

**Earth Rock Rain Sun**  
**April 18, 2010**

This coming Thursday is Earth Day. So, to put it simply, in preparation of that day, I want to talk about the earth. I want to talk about how incredibly lucky I've been to live in places like northern New Mexico, where the beauty of the mountain desert light silences any effort at articulation, or New York City, where I remember once witnessing the moon so incredibly full and huge and bright, it threatened to soften even the sharpest angles of steel and concrete. I want to talk about the fallen tree I once lay down next to and held, weeks after my mother died, and about the sun setting over the ocean and reminding me there's so much more to life than the drama of twenty-something love. I want to share with you how the word *awe* is key to me, essential, in the very innermost chamber of my being, and radiating outward to the boundary

between my skin and the sky, every time I think about how beautiful this earth is.

I want to talk of these things, and I will. But, speaking of radiating, I have to begin by sharing with you a small feeling this morning of irony. Namely, I find it ironic to be speaking to you today about the beauty and solace and celebration of nature, as I myself experience for the first and I hope only time, the presence not so much of natural radiance, but of *un-*natural, human-made radiation, radioactivity, in my own body. This past Wednesday, you see, as a follow up to my thyroid surgery, which revealed two very small malignant tumors, I opted to take the safety precaution of doing some radiation treatment, via a radioactive iodine pill, to make sure any last remnants of suspect thyroid cells would be done away with. I spent Thursday and Friday essentially in isolation, and

yesterday and today, I'm not supposed to touch anyone. By tomorrow, thankfully, the glow should be gone.

I share this with you because it's a funny juxtaposition for me to find myself in, my personal experience of radioactivity while speaking to you of the enduring beauty of nature. But, just so as not to make you too nervous, this thyroid cancer business is mild, and almost absolutely curable. I've met several other people who've gone through the same thing, and they're all A-OK. I'm confident I am, too.

Still, for me today, perhaps the beauty of nature, the solace it brings and the awe it inspires is all the more powerful, having internalized a little of the toxicity, for better or worse, that we human beings seem so inclined to weave into nature's web. That's the twist of being human—or maybe of being western, or American, or a consumer, I'm not sure which—on this earth. Questions arise, like, are we human

beings *of* nature, or simply just *next* to it? Are we, as human beings, just a little below the angels, as some would proclaim, or are we more accurately just below those wild creatures—birds, horses, wolves, dolphins, bears—who instinctually take no more than their share?

Wherever we fall in the interdependent web of existence, it seems we human beings want a *relationship* with the rest of the Earth. We *want* to be connected, whether we do so by going birding or going to the zoo, by going to exotic resorts or resorting to our own backyards, by building a house that will have a beautiful view, or by fighting over-development that would forever *alter* the view.

My own parents taught me the simple art and joy of hiking, a way to connect with nature with minimal damage to it, and at a pace that allows for appreciation of each rock, each rapid, each scent of pine caught in the breeze. And,

remembering my own family's outings, my hope is that at this weekend's family campout at Bastrop State Park, at this very moment, Wildflower parents who endured the rain are peering at bugs and mud puddles and leaves and flowers with their children, showing them the beauty of the earth, as well as the science, the art, the music, and the poetry of it, too. How else will our children learn to treat this awesome home of ours with the respect it deserves, if not from their elders?

We *all* would do well, actually, to continue to learn from and about the earth. I think of the unison reading we shared earlier, the cry from the speaker: "Earth cure me. Receive my woe.//Rock strengthen me. Rock receive my weakness.// Rain wash my sadness away. Rain receive my doubt.// Sun make sweet my song. Sun receive the anger from my heart." How many times have you taken to nature, whether on a trail or in

your garden, at the beach or on a mountain, in hopes that the earth would indeed receive all the pain of your life?

And why wouldn't we have such hope of it doing so?

When we compare our minute human bodies to the size and the scope of the earth, it's not hard to believe the earth can take in all this woe, all this weakness, all this sadness, all this anger. I hiked nearly every single day in the mountains for over a year after my mother died, in hopes of that very thing. The forest was a refuge to me, even as a child. Today, a drive out to the hill country, once past the congestion leading up to Dripping Springs, expands my vision, my contentment, and my appreciation of my Central Texan life.

However, just because the earth is bigger than any *one* of us, doesn't mean we should always ask the earth to do all the work. In so many ways, we have assumed that the earth could take in all our woes, our anger, our sadness, without any

consequences. We could bury nuclear waste, drill for and pilfer oil in the oceans, scrape off mountain tops, poison rivers we once swam in, so that we human beings might feel better, more comfy, in our little homes. My question this morning is, is it our *right* then, to ask the earth to cure us? Or is it that we feel entitled to ask it to do so? Maybe that's my problem this morning with that unison reading we shared. The speaker making the plea forgot to say thank you.

Meister Eckhart once said, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough." Now, I'm not sure I *entirely* agree with this, especially when I think of the incredible spate of earthquakes that have rattled the world since January, and the huge number of deaths they have caused. Still, I believe an attitude of thanks points us in the right direction in regard to our relationship with the earth. For to give thanks to the earth is to acknowledge the gifts *already*

given. To give thanks to the earth is to practice humility, which is to acknowledge, in the words of Chief Seattle, that “the earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth.”

And, as Mary Oliver illustrates in her poem we heard Michael read earlier, humility in turn teaches us to practice faith. Oliver can’t see or hear or feel the imperceptible growth of the summer corn. It is beyond, as she says, “any seeable proof, or hearable hum.” And yet, she continues,

... let the immeasurable come.

Let the unknowable touch the buckle of my spine.

Let the wind turn in the trees,

and the mystery hidden in the dirt

swing through the air.

How could I look at anything in this world

and tremble, and grip my hands over my heart?

What should I fear?

One morning  
in the leafy green ocean  
the honeycomb of the corn's beautiful body  
is sure to be there.

The poet's words call us to rest assured. The earth will provide.

On the other hand, while Oliver's poem calls us to have faith in the workings and the timing and the creative powers of the earth, Claribel Alegria's poem about the death of her husband cautions us that however much we might seek answers, seek love, seek healing in the earth, sometimes the earth, and life on it, has something else to teach. She writes:

I went out searching for you  
Crossing valleys  
And mountains  
Ploughing distant seas  
Asking of the clouds  
And the wind your whereabouts

It was all useless  
Useless  
You were within me.

Here, no matter how much we scour it, the earth does *not* provide; the earth's not a nurse or a mother or a best friend in who's going to say, "I'll get you back to your love; I'll take in your pain and your sadness, your anger and your weakness; I'll make it all better." No, in a much more equanimous way, the earth is really just there to do its own thing. As much as we want it to serve our own needs, and as much as it in many ways *will* serve our needs, its very indifference to our seeking, its very ambivalence as to whether we are just below the angels, with dominion over the rest of earthly life, or whether we are the silliest species of the whole bunch—that indifference demands that we seek solace and connection not only in the mountains, on the beach, in the desert, in the

river, but *within* ourselves. “It was all useless, useless. You were within me.” Alegria, of course, is talking to and about her late husband when she writes this line. But I can’t help but believe that in *all* our searching, we might do well to see that while the earth is there to shelter and feed us and to share with us its extraordinary beauty, it is not at our beck and call, not to be taken for granted. More than asking the earth to mother us, we might do well to learn from it the ebbs and flows, the droughts and the downpours, the muddy springs, sweltering summers, cooling autumns and chilling winters and back again to spring, of our own lives.

For remember: the earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth. Even if we *are* capable of building SUVs, oil rigs, strip malls, highways, skyways, space shuttles, and smart phones, when it comes down to it, we are *not* next to nature, but *of* it. For all our altering of the earth, we’re no higher than

the beaver who builds his dam, the mole who makes his hill, the termite who tunnels through houses, or the wasp who builds her nest with a view, only to block ours.

Knowing this to be so, let us have faith in the earth, and let us, as creatures *of* the earth, have faith in ourselves to do right by the earth. Yes, let us be comforted, let us be in awe, let us be humbled by her power. But let us know too that the nature of the earth—all its beauty, all its power, all its cycles, all its mortality—lies within each of us, too.

Thus, in addition to asking the earth to be there for us, let us also say Earth, *thank you* for showing me the cure; Rock, *thank you* for showing me strength; Rain, *thank you* for teaching me how to wash my sadness away; Sun, *thank you* for helping me see the light and warmth of my own heart.

And so, human beings that we are, with our manufactured toys and our heartfelt struggles, our illnesses

and our individually small yet collectively prominent place on this earth—so may we say

Amen.

**SECOND OFFERING** will go to Communities in Schools for the purchase of school supplies and hygiene kits for students at Oak Springs Elementary and Linder Elementary Schools. Oak Springs is located in East Austin; 99.7% of the students are economically disadvantaged. Linder is located in Southeast Austin; 98% of the students are economically disadvantaged. Each school supply kit costs \$20 and each hygiene kit costs \$5. Our contributions will help make a difference in these children's lives.