Divine Traffic and Shin-Splitting Altars

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.
At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

This poem, entitled “Otherwise,” was written by poet Jane Kenyon shortly before she died of leukemia at age 47. Knowing that things would soon be “otherwise” for her, she envelops us in ordinary, everyday things, turning them *extraordinary;* transforming them into all that is precious and, indeed, sacred. *Sweet milk; Ripe, flawless peach; Silver candlesticks; A bed in a room with paintings on the walls.*

Episcopalian Priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor defines Reverence as “the recognition of something greater than the self.” Most remarkably, in the book that she wrote this in, *An Altar in the World*, it is the stuff of the ordinary, the mundane, the often tedious, that Taylor experiences as sacred, reverent-worthy; places and people, tasks and long-lines, bumper to bumper traffic–here is where altars can be built; marking them as holy places. And that they are everywhere!

Nine years ago my family and I were living in Portland Oregon. We were new to the city and trying to make a life there. My daughters at the time were three and 6 months old. It was 2009 and our country was smack dab in the middle of an economic crisis. We were one of the millions of families who were utterly pummeled by the effects of this recession. My husband, with no other option, began traveling for work, which left me at home for long stretches of time, the longest being four months, alone as a single mother on a shoe-string budget. My work was the work of care-taking two tiny children–babies–and being the sole operations manager of the house. Despite finding myself more or less excelling at this new role, I also found myself feeling utterly soul-sick over the mundane rote repetitiveness of it all. My days and weeks moved in cyclical units of time that had a way of both painfully dragging on–will this day never end? How is it only 11am? as well as catapulting me through the space-time continuum like some kind of slingshot. Where did this month go? How is it already summer? Do you know this feeling?

I was struggling. I loved being a mother, but I felt as though I had lost something precious deep within–terrified that my life was somehow passing me by. That this heap of laundry and the sink full of dishes was it. In Kathleen Norris’ book “The Quotidian Mysteries,” and I want to define that word for those of you who don’t know it (I did not know it, and it’s a great one). Quotidian means “of occurring everyday; the mundane and ordinary.” And it is in this book, that she spends 88 perfect pages exploring the tasks of laundry, vacuuming, cleaning out filthy garages, sitting in traffic, *rinsing off scallions*–the routine, quotidian, everyday must-do’s–as being akin to worship. Akin to prayer. What she means by this is that it is *in* these routines that we find the possibilities for the greatest of transformations. She writes that “we think we are only getting through” these tasks but that “the joke is on us,” for it is the perfunctory nature of the mundane and drudging routine that has the power to transform a seemingly indifferent

spirit. *It is the perfunctory nature of the mundane and drudging routine that has the power to transform a seemingly indifferent spirit.*

How, you might be asking, HOW can I possibly be transformed by vacuuming? How can I find spiritual sustenance in the laundry? How might we feel reverence for a two-hour traffic jam? Or an irritating human. Do you know any of these? And maybe it's more than these for some. Maybe the pains of our lives, our current complicated situations and relationships, make cultivating something sacred out the mundane feel like a flippant and impossible undertaking–one that care-free people attempt. Maybe many of our lives don't feel or look like our Jane Kenyon poem, yes, yes, *but I can promise you that there is not one person on this precious earth that is care-free.* This isn't to minimize anyone's pain, but rather to remind us that we are all connected in this messy thing called life. And I now want to ask you this, really ask you this: *What if there is more possibility in this moment, in this very moment, than there is at any other moment?*

So, this is about perception. And when I say "perception" what I mean is how our minds interpret and make sense of all that is around us. I can easily move through a day categorizing all that I encounter into neat, separate categories. Assigning labels to people, places, tasks and objects that I have allowed my water-tight perception to interpret. It's an attachment of sorts–because I am literally attaching myself to the interpretation. Right? *This laundry is mindless drudgery and has nothing to offer my spiritual practices. In fact it keeps me from them*. *This traffic is the worst part of my day; it's a complete waste of my time. This person in front of me is holding up the whole line–they are keeping me from the important things I need to get to.* Buddhist monk Pema Chodren writes that non-attachment, this is the practice of letting all that keeps us hooked *and attached* go, is actually *a desire to know, like the questions of a three year old*. I'm going to repeat that. The practice of letting go of all that keeps us hooked and attached is actually a childlike desire to know. And what do we know about a childlike desire to know? We know that it involves a curious mind and heart. One that has yet to completely form perceptions. So, this is how we start. We start by looking at all that we see as mundane, and all that we see as an obstacle, as being, rather, a place to build an altar. A place to practice reverence.

Barbara Brown Taylor also writes that, “The Earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars.” *The Earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars.* Can you stop what you are doing long enough to see where you are, who you are with, and how *awe-some* this thing called life can be? How your piece of paper came to be. What your shoes do for your feet. What it took to get that cup of coffee in your mug this morning. The man who scans your groceries in front of those cold opening and closing doors all day. The Athenian efforts of your garbage people. A hot shower. What if you *set a stone at the foot of these places or quietly flagged each and every one of them before moving on to wherever you are due next? What if you called them all altars?* Imagine for a moment what your day might look like, what your surroundings might look like, if you set a marker at the altar of every ordinary thing and place in your lives that, upon closer look, upon careful contemplation, took on *extraordinary-ness?*

It was something really simple that cracked me open back in Portland Oregon. I was reading a completely uneventful novel that I kept telling myself I should stop reading when I got to a chapter called “Memento Vivere.” In Latin, this means “Remember Your Life.” *Remember your life.* Like a bucket of ice water or a brick over the head I remember putting down the book and blankly staring around my tiny living room, filled with scattered baby toys, unfolded laundry and pacifiers that needed washing. I remember thinking, what if all that I’m looking for, all that I long for, what if it’s all here in this room? What if it is under that pile of laundry? What if it is in the painstaking and mind-numbing routine of it all? What if my life, right now, just as it is, is thick with Divine possibility? What if all I have to do is remember to look for it? To desire to know it?

Rainier Maria Rilke writes, “It’s not too late to open your depths by plunging into them and drinking in the life that reveals itself quietly there.” It’s not too late. My friends, it’s never too late to crack your shins on the altars that are, right now, at your feet.

It’s not the big things. It’s the little things. The Divine traffic things. Let us not miss them. Let us not dismiss them. Let us not allow them to *keep* us from living, but, instead, bring us back to life. May it be so.