

MOMENTS OF GRACE

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From my home in Bath, if I am lucky, on a dark night I can see just a handful of stars. The planets stand out more, and I was thrilled last year when Jupiter, Venus and Mars were visible, hanging together brightly over the roofs of our row of Georgian townhouses. But that was unusual: my vision is severely impoverished by the light pollution of the city. I know this from my experiences of sailing in a small yacht, frequently making overnight passages across the English Channel or the Celtic Sea. Often the sky is overcast, or bright moonlight hides the stars; sometimes, I am so busy managing the ship that I have no attention to spare. But when the sky is dark and clear, when all is calm onboard, the qualities of the night sky are revealed in what I can best describe as moments of grace. Blaise Pascal is famous for observing 'Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connait point.' For me, moments of grace occur when, *contra* Pascal, the reason of the heart is at one with the reason of reason.¹



I first became conscious of these qualities while crossing the Channel with my young friend Monica. The Plymouth breakwater dropped quickly into the distance as we set a course due south. The sea was moderately rough,

with short, steep waves. Coral was well heeled in a fresh breeze so that from time to time the sea poured up over the leeward bow and cascaded along the side deck. Every now and then the wind blew a cap of white foam from a peak. As we drew away, the coast of Cornwall and Devon flattened behind us. The near headlands – Bolt and the Dodman – stood out; but the coast beyond – Start Point in the east and the Lizard in the far west – disappeared in the haze.

We settled down for the long crossing to L'Aberw'rach, braced in the cockpit, tucked under the sprayhood out of the wind, our minds moving into that quiet, meditative space that can be induced by the sea and the wind. There was nothing to do except make sure the boat kept sailing well and safely, keep an eye out for changes in the weather and for ships, plot our position every hour, eat a bit, sleep as much as we could. After supper we set up a rota so that one of us was on watch in the cockpit while the other rested below. I took the evening watch as we entered the main shipping lanes, where east- and west-going ships are separated to lower the risk of collision. Several ships steamed past westward on my watch but none came close enough to worry about. As darkness gathered I woke Monica – even though this was her first long sailing trip,

she seemed already to have the sailor's knack of grabbing sleep whenever possible.

As she came on deck I made sure she was well wrapped up against the cold – it would get chilly even though it was a summer night – and that her lifejacket was properly fitted, with a safety line attached to a strong point. 'This is it!' she said, with nervous excitement in her voice. 'My first night watch!' I knew this was the moment she had been anticipating, when she would be on deck in the dark on her own.

'Call me if anything concerns you,' I reminded her as I went below, and very sensibly she soon did so to check her interpretation of lights she saw coming from the west. A huge container ship emerged from the distance and passed very close in front of us, so we needed to spill wind from the mainsail to slow Coral down and let it go ahead. Often big ships are brightly lit, but this one showed little more than the red port navigation light and two white steaming lights on the masts. We watched as its vast presence, silhouetted darkly against the night sky, slipped past Coral's bows. As soon as it was safe, I went below again and slept soundly for a couple of hours.

When I climbed up the companionway to relieve Monica I found her sitting in the deep, dark, moonless night enthralled, as if in a cloud of stars. The shipping lanes behind us, the only lights were the distant twinkling of fishing boats. The wind and rain of the past few days had left the sky startlingly clear. She told me excitedly that

she had seen four planets drop below the western sky, and later three or four shooting stars. She pointed out another planet shining bright and steady in the southeast; and exclaimed how clearly the Great Bear stood in the sky. I followed her gaze, my attention expanding into the darkness, taking in the planets, the bright stars of the major constellations, and through the middle the path of the Milky Way, rising in the northeast, striding across the sky and coming down to meet the horizon in the southwest.

Monica went below to rest and I stared up at the stars for the next hour or so, remembering the poet Drew Dellinger's cry 'I want to write a love letter to the Milky Way!'² and singing softly to myself the Rogers and Hart lyric:

Though I know that we meet every night
And you couldn't have changed since the last time
To my joy and delight
It's a new kind of love at first sight.

~

Three years later in early May, this time with my friend Steve as crew, after an early breakfast we motored out of Old Grimsby Sound between Tresco and Bryher on the Scilly Isles, and sailed north by west through a bright, sunny, but cold day. Coral danced through the waves, travelling at a good speed toward Ireland on a brisk northeasterly. Again we made ourselves comfortable in the cockpit, taking turns to go below and cook up our morning coffee, then lunch, then supper, wedging ourselves safely against the bulkhead next to the cooker.

Early in the day the sun's low light gave form and texture to the ocean; as it rose higher through the morning and early afternoon, the stronger light flattened out the details and blurred the horizon. With the approach of evening, the sky turned an ever-darker shade of blue, and the waxing half-moon, which had risen in the afternoon as a faint presence, began to dominate the sky.

Around eight we started a formal watch system. Steve took the first three-hour stint, while I went below, settled myself comfortably into the leeward bunk, pulled over my duvet and slept well. When I woke to relieve Steve at eleven it was completely dark. After plotting our position I went on deck to find him very cheerful, having enjoyed watching the sun set and the day close. 'I've been sailing through this lovely night,' he told me happily. 'No ships to report, nothing in sight but sea and moonlight.' Once my eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, I too saw that the sky was still



clear, and the moon had moved across the sky toward the west, shining through the sails and casting a shifting silver path across the waves toward us.

Steve went below, and once he had settled into his bunk I began the familiar routine of a night watch: wedge myself into the corner of the cockpit under the sprayhood out of the wind; get up and look about for ships and fishing boats every fifteen minutes or so; go below, take our position from the GPS and plot our progress across the Celtic Sea on the chart every hour; snack on apples and chocolate. It's a familiar routine that I use to sink into a strange kind of contentment, a quiet, almost thoughtless contemplation of my surroundings.

Coral continued sailing on a starboard tack, now more gently heeled and rocking away in a slight sea. There was nothing big to bang into, just the gentle rhythm of one wave after another passing under the hull, with a deeper note as she heeled into a bigger one. The winds had been very kind to us on this crossing: we had kept up well over five knots through the passage so far, sometimes as much as seven – although that had been a little uncomfortable compared with this easy amble through the waves.

It was that kind of beautiful night sailing time when everything is only vaguely coloured. In the just-light I could make out, or maybe imagine, the red of my waterproofs, the yellow of the lifebuoy and the silver of the outboard. Looking forward, I could see the moon glinting on the rails of the pulpit, casting lumpy shadows in the troughs between the waves and catching the occasional luminescent breaking peak. When I stood up to look out for ships, my attention was arrested by the path of the moonlight across the sea, fragmented by the waves into tiny flickering points of light so it appeared to be flowing towards me. The cold light sharpened the line between sea and sky in the west and north, while leaving an indistinct blur in the south and east. It lit up Coral's sails so I could see without shining a torch that they were setting well; and illuminated Aries, the steering gear, showing the windvane moving this way then that as it constantly adjusted Coral's course to keep to the same angle to the wind.

Then, following the sun, the moon began to sink toward the horizon, gradually turning from cold white to a deep yellow, almost orange. As it dropped and changed colour, the world changed with it, becoming darker, less clearly articulated, more mysterious. And in the darkening sky, gradually the stars came out: first one or two right above me, then a handful, then more than I could count.

About one in the morning, suddenly and unexpectedly, the wind dropped away and backed northerly. Coral's speed fell back from a steady five knots down to three, then two. Aries, following the wind around, steered her onto a westerly course, away from Ireland and out into the Atlantic. I lost my attention for the moon and stars and started fussing with the sails, the steering, the course. It made no difference: Coral wallowed around uncomfortably in the waves, getting nowhere, the sails flapping aimlessly. What to do? Should I start the engine?

But that would waken Steve and I remembered how he hated the movement when Coral is motoring. Should I drag out the big genoa, take it forward on the deck and set it? But it would be silly to work alone on the deck in the middle of the night; that too would waken Steve; and if the wind stayed light it probably wouldn't do much good anyway.

So I decided to do nothing, just wait, see what happened, and enjoy the night. By this time, with the moon fully set, everything was in deep darkness. The sea now merged with the sky at the horizon so all that was left was the increasing starlight to contrast with the lurking quietness of the sea. I tipped back my cap and looked up past the green loom of the masthead navigation light into the night sky. Just as I stopped worrying about our progress, something happened that loosened my attention from the multitude of individual stars, even the patterns between them. I looked beyond the bright stars into the smoky haze of starlight that filled the sky, faint but dense, profoundly dark and lightly lit at the same time. And with the gazing I was drawn into the infinity of the space above me, so that I felt I was both disappearing into, and becoming part of the whole of everything. I am not sure how long this sensation lasted, maybe a few seconds, maybe minutes. But even now as I write it feels like it might well have lasted forever.

It seemed to me, having watched the sun and then the moon traverse the sky through the day, that they create a perceptual firmament, delineate a boundary to our planet, a sense of finiteness. In the daytime the white light of the sun is scattered as it passes through the atmosphere, giving us the illusion of a bowl of blue sky curving from horizon to horizon. Moonlight scatters too, creating a profoundly blue night sky and a similar, though subtler, sense of sky as boundary. But in the deep darkness of a moonless night, particularly when one looks beyond the bright stars and planets into the infinite haze – into what we have learned very recently is not just billions of stars but billions of galaxies – this sense of a boundary disappears. There is not a sphere up there which is 'the sky'. You look beyond and through into some other reality.

I see my sailing as eco-pilgrimage. The faithful embark on religious pilgrimages to encounter a holy realm; my ecological pilgrimage takes me away from the habits of civilisation and disrupts the patterns of everyday life in search of a vision of the Earth of which we are a part. The theologian Richard Niebhur suggests pilgrimage reinterprets the word 'experience' for us. In its weak form, he writes, experience just means the flow of moments scarcely distinct one from another. But in its strong form, experience can mean much more:

... the passage into ourselves of places and beings previously unfamiliar and an accompanying enlargement of ourselves. With these increments to our being, we are made new, made more thorough kin to the earth, its elements, and its peoples. Pilgrimage experience is radical experience – exposure to trial and peril, the making of perilous

passages from a world grown comfortable and too confining into a world whose vastness we had only dimly surmised. Pilgrimage experience departs us from home; it exports us abroad into an hitherto unimaginable reality.³

These stronger meanings of experience open up quite unexpectedly, as on that night when I stopped fussing about the technicalities of sailing and opened my attention to the sky.



As I sat in Coral's cockpit and gazed at this infinite sky I recalled an earlier experience when the night sky had opened my sense of myself and my world. For several years I had been one of maybe thirty Apprentices in the Dreamweavers Lodge, exploring earth-based spirituality through Native American Medicine Wheel teachings. Our explorations took us through a series of ceremonies, starting with the Night on the Mountain, a 24-hour vision quest alone on a hillside; and continuing through increasingly challenging encounters with natural and spirit teachers. My Night on the Mountain took place on the cliffs of Ramsey Island in Wales, where I watched the world go to sleep and re-awaken with the dawn. I became so quiet that I could hear the wind rustling through the feathers of martins as they flew low over my head to their nearby nests. What I remember most is my experience of the startling beauty of the world around me.

According to Hyemeyohsts Storm, the Medicine Wheel teaches that everything on earth has spirit and life, including the rivers, rocks, earth, sky, plants and animals.

The Medicine Wheel... can be best understood if you think of it as a mirror in which everything is reflected... Any idea, person or object can be a Medicine Wheel, a Mirror, for man. The tiniest flower can be such a Mirror, as can a wolf, a story, a touch, a religion or a mountain top...⁴

All beings know their harmony with other beings within the Wheel – except humans. But humans are alone in having a determining spirit, and can find our place in the circle of beings only through direct, intense physical and spiritual encounter with our brothers and sisters. We each can discover our gifts and character, our 'giveaway', through our reflection on the world we live in.

The culmination of the first ceremonial cycle was the Sacred Name ceremony. This took place after several years of practice, once the Apprentice had built their own Medicine Wheel of sacred objects and gone some way to discover her or his core gifts and qualities, their 'sacred essence'. The challenge of the ceremony was to find and confirm a Name to represent this. This was not a name to be used every day – I already had been given the Medicine Name Wolfheart – but between oneself and Great Spirit. It was to serve as a reminder as to who one truly was, and a challenge to live this fully.

When the time came for me to prepare for this

ceremony, I searched over several weeks for an indication of what my sacred name might be. When the time came, I took my sacred objects – the crystals and icons representing my allies and teachers – along with my Wolfheart staff up to the summit of a hill in mid-Wales in the middle of the night. I laid everything out around me in a Medicine Wheel, called the powers of the Four Directions – and settled down in the middle with my prayers.

My instructions for the ceremony were like this. Having set up the Wheel, I was to call my Name – or what I imagined was my Name – loudly in each of the sacred directions and listen for a response from the world around. The response might be a stirring of the trees, the calling of an owl, or just an inner experience of a reply. If and when there was such a response the second stage was to conjure a sign from the Universe – usually a shooting star – to confirm this. Conjuring involved chanting that would build power to reach through the 'circle of law', which holds all things in their everyday place, and summon this extra-ordinary event.

My first attempt at calling my Name into the darkness produced no response of any kind at all. There was nothing but a dull silence from all directions. Feeling foolish and crestfallen I returned to the centre of my Medicine Wheel. What did I expect? Whatever doubts and scepticism I had brought up the hill with me were confirmed – why would the world and spirit respond to me? And what was so special about a name? What was I doing with this New-Age nonsense? My rational mind and scientific education ran riot, explaining to myself why this was all so misguided. I sat in the middle of my Medicine Wheel in the dark, feeling profoundly silly. I must have fallen asleep. When I awoke I found I had dreamed a new version of the Name that felt more right, more powerful. And so for a second time I called my Name in the eight directions, and this time had an altogether different feeling, as if something out there was stirring in response.

So, holding myself between hope and scepticism, I went back to the centre and took up my Wolfheart staff. I chanted the words of the conjuring as loudly as I could, swung my staff in a spiral to build a cone of power up into the sky, called out my Name loudly and confidently and pulled my staff in a line across the sky from east to west. And then, full of doubts, still by no means convinced by my own performance, I lay back to see what happened.

The moment my head touched the ground a brilliant star streaked right across the sky above me, from east to west, just as I had commanded. I was wide awake, fully present. This was a real star that I experienced incontrovertibly as responding to my call. I just lay there for a while, amazed and thrilled. Then, after thanking and releasing the Powers I had called, I collected my ceremonial items together and made my way back down to rejoin the others in the Lodge.

I was in a most extraordinary state of elation and confusion. To this day my hair stands on end when I recount this story. What I remember most was that I couldn't stop grinning.

For a long while after I didn't tell anyone. I saw all



this as private; that it was between me and the cosmos, between me and Great Spirit. I didn't want to seem to be boasting about my spiritual or shamanic capacities. But more recently I have regarded this experience as a teaching that I should share with others. How could this happen to a rational European male like me? For this extraordinary event cuts right through everything we take for granted about the nature of the world. And it seems central to the questions of who we are as humans and our relationship to this world and universe we inhabit.

There is an old Buddhist story of a monk who is having terrible difficulty with his meditation practice over many years and is forever arguing with his teachers. One day he storms out of the meditation hall in disgust. After a while trudging through the woods, he comes across a stream with a bridge over it, and as he crosses the bridge he looks over the side and catches sight of his own reflection. In a moment of enlightenment experience he exclaims, 'Ha! I am not it, yet it is all of me!'⁵

The point, very simply: we are already part of it all. We don't have to work at it. We belong in the cosmos, always in relation to each other and the more than human world, glorious and flawed yet temporary centres of awareness and action within an interconnected whole. And since we are part of it all, then the moral and practical issue for all humans is to learn to live in a way that does justice to this participation.



Modern cosmological science tells us that as we look up into the stars we are looking back in time toward the origins of the universe. We know now that incomprehensible billions of years ago, time and space began in the explosion of matter and energy we call the Big Bang. The visible universe flared into being and began unfolding into ever-greater diversity and complexity. We know now that when early stars exploded as colossal supernovae, the heavier elements required for life were forged from hydrogen and helium – carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, calcium, magnesium and all the others. We know that when one of these primal stars in our galaxy, the Milky Way, exploded, it scattered these elemental remnants far and wide, giving birth to yet another generation of stars, among which was the one we call the Sun.

Thomas Berry, a priest and theologian who explored the connections between spiritual and scientific understandings of life, wrote that in our present times we are in trouble because we are between stories: the old stories no longer satisfy us. We need, he says a story that gives us an understanding of our origins and our place in a wider context.⁶ With his cosmologist colleague Brian Swimme, Berry emphasised the importance of the universe as story.⁷ Drawing on the very recent unfolding of our cosmological knowledge, the story of the universe can be a Medicine Wheel, a mirror in which we are reflected.


We now know that the universe is made up of nearly a hundred billion galaxies, each containing billions of stars. We know that the universe is expanding and, against all common sense, each of these galaxies, indeed each one of us, is a centre of this expansion. The universe and everything in it belong together in an unfolding creative process, the manifestation of a deep patterning, immanent in the whole and reflected at every level. The universe is not just a space where things happen; it is a process of evolution. It is not based on anything like a predetermined design, for nature itself is creative, exploratory. There is no difference in principle between the self-organizing dynamics of the stars and galaxies and the evolution of life on Earth. They are both part of this creative process out of which different life forms and then sentience and consciousness emerge.

After the formation of the Sun the story continues. The solar system with its planets coalesced out of the dust and rock that circulated the early Sun. It seems that of all the planets it was only on Earth that life evolved as a self-creating evolutionary process. Life on Earth learned to draw on the vast energy of the sun through photosynthesis and use it to increase diversity and modify the planet to make it ever more habitable.⁸ It took some ten billion years to bring the Earth into existence. It took another 4.6 billion for the Earth to shape itself into its current complexity and beauty.

As Thomas Berry puts it, all beings on Earth, humans included, have their origins in the evolution of a self-creating universe and so make up a community of subjects. All bring their particular gifts and sensitivities to the whole. The human intellectual, emotional and imaginative capacities, and our capacity for reflexive self-awareness, are part of the universe expressed through the human. The universe story places humans as part of the whole: it shifts us away from a human-centred perspective and puts us back in the context of the evolving universe. We are the universe looking at itself, reflecting on itself, understanding itself, even celebrating itself.⁹

But just because we bring this particular gift, it doesn't make us more important than anything else. In the religious language of St Thomas Aquinas: 'The order of the universe is the ultimate and noblest perfection in things.' Perfection lies both in wholeness and in differentiation; each part belongs to the whole and articulates the whole in its own unique fashion.¹⁰ So humans take their place within the community of beings.



Back home in Bath, whenever I can I look up through the light pollution at the faint stars and remember those times of wild darkness. I wonder whether my city-dwelling grandchildren have ever seen a bright night sky. If we cannot see the stars, how can we be open to those moments of grace when we see ourselves reflected in the mysterious infinity of which we are part? 

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