



## BODY BRIGHT

IT WOULD BE HARD TO IMAGINE a setting less wild than the interior of a subway car rumbling through tunnels beneath city streets. The city happened to be London, but you could not have guessed that from glancing at the passengers. There we sat on plastic benches, forty-two of us by my count, every shade of the human rainbow in every sort of get-up from sari to suit, reading newspapers and books, listening to earphones, clutching bags and briefcases and backpacks, our shod feet shuffling on the rubber floor while lights flickered overhead, wheels groaned below, and a loudspeaker voice called out the names of stations. The nasal drone of that voice might have been playing beneath the streets of any city where English is the common tongue. Although my watch told me it was 9:00 A.M. on July 1, nothing in the Underground revealed whether it was day or night, summer or winter. The smeared windows gave back our own reflections. I was headed to the British Museum, but for all I could see, our subway car might have been a spaceship rocketing to the stars.

Aside from the gleaming metal and glass, every surface was a pastel hue reminiscent of Valentine candies or polyester shirts. Where our ancestors might have painted deer or bison or bear on the walls of their caves, the walls of the car and the stations it rumbled through were plastered with ads for condoms, liquor, movies, banks, weight-loss parlors, record albums, night

schools, tourist destinations, soft drinks, air-conditioners, perfume, bluejeans—beckoning images that reminded us of our own cleverness.

We scarcely needed reminding. Weren't we the magicians of this Underground? Except for us, everything within sight or smell or touch had been made by human beings and our machines, and even we ourselves sat muffled in clothes, lathered in cosmetics, hidden behind parcels. Among those forty-two passengers, no doubt many used medicines to regulate their quirky organs; some wore dentures; some flexed artificial joints in hips or knees; perhaps a few hearts ticked to the beat of pacemakers. Certainly there were ears among us that listened with the aid of batteries and eyes that saw through spectacles or contact lenses.

Taking inventory, I noticed that all but one pair of eyes carefully avoided looking into the eyes of any other person.

The bold eyes belonged to a toddler, perhaps a year and a half old, who squirmed in his mother's lap and stared at anyone and everyone, as though he had just been set down among marvels. The utterly clear gaze of those brown eyes swept over me like warm rain. Not content with looking, the child crimped one hand into his mother's blouse and reached out with the other to feel the arms and tug the hair of people sitting nearby. The mother kept pulling him back, apologizing to their neighbors, but he kept groping and staring. In the commotion, a stroller and shopping bag propped against the mother's knee slid to the floor, and when she bent down to retrieve them the child wriggled from her lap and set off toddling among the travelers, peering up into each face as he went, patting legs, babbling a nonstop commentary.

While the mother pursued, the child swayed on down the aisle, and the warmth of his presence thawed the subway glaze. People began murmuring and grinning and stirring wherever he passed, as though restored to life. Even pinstriped businessmen and terminally cool teenagers let loose a smile when he brushed their knees. I suspect that I was not the only one who felt like

cheering him on, the uninhibited little animal so curious about his surroundings. But the mother soon caught up, gathered child and stroller and shopping bags, edged toward the door, then hurried off at the next stop, the toddler meanwhile craning around for one last look.

After their departure the glaze quickly hardened again over the passengers. We drew everything tender back inside our shells. The rest of the way to my own stop near the museum, I kept thinking about that baby. We all once dwelt in our bodies with such frank delight. We ran our hands over everything within reach. We sniffed and tasted. We studied buttons and pebbles and bugs as if they were jewels. We turned our cheeks to the wind. We gaped at birds kiting in the sky and froth dancing on water and sunlight flashing through leaves.

Such richness flowing  
through the branches of summer and into  
the body, carried inward on the five  
rivers!

exclaims Mary Oliver.

Any child is a reminder that the rivers of our senses once ran clear. As we grow older, the rivers may be dammed, diked, silted up, or diverted, but so long as we live they still run, bearing news inward through ears and eyes and nose and mouth and skin. Beneath our grown-up disguises, beneath a crust of duties and abstractions, even beneath the streets of London in a rattling subway car, we are still curious and marveling animals. No matter how much we camouflage or medicate them, our bodies remain wild, bright sparks from the great encompassing wildness, perfectly made for savoring and exploring this sensuous planet; and that is another source of hope. Just as we can help endangered animals and plants to recover and help wounded lands to heal, so we can clean up these rivers that flow into us. And if we restore our senses, they in turn will replenish us.

Cities the size of London are not easy places to begin that cleansing, however. I rode escalators and climbed stairs up from the Underground into the bustle and blare of Tottenham Court Road. The breath I drew in tasted like one part air to three parts engine exhaust. The gray sky might have been a scrim. Otherwise, here on the surface, too, nearly everything visible except the crowds had been manufactured: pavement and poles, buildings, buses, and taxis, kiosks heaped with T-shirts and London souvenirs, windows in shops and everything for sale behind the glass. I felt as gray as the sky, my senses numbed by noise and fumes and the crush of people.

Then, as I dodged along the sidewalk, a poster on a news agent's booth caught my eye. It showed a young woman in black bikini, the top undone, a hand cupping a triangle of fabric to each breast; she leaned forward with a grin on her lipsticked mouth and tawny curls tumbled down over her shoulders. Statuesque is the only polite word that comes to mind for describing her shape. It snared me. I paused long enough to see that she was promoting the latest issue of a men's fashion magazine. The caption read: "Bikini or Bust . . . the Body Laid Bare." For a few seconds I gawked, as vulnerable to her paper gaze as I had been to the toddler's real one. Although I did not buy the magazine, I felt stupid for giving in, even momentarily, to this cheap ad. It was as though the woman's shape exactly fit a lock deep within me, opening the door to an old hunger.

Once that door swung open, the women in light summer clothing moving past me on the sidewalks of London kept it open. Their bare arms and legs, their glistening hair, their shining faces seemed all the more vivid against the backdrop of concrete and steel. In the sober light of the British Museum, I fixed my eyes on the antiquities, browsing through the Middle Eastern halls in a vague effort to commune with my Assyrian grandfather and a deliberate effort to forget the bodies laid bare. But there in the first exhibit case I approached were two figurines entitled, accurately enough, "Women Holding Out Their Breasts." One of

them sported an elaborate hairdo, the other was painted with designs as if tattooed, and both were naked. Had they worn bikinis they could have been posing for the magazine.

The rest of the morning, in room after room, I kept finding other little statues of women in the same pose, their breasts cupped in their palms. Made from terra-cotta or stone, ranging in date from 5000 to 500 B.C.E., they came from all across the Near East, Anatolia to Babylonia. The labels speculated that the figures might have been fertility charms or amulets to assure safety in childbirth. I could imagine one hanging over the bed, the pallet, or the straw mat as couples made love; I could imagine a woman clutching one as the birth pangs arrived, nine-month fruit of that old, old hunger.

Humans will do almost anything to their bodies, it seems, to heighten their chances of winning a mate: bleach or tan skin, straighten or curl hair, bind feet, flatten heads, stretch lips and ears, cinch waists, inflate biceps and bosoms, tattoo or scarify, pierce and perfume and paint. A good many of these stratagems were on display in the British Museum, among the onlookers as well as in the exhibits. Judging by the size of the human population, the stratagems have been working all too well.

While snared by the woman on the poster, I'd read that her name was Elle, the French word for *she*. The name suited her, for there was something of the archetypal female about her, something primordial, as there was about the figurines in the museum. Images of men rippling with muscles also appeared on pedestals and magazine covers, and they might have been labeled simply *He*, as embodiments of the archetypal male. "The nakedness of woman is the work of God," William Blake declared, and I believe him. The nakedness of man, too. She and He. We ordinary men and women move between these figures as through the charged air between the poles of magnets, pushed and pulled by desires that have been stirring in our kind since the invention of sex.

For the child on the subway, that particular marvel still lay in the future; for a few passengers and museum-goers, perhaps, it lay in the past; but for most of us, most of our lives, the allure of sex is present and potent. Body, body, burning bright. What power framed this fearful symmetry? Like Blake's tiger, humans, too, shimmer with the fierce and magnificent power that lassos the comet and stiffens the fern and guides the owl on its deadly flight. We are wild. Through our bodies, through the ever-flowing channels of our senses, and most vividly through sex, we participate in the energy of Creation. That energy wells up in us like a perennial spring, urging us to ramble and play, to poke about and learn, to seek a mate, join body to body, and carry on with the story.

When I was in high school, the former Marine drill sergeant turned basketball coach who taught health looked aggrieved when he told us that most of what went on inside our skins was beyond our control. "You like to think you're the boss," he would say, "but you're not." Our hearts thumped to their own tunes, he pointed out, just as our glands secreted hormones and our livers filtered toxins and our eyes dilated, just as our cells zipped and unzipped strands of DNA, all without our say-so. "Right now," he told our afternoon class, "you're digesting those baloney sandwiches from lunch whether you want to or not."

For the quiz we learned that something called the autonomic nervous system governs everything from blood flow in our toes to goose bumps on our scalp. "For ten points, define *involuntary*." "For twenty points, compare the human body to a robot." While I wrote my answers, the hair bristled on the back of my neck.

Forbidden in those puritanical times from speaking about the one bodily subject that obsessed us all, our health teacher let us know in his gruff way that certain of our organs and appendages might be unruly at times, even embarrassing, and that strong feelings might wash over us. "Like tides of the sea," he told us, "except less predictable."

As teenagers, we knew without being told that our bodies were swept along by obscure currents. Acne, hot flashes, chills, blood flow and blushes, growing pains in our joints, nightmares looming up from the still waters of sleep—all convinced us that we had lost control. Unable to govern our bodies, we yelled at our parents, we pounded fists into lockers, we teased or dyed our hair, we tortured the engines of cars.

We could remember when life in the body had seemed far simpler, when the world had been a smorgasbord of sensations, all of them delicious. Now suddenly every sensation was edged with danger. The print of a girl's fingers on your elbow, briefly settled there between classes, would burn for hours. A girl might cry all night, so the guys were told, because of the way a boy quirked his lips when he said her name. And when lips opened, no telling what might fly out. Obscenities bred inside there, along with sweet nothings and jokes. Songs would get into our heads and circle like birds of prey. Disastrous odors leaked from every crevice and pore. Dreams lit up our sleep with mad fireworks. In cinemas and drive-ins we watched giant gorillas break out of cages and hairy monsters lumber forth from caves and werewolves howl at the moon, and we knew in our own flesh the truth about these rebellious beasts.

Much of the lore we learned while growing up taught us to be wary of the animal lurking within. We'd all heard of family dogs, as gentle as lambs indoors, that would disappear for a few days into the fields and return with bloody snouts and meat on their breath. Big Foot and Sasquatch, rumored to be shambling through the nearby woods, suggested what we might become if we gave in to our instincts. Stories of satyrs and centaurs bolstered our fear that, however human we might appear above the waist, we were lustful beasts below. In folktales, bears and frogs claimed the heroine's heart only after she broke the spell to reveal that they had been charming princes all along. Beauty might come to love the shaggy Beast in spite of her revulsion, yet he, too, was only redeemed by turning back into human shape.

The very suddenness of these transformations was unsettling. If beasts could so swiftly turn into princes, couldn't princes turn into beasts? Before going on dates, girls were cautioned that no matter how polite a boy might seem in the daylight, he could become savage in the dark. Savage, brutal, bestial, filthy, foul: we learned a litany of scornful names for our animal selves. Boys were cautioned against their own impulses, but also against the wiles of loose girls. "Don't give her that first kiss," our mothers told us, "because you know where kissing leads." Where kissing leads was never spelled out, but we sensed that the werewolf's fur might bristle beneath our own smooth skin, that our teeth might suddenly lengthen into vampire's fangs.

Two bas-reliefs in the Assyrian galleries at the British Museum brought back memories of those teenage anxieties about the body's fierce desires. In one of the stone carvings a protective spirit in the guise of a bearded, winged, and heavily muscled man stands in profile with a goat clamped under his arm; the goat is small and thin by comparison to the man, helpless in his grip, meekly waiting to become supper. In the second carving, an Assyrian king in armor holds a rearing lion at bay with one hand and with the other plunges a sword through the lion's breast. The king is calm, upright, wearing the hint of a smile, while the lion's huge paws flail uselessly and its great mouth sags open in a deathly grimace. In both panels human will triumphs, either by taming the beast or by killing it.

Those twin icons, the good beast and the bad one, the tame and the wild, lay behind the cautionary lore about the body that I learned during my teenage years. One had to choose, it seemed, to become either a docile goat or a dead lion. Only when I went off to college and began reading about cultures other than the ones I'd inherited from Europe and the Middle East did I discover quite different visions of our relations to animals.

In ancient tales from Africa, Australia, China, and India, humans appeal to animals not only for gifts of food but also for guid-

ance on the path of life, and men and women talk freely with monkeys and spiders, birds and snakes, leaping over the chasms between species. In totemic cultures every clan has kinfolk among the animals. The Lakota and Chippewa and Iroquois, the Tlingit and Inuit and many other North American peoples tell stories of humans changing form to become seals or salmon, ravens or coyotes, buffalo or wolves. Wayward, tricky, charged with power, these shape-shifters bring wisdom and spiritual medicine to the human tribe from our nonhuman neighbors. We can only guess what our Paleolithic ancestors meant by painting deer or bison or bear on the roofs of caves, but we cannot mistake the feeling of awe that suffuses those portraits. Although we are clever, these old pictures and tales remind us, we also have much to learn from our fellow creatures, for we are only one tribe in the great circle of life.

This seems to me a more convincing as well as a more hopeful view of our animal nature than the one conveyed to me in high school. The truth is, as teenagers or toddlers or elders, we would be in trouble if we thoroughly tamed or killed off the beast within us, because nothing else keeps us alive. Waking and sleeping, the body goes about its business faithfully, assimilating food and water and sunlight, pumping and circulating, clearing away old cells and making new ones, fighting disease, mending and dreaming. What we call instincts are those enduring habits of the organism that hold us together and keep us going from conception to death. Saint Francis referred to his body as Brother Ass, because it carried him so patiently on life's journey. We each ride our own dutiful beast, however much we may ignore it until injury or illness grabs our attention.

When I began work on this chapter my right thumb was split from a run-in with a chisel. Every bump of that thumb on the space-bar sent pain shooting up my arm. Day by day, as I've added words, the pain has dwindled away, the split has closed, and now

fresh skin gleams where the wound used to be. That was a minor cut; I have recovered from worse. In fact, after fifty years, much of my body has been torn apart and reknit. Because of daily wear and tear, in each of us, all the time, countless bruises and scrapes are healing, infections are simmering down, imbalances are being set right. Whether damaged or healthy, all of our cells get replaced every seven years or so. It is as though the body longs to be whole.

A lifetime of study persuaded Carl Jung that the same is true of the psyche, by which he meant the entire mind, conscious and unconscious: "The psychic depths are nature, and nature is creative life. It is true that nature tears down what she has herself built up—yet she builds it once again." Certainly our conscious minds may tip out of kilter—from worry, doubt, hatred, fear—but when that happens, according to Jung, the unconscious mind casts up countervailing images and impulses, thus moving the psyche back toward balance: "The psyche is a self-regulating system that maintains itself in equilibrium as the body does." The fact that most of us are sane most of the time, holding ourselves together while life tugs us in a dozen directions, suggests that Jung is right. The mind, too, longs to be whole.

This parallel between mind and body is precisely what one should expect if these are inward and outward manifestations of a single reality, as I believe they are. Whether we are made up of two substances or only one is a grizzled metaphysical debate, which I do not expect to settle here. In either case, we know that mind and body are intimately linked, that pain and well-being can leap over any gap there may be. Doctors have long known that the state of a patient's feelings, the degree of happiness or grief, hope or despair, can greatly influence the prospects for healing. As both physician and Auschwitz survivor, Viktor Frankl testifies that "the sudden loss of hope and courage can have a deadly effect" by lowering the body's resistance to disease. Following his recovery from cancer, Norman Cousins reports in

*Head First* on medical research that shows how “the negative emotions—hate, fear, panic, rage, despair, depression, exasperation, frustration” can “produce powerful changes in the body’s chemistry, even set the stage for intensified illness,” while “the positive emotions—purpose, determination, love, hope, faith, will to live, festivity” can “help activate healing forces in the endocrine and immune systems.” Whatever else may be involved in the seemingly miraculous cures performed by faith healers, the faith itself is crucial.

Here, then, are two more reasons to be hopeful: because hope is a healing balm, and because mind and body, against all odds, keep renewing themselves. If you have ever looked at photographs tracing the growth of a fertilized egg into a newborn child, you realize that millions upon millions of things must go exactly right in order for a healthy baby to enter the world; and most of the time, amazingly, they do go right. Once born, we depend on the same organizing genius to keep us going from moment to moment. As in restoring the land, so in restoring ourselves, we can rely on help from wildness.

The body is not endlessly resilient, of course; injuries or disease or the cumulative fraying of old age will eventually break it down. Senility or madness may shatter the mind into pieces so jagged they will never fit back together. In a universe ruled by entropy, where everything slides from order to disorder, this eventual disarray should come as no surprise; the remarkable fact is that an organism can repair and maintain itself for twenty or fifty or ninety years. Life runs counter to entropy, drawing scattered elements and fleeting energies into coherent shapes. The Old English root of *body* means trunk, chest, or cask: thus, a container. You are one of those astounding containers, and so am I, and so is every living thing. We may be temporary, but here we are, each of us a gathered wholeness.

Since we are containers, we must be careful how we fill ourselves. Whatever we take in through our five senses, which Blake

called “the chief inlets of Soul,” becomes who we are. Try this experiment: Sit beside a freeway for half an hour, listening to the traffic; then sit beside a rocky stream for half an hour, listening to the current. Which sound calms you, feeds you, restores your soul? I expect you will choose the river, not because the mechanical world is evil, but because over millions of years our bodies have been tuned to the sounds of the earth.

Like the London Underground, with its drab concrete and flickering lights and tattered ads, much of the world we have made starves our senses. As we insulate ourselves from wildness, retreating farther and farther inside our boxes, life loses piquancy, variety, delight. So we gamble or drink or jolt ourselves with drugs; we jump from airplanes with parachutes strapped to our backs, or jump from bridges with elastic ropes tied to our ankles; we ride mechanical bucking bulls in bars or drive fast cars or shoot guns, hunting for a lost thrill. We cruise the malls on the lookout for something, anything, to fill the void. Bored with surroundings that we have so thoroughly tamed, we flee into video games, films, pulp novels, shopping channels, the Internet. But all of those efforts eventually pall. As the novelty wears off, once more our senses go numb, so we crank up the speed, the volume, the voltage.

These manufactured sensations pall because they have no depth, no meaning, no *being* apart from ourselves. Again, let me be clear that I am not condemning human works: I spend most of my days in the midst of them. I am only pointing out what a small fraction of the universe they represent. Buildings may be comfortable, machines may be convenient, electronics may be ingenious, but they are never mysterious; they speak of no power, no intelligence, no imagination aside from our own. Like those windows in the subway car, they give back only our own smeared reflections.

No one who has been thoroughly awake to the real universe would swap it for a “virtual” one. Our deepest religious urge, as D. H. Lawrence wrote, is to bring our lives into “direct contact

with the elemental life of the cosmos, mountain-life, cloud-life, thunder-life, air-life, earth-life, sun-life. To come into immediate *felt* contact, and so derive energy, power, and a dark sort of joy." Mary Oliver speaks of this craving in a few exultant lines:

there is still  
somewhere deep within you  
a beast shouting that the earth  
is exactly what it wanted.

No matter how clever our works, they will never satisfy this hunger. Only direct experience of Creation will do. The likeliest way to achieve contact with the life of the cosmos, the likeliest way to recover our senses, is by shutting off our machines and closing our books, climbing out of our tunnels, our cars, our electrified boxes, walking beyond the pavement to actual dirt or rock and opening ourselves to the world we have not made.

Soon after returning from London at the end of July, I visited friends in the Green Mountains of Vermont. One afternoon when they were busy with their jobs, I set off by myself on a hike. The trail led through a meadow where dragonflies dashed and butterflies lolled over the seedheads of grasses, over milkweed and ragweed and hawkweed, over creamy yarrow and purple aster. The borders were boggy but the heart of the meadow was high and dry. I lay for a while on that swell of land, hat shading my eyes against the sun, the smells and sounds and sights pouring through my soul's inlets. The place made me buzz. I plucked a spear of grass and chewed the juicy stem, a sensation I'd loved since long before discovering that Walt Whitman had put it in a poem. I might have stayed there all the afternoon had I not been told by my friends that the South Fork of the Middlebury River lay just up the trail. As a respectable New England river, it would be rocky; and the tug of water sliding over rock will draw me away from almost any other bliss, even from the heart of a meadow.

So after a spell I dusted myself off, picked another stalk of

grass for the road, and continued on. Beyond the soggy fringe of the meadow I entered a woods, mostly hemlocks and maples and birches. The trees had been left in peace long enough to grow thick at the waist and gnarly at the roots. The soil underfoot was spongy from the depth of decay. I shuffled knee-deep through cinnamon ferns and skirted mossy hummocks, filling my lungs with moist and loamy air. Before long I heard water, a purring hustle that made my heart glad, and a few more steps carried me to the river. It was rocky for sure, a narrow trough of boulders that shredded the current into dozens of riffles and chutes.

I left my boots and socks on the bank, rolled up my jeans, and waded out to a flat stone in the middle of a rapids. There I sat, enveloped in mist and rushing water-sound. Sunlight broke through the canopy of trees, filling the ripples with scoops of silver and pressing a warm hand against my back. Everywhere I looked, the push of water against rock formed shifty yet durable shapes: a fountain, a braid, a swarm of bubbles like bees, a tinsel of shining strands, a horse's tail, a lacy collar, a curly white wig. I felt like a water-shape myself, flung up on that boulder. Spray licked my face and soaked through my clothes. I started humming, moving up and down the scale until I struck a pitch that sounded in my skull the same as the river. Soon I felt the water flowing through me. Time slowed, circled, came to a halt. There I sat and sat, body laid bare.

Only when the scoops of silver vanished from the ripples and the air grew chill did I realize that the sun had disappeared below the rim of trees. Time resumed its ticking. My friends would be waiting supper for me. So I pried myself loose from the river and hiked back through the shadowy woods, over the darkening meadow, feeling buoyant but full, as though I had already feasted.

Wild surroundings often set me humming. When crickets or frogs or doves are singing, when rain drums on the roof or wind strokes the trees, I hum. I suppose I'm seeking resonance, one vi-

bration of self and world. This old habit seemed less peculiar after I read in Gary Snyder that “the practice of mantra chanting in India, the chanting of seed syllables, is a way to take yourself back to fundamental sound-energy levels. The sense of the universe as fundamentally sound and song begins poetics. They also say in Sanskrit poetics that the original poetry is the sound of running water and the wind in the trees.” I’ll buy that. What else could have moved us to poetry, back in the dim beginnings of speech, except the earth’s own voices?

Such richness carried inward on the five rivers! And it is all a gift of spendthrift nature. Our only task is to wake up, open up, pay attention. God’s first act, as recounted in Genesis, is to speak; our first duty is to listen. The eyes may trick us into a sense of mastery, but the ears know better. Sight insists on separation; hearing, like touch or taste or smell, insists on connection. Close your eyes and sound enters you, like juice flowing through the green fuse of the flower, like the surge of dream or desire.

Throughout this book I keep asking, What can we enjoy in abundance, without harming ourselves or our places? Some pleasures are risky to the body—recreational drugs, promiscuous sex, alcohol, tobacco—and some are costly to the earth—flying from the Great Lakes to the Caribbean to get a sun tan, or playing golf on grass kept alive in the Arizona desert, or eating hamburgers harvested from cattle that graze on clear-cuts in the Amazon rain forest. But other pleasures are inexhaustible. “If the doors of perception were cleansed,” Blake assures us, “every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.” Sitting on a rock in the midst of a river, studying the sky or the play of light on a tree, tracking the seasons, listening to the wind, turning over pebbles, learning the local plants, watching other animals, walking and talking with someone you love: the riches are there all around us. They require no electricity, no gasoline, no props aside from Creation.

“You must love the crust of the earth on which you dwell more

than the sweet crust of any bread or cake,” Thoreau advises. “You must be able to extract nutriment out of a sand-heap. You must have so good an appetite as this, else you will live in vain.” Wishing to live in earnest, Thoreau took his own advice. In a passage from his journal that would later appear, revised, in *Walden*, he described his reaction to the patterns formed by thawing mud on a railroad embankment: “The earth I tread on is not a dead inert mass. It is a body—has a spirit—is organic—and fluid to the influence of its spirit—and to whatever particle of that spirit is in me.”

The particle of spirit in me says yes to that. We are one flesh with the planet and with all our fellow creatures. When the land is ravaged we suffer; when the land flourishes we rejoice. “The problem,” says Adrienne Rich, is

to connect, without hysteria, the pain  
of any one’s body with the pain of the body’s world.

I believe that’s true: we must feel the connection if we are ever to heal either body or world. But I believe the hopeful version to be equally true: our health, our wholeness, our sensual delight are grounded in the beauty and glory of the earth. Since Creation puts on a nonstop show, we may relish the world without exhausting it. And that is the challenge for anyone who seeks genuine hope—to discover, or rediscover, ways of entertaining and sustaining and inspiring ourselves without using up the world.

Our bodies are bright like Blake’s tiger, burning with the energy of Creation. They are also bright with curiosity, like the toddling child in the subway car, eager to explore the territory. And they are bright with intelligence. All on their own, they mend and grow, balance and persevere; they yearn to reproduce themselves, and many succeed, passing on through their genes a skein of discoveries. Like all wildness, the body’s way is orderly, elegant, complex, and old. It is also fresh, constantly renewing itself, drawing strength from bottomless springs.





SIX

## MOUNTAIN MUSIC II

IF I DREAMED OF HOPE, lying there beside my son during that starry night in the Rockies, I carried no memory of the dream into daylight. I figured there was not nearly enough daylight yet to satisfy Jesse, so I let him sleep while I slithered out of the tent, shoved my stiff legs into cold jeans, and fired up the stove for coffee. So long as he slept we were still at peace.

There was a yeasty tang in the wind, spiced with birdsong from nearby trees and water song from nearby streams. Land slowly parted from air as the sky brightened, revealing the slopes of our valley, the feathery clumps of aspens, and the range of mountains beyond.

Watching the show, I kept remembering scenes from the previous day—the quarrel with Jesse in Big Thompson Canyon, our bucking ride among boulders on the Poudre River, our surprising communion just before sleep. The day had dragged me through so many rough emotions that I could scarcely believe how fresh I felt this morning. It was as though a fist had quit squeezing my heart. Even my gimpy knee had loosened up by the time the coffee water boiled. Whether from dream or mountain air, I sensed a new clarity, in myself and in the world. My struggles with Jesse had convinced me of the need for hope, a lesson I had known but forgotten in my preoccupation with loss. My first thought on waking was that I owed him an accounting of all that gives me

courage and joy. Now, on this clear June day in the mountains, I was eager to begin the work.

I wrapped my hands around the steaming mug and gazed at the radiant land. Grasses and pines, ground squirrels and hawks, the very rocks seemed to be bursting with energy. The sight made my pulse rise until I could feel the pressure in my throat. At the top of a clean page in my pocket notebook I wrote “Sources of Hope,” and on the line below I wrote “Wildness.” The word was a clumsy label for the power I felt in that place and in my hammering heart. Had you asked me to explain it, I could only have pointed.

By and by Jesse stirred, shaking the flimsy tent, and I could not help thinking of the way a cocoon twitches just before the butterfly emerges. What mood would he bring with him, I wondered—the anger of yesterday morning, or the tenderness of last night?

When he did emerge, blond hair tangled into a shaggy mane, he studied the sky with an unreadable expression. After a moment he turned on me a beaming face. “No sign of rain,” he said. “Not yet,” I agreed.

He stretched his lanky limbs. “Man, I can’t wait to snowshoe.” “Can you wait long enough to eat breakfast?”

Indeed he could. We ate pancakes, drank hot chocolate, washed up, then broke camp and loaded our packs, working in tandem without needing to say who should do what. The little we did say was about the previous day’s rafting trip and today’s hike into Wild Basin. There was an ease between us that I remembered from when Jesse was little, but that I had rarely felt over the past couple of years. Not knowing how long it would last, I relished every minute.

We drove to the park headquarters to get a camping permit. On the walkway from the parking lot to the backcountry office we met a herd of elk, which languidly moved aside to let us pass and then resumed grazing. On our return with the permit, the herd once again lazily parted before us, hardly missing a bite.

"Do you suppose they're hired to pose for the tourists?" Jesse mused.

"We're tourists," I reminded him.

"Only so long as we stay near pavement and cars."

We stayed on pavement for another few miles, then rolled onto a gravel road that led to the Wild Basin trail head. There we left our rented car, filled our water bottles from an outdoor spigot, and shouldered our packs. It had been a couple of years since I last carried that much weight up a mountain, so I worried how I would fare, even while I enjoyed the heft and balance of the load. A time would come when I could no longer accompany my son on these outings. Legs or back or heart would give out. But not yet, I told myself, heading up the trail, not just yet.

Most of the way to our campsite we hiked within earshot of North St. Vrain Creek, a froth of rushing snowmelt over boulders. The pulse beating in my head merged with the pulse of water in the creek. We made good time, soon leaving the dry lower elevations and rising into areas of patchy snow. Jesse pushed on ahead, driven today by excitement rather than anger. Today I could watch him pulling away without feeling guilt. Now and again I had to stop and catch my breath, unused to such thin air, and he would circle back to wait beside me, uncomplaining. Even when climbing he had plenty of breath for talking, but usually he kept silent, contemplating the trail ahead with a Buddha grin.

Once we stopped long enough to shrug off our packs and take a few swigs of water. Jesse sat facing uphill, forearms across his thighs, humming. I could read on the sweat-darkened back of his T-shirt three lines from the Navajo poet Lucy Tapahonso:

bless me hills  
this clear golden morning  
for I am passing through again

As I read, a fly settled on Jesse's back and walked across the words, passing through again. Below "Wildness" in my notebook

I wrote "Beauty," which I meant to include the fly, the poem, my son, the mountains, and my own fierce feelings.

All that morning we saw only two other hikers, a pair of wiry young men fitted out in high-tech survival gear on their way down from Thunder Lake. Like us, they had snowshoes tied to their packs. We wouldn't need the snowshoes for another few miles, they told us, but after that it was pure white all the way to the Continental Divide and down the other side.

By noon we found our campsite, in a stand of lodgepole pine just uphill from the boisterous creek. The sparse undergrowth was chiefly myrtle blueberries. Patches of snow two feet deep filled the open spaces, giving way to mud and dry ground near the trunks of trees, where limbs had formed a canopy, and around the bases of sun-warmed boulders. We pitched our tent in the only bare spot large enough to hold it, facing east to catch the dawn. With rough-sawn planks provided by the Park Service to discourage hikers from cutting down trees, we fashioned a pair of benches and laid out our gear. Meanwhile two gray jays flitted from branch to branch overhead, peering down at us and jabbering in their feisty way.

"Sounds like they're giving advice," Jesse said.

"Mainly about where to leave the grub," I said.

Again without needing to divvy up jobs, we soon had our mats and sleeping bags unfurled in the tent, the stove balanced on a flat rock, plastic bottles of eggs and butter plunged into a snow-drift, the food bag strung from a limb beyond the reach of bears, water filtered from the creek and hung in a bag from another tree, wet socks drooping from a clothesline.

"Dad, have you read Hemingway's Nick Adams stories? Especially 'The Big, Two-Hearted River'?"

"Sure."

"You remember the way Nick sets up camp, then looks around, sees everything he needs right where it's supposed to be, and how good he feels?"

"I remember."

"Well that's exactly how I feel." Jesse lay down on a plank, hands clasped behind his head, and stared up through the spires of pines at the sky. "Being out here clears away a lot of confusion," he said.

"For me too."

"Knowing I can carry on my back enough to live for a week in the woods makes me realize how little I really need."

I took out my notebook and wrote "Simplicity" on the page devoted to sources of hope.

The sight of Jesse sprawled on that plank, his face aglow with contentment, made me wish that Ruth were here to see him, to see us, father and son momentarily at peace. And thoughts of Ruth made me think of Eva, way back in Indiana studying birds, and that set me thinking of my mother, who loved to watch the cardinals and bluejays and chickadees jostling at her backyard feeder. And so I traveled through the country of the people I love, remembering them with a sharp joy.

In the notebook I wrote "Family." It would take me months to figure out everything I meant by that word, let alone "Wildness" or "Beauty" or "Simplicity." For now these were talismans for my medicine pouch. They were touchstones that I could turn over and over in my mind as I pondered how to answer Jesse's challenge: Given all that troubles me, about wars and waste and poverty and the devastation of the planet, what keeps me from despair? Where do I find promise of recovery? From what deep springs can we draw strength?



SEVEN

## FAMILY

DURING TWO HOT AND HECTIC WEEKS in August, I rushed about trying to meet the needs of everyone close to me. I helped my mother celebrate her eightieth birthday, then helped her choose new linoleum for her kitchen and new strategies for her budget; we spoke about the loneliness of longtime widows; we pored over old photographs, trying to summon up the names of almost-forgotten faces. I wrote to my brother about his winsome baby and to my sister about her irksome job; brother and sister were both feeling trapped by circumstances, and I racked my brain trying to help them figure out how they might wriggle free. Ruth and I spent a day visiting her parents in the Methodist Home, commiserating with them about their ailments, getting them caught up on paperwork and news. Then Jesse wanted to stretch his legs and clear his head before starting college, so he and I went backpacking again, this time in the Smoky Mountains; after we returned, I helped him buy a computer, build a loft for his room, and move into the dormitory. Eva, meanwhile, was getting ready to start graduate school and moving into her own house in our neighborhood, and I helped her by carrying boxes, scrubbing floors, hanging pictures, and running electrical circuits. Morning, noon, and night, Ruth and I talked about nothing except what needed to be done next.

Then one night toward the end of those two weeks I collapsed from heat exhaustion. For several hours, while my temperature perked up near 103 degrees, Ruth tried every method in the first-aid book, and several others besides, in an effort to cool me off. At one point I was lying draped in wet towels in the bathtub, shivering uncontrollably, while she splashed me with cold water from head to foot. Between shivers I was practicing a meditation exercise I'd learned from a Vietnamese Buddhist monk named Thich Nhat Hanh:

Breathing in, I calm my body.  
Breathing out, I smile.  
Dwelling in the present moment,  
I know this is a wonderful moment.

As I murmured these lines I realized that this *was* a wonderful moment, in spite of the shudders, the fever, the worry we might need to make a midnight run to the emergency room, and I laughed. Ruth thought she had a delirious patient on her hands until I explained to her why it felt so good to be lying there in that icy tub on an August night, worn down by the needs of my kinfolk and by the Midwestern heat, bathed by the hands of the woman I love, knowing I would recover to love and work some more.

In sickness we may forget the body's resilience and damn it as a clumsy contraption. In the grip of natural calamities—earthquake or plague or flood—we may forget the workaday beauty and abundance of Creation. Likewise, if we hear incessantly of war and rarely of peace, if we hear more about crime than kindness, more about divorce than marriage, we may forget how much we need and nourish one another. Grown suspicious of every person we meet, fearing disappointment or disaster, we may withhold ourselves from love and friendship, from any sort of membership, and try going it alone. But that road leads to despair. To find hope, we'll have to travel in company. For just as there is healing in wildness, that perennial spring welling up

through body and land and every living thing, so there is healing in community.

Family is the first community that most of us know. When families fall apart, as they are doing now at an unprecedented rate, those who suffer through the breakup often lose faith not only in marriage but in every human bond. If compassion won't reach across the dinner table, how can it reach across the globe? If two or four or seven people who share house and food and even kinship can't get along, what are the prospects for harmony in larger and looser groups, in neighborhoods, cities, or nations? Many of the young people who come to me wondering how to find hope are wary of committing themselves to anyone because they've already been wounded in battles at home.

In the Sanders clan we've made our share of mistakes. We've had our share of turmoil, mainly across generations, including the occasional shouting match, like the one between Jesse and me as we drove through the Big Thompson Canyon in the Rockies. But on the whole we've gotten on well, looking after one another, trading stories and meals, braiding our lives together. Even the quarrels may strengthen our love, the way Jesse's angry words in the mountains set me to writing this book. So I remain hopeful about community, because my own experience of family, in spite of strains, has been filled with grace.

When Eva asked whether I thought she should ever have children, I wanted to shout "Yes!" because Ruth and I have had so much joy from our own children, and because I know Eva will make a superb mother. But Eva was asking for more than a father's hasty vote of confidence. She was asking for a deliberate answer, one that faces honestly the outlook for life in a context of swelling population, dwindling resources, persistent violence, epidemic consumerism, and spiritual drift. Like Jesse, she was asking me whether I believe there are reasons to live in hope not only for ourselves but for our children and grandchildren.

Eva's question became all the more pressing when she and her

longtime beau, Matthew Allen, told Ruth and me over supper one evening that they had settled on a wedding date for the following July. I felt a flutter of anxiety and a rush of delight. I gazed at my grown-up daughter, whom I had once held in the palm of my hand, then I gazed at this black-bearded young man, whom we had known since before he needed to shave. With his brooding manner and deep-set eyes, Matt seemed older than Eva. But they were both twenty-three, and they had been circling one another since high school. The circle had gradually drawn them to the center, where they now meant to dwell together forever and ever. It was a sober decision, and, like any marriage vow, a risky one.

"So," said Eva, "do we get the parental blessing, or what?"

Ruth laughed. "You've got mine."

"And how about you, Daddy?" Eva fixed her keen brown eyes on me.

"Heaps of blessings," I answered.

Matt grinned through his beard. "We'll take all we can get."

"We're nervous, I guess," Eva admitted. "Who wouldn't be, these days? But we figured, between you two and Matt's parents, we have more than half a century's worth of evidence that marriage can work."

As we lifted our wineglasses to celebrate, their new engagement rings flashed in the candlelight.

Who wouldn't be nervous, these days, about deciding to get married and perhaps to bring children into the world? The daily news gives us plenty to worry about in the life of families: a mother who drowns her sons by locking them in a car and rolling the car into a lake; a father who rapes his daughter; brothers who murder their parents for the insurance money; junkies who force their kids to run drugs; the estranged husband who stalks his former wife; the celebrity couple who sling insults at one another during their multi-million-dollar custody trial.

It's no wonder that recent commentaries on the American family read like a catalogue of failures and threats. We're warned that marriage is about to disappear, that parents are losing control of their children, that children are growing up without conscience or vision, that grandparents are being shuffled aside, that a legacy of values formerly transmitted from generation to generation is no longer being passed on.

Mesmerized by disaster, we don't often think about the countless families that carry on their work dependably and decently, any more than we think about our cars when they are running well or our bodies when they are fit. It's when the car won't start, when fever lays the body low, when the family breaks down that we pay attention. We are only too aware of the ways in which families can go wrong, can damage children, can twist the lives of husbands and wives, can unsettle communities. How can families go *right*? What are they for?

From a biological perspective, the family has evolved to nourish and protect children, and to educate them for survival until they in turn are ready to produce and care for offspring of their own. Many other animals rear their young in families, but none do so over such a long period and none with such elaborate training. We're a slow-developing species, weak and defenseless in our early years. I can remember wondering, as a boy, why my baby brother needed months to learn to crawl, nearly two years to walk, when the ponies we raised on our Ohio farm could romp about within minutes of birth. I'm still amazed at the speed with which most other animals mature. From my desk I can hear the newly hatched cardinals and robins in our yard haranguing their parents for grub, and yet in a few days they will be fledglings swooping about and feeding themselves.

Slow to develop physically, we also take a long time to acquire the skills necessary for survival. By comparison with other animals, we depend far less on instinct, far more on learning. Much of our education consists of finding out how to get along with

other people, inside and outside the family, how to talk with them, work with them, bargain and joke and play with them, because we're a social species, needing the cooperation of our fellows in order to secure food and shelter, to decipher the patterns of nature, to defend ourselves against predators and sickness and rival humans, to ponder the meaning of life and the mystery of death.

Needing so much knowledge, we're also a species that has valued its elders, those with the longest memories, those who carry the lore and wisdom of the tribe. The oldest burial sites of our human ancestors include the bones of people crippled by disease and gnarled by age, people who could have survived only through the care of younger companions. We might attribute that care to loyalty and compassion, but these sentiments have clear evolutionary benefits, since they assure the passing on of knowledge. The human clans that neglected their elders, like those that neglected their children, soon perished.

Watching Eva and Jesse grow up, I've been astounded by the force of their curiosity and the swiftness of their learning, but I've been equally astounded to realize how much they must know in order to function as adults in our complex society. From balancing on their legs to balancing equations, from tying their shoes to paying their taxes, from naming the parts of the world to programming computers, they've learned a staggering amount. Even in technologically simpler societies, boys don't become men, girls don't become women, until they've studied the ways of adults for a dozen years or more. Such education has always come in part from outside the family, from elders and teachers, from the men's lodge or the women's lodge, from neighbor children, from priests and strangers and storytellers and—over the past few hundred years—from books. Yet no matter how much instruction comes from outside, the family is the arena where learning begins, where knowledge may be tested and mistakes be made, where the hard business of becoming human may be safely practiced.

The family, then, is not a sanctuary cut off from the rest of society, not a secluded preserve, but a training ground for life in community, in village or clan or tribe. If there is to be a vigorous community for children to join, the family must also provide, in Gary Snyder's phrase, "the Practice Hall" for adults as well, a place where men and women perform the ceremonies of mutual aid, amuse and challenge one another, share comfort and love. By all these measures, a good family is one that encourages the full flowering of parents; that cherishes grandparents as carriers of wisdom; that nourishes children in body and mind and soul, and prepares them to enter the world as responsible and competent adults.

On a Saturday morning in late September, a month after my bout with heat exhaustion, Eva came over to help Ruth make pies for a supper that we would share in the evening with Matt's family, the Allens. Mincemeat, apple, pecan. I was up on the roof emptying leaves from the gutters, but I kept making excuses to climb down the ladder and visit the kitchen, where I breathed in the luscious smells and listened to the women talk. One minute they were talking about genetics, the next minute about politics, and the next about wedding dresses. Eva's hands moved in harmony with Ruth's, cutting fruit, rolling out dough, scattering spices, crimping the edges of crusts.

I broke in to ask, "Do you need me to test any of that filling?"

"Here," said Ruth, lifting a spoonful from a mixing bowl, "let's see what the expert thinks of our mincemeat."

I rolled the fruity sweetness in my mouth. "Not bad," I said, "but I'll need another bite to make sure."

"One more spoonful, then go finish your gutters and let us finish our pies."

I left the kitchen reluctantly. "Remember to listen for my yell, in case I fall off the roof."

"Just don't break any legs before July," Eva warned. "You've got to walk me down the aisle."

Back on the roof, scooping hemlock needles and maple leaves from the gutters, I felt no dizziness from the height, from the clouds scudding by, from the whirl of chimney swifts overhead, but I did feel dizzy over the prospect of walking Eva down the aisle.

Later that morning, the pies all baked, Eva took off to scour yard sales in search of chairs for her newly rented house. Meanwhile, Ruth and I went over to my mother's house to do some small repairs. We fixed a storm door, replaced a rubber gasket on the garage door, changed a light switch, installed a bathroom exhaust fan. While Ruth and I traded hammers, screwdrivers, and pliers, Mother was busy repotting plants—lilies, geraniums, impatiens, azaleas. She would be leaving soon for a trip to Ireland, and she wanted to ease our chore of watering her plants while she was gone. As we gathered our tools, Mother gave me a bag of roasted seeds from a pumpkin she had cleaned. "Share them with Jesse," she told me, and I promised that I would.

What values and behaviors should the family teach if it is to be a training ground for life in community? That all depends on what sort of community we desire. For my part, I wish to live in a community that is peaceful, that cares for the weak and the poor, that welcomes the immense variety of humankind, that fosters the health and happiness and full development of all its members, young and old, male and female. I wish to live in a community that is beautiful, that encourages good work and discourages everything hasty or shoddy. I wish to live in a community that acknowledges the holiness of Creation by conserving the land and by respecting the creatures that share the land with us. I wish to live in a community that recognizes its links to the larger world yet also meets many of its own needs, especially for food and entertainment, and that has a modest sense of what those needs are. I wish to live in a community inhabited by citizens rather than consumers, public-minded people who honor the richness

of our shared life by supporting libraries and museums and schools, and by planning for the common good. I wish to live in a community that has a keen awareness of its own history, one that values continuity as well as innovation and aspires to leave a wholesome place for others to enjoy, undiminished, far into the future.

That vexed phrase "family values" often serves as shorthand for a political agenda that is never spelled out. I have my own agenda, which is why I've sketched this vision of a desirable community. The family values that I embrace are the habits of heart and mind essential for creating and maintaining such a community, and among these are generosity and fidelity and mercy, a sympathetic imagination, a deep and abiding concern for others, a delight in nature and human company and all forms of beauty, a passion for justice, a sense of restraint and a sense of humor, a relish for skillful work, a willingness to negotiate differences, a readiness for cooperation and affection. I don't pretend that we always live up to those values in my own family, but we aspire to do so.

While the family is not the only place where we might acquire such habits, it is the primary one. And above all it is the place where we are most likely to learn the meaning of love. In using that tricky word, I note Wendell Berry's distinction between the *feeling* of love, which may be no more than a warm and fuzzy glow, and the *practice* of love, which involves "trust, patience, respect, mutual help, forgiveness," and other demanding virtues. If children and adults emerge from a household bearing those habits of heart and mind, I would declare that family a success, a blessing to its neighbors and its place.

I am all too aware of the distance between these ideals, for community and family and individual character, and the reality we meet in contemporary America. In most of our households, real income has been stagnant or declining for twenty years, despite

the fact that more women and more mothers of young children are employed outside the home than ever before. A third of all jobs carry no health insurance, and that percentage is increasing. The rate of divorce is also increasing, along with the rates of homicide and suicide among children; and the rate of domestic violence continues to be appallingly high. Over the course of a year, children spend on average about twice as many hours watching television as attending school. Today, sixty percent of our families are headed by single parents, and half of those parents have never been married. Every day, roughly two million children return from elementary or middle school to a home where there is no adult to look after them for many hours. More of our children than ever before *have* no homes, more families are living on the streets, more people of all ages dwell in poverty.

We needn't harken back to the supposedly halcyon days of the "nuclear family" (a label that summoned up for me, as a child in the 1950s, the specter of radioactive homes) in order to recognize that our social fabric is coming unraveled. I don't pretend to know the reasons for this unraveling, but I can't help noticing that our economic system is hostile to virtually all of the values I listed earlier. Our economy rewards competition rather than cooperation, aggression rather than compassion, greed rather than generosity, haste rather than care. Our jobs commonly separate work and home, demand longer and longer hours from employees, and punish those who take time out for child-rearing. When a corporate CEO is paid a hundred times as much as a school-teacher or a factory worker, and when the richest one percent of Americans earn as much as the poorest forty percent, how does one teach a child to believe in equity and justice? When success is measured only by quarterly reports, how does one teach patience? When corporations close plants and move their operations overseas or to rival states in order to boost their profits, how is one to teach loyalty? How does one teach modesty or restraint when advertising promotes instant gratification as the goal of

life, and the media celebrate excess and arrogance? When entrepreneurs treat every square inch of the planet as raw material, how does one teach a conserving love for the earth?

We are the richest nation on earth, yet study after study shows that the greatest threat to American families is poverty. Certainly, individuals and families and entire communities act in ways that contribute to their impoverishment, and insofar as we can identify such harmful ways we should do everything we can to help those who are struggling to overcome them. But it is hypocritical to exhort young people to abstain from sex when our merchants rely on sex to sell their products. It is hypocritical to demand from the poor a higher level of moral behavior than celebrities or executives or stockbrokers or politicians consistently demonstrate. It is dishonest to exhort the unemployed to try harder when they have no marketable skills and no prospects of acquiring such skills. It is dishonest to blame the poor for being poor when millions of those who work full-time cannot earn a living wage. The fact is that our economy has less and less use for more and more people, and most of those discarded people know and bitterly resent this.

Finished for the moment with repairs at my mother's house, Ruth and I went home for lunch. The lingering fragrance of pies gave way to the smell of sesame oil as Ruth stir-fried vegetables. While I was setting the table, Jesse showed up, a refugee from the bland fare of the dormitory cafeteria, so I set an extra place.

"You're just the man I wanted to see," I told him over our steaming plates.

"Uh, oh," Jesse said. "That sounds like work."

"It'll be good for you. Stretch those big muscles of yours. We're going out to the Allens' this afternoon to help Don cut up some trees that washed onto his field down by the creek. Matt will be there, too."

"Count me in," said Jesse.



"Charlene and Eva and I are going to talk about the wedding," Ruth added.

"And we're going to stay for supper," I said. "With three kinds of pie."

"I'll pass on the wedding talk," Jesse said, "but supper sounds great."

We loaded the car with chain saw, gas can, splitting maul, wedges, and gloves. Then we drove beyond the sprawling fringe of town into the hills bordering Clear Creek, where Matt's parents, Don and Charlene, had recently built a house. As we rolled down the gravel drive, we could see Matt and Eva in the open door of the garage, bending over four ladder-back chairs. Two young bird dogs romped in circles around them, begging to play fetch-the-stick. Don and Charlene sat on the front steps, surveying their new yard. We climbed out of our car, greeted the dogs, greeted the Allens. Eva wanted to know what we thought of the chairs, which she had bought at a yard sale. I examined them one by one. The seats were gone, the joints were loose, and the finish was a patchwork of grimy shellac.

"They'll be gorgeous after you fix them up," I said. "Refinish them, reglue them, weave some new seats, and they'll be strong and balanced and light."

"They're like ours at home, aren't they?" Eva asked.

"Just like ours," Ruth agreed.

"Did yours ever look that bad?" Matt asked with a note of skepticism.

"Worse," Ruth said. "One of them came to us as a bundle of sticks."

"So where do we start?" Eva asked.

The four parents spoke at once, and then we laughed and took our turns. Between the Allens and the Sanderses, it turned out, we possessed all the knowledge and tools needed for restoring ladder-back chairs. With family help and plenty of elbow grease, Eva and Matt would turn these rickety yard-sale discards into

sturdy seats for the new household they were about to form. Eva wanted to begin right away, figuring she could talk about the wedding and strip chairs at the same time, so she and Ruth and Charlene went off to gather steel wool, alcohol, and glue.

The four men, meanwhile, loaded saws and wedges and mauls into Don's truck. Jesse and Matt climbed in back along with the bird dogs, and Don and I climbed into the cab; then we jounced down the hill and across a stubbled field to the bank of the creek, where summer floods had flung a snarl of driftwood. The chain saw roared on the first pull and for a while I did the cutting, Jesse did the carrying, Don and Matt did the splitting. We soon peeled off our jackets and sweated along in T-shirts and jeans and boots. We worked quickly through most of the pile of wood, mainly beech and hickory, then took a rest before tackling the fattest log. Bare of bark, it was from a tree that had been dead quite a while, but the wood seemed sound. Neither Don nor I could tell from the shape alone what it was, although we both were guessing oak.

The dogs bounced around our legs, nuzzling us, and eagerly chased any stick we cared to throw. The creek slid by, dappled with scarlet reflections on this September afternoon, and crows caucused in the tops of sycamores that leaned toward one another from opposite banks. Matt and Jesse also leaned together, sitting on the tailgate of the truck and gabbing away about music, and I thought how much they would be able to give one another as brothers-in-law. Don and I talked about carpentry and cosmology.

Before our sweat cooled we started on the big log. This time Jesse handled the saw, Matt lugged the cut sections, Don and I swung the splitting mauls. The first cut revealed the wood to be red oak, long dead but still firm. Each round of log split with a solid *thunk*, usually on the first blow.

After another hour or so of labor, interrupted now and again for wisecracks and water, we had cut and split all but the stump of the great log, with its tangle of naked roots. What the creek

had flung in one casual motion onto the bank, we flung in several hundred pieces into the truck. The shock absorbers groaned under the load as we drove back up the hill to the Allen house, then on into town to the Sanders house, where we unloaded the wood, stacked it on a platform beside the compost bins in the backyard, and covered it with a blue tarp. Then we retraced our path into the country, where the women had already stripped two of the ladder-back chairs, and where we ate all three pies.

Now, whenever I light a fire in our woodstove I think about cutting up the drift logs with Jesse and Matt and Don, about Eva restoring her chairs with help from Ruth and Charlene. I think about our expanding family in the midst of family, just as each of you, reading this, dwells in your own force field of kinship and responsibility and affection. I use the physics metaphor deliberately, because life in family feels to me like a constant giving and receiving of energies, with each member bound by memory and thought and emotion to all the others. We exchange labor and sympathy, we teach and learn, we nourish and nag, without calculating who owes what to whom. When any one in the family hurts, everyone aches; when any one exults, everyone celebrates.

Although Ruth and Eva and Jesse are at the center of my own force field, the influences of family as I experience them reach out beyond those who've shared a house with me, beyond kinfolk related to me by marriage or blood, to include those friends and neighbors and ancestors whom I carry in mind as vital presences. I act, always, before a cloud of witnesses. There is no sharp outer boundary to this set of people whose needs and moods tug at me, but only a gradual tapering away of their influence the farther they are from my emotional center.

Just as I am bound in kinship beyond the limits of my knowing, so any family is bound to other families, to neighborhoods, to schools and libraries, to places of work and places of worship, to shops and clubs and hospitals and parks, to local communities

and the larger society. If that society is troubled, no walls, no stretch of lawn, no insurance policy, no fervent faith will keep the troubles out. There are more than enough troubles in contemporary America to unsettle any household: poverty, infidelity, illiteracy, racial strife, drug addiction, alcoholism, unemployment, mayhem in the media and on the streets.

In spite of these troubles, even in the most hostile and dangerous settings, families endure. As the biologist E. O. Wilson reminds us, "The family, taking either a nuclear or extended form, has rebounded from countless episodes of stress in many societies throughout history." But even if families endure, will they be able to carry on as centers for education and care? Will they be able to nurse children along safely from infancy to responsible adulthood? Will they make room for grandparents and preserve the wisdom of elders? Will they serve as training grounds for life in community?

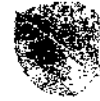
None of us can guarantee that the answer to those questions will be yes, but all of us can help to make that answer more likely for ourselves and for others. If we are intent on strengthening families, we could push for changes in the job culture, such as flexible scheduling and child care at the work site and paternity as well as maternity leave, changes that allow parents more time with their children and couples more time together. We could turn off our televisions, and leave them off, unless there's a worthy reason for turning them on. We could denounce those broadcasters and filmmakers and advertisers who cheapen life. We could work to see that all pregnant women, all children, indeed all Americans receive decent health care. Instead of blaming the poor for their poverty, we could make sure that they receive training and jobs. We could worry less about who lives with whom, and worry more about the quality of their lives together.

Those of us who have more than we need, of money and possessions, could choose to own fewer things and spend less. We could resist the calls of consumerism, and share some of our

abundance with families who have little. Those of us who hold jobs could bear in mind, always, the impact of our work on the world, for the present and for the future. Those of us who are retired could choose to stay near our children and grandchildren, or in towns and cities where we have long-standing friendships, rather than shuffling off to recreational villas; wherever we live, we could invest our wisdom, talents, and time in the community.

While acknowledging that it takes a village to raise a child, we must remember that it takes citizens to make a village. If we are intent on strengthening families, we could help to restore our cities and towns and neighborhoods. We could defend those institutions and programs that we can only create *as citizens*, which means defending the good that we can do together through government. We could speak up for the commonwealth, for the land and water and air and our fellow creatures; we could speak up for future generations and their right to inherit an undamaged planet. While holding our public officials, our legislators and regulators, our judges and teachers accountable for their work, we should also give them humane conditions for carrying on that work, and we should hold ourselves accountable for the services we require of them.

There is no shortage of work to be done, and much of it must be done against the grain of our commercial culture. But the family is much older than television or advertising or global corporations, and I suspect it is more durable. The root meaning of the word *family* is household, a gathering of people who take shelter together. No matter how troubled our households, we're going to keep on taking shelter together because we need one another; we need protection when young, help when old; we need guidance and companionship and affection our whole lives long; we need a kindly place where we can fall sick of heat exhaustion or celebrate a wedding or share bread. In the struggle between a destructive, reckless, shallow culture and these ancient human needs, I place my faith in the family.



EIGHT

## FIDELITY

WHEN I WAS COURTING RUTH I memorized a bundle of poems, to make sure I'd have somebody else's artful words handy whenever my own words failed. One of the sure signs that I had found the right woman was that Ruth could listen with a straight face while I reeled out a verse, as though it was the most normal thing in the world. The other women I knew in those days would have started heading for the door, or rolling on the floor, if I'd lapsed into poetry.

Among the first poems I learned for wooing purposes was the Shakespeare sonnet that begins,

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds . . .

Even as I recited those lines, I wondered how we could tell for certain whether our minds were true. Were we in love for life, or merely infatuated? Could the dizzy attraction I felt toward Ruth ever be dulled by alterations, in her or in me? Could we grow weary of one another, the way some older couples we knew seemed to have grown stodgy and stale? Spooked by those questions, I reserved Shakespeare for solemn occasions, and opted most often for less worrisome lyrics by the likes of Donne and Yeats and Neruda and Frost.

Did the poems help to win Ruth over? Maybe a little, she admits when I put the question to her at breakfast.

"Even the one about the marriage of true minds?"

"How does it go?" she asks.

I launch into the sonnet over our cooling bagels, get stuck halfway through, then have to go look it up to finish the last lines:

If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ nor no man ever loved.

Ruth smiles. "Oh, that one! Sure, I liked sly old Shakespeare too."

Whatever the effect of the poems, she did agree to marry me, and since then all the evidence has suggested that we're in love for life. After thirty years of marriage, and quite a few alterations, I still feel attracted to her, maybe not so dizzily, but more steadily and powerfully than ever. It's that *more* I want to speak about here—the depth of feeling and richness of meaning and strength of purpose that only emerge from long commitment. Although I open with the example of marriage, I'm also thinking about other sustained commitments—to friends, to work, to place, to causes and concerns. We all try out a lot of enthusiasms, chase a lot of rabbits hither and yon, but what we stick with after the infatuation wears off is what defines our lives.

I don't mean habit. I don't mean trudging along in a rut. I mean actively choosing, over and over, to stay on a path, to abide in a relationship, to answer a call. The sort of commitment I have in mind is compounded of stubbornness, affection, and wonder. My shorthand term for it is *fidelity*, by which I mean not only the honoring of marriage vows, if you happen to be married, but keeping faith with anyone or anything that claims your love.

Fidelity is not a virtue to brag about, but a native impulse, like curiosity. I see it in Jesse and Eva, in my students, and in many other young people—a yearning to find a person, an idea, a vocation, a cause to embrace with a whole heart. What holds them

back is the fear they'll find nothing worthy of their dedication; the fear of being disappointed, deceived, or hurt; the fear of being mocked as fools for showing loyalty in a culture that celebrates fickleness and fashion. They look around and see aimless mobility, broken promises, shifting allegiances, and the frenzied pursuit of novelty. They hear voices urging them to avoid entanglements, keep their options open, always look for something sweeter. Against that clamor for change, I wish to celebrate our capacity for steadiness and devotion. Here is an antidote to drift. Here, in fidelity, is another source of healing and hope, freely available to all, like wildness or the body's own resilience.

A while ago Jesse and I went to a performance by a jazz band from South Africa, fifteen young men and one young woman, all of them visiting America for the first time. Their conductor was a round, restless, exuberant trumpeter named Johnny Mekoa who had come to the university where I teach on a Fulbright Scholarship some years earlier to earn a degree in music, had then gone back to South Africa to start a school, and had now returned with his students to show the fruits of his work.

The fruits were delicious. The band played American and African pieces by turns, riding hot rhythms back and forth across the ocean, and between numbers Mekoa praised his young musicians. Two years earlier most of them had never held an instrument, never read a line of music. Some of them had been living in squatter camps, some had been living in the streets. Yet here they were, after only two years of practice, cooking up spicy jazz for a wildly appreciative audience in this music-loving place.

Now and again during the program I glanced at Jesse, who sat with some of his friends down the row from me. The look on his face was rapt, washed clean, shining, the same look he had while churning through whitewater on the Cache la Poudre River.

As Mekoa spoke he kept bowing to his former teachers in the audience. He told how in the grim old days of apartheid he had

learned to play jazz by listening to smuggled records. When the walls of apartheid came tumbling down, he itched to give up his job as an optician and go study trumpet in the land where jazz was invented. His wife, a nurse, said go ahead; she would hold down the fort while he was gone. So he traveled to Indiana; he worked night and day, the sooner to finish his degree and return home to his wife; then he went back to South Africa eager to start his own school. Music would help mend the torn fabric of his bedeviled and beloved country. "Why should we fight, if we can dance together?"

Supporters in America and England sent him sheet music and instruments, and he set up shop in an abandoned warehouse. He went the rounds of the poor neighborhoods, found young people who wanted to learn, and started giving lessons. He found other teachers, one for keyboard and one for saxophone. He scrounged up money from businesses, foundations, and private donors, and from the amazing new government headed by Nelson Mandela. Soon music began wafting from that disused warehouse. With his first students he gave concerts for street children, and the urchins whose eyes shone the brightest he recruited for his school.

"When I looked at these children," he told us, "I knew there were artists among them. I could see it in their faces."

In the question period following the concert, Jesse asked how you teach someone to improvise. I knew the question came from Jesse's own efforts on the guitar.

Mekoa pressed the trumpet to his chest. "You improvise with your ear and your heart. There are no wrong notes. Whatever you feel moved to play, play it. When you hear how it sounds, then you can decide whether to play it so again."

I came away feeling that Mekoa's many strands of devotion—to jazz, to the trumpet, to his wife, to his homeland and his students, to the composers and teachers and performers whose work he is passing on, to audiences, to the future of South Africa—are braided together into a single vocation. He was called

to make music, share it, teach it, pass it on; he was called, and he answered yes. He keeps on saying yes with body and soul. Jesse could see, we all could see, that here is a man who has found a purpose, a man who knows why he is alive.

I prize integrity of purpose even when the fruits of it set my teeth on edge. Recently a local woman wrote to the newspaper to say that she was retiring from her role as gadfly to the school board. You could almost hear a sigh of relief spreading across town as people read the announcement. For longer than the twenty-five years Ruth and I have lived in Bloomington, this woman has shown up at every school board meeting, followed every debate, and challenged every proposal by demanding a return to basics. Basics will save us, she declares. Basics will restore morals to our wayward society. Basics will keep children afloat in the choppy seas of life. Reading and writing and arithmetic were good enough for our ancestors who built this great country, yet these subjects have been squeezed out of our schools by all this rubbish about diversity and drugs and self-esteem and sex. Teaching about sex is the worst folly, she maintains, because it only gives young people lewd ideas.

This woman had telephoned me once to complain that in a book of mine about the Indiana limestone quarries I had put swear words in the mouth of a retired mill worker.

"I didn't put them there, ma'am," I replied. "I wrote a few of them down after they came pouring out, and the mildest ones at that."

"You're corrupting our youth," she told me.

"By suggesting that some of their elders occasionally say 'hell' and 'damn'?"

"You're corrupting our youth," she repeated.

She could have sent a tape recording to deliver her message to the school board, it was that predictable, but instead she delivered it in person. Neither rain nor snow nor dark of night kept her

from showing up. Ridicule would not silence her. Why did she keep coming to meetings, keep reading interminable reports, keep raising objections? She had no children in school. She wasn't running for office. She wasn't anybody's paid lobbyist. You might figure she just liked to hear herself talk, or maybe she craved an audience. But the audience was usually hostile, and the words burst from her with a note of exasperation, as though she would much rather not have had to say them. No, there was nothing of the show-off about her. Then why her persistence? I think she was simply determined to be a good citizen and to stand up for her convictions. In doing so, she made the rest of us think harder about our own convictions, made us a bit more honest. And isn't that how democracy is supposed to work, with informed citizens debating the issues vital to their common life? I hardly ever agreed with her views, but I admired her tenacity and grit.

A cause needn't be grand, it needn't impress a crowd, to be worthy of our commitment. I knew a man, a lifelong Quaker, who visited prisoners in our county jail, week in and week out, for decades. He would write letters for them, carry messages for them, fetch them clothing or books. But mainly he just offered himself, a very tall and spare and gentle man, with a full shock of white hair in his later years and a rumbling voice that never wasted a word. He didn't ask whether the prisoners were innocent or guilty of the charges that had landed them in jail. All that mattered was that they were in trouble. He didn't preach to them, didn't pick and choose between the likable and the nasty, didn't look for any return on his time. Nor did he call attention to his kindness; I had known him for several years before I found out about his visits to the jail. Why did he go spend time with outcasts, every week without fail, when he could have been golfing or shopping or watching TV? "I go," he told me once, "in case everyone else has given up on them. I never give up."

Never giving up is a trait we honor in athletes, in soldiers, in

climbers marooned by avalanches, in survivors of shipwreck, in patients recovering from severe injuries. If you struggle bravely against overwhelming odds, you're liable to wind up on the evening news. A fireman rescues three children from a burning house, then goes back inside a fourth time to rescue the dog. A childless washerwoman in the deep South, who never dreamed of going to college herself, lives modestly and saves her pennies and in old age donates everything she's saved, over a hundred thousand dollars, for university scholarships. A pilot flies his flimsy plane through a blizzard, searching for a pickup truck in which a woman is trapped; gliding and banking through a whirl of white, he catches signals from her cellular phone, ever so faint; the snow blinds him, the wind tosses him around, his fuel runs low, but he circles and circles, homing in on that faint signal; then just before dark he spies the truck, radios the position to a helicopter crew, and the woman is saved. What kept him searching? "I hadn't found her yet," he tells the camera. "I don't quit so long as I have gas."

Striking examples of perseverance catch our eye, and rightly so. But in less flashy, less newsworthy forms, fidelity to a mission or a person or an occupation shows up in countless lives all around us, all the time. It shows up in parents who will not quit loving their son no matter how much trouble he causes, in parents who will not quit loving their daughter even after she dyes her hair purple and tattoos her belly and runs off with a rock band. It shows up in couples who choose to mend their marriages instead of filing for divorce. It shows up in farmers who stick to their land through droughts and hailstorms and floods. It shows up in community organizers who struggle year after year for justice, in advocates for the homeless and the elderly, in volunteers at the hospital or library or women's shelter or soup kitchen. It shows up in the unsung people everywhere who do their jobs well, not because a supervisor is watching or because they are paid gobs of money but because they know their work matters.

When Jesse was in sixth grade, early in the school year, his teacher was diagnosed as having breast cancer. She gathered the children and told them frankly about the disease, about the surgery and therapy she would be undergoing, and about her hopes for recovery. Jesse came home deeply impressed that she had trusted them with her news. Before going to the hospital, she laid out lesson plans for the teacher who would be replacing her. Although she could have stayed home for the rest of the year on medical leave while the substitute handled her class, as soon as she healed from the mastectomy she began going in to school one afternoon a week, then two, then a full day, then two days and three, to read with the children and talk with them and see how they were getting on. When a parent worried aloud that she might be risking her health for the sake of the children, the teacher scoffed, "Oh, heavens no! They're my best medicine." Besides, these children would only be in sixth grade once, and she meant to help them all she could while she had the chance. The therapy must have worked, because seven years later she's going strong. When Ruth and I see her around town, she always asks about Jesse. Is he still so funny, so bright, so excited about learning? Yes he is, we tell her, and she beams.

I have a friend who builds houses Monday through Friday for people who can pay him and then builds other houses on Saturday, with Habitat for Humanity, for people who can't pay him. I have another friend who bought land that had been stripped of topsoil by bad farming, and who is slowly turning those battered acres into a wildlife sanctuary by halting erosion and spreading manure and planting trees. A neighbor of ours who comes from an immigrant family makes herself available night and day to international students and their families, unriddling for them the puzzles of living in this new place. Other neighbors coach soccer teams, visit the sick, give rides to the housebound, go door to door raising funds for charity, tutor dropouts, teach adults to read; and they do these things not just for a month or a season but for years.

There's a man in our town who has been fighting the U.S. Forest Service for two decades, trying to persuade them to quit clear-cutting, quit selling timber at a loss, quit breaking their own rules in the Hoosier National Forest. All the while, those who make money from tearing up the woods call for more cutting, more road-building, more board feet. This man makes no money from carrying on his crusade, but he makes plenty of enemies, many of whom own chain saws and guns. He won't back down, though, because he loves the forest and loves the creatures that depend on the forest. Hearing him talk, you realize that he sees himself as one of those creatures, like any warbler or fox.

I could multiply these examples a hundredfold without ever leaving my county. Most likely you could do the same in yours. Any community worth living in must have a web of people faithful to good work and to one another, or that community would fall apart.

To say that fidelity is common is not to say it's easy or painless or free. The man or woman who forgoes a promotion by refusing the company's offer to move across country pays a price for staying put. The parent who remains devoted to a troublesome child may come to grief. Those who are loyal to a cause or a place or an institution will almost certainly be taken advantage of by those who are loyal only to themselves. People who champion unpopular views or stand in the way of the powerful may risk more than serenity or cash; like the defender of the forest, they may even risk their necks.

Fidelity costs energy and time, maybe a lifetime. Every firm *yes* we say requires many firm *nos*. After Quaker Meeting one Sunday I was talking with the man who visited prisoners in jail, when a young woman approached, breathless with excitement, to ask if he would join the board of a new peace group she was organizing. In a rush of words she told him why the cause was crucial, why the time was ripe, why she absolutely needed his leadership. Knowing this man's sympathies, I figured he would agree to

serve. But after listening to her plea, he gazed at her soberly for a moment, then said, "That is certainly a vital concern, worthy of all your passion. But it is not *my* concern." The challenge for all of us is to find those few causes which are peculiarly our own, those to which we are clearly called, and then to embrace them wholeheartedly.

If your goal is to find a center, a focus, a gathering place within your life, then you would do well to practice fidelity. By slowing down, abiding in relationships, staying in place, remaining faithful to a calling, we create the conditions for paying attention, for discovering depths, for finding a purpose and a pattern in our days. Fidelity enables us to orient ourselves, to know with some confidence where we are. It provides continuity, enabling us to see how things change, what is endangered, what persists. It keeps us from drifting, keeps us from hurrying through our days. "The reason why we don't take time is a feeling that we have to keep moving," says Thomas Merton. If we would only be still and look about, we'd realize that we already "have what we seek. We don't have to rush after it. It was there all the time, and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us."

We cannot give ourselves to every person or place, cannot answer every need, if we wish to act responsibly. Monks who follow Saint Benedict's Rule take a vow to seek spiritual transformation, as one might expect, but they also take a vow of stability, which means a commitment to the grounds of their monastery as well as to their community. The second vow is a condition for the first: outward stability provides a framework for inward change. One needn't be a monk to benefit from loyalty to a home ground. Those who stay put instead of rushing about are likelier to face the hard questions, to focus their energy on the real work. Gary Snyder offers us a secular version of this insight:

Stewardship means, for most of us, find your place on the planet, dig in, and take responsibility from there—the tire-

some but tangible work of school boards, county supervisors, local foresters, local politics, even while holding in mind the largest scale of potential change. Get a sense of workable territory, learn about it, and start acting point by point.

If you imagine trying to solve all the world's problems at once, you're likely to quit before you finish rolling up your sleeves. But if you stake out your own workable territory, if you settle on a manageable number of causes, then you might accomplish a great deal, all the while trusting that others elsewhere are working faithfully in their own places.

Fidelity entails restraint. The marriage vow means choosing one lover and forsaking all others. The fact that it's broken left and right does not change the meaning of the vow. In my experience, choosing one lover and renewing that choice day by day, year by year, is not a sacrifice of freedom, the way bachelor jokes make it out to be, but a fulfillment of desire. Marriage gives meaning to desire, gives it a purpose, a history, a home. I keep faith not merely with Ruth but with myself, for the person I have become is inextricable from the life we have shared. Our travels, our meals, our walks and talks, the books we've read together, the movies and plays we've seen, the children we've brought into the world, the work we've done, our struggles and accomplishments—the sum of this mutual history defines who we are.

Having shared so much, Ruth and I sometimes communicate in lopped phrases, as though sending telegrams, a habit that irks Eva and Jesse.

"Did you—?" Ruth might say, and I might answer, "The rain—."

"Then Saturday—?"

"Charlie's teeth—."

"I see," Ruth might conclude. Whereupon one of the kids is



likely to cry, "I *don't* see. Will you two talk in complete sentences so normal people can understand!"

For a couple to be that familiar with one another's thoughts may seem stifling to young people, for whom privacy is precious, and for whom the making of a self distinct from family and friends is an urgent task. I've heard my students refer to a thoroughly wedded couple as "joined at the hip," as if the two partners had fused into a homogeneous lump. That may happen, of course, if the partners lazily surrender their separate identities, but it need not. I know many long-married folks who remain distinct individuals, as if the durability of marriage emboldens them to become ever more thoroughly themselves.

But won't marriage eventually grow stale if the partners know one another so intimately? I worried about that back when I was memorizing poems for wooing, and I suspect that Eva thinks about it now, as she prepares for her own wedding. Marriages *do* become stale if husband and wife hunker down within their old boundaries, and if either one makes the mistake of regarding the other's personality—the small ego of the self—as all there is to know. But the truth is that each person opens into depths that can never be fathomed. You will not discover those depths over a weekend or a summer, no matter how romantic, but only over the long haul, and you will never exhaust them. The more I learn of Ruth, the more she reveals to me.

In late September, barely a month after suffering heat exhaustion, I flew to Phoenix to give a speech. Before I left, Ruth said, "Now don't you go hiking in the desert and get yourself sick again." My host was going to take me backpacking in the mountains, I assured her, and in my Midwestern ignorance I envisioned cool green peaks rising above scorched flatlands.

My host and a friend of his did take me into the mountains—the enticingly named Superstition Mountains, which turned out to be neither cool nor green, but rather blistering and stony and

dry, pure desert tilted uphill and down, as anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of Arizona geography would have predicted.

We parked at the trail head above Apache Lake around four in the afternoon, ate crackers smeared with avocado, shouldered our packs, and set off. Had they known the temperature, and how little water we carried, and how far we planned to hike, neither Ruth nor my doctor would have let me take a step away from the car. We didn't need to carry much water, or much food either, according to my hiking buddies, because we were headed for a green valley ten miles up in the mountains, where a stream flowed even in the driest months and where an orchard of apples would be ripe about now. A man named Reavis had planted the orchard early in this century, carried water to the young trees, protected them from varmints and thieves, and eventually began selling his crop in faraway Phoenix, hauling bags of apples on the backs of mules. Decades after Reavis died (his skull parted from the rest of his skeleton), the unpruned, unsprayed, unfertilized trees still bore generously (or so my companions had been led to believe; neither of them had made this trek before).

The biscuit-colored land, spiky with cactus and green-barked paloverde, caught at my heart, and our talk along the trail was infused with the beauty of the place. But even in this fine company, in this magnificent terrain, I kept thinking of our destination, which sounded too much like paradise to be real. Four hours into the hike, with darkness pooling in the arroyos and no hint of a green valley, we began to think we had lost the trail. As we paused to consider our fix, we caught a whiff of wood smoke, just a trace on the dry air. So we hiked on upwind, picking our way over stones in the dim light of a half moon.

Nearly an hour later we spied the gleam of a campfire and heard the murmur of voices. Avoiding these other hikers, so as not to intrude on their privacy, we made our way across a sagging fence, through implausible knee-high grass, and into the presence of trees. From their bowed and fretted shapes I could tell

they were fruit trees, and from their smell I knew they were apples. The nicker of horses rose from a paddock near the campfire, and from closer by, barely audible above the sound of wind in grass, came the trickle of water. It was the sound of blessing. We would have to wait for morning light before pumping water from the creek, but tonight we could drink the last few swigs from our canteens. Before we laid out our sleeping bags under the stars, we rummaged on the ground for apples. We ate and ate until the juice ran down our chins, until the sweet flesh filled us, and then we slept.

The next day we loaded our packs with apples, a few for munching on the hike out, most for family and friends—manna from the Superstition Mountains. As I swayed along the trail that morning with this lumpy weight on my back, I couldn't decide which gave me more hope, the persistence of the trees or the persistence of the man who had tended them. Then I realized that the two forms of constancy are kin—that fidelity is a human expression of wildness. For years Reavis kept faith with his vision of an orchard in the desert, laboring to bring it about, and for even more years the apple trees have kept faith with their cycles of growth.

Back home, I presented Ruth the largest, reddest, firmest apple, to show her that I had guarded myself from heatstroke, away out there in the desert, by walking in wet and fruitful country.

It's hard to imagine Arizona heat on a winter morning in Indiana, with the windchill at twenty below. I write these lines on a January day while Ruth drives over icy roads to the town an hour away where her parents live in the Methodist Home. Her mother suffers from Alzheimer's disease, and her father has been slowed by heart attacks and strokes. Those two have suffered through alterations that no one in Shakespeare's day could have survived, and yet they remain devoted to one another and they have inspired a

comparable devotion in their daughter. Over roads that a state trooper on the radio describes as "slicker than grease on glass," Ruth will carry her mother and father to doctors' appointments in Indianapolis, then to lunch, then to the drugstore and bank, then back to their apartment, where she will help them with medicine and bills, settle their worries, and rouse their spirits.

Watching Ruth care for her parents as they age, a responsibility she fulfills with good humor and grace, I consider how much harder their lives would be without her loyalty. I consider how grim the world would be for all of us without the innumerable acts of kindness and support arising from fidelity, not only of children for parents and of parents for children, not only of partners and neighbors and friends for one another, but of visionaries for their causes, workers for their jobs, citizens for their communities, inhabitants for their home ground. Such acts are so widespread, so vital to our preservation, that I cannot help thinking they arise, like wildness and healing, from our very nature. True, we must be taught the way of steadfast love, but we learn it readily.

The first Psalm of the Hebrew Bible, handed down by people who knew quite well the rigors of life in the desert, offers hope to those who obey the law of the Lord:

They are like trees planted by streams of water,  
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither;  
everything they do shall prosper.

Reading that now, I see an orchard hidden away in a valley of the Superstition Mountains, I hear a trickle of water through a tangle of willows, I taste the sticky apple juice on my lips. I draw courage from these tokens of fidelity, and I take delight in the Psalmist's image, even without believing that anyone knows, once and for all, the law of the Lord and without believing that good people will inevitably prosper. The universe is not set up to

reward us for virtue, nor to comfort us for our losses, nor to coddle us in our pain; and yet it has, remarkably, brought us into being. How can we help wondering about the source of our existence?

Since it dawned on me at the age of ten or twelve that Creation is a great mystery, and that life and consciousness and death only compound that mystery, I have been searching for ways to understand the ultimate ground out of which all things rise. Surely this is one of the oldest human searches, older than philosophy or science, older than religion, older perhaps than speech. I have learned much from philosophy and science and from many religions, beginning with the low-temperature Christianity of my childhood, yet none of these traditions has seemed adequate to the splendor and intricacy of the world. When the apostles beg Jesus to increase their faith and Jesus answers, *If you had faith even as large as a mustard seed, you could uproot trees, you could move mountains, I want to break in on that ancient conversation and cry, "Faith in what?"* I know very well the tidy answers. But no catechism, no scriptures, no commandments, no equations seem rich or subtle enough to comprehend even a single life, let alone the universe.

Although Thomas Merton worshiped as a Trappist monk, reciting holy offices several times a day, he warned us not to be caught up in religious formulas: "The object of our faith is not a statement about God but God himself to whom the statement points and who is infinitely beyond anything the statement might lead us to imagine or understand." A Zen parable reminds us that every spiritual teaching is only a finger pointing at the moon: we must not become so obsessed by the finger that we forget the moon. The Tao that can be told is not the Tao; the Way that can be named is not the Way. Even to speak of the source and pattern of things as "God" or "Tao" is risky, since we may confuse the neat word, so easy on the tongue, with the bewildering reality.

Yet fidelity requires us to embrace *some* vision of ultimate real-

ity—if not one of the prepackaged varieties, then one we compose ourselves. To lead a centered life, I believe, one must keep faith not only with a vocation, a mission, a person, or a place, but also with a moral ground that sanctions and upholds these loyalties. You can see the effects of such faith in any firmly grounded life.

In an earlier chapter I mentioned the example of Vaclav Havel, who said that hope is "an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons." And we can look to Mohandas Gandhi, who founded his campaign of nonviolent resistance on a principle he called *satyagraha*, which means "firmly grasping the truth"; Gandhi believed that love and kindness and peace are in keeping with the nature of things, and they will therefore eventually prevail over hatred and cruelty and violence.

Neither standing by truth nor anchoring one's faith in a transcendent power guarantees that justice will vanquish injustice here and now, nor that righteousness will roll down like an ever-flowing stream, but it does give one strength to carry on. And if we receive the strength to carry on the work we believe in, with people we love, in a place we cherish, what else do we need?