

Spring and its discontents

April used to be the cruellest month – the world was having a party and I was at home washing my hair. People full of joy, turning outwards to greet the spring with open arms; convertibles converted; naked flesh was finally on show. But I couldn't take part. I turned in, refusing to be caught up in anything so frivolous as mere sunshine and flowers, the lustful gush of life exuberant. Yes April was cruel alright, my dull roots straining to remain unstirred, somehow unequal to the challenge.

Why was spring such a challenge?

Nature resumes her rhythm – after rest the irresistible rush of living matter into another round of display and arousal and erotic connection. I can't do that. I can see the appeal, but I can't join in. Just leave me alone. I'll be fine. I'm fine.

At the turn of the year I was having what they call 'suicidal thoughts'. Don't worry, I would never act them out, but every 10 years or so I seem to lapse from my bright life down into the darkness below - problems with people, money, work, hope usually. This time it was the end of an exhausting and deeply disappointing year: it requires active effort for me to stay afloat, and I was drowning; despite vigorous rebellion, there were few overt signs of change on climate; the general election placed trust in the most grasping hands; which meant that Brexit would make losers of us all. Who are these people I live with? Why is it so hard to live right? Researching and writing my tree book had sustained me somewhat over the last three years, but that huge creative effort was finished – so what now? I felt lost.

I stopped registering pleasure – life instead became a parade of unwelcome events and painful encounters. So, as before, one by one the strings holding me up were cut till I slumped lifeless to the floor. I cut them. I cut them because they felt more trouble than they were worth; I could do without those tensions in my life, that commitment to shape and stature, that pleasing puppet life. More real to collapse alone, limbs contorted, no strings attached. Safe.

More real – yes there is no pretence here. Life reduced to bare essentials, or beyond. Fuck that puppet-master! I'll lie here as long as I like! But what of those around me? It turns out the other ends of those strings are held by friends, family, colleagues. When I cut, their string goes slack too – do they recoil? Are they relieved? Or do they feel their own limbs suddenly slacken and drop? Perhaps I was holding them up too?

I am told it's like a black hole in our midst, a dark absence with terrible gravity sucking the life out of life. No light escapes it. Stay away, but difficult to resist. Yes, that sounds familiar. Inside the black hole, I cannot see beyond my own event horizon.

So what's different this spring? Simply put, I feel connected to the web of life. That and the pills.

First the web: This has been a prominent theme of my tree book – repairing the frayed web of life and restoring our rightful role in it. But I was always puzzled as to how we humans placed ourselves outside and above the natural world. I found a satisfying answer this March when I read David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1997), and so compelling was it that, as soon as I had finished it, I started reading it again. I found breath-taking passages exploring our relationship with the natural world, or as he terms it, the more-than-human world. He writes as a physical body embedded in an animate landscape, his descriptions and imagery revealing how we are part of the warp and weft of the web of life; we are contiguous with nature; we are nature. We lost our place in nature when we diverted our attention away from our wild landscapes and companions and towards the written word. This happened around the time of Plato; we exchanged the spell of the sensuous world for the spelling of words. Since then we have been literally sentenced to exile.

Till now.

I am beginning to feel the strings tug and draw me up again, restoring my shape, confirming my stature, and they are many and diverse. Most of all I feel a horizontal plane of participation, a spectrum of species beside me. I am neither above nor below, just part. Fungal threads fan out, connecting, exchanging, supporting, receiving; a solitary tree now part of a forest, my ecology in this time and place. I am casting out these lines and, by reading this, you are now part of my forest and I am part of yours. Ours. And in the sunshine the bees are drawing me into their world, silken buzzing threads drawing me deep into flowers.

Then there's the pills. A low dose of anti-depressants seems to be working so far. No more suicidal thoughts, but something has died...

*I have been taken over by a better man, or better men
Say hello to Jack
Say hello to Zac, golden boy Zac
rich, smooth and caring
Zac & Jack ("Zac'n'Jack!") now manage my emotions.*

*Cruising the dusty streets in their air-conned limo, Zac & Jack ("Zac'n'Jack!")
dispense pencils to beaming ragged urchins crying 'galum! galum!'
The window glides down and Zac feeds slightly chilled Zac & Jack pencils
("Zac'n'Jack!") out to the eager grubby hands of the lucky few, one at a time.*

*How I wish I was that man, those men
Whether you are pro- or anti-Zac, you can't deny it's a better life, surely?
These guys are better at living my life than I am, paradoxically.
How long can it last?
What if they move on to a new host?
Please let it last!
No more Zac & Jack pencils ("Zac'n'Jack!") for the urchins, only the dust and
the scorching sun and the waiting...*

A book and some pills? Is that it? And suddenly you're Nature Boy?

I see nothing new, but I am ready to look

I hear nothing new, but I pause to listen

I know nothing new, but I am open to learning

I don't have to understand it or name it or control it or judge it

Spring is not about me, not cruel, not a challenge

Spring is all about us and I can just let it happen

Just let it unfold and unfold with it

Robin Walter

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