

Learning to Navigate Amid Loss

-- Mary Evelyn Tucker

(Note: This essay was written as the introduction to the book Great Tide Rising by Kathleen Dean Moore. As we read this introduction we were deeply moved by its clarity, beauty and wisdom. We have adapted it, only slightly, for a more general readership by removing the occasional specific references to Kathleen Dean Moore and her book.)

Mary Evelyn Tucker teaches at Yale University and is a longtime associate of Thomas Berry and “The Great Work” of our time. And, for anyone wishing to go deeper, we highly recommend Great Tide Rising.

When we humans are lost we need directions or a map. Earlier humans had religious and cultural traditions to guide them. They provided, even imperfectly, some markers on the road--rites of passage to navigate the changing stages of life from birth to death. Those rites have becomes less effective as religious traditions have become somewhat diminished in the noise of infotainment. We need new guideposts to find our way amid large scale changes such as climate change and loss of species. How do we live through these most challenging times?

Clearly, the nourishing of the human spirit and imagination is what is at stake in our present moment--a spirit and imagination that is shriveling before our very eyes with an anguish and confusion that is heart rending. The human spirit and imagination are deeply entwined in the living forms around us. Their destruction is diminishing our capacity to dream and to hope. Without vibrant oceans and rivers, without lush quiet forests, without the movements and sounds of animals about us we will create a silence even larger than the silent spring Rachel Carson predicted. The silence will engulf us in the sound of our own lament. This lament will not end soon for we are just beginning to write the eulogies, to sing the requiems, to plant the markers for life that is disappearing before our very eyes. And this is true in areas that are urban and suburban, as well as rural and wild.

We are dwelling in a period of mass extinction and climate change. Loss is all around us. We are engulfed by it and at the same time we are nearly blind to it. Yet we feel in our bones some kind of unspeakable angst that will not leave us in the depths of night or even at daybreak when the birds greet the sunlight again. This crushing feeling of unstoppable destruction is holding us back from acknowledging our grief. Such loss of life demands not only mourning, but also recognition that we are in a huge historical whirlwind. It will require every part of ourselves to find our way out. Are we like Job struggling to hear the call of life in the midst of the whirlwind of inexplicable

loss? Or are we like Jacob wrestling with the angel of life in the presence of death? Or are we like Noah collecting and counting the animals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians that will pass through this hourglass of extinction with us?

We are groping, we are limping, we are struggling. But in this groping, in this dark night we are seeking to return to who we are. We are beings of Earth who feel the mysterious rhythms of life unfolding. We sense this in the arc from sunrise to sunset, in the migrating patterns of birds and wild animals, in the call of whales in the depths of the oceans, in the leaping and twisting of animals and children at play, in the smell of spring soil appearing through winter's snow. All of it sings to us in the movement of seasons as the planet finds its way around the sun and back again. These rhythms will ground us anew in the Earth that has brought forth and sustained life for billions of years. The rhythms have changed, yes, with climate change and with extinction. We are being uprooted from predictable seasonal time, yet we dare to uncover ways forward. Deep time grounds us; planetary awareness encircles us as never before.

Rediscovering who we are. Finding our purpose as humans to enhance life, not diminish it. This is our endless prayer. In this we embrace our still evolving role as children of the Earth and as a planetary species. No longer are we citizens of nations alone but of the entire globe. Our allegiance is moving ever outward from family, society, state, continent, the blue green planet that is home, and even beyond to the ethics of The Cosmos. There is no time for wavering. Rather, we are ready to move carefully and humbly into our mature role as a mutually-enhancing species. To do otherwise is to risk the destruction of life on the planet.

We are currently at sea. But we know somehow that our muddling through will be crucial to finding our way back home again. Patience, courage, and endless endurance are part of this process. Maybe humor, hope, and moral clarity will steer us through the whirlwind. The lights from the shore are there if we can only come up to the deck to see them. In a dark moonless night this requires a new kind of learning of currents, of winds, and of stars for navigation. . . a compass into the future.