

Annie Dillard: Living a Life of Mind & Heart
A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

There are experiences that leave me speechless. More and more, as I get older, there are sights, sounds, feelings, ideas, and mysteries that leave me speechless.

This is a problem when one has a sermon to write- this is a problem when one is called to stand in a pulpit on a Sunday morning and offer heartfelt thoughts and insights.

Writer and poet Annie Dillard encourages me by showing how short the distance between speechlessness...and wild yelps of exhilaration.

Reading Annie Dillard encourages me to penetrate the world of things and thereby free the world of ideas. To take my chances with that which moves me to give up speech.

Generally, I'm not a very good follower...but I would follow Ms Dillard anywhere. She wouldn't like it, of that I'm sure...she wouldn't like to be followed...she doesn't let out much about herself...except her brilliance, and her loves...which include insects, whales, stars, wind, sand, Broken things, words no one else uses...creeks, and extravagant gestures of all kinds and makes.

Reading from Dillard on Prose Styles

*From "Contemporary Prose Styles"
On the value of plain writing*

*There is something about plain writing that smacks of moral goodness. There is modesty to it.
Plain prose is humble. It calls attention not to itself but to the world.
It is intimate with character; it is sympathetic and may be democratic.
It submits to the world; it is honest.
It praises the world by seeing it. It seems even to believe in the world it honors with so much careful attention.*

In the fancy prose style of the nineteenth century, readers like their prose syntactically baroque and morally elevating. Each bit of world was a chip off the old sublime... (think of Thoreau's writing in Walden)

We, (of modern tastes) like writing that is precise and uncluttered. We are agnostic or materialist and like writing fastened to the world of things.

This plain prose represents literature's new morality. It honors each thing one by one, without metaphor. No angelic systems need be dragged in by the hair to sprinkle upon objects a borrowed splendor. Instead, each of the world's unique objects is the site of its own truth and goodness. Each thing is its own context for meaning.

Its virtue is its stubborn uniqueness, in its resistance to generalization, and even in its resistance to our final knowledge of it. Such writing can claim the just precision of a tool, the spareness of bone, the clarity of light.

Plain writing is not a pyrotechnic display, but a lamp.

Having grown up in Pittsburg, and lived for a time in the Pacific Northwest, she now lives in rural Virginia. Ms. Dillard is 62 years old, has a husband and one daughter. She attended Hollins college in Virginia. She has received a Pulitzer Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts grant and many many other prizes and fellowships. She is an extraordinarily gifted writer. One reviewer describes her as a gregarious recluse.

I'd like to say that Ms. Dillard is a Unitarian Universalist, but I don't think she is... she was married in a UU church, but she was raised in a Presbyterian Sunday school memorizing bible quotes which still come naturally to her...but for most of her life she has been memorizing the rest of the world...and more often that is what she describes...the world of things, which for her, is simply the place where one encounters idea or mind.

Her writing feels to me so intense, that some would call it spiritual writing. That is not, I think, her intent. To be spiritual, I mean.

She simply wants to describe the world as it is- and for Annie Dillard, the world is, on fire.

She is most interested in reason, in using reason to get the imagination to seize, as she says...the actual world...

Dillard writes, in her autobiographical memoir, "An American Childhood";

"The interior life is often stupid. Its egoism blinds it and deafens it; its imagination spins out ignorant tales, fascinated. It fancies that the western wind blows on the Self, and leaves fall at the feet of the Self for a reason, and people are watching. A mind risks real ignorance for the sometimes paltry prize of an imagination enriched. The trick of reason is to get the imagination to seize the actual world- if only from time to time."

And so I recently went to Alaska. And from time to time, I encountered the actual world. One morning I looked out of our cabin window and I was amazed to see chunks of blue ice floating in the water of the inside passage.

As we moved forward the ice chunks became larger and more numerous. And they were very very blue. I didn't know whether to be afraid or not. I had no idea what I was seeing, or what might lay ahead. I hurried out on the foredeck...secured one of my regular spots by the rail...and watched entranced as the ship entered Glacier Bay...Glacier Bay, I love saying those words...

Glacier Bay must be one of the most beautiful places on earth. Black rock mountains rise directly out of the sea...at the top, in the valleys between the ridges there is snow...white, pristine, the air is so fresh and clear, you almost think you are looking through glass...or that if you take your glasses off, you'll see perfectly.

The ships' motors are idling much quieter than usual...I can see in an arc around the bay...and there are moving (at glacial pace) all around us glaciers of different sizes and shapes, we have learned to recognize glaciers because they are blue and they have curved lines that show how they have moved down the mountain passes...there isn't just one glacier...there are many, they seem close...(people were cheering as the glacier "calved", as pieces broke off and crashed with a loud noise into the sea- I wondered why they were so happy about what seemed to me to be effects of global warming?)

The ice chunks all around are pieces of glacial ice...and there on one floe someone sees a seal, there, there, a small school of porpoises...there small birds scooting over the water splashing their wings like loosened oars....and on the shore, using binoculars, we spot a grizzly bear...standing on hind legs at the waters edge. There he stands looking back at us.

I can't believe my eyes! I am held at the rail by sheer awe. I never want to leave this moment, this place, this vision of splendor, this world on fire, with ice.

I don't have to give this moment any deeper meaning, any greater significance, any holier-than-thou language...It is earth, ice, bay, glacier, seal, bear, bird, wind, air, silence, blue, snow, cold, mountain.

And in this moment, from within that context, these words bring tears to my eyes. And I am speechless once again. What is it, I wonder, that leaves you speechless, that moves you to tears?

Annie Dillard writes about polar explorers...about archeology and buried treasure. She encourages me to think of my living as exploration. Exploration from childhood fort building and tree climbing to voracious reading of the great authors, to travel to Europe, to sexual revolution, to now...exploration as a way of living.

I didn't get as far north as the pole, but this trip was, my polar exploration.

There were moments on ship board, when reference was made to the sinking of the Titanic – it was a common touchstone...everyone had seen the movie, everyone imagined themselves in a particular scene of that movie... especially during our first hour on board, when we all had to don life jackets and participate in an emergency drill on deck.

And throughout the days on board, I could imagine people imagining themselves hanging off the prow with arms spread ready to fly, imagining themselves in the crows nest...enjoying one last dance, or in the string trio...playing Vivaldi or Bach for eternity...or manning a lifeboat and saving small children and beautiful women.

On the day we stopped in Ketchikan, I found my way to small local used book store. I was searching for a true story of polar exploration. I found a dog-eared copy of “Endurance” by Alfred Lansing, the story of Earnest Shackelton’s Anarctic expedition. For the duration of our journey, I stood at the rail during the day and read “Endurance” by night.

Perhaps you know the story, how Shackelton’s ship was icebound... how they lived on board for several months, waiting for a waterway to open in the floe...how the ship was crushed by moving ice...how they lived more months in flimsy tents on an icefloe...how they pulled boats over the ice by hand, how they had to sacrifice their sleddogs...how they had to ration food, how they went out to hunt seals day after freezing day...

how one of their party had to undergo the amputation of a foot, how others were almost crazy...how they waited days for the right wind to allow them into harbor when finally they made landfall...how a small number of the party had to travel overland to the whaling station on the other side of the island...how it took three more months for the rescue team to penetrate the ice...how the men were kind and helpful to each other, how when one spilled his soup...the others shared what little they had...how in the end... all were saved, all survived...all endured.

Annie Dillard has written: “There is no such thing as a solitary polar explorer, fine as the conception is.”

Dillard, in her essay; “An expedition to the pole” imagines a small-town protestant congregation as a kind of polar expedition. With survival depending on how the icebergs move among the floes...and how the cloud cover is on a given day, and how the supplies hold out, and who can play some music to keep our spirits up and patience and jerryrigging and map-reading and risk-taking and being rescued at the last.

Perhaps all congregations are like this. Perhaps all congregations are polar expeditions... All of us explorers on a grand voyage of discovery.

Einstein wrote; “nature conceals her mystery by means of essential grandeur, not by her cunning.”

Twice in the last few months, I have watched in 2 different cities large birds of prey devouring their kill. Both, it turns out happened on the rooftops of public libraries, one in Evanston, IL. And one in Juneo, AL. In Evanston, my daughter watched as a peregrin falcon caught a pigeon in mid-flight and carried to the roof edge of the library...she was in the rooftop garage across the street, I was on the street below when she called me on my cellphone to tell me to rush up and watch what was happening... as I walked toward the garage, I saw pieces of something white drifting down on the street and sidewalk...it took me a minute to realize it was pigeon feathers...that the falcon was cleaning and preparing his meal. There were a lot of feathers...it looked like snow in May.

After about 7 or 8 minutes, the storm of feathers ceased and the falcon flew off carrying a piece of lunch in his claws...off to share with the nestlings, I presume.

In Juneo, the lurching eagle on the library roof, directly across from where our ship was docked...was being challenged by a group of very large and noisy ravens. They kept threatening to steal whatever bounty the eagle had caught. Before too long, a second eagle came to stand guard and scare off the ravens, while the eagle hunter, enjoyed the first course.

Sometimes I worry that global warming or urban sprawl will leave us humans bereft of so many other species – that we will be robbed of experiences of awe and speechlessness.

But Annie Dillard and my personal polar expedition remind me that all we need to do is get outdoors. The wind, the insects, the stars, the birds, the flowers, the horizon, the rain and sun and cold...daily acts of grandeur are happening all around us...in every season, in every back yard, in every pond and stream, in every sky.

Dillard writes..."Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there."

As explorers...we are destined to be there. To stand speechless before the grandeur of life itself. As UU's our reason is strong...stronger most times than our imagination...our reason tells us that this grandeur, that this life is enough...we need add no overlay of creed or creator...

In Glacier Bay it was clear to me that both science and religion were

at play. I didn't have to believe or understand everything, I only had to be there.

In her most recent book, "The Maytrees", her second novel, Dillard writes a love story...an aging story...a story of abundant beauty and grace – a story in which the people are present to life's grandeur.

They develop a habit, late in life, of sleeping outdoors...they redesign the lower level of the house to have double doors that open to the grass, to the sky to the bay of Cape Cod.

And when anyone is sick or dying...they move a bed there...and depending on the weather, the bed is either just inside the doors, or just outside the doors...day and night...the men and women are there, present to all the life that happens out of doors.

It is a brilliant and inspiring image...that all of our lives, we can explore, we can be present, we can be out in the places where we are moved beyond speech.

I am grateful to Annie Dillard for her body of work. For her encouragement to be a polar explorer. I am grateful to you for being part of this particular shared expedition. As Dillard might say, pay attention, Get ready, we are nearing the pole.

Let me end with Ms Dillard words from American Childhood
"...it is not you or I that is important, neither what sort we might be nor how we came to be each where we are. What is important is anyone's coming awake and discovering a place, finding in full orbit a spinning globe one can lean over, catch, and jump on. What is important is the moment of opening a life and feeling it touch-with an electric hiss and cry- this speckled mineral sphere, our present world."

Blessed Be/Amen

READING from Annie Dillard

*From "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek"
About living extravagantly and wildly*

Thomas Merton wrote, "there is always a temptation to diddle around in the contemplative life, making itsy-bitsy statues."

(There is always an enormous temptation in all of life to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end. It is so self-conscious, so apparently moral, simply to step aside from the gaps where the creeks and winds pour down, saying, I never merited this grace, quite rightly, and then to sulk along the rest of your days on the edge of rage.

I won't have it. The world is wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous and bitter, more extravagant and bright. We are making hay when we should be making whoopee; we are raising tomatoes when we should be raising Cain or Lazarus.