



## RESTING IN THE SWALE

In the 20th century many scientists and theologians felt it was necessary to attempt to make sense of the chaos in the world. Now 19 years into the 21st century, there seems to be a tendency to just accept the chaos. In fact some people think it is a political advantage. We were warned about this when Thomas Frank (1965 - ) of *The Wall Street Journal* wrote *The Wrecking Crew: How Conservatives Ruined Government, Enriched Themselves, and Beggared the Nation* in 2008. I feel more comfortable substituting “the 1%” or something similar for “Conservatives.” However Frank was not alone in forcefully revealing the advantages chaos brings to the few people holding most of the wealth of the United States. Many folks are pointing out correctly that in some issues like the treatment of women and people of color the United States has never really been united.

I grew up, long ago, in an environment where people were trying, often successfully, to pick up the civic shards and put them back together. It seems to me, and I may be wrong, that at least on the national level there are now fewer people who are optimistic about picking up those shards.



So what are our life choices in the midst of this chaos? You may have other ideas but I see three approaches for what way back in the 30s our grandparents would have called “the little guys.” Today it would be better to just say “ordinary people.”

The first approach is to simply protect yourself and your loved ones. There is nothing wrong with that. It fits in with psychologist Abraham Maslow's (1908–1970) hierarchy of human needs. This approach forms the necessary foundation for everything else.

The second approach calls for people to come together in organizations that effectively combat the political and economic systems. The goal is to bend the arc of human history, to use Martin Luther King's words, back toward justice, equality, and universal dignity. I think it is unclear what impact this approach has been having. I really hope throngs of people are beginning to gravitate in that direction. I have been in those struggles enough to know that an eighty-eight-year-old quasi-hermit creeping around with his walker is not on the top of the needs list of any community action organization. I think there are a lot of people who for various reasons are not able to participate in this approach, even though they are sympathetic. So what can they do?



The third approach is to understand that when it comes to our present problems no contribution is too small. I greatly admire our Sister Julie who for years struggled to get a conservation easement on our small patch of earth here at Starcross. Recently I have found that people with only 1 acre of land are putting protective and perpetual easements on their land. The situation with our climate is so serious that everything done, even in the backyard or on an apartment balcony, matters. The same can be said of all the other problems we face in this hour of chaos. Every bit helps.

For as long as I can remember, I have been deeply impressed by the words of the philosopher Albert Camus (1913–1960) about the foundation and quality of human existence.

*Great ideas, it has been said, come into the world as gently as doves. Perhaps then, if we*

*listen attentively, we shall hear, amid the uproar of empires and nations, a faint flutter of wings, the gentle stirring of life and hope. Some will say that this hope lies in a nation; others, in a person. I believe rather that it is awakened, revived, nourished by millions of solitary individuals whose deeds and works every day negate frontiers and the crudest implications of history. As a result, there shines forth fleetingly the ever threatened truth that each and every person, on the foundation of his and her own sufferings and joys, builds for all.*



Often I am deeply troubled by news of “the crudest implications of history” around the world. I suppose it has something to do with coming to terms with the fact that I am no longer able to just hop on a plane, and be in Romania, Uganda, the UN in Geneva or similar places to lend a hand. There was a Zen poet who observed that he used to be a tiger but now in his old age he was happy to be a pussycat. Apparently I have not yet managed to completely make that important transformation!

Yesterday it was the massacres in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday that occupied me as I went to bed. First they said the suicide bombers were a radical Buddhist sect. Now they are saying it was a radical Muslim sect. In a way it doesn't matter. What matters is that over 250 people were murdered by suicide bombers and 500 were seriously injured. Many of those will die. They leave behind families, loved ones, and dreams.



I woke up in the middle of the night. My physician, who is a Western Sufi, recommends that when that happens I should meditate. But I didn't feel like meditating, so I read a poem by Mary Oliver (1935–2019) called *Blossom* which was apparently written at this time of year. It had these fascinating lines,

*What we long for: Joy before death, nights in the swale —  
everything else can wait..*

I realized I didn't know what a “swale” was. Looking it up I found that it is a low or depressed place formed either by nature or by farmers and gardeners. When people make a swale it is to have in the orchard or garden a simple place with nourishing water. In a

variety of ways, some not easily understood, the swale brings health to the environment. I think the poet was thinking of an emotional or spiritual shallow pool that we should always have with us. And so at night that swale is where we should rest — everything else can wait!

My spiritual swale is not very well constructed. I would like it to be somewhere I could return to in my thoughts, a place of peace and beauty, not fractured by politics, hatred and greed.



The tulip gardens of Keukenhof in the Netherlands are in full bloom. Years ago I



walked there with someone I loved. I used that memory to round out the gentle slope of my swale and rested until dawn. And the first thing I saw on waking up was a very old apple tree that should have fallen over years ago. Instead it was in full magnificent bloom.

The world is still fractured and in chaos, I am still living in it, but somehow the poet was right. It is important to spend the night in the swale. And no one has a right to take that away from any living creature. So I'll do my best today to lend hand in helping someone build a swale. Does it matter? Yes.

***Brother Toby***