

*Reading from Teaching a Stone to Talk by Annie Dillard*

Now we are no longer primitive. Now the whole world seems not holy... We as a people have moved from pantheism to pan-atheism... It is difficult to undo our own damage and to recall to our presence that which we have asked to leave. It is hard to desecrate a grove and change your mind. We doused the burning bush and cannot rekindle it. We are lighting matches in vain under every green tree.

Did the wind used to cry and the hills shout forth praise? Now speech has perished from among the lifeless things of the earth, and living things say very little to very few... And yet it could be that wherever there is motion there is noise, as when a whale breaches and smacks the water, and wherever there is stillness there is a small, still voice, God's speaking from the whirlwind, nature's old song and dance, the show we drove from town...

What have we been doing all these centuries but trying to call God back to the mountain, or, failing that, raise a peep out of anything that isn't us? What is the difference between a cathedral and a physics lab? Are they not both saying: Hello?

### *Magical Thinking*

Do you know what a rally cap is? It's a baseball tradition of wearing a cap inside out to will the victory of a team trailing badly. So, your team is losing and you turn your baseball cap inside out – and usually turn the lip upward – because that action is said to have the power of changing the odds in your favor.

Les Miles, a football player, eats grass from the field where he's about to play as a way of connecting with the ground. He believes this ritual will give him an advantage during the game. It's apparently fairly common to think that hockey teams are more likely to win a Stanley Cup if the players don't shave. And more athletes than I care to know don't change underwear they think is lucky. This is magical thinking and it all sounds pretty silly. There's no evidence of a connection between facial hair and victory. But these kinds of practices or rituals are common and not just among athletes.

The term Magical Thinking is often used pejoratively, even condescendingly. Magical thinking is an unproven cause and effect. Don't worry, the budget will be balanced even as our expenses increase and we neglect to close corporate loopholes to fill the financial gaps. It'll happen by magic. And have no fear about that life threatening illness; we aren't going to treat it with any medicine, but Jesus is our trusted healer. It's referenced when we feel out of control, when we want an outcome that might not be reasonable to expect. We engage magical thinking on anything from the search for a parking spot to terminal cancer. We create the illusion that we can make something happen even if there's no logic to believing it.

Some people would declare that prayer is equivalent to magical thinking. It's an embrace of the illusion that a sugar daddy in the sky will fill the gap between what is realistic and what we want; it's a fantasy we employ to help us feel better. Other kinds of magical thinking might include the idea that if I do something good for someone, the universe will reward me by fulfilling an unrelated desire. Of course I got that promotion I've been wanting; I spent all of last weekend helping an elderly neighbor clean out her attic.

Talismans are also part of magical thinking. In the Middle Ages, pieces of wood were sold as parts of the cross on which Jesus died. Owning one was good luck or a form of protection. But magical thinking isn't limited to pre-enlightenment populations. I know plenty of people who carry a rabbit's foot or who wear crystals. We proscribe meaning to objects and then feel safer as a result. Here's an example. How would you feel about throwing your wedding ring across a room? That feels wrong and not just because we might lose it, but because it has sentimental value. Or for some of us, how would you feel if the stained glass window behind me broke? It came from the old church, the founded in 1854 as the First Unitarian Church of Yonkers. Some of us might feel like something has broken in us or in our community were that to happen. Those are all examples of magical thinking.

In some ways, we disenchant our thinking during the Age of the Enlightenment. Reason broke the spell. Rationalism, born of the scientific heritage of the Renaissance, removed the possibility of magic from our cultural consciousness and replaced it with evidence. We started to look at everything differently. Things could and

should be tested and tried and understood. Philosophy became an all comprehensive medium in which principles of natural science and law and government and religion are formulated, developed and founded. Rationalism wasn't a doctrine but a campaign of renovation based on broad presuppositions informed by new achievements of science and an innovative vision being made manifest in a new democratic state where ideas are given room to breathe. The Earth is not the center of the universe and contrary to perception, it's round. Gravity, which can be proven, creates the illusion that we are standing straight up and it keeps us from floating into space. We had to come to terms with an infinite universe, both our ability to understand and not to understand all that we were discovering. Humans were rethinking everything, using a new lens.

We've benefitted greatly from the advances made from philosophy, science and political theory during that time. We understand things like how disease spreads and the value of the individual person and what our place is in the universe and what we need in our air to survive. Reconsidering traditional ideas about religion, we started to challenge the notion that there is a god who is all-powerful and all-knowing and on our side. We started to investigate the world for ourselves rather than waiting for revelation to be handed down from above, and we discovered the answers to questions humanity had never before been willing to ask. The progress of that age laid the groundwork for the technological age we're now in, making the planet smaller, bringing us closer to strangers across the globe, if estranging us some from our neighbors.

Reason is exciting and it opens up a world of possibilities. If the Bible isn't literal truth, what is true? And how do we discover it? Carrots don't grow because god wills them, but because we planted carrot seeds in fertile earth and watered and weeded and ensured they got enough sun. We know how things work. The Age of Reason disenchanting everything- or most things -and left us with full confidence that we will one day understand it all.

It's all good; I'm grateful we don't live in the dark ages, thinking that drilling a hole in your head will let out the demons that have brought on your headaches. But, I'm also aware that disenchanting all things leaves us with a world a little less magical. And, to tell you the truth, I'm not interested in cold, stark reality right now. It's been a difficult winter and I'm tired. Everything feels a little harder than it should be. Things are cancelled, plans are changed, I find myself trapped at home with a list of things to do and no way or even no energy to get them done. Just driving in my neighborhood is difficult because the snow has narrowed roads that didn't have much leeway to begin with. And a few days of temperatures over freezing hasn't taken the chill out of life this winter. So, the fact that magical thinking might be silly doesn't feel like it matters to me. Today, I'm interested in possibility. I'm interested in hope and thin prospects. I don't want to live my life seeing nothing other than what is visible, tangible and scientifically provable.

With all the progress of the Age of Reason, there was a bit of regression. Annie Dillard says it well. "We doused the burning bush and cannot rekindle it." We are lighting matches in vain under every green tree. We cannot capture again what was lost, that sense of magic being afoot, the ability to hear the voices of the mountains or hearing god in the whirlwind.

So we live in a smaller world than we did before.

What if magic is real? I don't want to undo centuries of progress. But, what if there's an element of life we're missing when we use our rational glasses? Did we douse the burning bush, forgetting to wonder how it was ignited?

Moses parted the Red Sea. I doubt there's a soul in the Western World who doesn't have some knowledge of what that's about. The common story is that the Jews, the slaves, were escaping their captors and came to the Red Sea and god empowered Moses and he raised his staff and the sea parted, allowing the slaves to walk through safely, but when the soldiers followed after them, the sea engulfed them and they all drowned. In the very first course I ever took on Scripture, I learned that it was more likely they crossed the Reed Sea. It's not only smaller and closer to the path they were likely to take, it has tides that actually make it crossable. Ah, it was the Reed Sea. No need for a charmed staff. No need for irrational belief in god while walking into a raging body of water, likely to our deaths. No need for magic. It all makes sense.

But in taking the mystery out of the story, have we lost its meaning? Does it matter that the story doesn't break our understanding of the physical world? Do we need that to be true in order for the story to be meaningful?

In the 80s and 90s, there was a group of 150 scholars who worked diligently to reconstruct the historicity of Jesus' life. They were called the Jesus Seminar. Many of my friends and colleagues were intrigued. It was a reason-based, a history-based experiment. It reminds me of Thomas Jefferson's Bible. True to his Unitarianism,

Jefferson, cut all the pieces out of Christian Scripture that seemed in any way other-worldly. He kept, for instance, the story of his birth but cut the magi and the north star and the angels singing. The Jesus Seminar was attempting something similar. Using their vast knowledge of history and what can be revealed through archeology and other physical sciences, what can be discerned to be true enough to hold up to 20<sup>th</sup> century expectations of what is reasonable? There were books and articles and video tapes and plenty of theologians were waiting eagerly for their conclusions. I was glad someone had undertaken this project, but found myself unexpectedly uninterested. I kept thinking- who cares about the facts? They're missing the story. I suppose the facts matter in some circles, but I wonder sometimes if we're not so busy with the facts, we miss some truths. Were we throwing water on the burning bush?

Even if we did, I don't think magic is gone forever. I think we continue to have the capacity to see beyond what is most apparent, of believing in something for which there is insufficient evidence. The classic definition of magic is a change in consciousness according to the will. Some contemporary practitioners of magic will claim that the transformation is internal, an alignment of your own desire with that of the universe, rather than an ability to alter the course of the natural world.

But I'm going to suggest that it's possible to perform magic by affecting the world around us. We've seen it happen. I think of Gandhi. Gandhi was a magic man. He was able to get millions of people to imagine themselves free from an oppressive regime. And not just free, but to believe in a vision of a non-violent revolution, of living so in line with their spiritual values that the oppressor chooses to leave, and to leave as friends. People laughed. His critics, his supporters, even his family. But he was able to change the minds of the people in the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest country on the planet. One man, before Twitter. Hitler had a similar talent. He transformed a depressed nation into one completely empowered and ready to take over the world.

I'm not suggesting that all magical thinking is good. Obviously, Hitler might have been successful, but his goals were nefarious. And, as it happens, his ability to alter the consciousness of a nation was still limited by the reality that Germany's resources couldn't match those of his opponents.

But I am suggesting that there might be more to life than we can know through scientific experimentation, that not everything falls neatly into our expectations for cause and effect. There is a sacred element to being alive, one that exists even after the spell is broken, even after we've experimented and dissected and analyzed all that we can. Reason is good, but it's not the only trick we have up our sleeves. Nice to know the slaves escaped through the Reed Sea, but in knowing that, let's not lose the magic, the drama of the Crossing of the Red Sea.

I want to live in the space between reality and magic. I want to know what's true and I want to live beyond it, live past what is most real and into what is possible. I want to bring a nation suffering under the weight of oppression to a greater vision of itself. I want to sit in the bleachers with my baseball cap on inside out, knowing that my faith might change the outcome of the game. I want to teach my son to experiment and uncover truth and then to wonder at the mystery of hanging on the edge of a round planet.

It is good to know the facts, but it's also good to leave the facts behind sometimes and live in the sacred moments. Imagination can be more powerful than actuality, mythology is at least as important as history. When I am sick, I want to ask everyone I know to pray for me and I want them to live in such hope that, even if it's all they have, they have enough. That all those prayers can be tied together in the magic of the universe and somehow fill in the empty space between what is and what I hope will be. I believe that hope is more powerful than experience and that magic is sometimes the most reasonable thing for us to believe.