mass of twigs and dried leaves, and, even though he was mostly brown this time of year, I knew it was my old friend the Green Man. This leafy apparition seems to know when I need his—well, maybe ear isn't the best word, but his sage presence.

The green being settled in beside me, step for step, as though we'd been walking together for hours. I wondered whether he was waiting for me to break the silence, when he spoke in a low, melodious voice. "Welcome back." "Thanks," I said. Last time we'd met, it had been in the summer, and he was resplendent in bright and deep shades of green. Today, I marveled at the change, as what I thought of as winter's groundcover walked beside me. As we stepped in silence, I noticed something else about my old icon that I'd not paid attention to before. Not only had the seasonal transformation taken place, but, as he strode along the narrow path, his seemingly solid body was constantly shifting, leaves and twigs moving forward to take the brunt of the step as his foot landed. A swirl of vines moved like sinew and muscle, shifting with each swing of his arms. For the first time, I experienced the impermanence of his form, the constant shifting of material.

"It's all life," he said, seeming to read my thoughts. "Just as brown and green are different phases in the process, each part is constantly recreated, reorganized to fulfill the movement toward life, each bit doing its part to further the identity of the whole." I was stunned by the idea that what seemed so solid, so permanent, was changing in an apparently random fashion every second. Sensing my stare, his acorn eyes gave me that glimmer he shared when he detected that I'd learned something new. Knowing he was waiting for me to give voice to this realization, I said, "You're not really all there, are you?" I was left inarticulate by the gravity of the revelation. In response, his frame seemed to chuckle, and he said, "If by 'there' you mean a solid form, a singularity of permanence, no, I'm not. But neither are you." I looked down at my hands, which looked just as they did the last time I looked at them. "Yes, your hands seem the same. But each moment, skin cells are being shrugged off; your entire skeleton is reformed every so many years. That sense of permanence provides order, which is a myth you've created for comfort. I'm happy to know that new growth occurs, that the forms will shift into position as they are needed." After a moment's pause, I said, "It all sounds pretty chaotic." "That it is, creative chaos. Remember your Greek Gods of creation, Chaos and Gaia? Chaos provided the energy, imagination, and drive, while Gaia provided the vision and the resources to make it real. Just like in the old story, the organization to

create me occurs as needed. My form, such as it is, needs no motivating speech or organizational chart to meet its purpose. This is the way of creativity in nature, each part responding to the other to create a whole more beautiful than could exist alone.”

We walked in silence again. I was trying to decipher this idea of chaotic harmony, an organization that occurred in the flow of time, arising from the energy of chaos with structures created as needed. As his words and images flowed into my thoughts, I remembered Margaret Wheatley, an organizational theorist who seems to have a bit of the Taoist about her. She wrote, “Western cultural views of how best to organize and lead (now the methods most used in the world) are contrary to what life teaches. Leaders use control and imposition rather than participative, self-organizing processes. They react to uncertainty and chaos by tightening already-feeble controls, rather than engaging people’s best capacities to learn and adapt. In doing so, they only create more chaos.” The Green Man was advocating a much more life-affirming means of organizing, one that involved trusting the chaos as able to yield a system that would meet the needs here and now.

I turned my thoughts back to my companion. “So,” I began searching for understanding, “each piece of you operates independently but toward a purpose?” He inclined his moss-topped head, “Each is interdependent with the other and knows that what appears to be chaos is movement toward a new, impermanent order to express our identity, our goal if you will, in a particular environment.” He could see he’d lost me. “Throughout the ages, I’ve adapted my form to help humanity learn. My identity has always been seeking to teach Earth wisdom, the relationship between all things. In ancient times, I was a forest deity, embodying the fertility of the Earth. As the king of the wood, I died in the fall to be reborn in spring, offering hope to all that they, too, could survive the harsh winter’s days. As the forests were cut down and the mystical connection to the trees lost, I became part of the dance, carved into the woodwork as a reminder or a token of ways that were left behind but not forgotten, a little homage to Earth-loving rituals.”

Trying to find a tactful way of broaching the subject and failing, I just said, “But your image hasn’t always been positive.” The shake of his head let a few small leaves scatter on the breeze. “No. During your Middle Ages, some used my image to instill fear of the forest. The vines growing from my face were twisted to represent gluttony or other sins, instead of the fertility of the Earth in my dreams. My identity became the property of others—always a risk when the creativity of chaos is called upon. Like the wise Lao Tzu said, “Be careful what you water your dreams with. Water them with worry and fear, and you will produce weeds that choke the life from your dream. Water them with optimism and solutions, and you will cultivate success. Always be on the lookout for ways to turn a problem into an opportunity for success. Always be on the lookout for ways to nurture your dream.” Now, we dream together again. My image is once more a face of interconnection and creativity, of the chaotic and regenerative power of nature. I take on human guise to remind you you’re part of this process.”

Physicist John Archibald Wheeler echoed this thought, describing how we aren’t really creators of reality but are essential to its coming forth, evoking potential that is present. Evolution is a dynamic process, one in which the component parts can shape the outcome by using the seeming chaos as part of a creative process. But this demands faith in that process, faith in the chaos, faith that without strict rules and hierarchies we will have more freedom to create a new path. Faith in this context is, as Buddhist Sharon Salzberg uses it, a verb. We gain trust in this dynamic process as we engage in it, as we allow ourselves to experience our own creative abilities in helping an organization become, come into being. It

can't be achieved if we stand on the outside. Often we're skeptical; we want something concrete, a goal or statement of purpose.

I asked my companion, "With your identity of interconnection and creativity, what do you hope to create in the world? What is the purpose, the goal?" My companion answered simply, "Harmony." I knew what he meant. I'd recently seen a film in which David Suzuki, geneticist and environmentalist, met with a heart specialist who showed how the beat of a healthy heart has a rather-erratic pattern. When this pattern is laid out on a grid, the dots look very chaotic. But when those dots are played as musical notes, they create a beautiful melody. On the other hand, an unhealthy heart has a very flat pattern with very little variation to its beats, resulting in a virtual monotone.

We create harmony by embracing change, adding information, developing, responding to our environment. Like the Green Man, we have a sense of purpose, a mission and identity that provide our melody's starting note. Our response to the world around us adds to the music. Lifting me from my reverie, the Green Man shouted, "Look," as a flock of birds lifted from a nearby field. As they spiraled into the air, they created a beautiful pattern that flowed and swirled. "See how each bird responds to those around it, each one sensitive to the seemingly random movements and, in their relationship, creating a thing of beauty?" I stood mouth open at the real-life example that flew before us. "You know why one side of the flying V of geese is longer than the other?" asked the Green Man. Expecting another profound lesson, I turned to him and, with wide, expectant eyes, said, "No, why?" "One side has more geese," he replied. As he turned, I could have sworn he was laughing. "Don't take it too seriously. Enjoy the process."

Ultimately, birds in flight and people in community need to find humor, joy, and love to create beauty. It's this joy in the doing that fuels our dreams with love and roots us in the here and now rather than pining for a hoped-for future. Love is an important fuel for creativity. As Henry David Thoreau said, "Love is an attempt to change a piece of a dream-world into reality." As the flock of birds melted into the distance and Thoreau's words sank into my brain, I looked at the twig-and-leaf figure who gave me a long, knowing stare. In the shape, in the motion, in the words of this creative icon, I saw the beauty and potential of our Fellowship, a place that, like the Green Man, has evolved through the years, responding to the needs of our community, inside and outside of these walls. Here, where we seek to be ever-mindful of the ongoing revelation of the universe and attentive to our relationships with one another, our organization often seems chaotic. But out of that chaos arises more than could have been dreamed by a select few.

I've referred to us as a disorganized religion. And these new ideas helped me realize those are prophetic words. Disorganized doesn't mean uncommitted. That's an important facet of this chaotic creativity—commitment. As Wheatley said of such groups, "There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about." To harness that power, we must join together. Commitment is not the same as agreement. We've witnessed the stupefying results of equating commitment to agreeing with controlling leaders. People are robbed of their voice, robbed of their dreams, and robbed of their ability to participate in creative possibilities. Commitment means being part of the process, identifying with that process, helping craft not only the identity but the means of expressing it.

Leadership in such organizations takes on a new meaning. Wheatley says that, in self-organizing systems, "a leader is anyone willing to help, anyone who sees something that needs to change and takes

the first steps to influence that situation.” People are motivated by their passions. Leadership isn’t motivated by a quest for power or a conservative desire to keep things as they are, but by faith in the dynamic, creative process to move us forward. This type of leadership relies on relationships of the parts to keep it strong. It means we have to reach out to one another, talk to each other, and trust in our best intentions. It’s not easy, especially since we’ve been trained in top-down, hierarchal models of leadership, in which authority is invested by a piece of paper rather than passion. But passion is how the world changes, though it is often met with great resistance from the forces that have assumed leadership to seek power and then relied on those pieces of paper to keep it. This is our dream, to make real another way of relating to each other and to our planet Earth.

In this chaotically creative model, the Fellowship exists only as a series of relationships, me to you, you to the person next to you, each of us to the stories of our past and the identity we create to shape our future. Our building only exists to foster those relationships, the budgets to advance it, the staff we hire to support it. This is why the congregation voted to increase our investment in green projects; part of our fundraising process this month is to make those dreams real. These dreams shape our identity when they become real. They become real when we put our many forms of energy into them.

Our dreams are one form of energy. But to make those dreams real, we also need to bring our humanity. By that, I mean showing up with our passion and our forgiveness. For our passion to create change, it must be expressed in relationships. Those relationships will be all too human, creating energy of excitement and promise, as well as times of frustration. Each one of us is trying to make sense of this life we live. Sometimes we make mistakes. The universe we live in is not a perfect place, and it’s through the trial and error that we evolve toward that next state of harmony, the harmonious clatter of all our voices. These voices join with others outside our walls, voices raised in a quest for peace, in a cry for justice, in a prayer that we realize our interconnectedness to our beautiful planet before it’s too late.

We realize our dreams to create a better community, serving meals at the Emergency Residence Project, helping through Good Neighbor, Mid-Iowa Community Action, and Youth and Shelter Services, as well as through our environmental programs, for both the Fellowship and the community. We seek to nurture people’s spirits with our spirituality and meditation groups and with our religious education for young people that shows them a path of joyful interconnection and teaches respect for ideas, as well as life. And we hope to grow our music program to bring the joyful noise into more hearts, while we dream of making our building a friendlier place in our environment by reducing our ecological footprint however possible.

Each of us has talents that express our passions or the desire to stretch ourselves in new directions. We bring both of them here to live those dreams. We also bring our financial resources to share. My partner, Lisa, and I are in the privileged position to be able to contribute 5 percent of our net income to the Fellowship. Another 5 percent goes to creative ventures in our larger community to support our vision of what the world might be. But here is where we seek to have the greatest impact, with our dollars and our time.

Having imparted his dreams, the Green Man’s time with me was at an end. The breeze first caught his shoulder and began to unravel the creation in a swirling mass of leaves and twigs, bits of shell and acorns creating a pattern as complex and beautiful as the rising birds. Once again, he’d arrived to offer me another glimpse at the world beneath the world. Here in the woods, I had come to learn what I

already knew: This earthly home of ours is a place of ever-evolving dreams and beauty. If we let ourselves become part of that process, who knows where our future will lead? As Mark Twain said, “Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.”

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