

Rev. Betsy Mead Tabor
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
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Take a page from the natural world: it's OK to slow down.

*Topping Off the Tank*¹

We are bombarded with messages this time of year. Which ones are you listening to?

The world of retail is telling us that it's time to gear up and get going. Get busy. It's time to spend! The messaging, constant and loud and urgent, tells us that, if we don't buy now, it may be too late. Search engines take note of our shopping habits and on-line ads hound us to buy now and buy more.

These messages tug at our guilt. A friend's daughter went into labor the other day in New York, so my friend had to get there but first purchase all her Hannukah presents. Because she was in a rush, she said she spent far more money than usual, too much, on the gifts. She said that shopping on-line and having to decide quickly brought up guilt, somehow.

Meanwhile, many religions the world over preach self-care and love. While they remind the faithful that we are enough and that we have what it takes to live fully and lovingly, the retail world continues to drum home the message that we need more. We don't have enough – enough clothes, enough toys, enough entertainment, enough baked goods! To be happy, after all, we need more stuff, right?

There was a time in my life when I really dreaded this season. That's when our daughter wrote those embarrassing words in a grade-school essay, "My mom hates Christmas!" I can see how she thought so. So much about Christmas overwhelmed me. My mom had set the bar high with one perfect Christmas after another. She shopped and wrapped, baked, decorated, gifted everyone around us with home-made remembrances. Her hard work made for happy memories.

A favorite Christmas morning tradition was when we kids had to wait at the top of the stairs for the big moment when we'd race down and see the tree, the presents, the stockings, the note from Santa. But first Dad had to take pictures of us perched up there while Mom was putting the sour cream coffeecake and ramekins of baked eggs in the oven – believe me, that was a once-a-year event. Then, finally, Dad would put the Perry Como album on the turntable. When we heard Perry sing "Joy to the World," we'd race downstairs. To this day, our kids – 27 and 30 – perch at the top of the stairs and wait for Perry Como.

When they were little, long before Laura wrote those words, I tried to make my mom's Christmas traditions happen every year. The same rolled cut sprinkled sugar cookies, the same Russian teacakes, the same outrageous pile of presents – some real gifts, but mostly socks and underwear to make it look huge. (Of course, just as much effort goes into buying a package of

¹ Opening Words (Mary Oliver) and Reading (Loren Eiseley) on pp. 4-6.

undershirts as a fancy watch: shopping, bringing it home, hiding the bag, secretly wrapping it, hiding it again....)

I remember a moment one of those first early Christmases when we lived in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania. My perfect-Christmas self needed to photo-document the kids coming down the stairs, so I was juggling the regular camera in one hand and the video camera in the other – a tricky balancing act. It was that morning that it slowly began to dawn on me that my expectations of doing everything just right came at a cost: I wasn't in the picture frame. You might say that I wasn't even present. Not present to the excitement, the kids, John, not present to our family's togetherness, the magic of the day. I remember this realization clearly, though it took a while to take shape.

We soon returned to New Hampshire, where I continued to try to make it all happen. One December, exactly ten years ago, I was in full Bah Humbug mode. I also belonged to a small discussion group at church – we met every couple of weeks for spiritual exploration. Our topic that week was the symbols of the season. I shared my annual ritual of gathering greens and red berries. This was Marie's favorite season – I couldn't believe that! She saw winter as a time for going within—the wreath, she said, was a “welcoming in.” Ashley's symbol was Mary. “I see this,” she said, “as a time of quiet waiting and anticipation. Anticipation of birth, of something sacred, something worthy of angels singing. Every birth,” she said, “is a sacred birth.”

Well, I had been pregnant during two Christmases —and surely I had been given *two sacred births!* Her words resonated. They became a mantra for me. While carols blared and shoppers slogged by, I'd push away the lists in my head and think “quiet anticipation of something sacred.” We do have a choice about where to put our energies this time of year!

The holidays still elevate my heart rate but I like to think these days in terms of leaning in to the parts of the season that feel nurturing. Nature helps. While the human world ramps up, the natural world is doing the exact opposite. Everything is slowing down. The days grow dark and cold, and by degree, the ground begins to harden and freeze. The first snows put an end to the mad dash to collect nuts for the winter.

Birds live differently in the winter. Casting off their bright mating colors, gray and brown finches chatter companionably at the feeder. Many animals have fattened up all fall so they can sleep come winter when food is hard to find. Some sleep sporadically, others soundly for the whole season. Bears wake up from time to time, briefly emerging from their holes before going back to sleep. Females give birth mid-winter and nurse their cubs 'til spring. Groundhogs sleep for months at a time – while hibernating, their heart rates slow way down, from 80 to 100 beats per minute to only 5 to 10 beats per minute. Tree frogs, snakes and turtles also sleep the whole winter.

The cold reduces the activity around us. Sound carries differently, the air sharp and clear without summer's buzzing and chewing and scurrying. Even the water is quiet. When water molecules come in contact with low air temperatures, they slow down, no longer able to move freely. The molecules begin to form a crystal. When fully crystallized, water becomes ice. When sheets of

ice form across the top of a river or a lake or puddle, the ice acts as an insulator between the frigid air and the liquid water below.

In moving bodies of water fed by another source – rivers and many ponds and lakes – water continues to flow beneath the ice. Here too, animal life slows down in the winter. Fish, cold-blooded, "rest" near the bottom. Their metabolism slows down as the temperature falls. In this resting state, their heart rates drop. They need less food and oxygen and barely move about. Some fish cluster in groups in the deepest pools near the bottom. Others go dormant like frogs.

You may have cross-country skied up in Jackson along the flat stretch of trail by the river? I love the stream there in the frosty quiet of winter – it looks rippled, a beautiful sherbert-y pale green and white, frozen and frothy, caught mid-flow, solid in shallow places with water still flowing in the eddies.

We know these cycles of nature. The slowing down of the natural world, the quieting of creatures, their old rhythms. There's a sameness to them every year. We count on it. We know our own cycles, too. Each year in December, we look back. We revisit the old stories of ancient solstice traditions, the oil in the temple, a child in a manger. And each year we enter our own cycle of preparing for the season. Preparing to gather, as humans have done through the ages. For some of us, our pace quickens. I'll bet our heart rates go up with the length of our to-do lists!

The season is upon us. Tonight, UUFES parties. Next week we'll bake and sell a hundred pounds of cookies. The town will light the tree across the street, and Santa will arrive on the fire truck. Carolers will sing around the fire pit in our parking lot and come up here for cookies and hot chocolate.

And again this year, each one of us will create some variation on our annual holiday cycle. Tired, anyone? Don't forget to top off your spiritual tank....

Remember our napping neighbors. Remember the sleepy bear stumbling out of her cave mid-winter, looking around and then heading back to nurse her cubs and dream. Remember life under the blanket of snow – seeds, tubers, old oaks and maples dark and dormant. Feel their restfulness, their slow energy, nearly stilled yet living. Listen to the quiet of the river and remember the movement below: walleye, pike, perch and trout moving slowly, heart rates low.

Which messages are you listening to this year? It's OK to slow down!

So may it be.

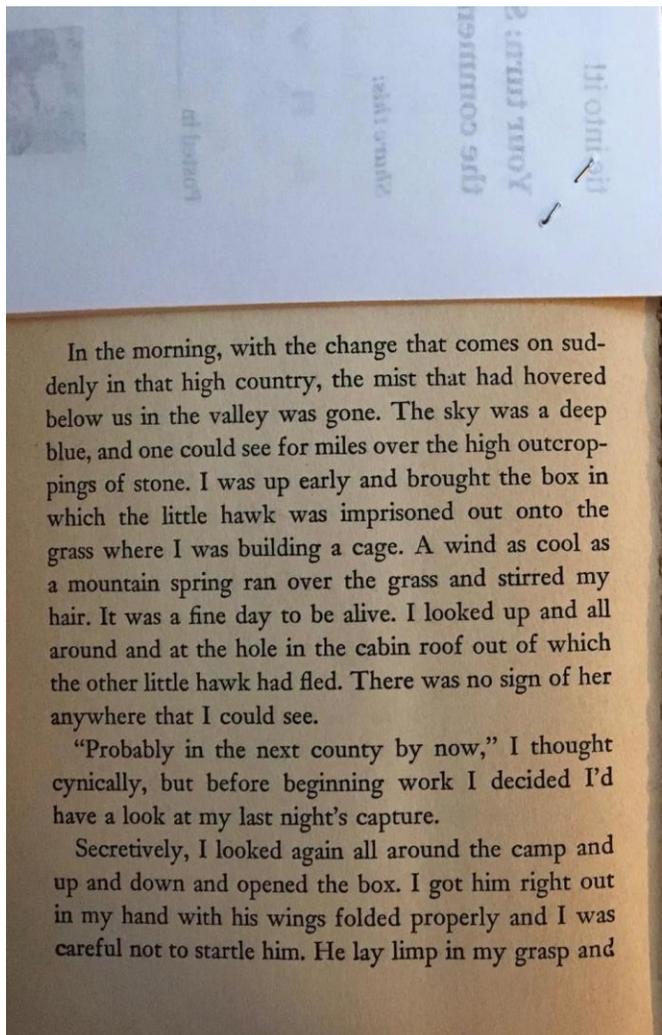
OPENING WORDS

Snowy Night” by Mary Oliver

Last night, an owl
in the blue dark
tossed
an indeterminate number
of carefully shaped sounds into
the world, in which,
a quarter of a mile away, I happened
to be standing.
I couldn't tell
which one it was –
the barred or the great-horned
ship of the air –
it was that distant. But, anyway,
aren't there moments
that are better than knowing something,
and sweeter? Snow was falling,
so much like stars
filling the dark trees
that one could easily imagine
its reason for being was nothing more
than prettiness. I suppose
if this were someone else's story
they would have insisted on knowing
whatever is knowable – would have hurried
over the fields
to name it – the owl, I mean.
But it's mine, this poem of the night,
and I just stood there, listening and holding out
my hands to the soft glitter
falling through the air. I love this world,
but not for its answers.
And I wish good luck to the owl,
whatever its name –
and I wish great welcome to the snow,
whatever its severe and comfortless
and beautiful meaning.

READING

From *The Bird and the Machine* by Loren Eiseley



I could feel his heart pound under the feathers but he only looked beyond me and up.

I saw him look that last look away beyond me into a sky so full of light that I could not follow his gaze. The little breeze flowed over me again, and nearby a mountain aspen shook all its tiny leaves. I suppose I must have had an idea then of what I was going to do, but I never let it come up into consciousness. I just reached over and laid the hawk on the grass.

He lay there a long minute without hope, unmoving, his eyes still fixed on that blue vault above him. It must have been that he was already so far away in heart that he never felt the release from my hand. He never even stood. He just lay with his breast against the grass.

In the next second after that long minute he was gone. Like a flicker of light, he had vanished with my eyes full on him, but without actually seeing even a premonitory wing beat. He was gone straight into that towering emptiness of light and crystal that my eyes could scarcely bear to penetrate. For another long moment there was silence. I could not see him. The light was too intense. Then from far up somewhere a cry came ringing down.

I was young then and had seen little of the world, but when I heard that cry my heart turned over. It was not the cry of the hawk I had captured; for, by shifting my position against the sun, I was now seeing further up. Straight out of the sun's eye, where she must have been

soaring restlessly above us for untold hours, hurtled his mate. And from far up, ringing from peak to peak of the summits over us, came a cry of such unutterable and ecstatic joy that it sounds down across the years and tingles among the cups on my quiet breakfast table.

I saw them both now. He was rising fast to meet her. They met in a great soaring gyre that turned to a whirling circle and a dance of wings. Once more, just once, their two voices, joined in a harsh wild medley of question and response, struck and echoed against the pinnacles of the valley. Then they were gone forever somewhere into those upper regions beyond the eyes of men.

I am older now, and sleep less, and have seen most of what there is to see and am not very much impressed any more, I suppose, by anything. "What Next in the Attributes of Machines?" my morning headline runs. "It Might Be the Power to Reproduce Themselves."

I lay the paper down and across my mind a phrase floats insinuatingly: "It does not seem that there is anything in the construction, constituents, or behavior of the human being which it is essentially impossible for science to duplicate and synthesize. On the other hand . . ."

All over the city the cogs in the hard, bright mechanisms have begun to turn. Figures move through computers, names are spelled out, a thoughtful machine

selects the fingerprints of a wanted criminal from an array of thousands. In the laboratory an electronic mouse runs swiftly through a maze toward the cheese it can neither taste nor enjoy. On the second run it does better than a living mouse.

"On the other hand . . ." Ah, my mind takes up, on the other hand the machine does not bleed, ache, hang for hours in the empty sky in a torment of hope to learn the fate of another machine, nor does it cry out with joy nor dance in the air with the fierce passion of a bird. Far off, over a distance greater than space, that remote cry from the heart of heaven makes a faint buzzing among my breakfast dishes and passes on and away.