

TAISHA OSTLER

Dust to Dust

With a canopy of starlight above us, and a warm campfire at our feet, my family listens to the steady resonance of my dad's story-voice. We are soaking up the last bits of summer in southern Utah at our annual family reunion. At forty-two years old, I am the oldest of five children—each of us with children of our own now—and though my parents divorced nearly twenty years ago, both of them are here. Neither of them is willing to miss traditional family time, so they agreed long ago to be amicable for family events. Despite Dad's second marriage (and divorce) and Mom's dating, they somehow make things work. So, here we are, three generations of a broken, yet united clan listening to Pops recount being charged by a grizzly bear in the wilderness of Kamchatka, Russia, just one week ago.

Picture this: He is fly-fishing (absorbed in the art) when he hears a roar. He looks up, the bear is charging full force. Dad freezes—locked in a scream that will later leave his throat raw—he can do nothing but grip the fly rod harder and watch the animal advance. The bear roars again, and though time seems to slow down, the hulking animal pounds out fifteen

yards within a matter of seconds. “It’s the shoulders I see in my nightmares,” my dad tells me later (when the kids are safely tucked into bed). The raw power of those flexing muscles in forward propulsion, ripping up the ground, is the most frightening thing he has ever seen.

Fishing downstream, the group’s Russian fishing guide hears the first roar, turns and runs toward my dad, waving and yelling. This action saves Pop’s life. Approximately ten feet before the grizzly reaches him, it catches sight of the waving man to its left, stops the charge, turns, and gallops away. To sum up the story dad says, “I sure am glad I’m not Russian bear poop right now.” Releasing a collectively held breath, we agree, then shake our heads as we count the near-death accidents he has had in the last few years. There was the car crash in Canada, the plane accident in Alaska, and now a bear charge in Russia. He is seventy years old, and I find myself worrying about his adventure-filled travels, but I know he won’t stop. To be honest, death by bear would be the ultimate culmination for my dad. I can’t imagine him wasting away to cancer, or some other drawn-out disease. Not that I’d prefer he be eaten by a bear, it seems a painful and frightening way to go, but all this talk of close-calls gets me thinking about our eventual demises.

A few weeks after the family reunion I attend a symposium at Brigham Young University titled “On Being Vulnerable: Faith after the Anthropocene.” Since first hearing the term *anthropocene* in 2018, I’ve been fascinated by the idea that we have entered an age in the earth’s lifecycle where humans, like the ice that came before us, have become a force so large and destructive to the planet that it is nearly impossible to change our course. From carbon guzzling machines, to deforestation, to over-grazing, we can no longer sustain ourselves without major innovative changes. I find myself feeling overwhelmed with the prospects. My children will face a perilous situation when they reach my age—lack of clean water, increased temperatures, and

higher population. I worry about the eco-legacy that I am leaving for them.

As a Christian, I believe in life after death. An eternal happily ever after, if you will. I believe that there will be a second coming of Christ, when He will restore everything to its proper order. I believe that after death, both I and Mother Earth will be resurrected to a perfect state, eternal beings, glorified. While I love the comfort that this dogma gives me, the “Everything will be all right in the end,” state of mind can be problematic because it doesn’t exactly engender feelings of environmental responsibility.

At the symposium, scholar Lisa E. Dahill presented a paper entitled, “Eating and Being Eaten: Interspecies Vulnerability as Eucharist” in which she explored ideas of humans as food. She emphasized the reality that we are part of the food chain, though we often see ourselves as standing outside of nature. We are natural beings, vulnerable to bear attacks. Her work introduced the idea that Christian rituals such as eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ should incorporate more ways of connecting us to human responsibility. As I understood it, she inferred that by taking Christ into ourselves as food, we create a type of eternal spiritual link to our mortal weakness that, as Christians, should move us into a more ecologically responsible plane. This idea was solidified for me even more when I read 2 Corinthians 4.9–10: “Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body.” If the dying Lord is always in me, if His life is made manifest through my body, then as long as I am living, the Lord’s life is perpetuated. And if I am made eternal through resurrection, then Christ will always be alive in me. Dahill suggested that resurrection includes a process of giving our bodies to the earth in a never-ending cycle of eat-and-be-eaten. Because of this, we should be more aware of how we treat our bodies,

respect animals, and care for our planet. We should recognize that we are connected-with, rather than dominant-over the earth and its other-than-human inhabitants.

Our bodies are more than simply connected with the earth, they *are* the earth; they are made up of elements like hydrogen, oxygen, and carbon. We need minerals like sodium, iron, calcium, and magnesium to live. Our bodies do not create these on their own. We receive daily replenishments from the earth by breathing in dust, drinking water, and eating food that has grown from mineral-rich soil. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, we are made from the earth. We eat animals; and though we are at the top of the food chain, we are edible ourselves. We take from and give back to the earth every day as we live and die. When we die, whether we are buried or cremated, our bodies are incorporated back into the biosphere. We are tied together in culpable, and dependent ways. We eat and breathe one another, in and out, in a continual cycle.

I don't think that my dad's bear necessarily intended to eat him. More likely, the bear mistook him, dressed from head to foot in brown clothing, for another bear infringing upon its territory. Had Pops been attacked, it is likely that the bear would have stopped the attack once it realized that my dad wasn't another bear. I don't think animals intentionally seek to do harm, but we all must eat. Because of the harm we humans, knowingly or unwittingly, cause in their natural habitats, human animal attacks can often be attributed to a lack of natural food supply.

Even though we are sometimes at odds with animals, we share plenty in common. For instance, I believe that every living organism has a spirit. That God has given to the animals, and plants, and fungus some portion of spiritual awareness that can lead us to answers about how to co-exist abundantly with all creatures. In the book of Job we are admonished to recognize and connect with these spirits:

But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee: Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee: and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee. Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the Lord hath wrought this? In whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind. (Job 12.7–10)

So, how does one ask the beasts or speak to the earth? St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), patron saint of ecology, is said to have brokered a deal between a hungry wolf and villagers. The wolf agreed to let the villagers live if they would share a portion of their food. Assisi preached the value in all life, and encouraged his followers to give before taking. He spoke to and preached to animals as if they were his brothers and sisters (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Anna Breytenbach is an interspecies communicator from South Africa who uses her abilities to bring awareness to animal needs. She travels the world teaching others about her techniques for communication and engaging in conservation efforts. In essence, she has learned how to listen to and translate for animals. As I watch clips from a documentary that features the phenomenon of her telepathic abilities, I am somewhat skeptical, but mostly intrigued (*The Animal Communicator*).

Telepathy, from the Greek words *tele*, meaning distant, and *pathy*, meaning feeling or perception, is the transmission of information from one being to another without using physical forms of sensory connection. With no way to scientifically prove that telepathy is possible, it is easily discounted. Yet, Stephen King points out in his book *On Writing*, that as a writer, I use a form of telepathy every day (103–06). I transmit images from my mind to the minds of my readers across a distance without speaking out loud.

Breytenbach claims to do the same thing with animals by calmly emitting energy from her mind to theirs. In the documentary, she kneels next to the cage of an angry black leopard named Diablo who has been sent to a South African rescue reserve for big cats. Her feathery brown hair blows haphazardly into her face as she quietly stares at the animal “listening” to the cat’s concerns with his current situation. The leopard conveys to Anna that he is a powerful animal that has been disrespected by humans, and that he does not like the connotations that the name Diablo suggest. The camera zooms in on the leopard’s hazel blue eyes intently staring back at the communicator as she translates the messages. According to the documentary filmmaker, Anna has been given no information about Diablo’s background. Midway through the communication, the leopard asks about two cheetah cubs he was formally housed next to. This detail is what convinces the reserve handlers that Anna is actually communicating with the animal. They ask her to explain that nothing is required of him in this new place, that he is safe and free to be himself.

After the session with Anna, they change his name to Spirit, and the main handler tries emitting good and respectful energy toward the leopard. For the first time since coming to the rescue six months earlier, he leaves his enclosure and begins to explore his surroundings. The handlers are stunned—amazed by the calm change that occurs in the once snarling and angry animal. When asked how her ability works, Breytenbach explains that it is a form of intuition, and that all of us have and use the skill, but she is just more tuned into it with animals than others might be. Whether or not she can really communicate with these animals, I do believe that she has a strong and calming sense about her. That she is tuned into what we humans can do to provide for animal’s needs, even if her understanding only comes from years of acquiring knowledge about how animals and humans interact, she is listening.

My responsibility to the earth includes hearing the voices of the earth, listening to fishes and animals by trying to understand what my role is in concert with theirs, to grasp what I can do to help all of God's creations, not just humans. And I don't just mean the adorable Russian Blue Siamese kitten that I recently adopted. I mean the worms and mosquitos, the rats and vultures. The animals that may have some of us asking, "Why do we have to deal with this foul creature?" The reality is that without scavengers and pests, eco-system mayhem would ensue. In His wisdom, God created all creatures with purpose and precision. The vulture, for example is well-equipped with highly acidic digestive juices that kill off diseased bacteria (harmful to us humans) when they eat dead animals. When vulture populations decreased in India and Nepal, diseases such as rabies increased because other animals not equipped with super acidic stomachs ate the carrion and became infected.

Too many animal populations decrease because of human interference. Sometimes we are well-intentioned; we think we know best as the dominant higher-thinking species. We forge ahead with wolf removal plans, pesticides, and drugs meant to heal that end up poisoning other life-forms. We forget to ask the beasts to teach us first. We forget to listen to the earth, and to seek the spiritual connections that will lead to more understanding about how God has prepared every needful thing, *for every living thing*. Though I am optimistic that we are learning from our mistakes—wolves, are once again thriving in Yellowstone, and the veterinarian drug diclofenac has been banned in India and Nepal to protect vultures from kidney failure, I believe we still have much to learn.

Based on family history, I've (likely) reached the halfway point of my life. It's a sobering idea. I figure I've earned the right to assert some selfishness as I move through and plan the second half. Hence, a coffin will not be in my future. The cultural customs in my corner of the world call for bodies to be confined

in tightly sealed metal boxes before burial, but the idea of my body decaying inside satin-lined walls is just plain creepy to me. I discovered as a teenager that I am claustrophobic.

I grew up near the Nutty Putty Caves in central Utah. They were a popular spot for weekend fun. My seventeenth summer was filled with rock climbing, camping, dating, and friendship. One Saturday, a group of us set off for the caves. Since at least two people had been there we considered ourselves safely in the hands of spelunking experts, despite having no protective gear for the climb. I felt some trepidation about this adventure, but I received a rousing pep-talk on the way there to the effect of, “If I can do it, you can do it.” Powerful words to a teenager who wants to be accepted.

When the van came to a stop, I looked for the cave. I was confused by the flat area of land around us. When I realized the entrance was a small opening in the ground, my heart started hammering. I’m not sure what I expected, but something about going down instead of up unsettled me to the core. I watched as others began lowering themselves into the earth and told myself, “If they can do it, I can do it.” And, eventually, I did. I stepped where they told me to step, I gripped where they told me to grip. I held onto the rotting rope that some wise person had tacked to a wall years before, and lowered myself into a particularly steep area. I was all in; that is, until the we reached the Birth Canal.

As one gleans from the name, the Birth Canal was a very tight space into which a person climbed until reaching an opening with just enough room to fold the body in half and return through the chute, emerging headfirst—born again—into the cavern surrounding it. I watched my friends enter, and eventually re-emerge, like squirming teenage babies, from the small opening. I held back despite my desire to experience it. I shuffled to the back of the line. What was my deal? Didn’t I want to be born again? My determination finally won out. I grabbed a

flashlight, kneeled down and ducked my head to look under the lip of the canal. I could see that just inside, the tube sloped up. I took a breath and started in, feeling the need to arch my body backward as the tunnel began to slope. I was forced onto my stomach before my feet had fully entered the shrinking tube. Seized with fear, I quickly wriggled back out—a breech teenage baby—before my mind had fully registered what was happening. I could not do it. I was not willing to push myself into new birth if it meant facing a brush with death first.

About ten years after my Nutty Putty spelunking adventure, twenty-six-year-old John Edward Jones entered an area of the cave he presumed to be the Birth Canal and never came out. He became wedged, and despite twenty-seven hours of continued rescue efforts, he died from heart failure. A week after his death, the caves were sealed up—he was left to decay in a tomb of rock walls instead of one lined with satin.

No, I don't like thinking about demise, human or otherwise, but when my time comes, I want wide open space for my resting. Cremate me and spread my ashes to the wind. Or better yet, mix them with fertilizer and feed me to a tree. Let my decay give life back to the earth that I have taken so much from.

That give and take happens now and can continue even after I am gone. By recognizing that eternity is now, that I am smack-dab in the midst of it, I find an increased desire for responsible stewardship of our planet, and myself. I want to keep my body free from harmful substances, to “receive health in [my] navel and marrow to [my] bones; And shall find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures (D&C 89.18–19). Who knows what those hidden treasures include—telepathy? Intuition? Humility? I want to use the knowledge I gain to create solutions for making this slice of my eternity glorious. To remember that this planet and all the teeming life it incorporates is also in the eternal now. The way I see it, if in my death my body is offered to the earth to be recycled back to

those who come after me, that is a type of resurrection. My body will continue on, long after my spirit is gone, as it is passed from one organism to the next—perhaps this is part of what makes us eternal beings—in a process of regenerative resurrection. A tree grows from my ashes, a squirrel eats the seeds of the tree, a bobcat eats the squirrel, and little bits of me are recycled into each iteration (Dahill).

Predator and prey, we are all connected by this web of eat and be eaten. And, to me there is holiness and glory in it. Remember that adorable cat of mine? A few days after we brought her home, she went into the backyard to play and explore. My son, watching from the window, said “Mom, Bella just killed a bird!” *There’s no way*, I thought. *She’s too young, and too sweet*. Assuring my son that Bella probably only chased after a bird, I pulled on my purple Crocs and tramped my way outside. Two robins, perched on a low branch of our sixty-five-foot-tall blue spruce, were screeching. I stepped from the dim light of garage into brightness of day, shaded my eyes, and scanned the yard. Bella’s white fur was easy to spot under the shelf of the bay window that my son stood peering out of. I ducked my head to look into the shadows.

To my surprise, Bella had a small naked bird clasped in her paws. Not yet dead, the baby looked up at me, its eyes full of confusion and pain. It must have fallen from the nest. I imagine the tiny bird flopping about in terror as Bella, hulking shoulders propelling her, advanced upon it. The two birds in the tree continued to wail in our direction, a sort of, “Well don’t just stand there, help our baby!” sound. I looked from the robins to Bella, who was happily playing with her new toy, and for a heartbeat I thought I might rescue the little thing. But pinned and bloodied as it was, beneath the sharp claws of my hunter cat, I doubted there was much I could do for it, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to. Strangely, I was proud of Bella’s feline prowess. I stood up, looked in at my son, and shouted through

the glass, “You were right; Bella killed a bird.” Then I left her to her spoils.

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