

# ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

*by Barbara Whittaker-Johns*

*Abstract.* God, the sacred, is radically indwelling and immanent; therefore, nature is enough to satisfy our thirst for transcendence. The transcendent is the radically indwelling capacity of love to bring new life and a sense of being at home in the universe to us and to the people of the world. The epic of evolution, the scientific story of evolution understood as cosmogenesis, is the foundation of this position. However, my primary focus is on one particular practice of internalizing the transforming power of the scientific story of evolution—that of story. Here the practice of story is understood as framing moments of our encounters with matters of faith and love, creating narratives out of these moments, embracing these narratives as a kind of personal scripture, and telling these narratives as a source of inspiration and of guidance about how we are to be of use in the world.

*Keywords:* enough; immanence; narrative; personal stories of faith and love as scripture.

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The task set before me, and before all of you who have gathered for this conference, is to wrestle with the theme “Is Nature Enough? The Thirst for Transcendence.” I address this question in the context of acknowledging three things: (1) many people thirst for something called transcendence; (2) it is not immediately obvious whether a sufficient amount of this thing called transcendence can be found in nature; and (3) people don’t have similar ideas about what nature is, but if transcendence can’t be found in nature, we are still left holding the bag of questions about where else it might be found. All of us are left holding the bag of possible definitions we might assign to the terms in this theme.

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I am reminded of the young author in the short story “The Young Man with the Carnation” by Isak Dinesen (the pseudonym for Danish author Karen Blixen). The author in the story becomes unexpectedly famous and wealthy upon publishing his first book and thereafter is cast into a pit of despair, because the public is expecting a sequel of wisdom from him and he feels he has nothing else to say, that he has become worthless and unlovable. Dinesen describes the young author’s reflection: “It was no wonder that God had ceased to love him, for he had, from his own free will, exchanged the things of the Lord—the moon, the sea, friendship, fights—for the words that describe them” (Dinesen 1942, 10). He reflects thus on the contrast between his stuckness in coming up with adequate words to describe life and the glow of joy on the face of a young man he encounters—bedecked in fine evening clothes, with a fresh pink carnation in his buttonhole—going to visit his beloved.

Among those attending this week’s conference may be some who are joyously encountering the sacred *things* of nature and of transcendence and some who are wrestling with the *words* to describe such things.

I want to first offer some words to describe how I understand the theme. Then I acknowledge and describe a particular method that I have chosen to wrest meaning from the issues raised in the words of our theme—the method of story.

#### WORDS AND THEIR MEANINGS

I grew up surrounded by people who made a living from creating words to describe the things of the Lord. My father was a seminary president, and my mother was a high school science teacher. I was raised in a liberal Congregational church where early on I came to cherish the sermons of the minister, and I was befriended by enough of the adults of the seminary community to get a taste of dialogue in which my thoughts were encouraged and respected.

But I also grew up in an era, the 1950s, when the voices of children and youth and females were considered at best charming though trivial, and at worst an interruption to be silenced, and most of the time a kind of bothersome background noise.

I suppose it is because of this that I have a passion for, as well as a residual anxiety about, expressing myself in words. I do better when the setting allows for some advance planning of what will be said, although that can lead to overplanning and overstating.

I credit my junior-year high school English teacher for stimulating my recognition of my ability to express myself in words. I ended up that year in an advanced placement class; I was 15, and it was 1959. Miss Mullen was exacting. She reduced English grammar and composition to a science that we had to not only master but also memorize. (I can still, on most

days, stand up in front of a group of people and recite the twenty subordinating conjunctions.) She also introduced us to the value of etymology, of noticing the origins of words; and, although this is not a quest I've pursued with any consistency, I find myself drawn to explore the origins of a word when its definition seems not so much difficult as unwieldy.

Such is the case with words like *nature*, *transcendence*, and even *enough*.

For six months a group of us in the Unitarian Universalist congregation that I serve met once a month in an adult program titled "Is Nature Enough? The Thirst for Transcendence." We wrestled with the meanings of these words in the title. The group was composed of about twenty people—church members as well as nonmembers who are part of IRAS. Group members all read one or more books related to this theme. From my own reading and from that group discussion I came to appreciate the complex web of philosophical, theological, historical, biological, cultural, and personal meanings that connect the words *transcendence*, *nature*, *enough*, and *thirst*.

What happens when we cut through the tangled web of meanings and explore the roots of these words? There are root meanings that speak to me for three of these words.

*Nature.* I am drawn to one of its many primary meanings, that of referring to all the beings, things, processes, and forces of the world and of the universe, including the human; but I am especially aware that the word in its Latin roots has the meaning "to be born."

*Transcendence.* First, it seems that in the 1300s *transcend* was *transcenden*, coming from Old French and Latin and meaning "to climb over or beyond." Second, *transcendence* and *transcendent* come from the English of the 1600s and have connotations of "loftiness" and "elevation." Third, it is interesting to note the philosophy of Transcendentalism, closely associated with nineteenth-century Unitarianism. Unitarian Universalist scholar David Robinson describes Emerson's Transcendentalism this way: "In a system such as Emerson's, it was the ordinary course of nature that was endowed with divine significance, and a supernatural miracle was simply an intrusion on this process" (Robinson 1985, 78).

*Enough.* In its Latin roots its meaning is akin to words for "to get" and "to carry." Its modern meanings are several, including "as much as is necessary" and "in the amount or to the degree needed," as in "Nature is enough." Also, there is the meaning of "more than what is needed," as in "That's enough!" And, there is the meaning "I want you to stop," as in "Enough is enough!"

Here is how I put these meanings together to approach the question "Is nature enough?" and to reflect on our "thirst for transcendence."

The traditional religious idea of a transcendent God as supernatural, of the sacred as outside of and controlling nature and our lives, is related to the meaning of transcendence in the English of the 1600s—having connotations of loftiness and elevation. In this traditional view of God as a supernatural being, God is outside of nature but can also choose to dwell, or be manifest, in nature. This kind of theology is one of the ways we get the notion that God has two opposite dimensions—the transcendent and the immanent, or indwelling.

As we well know, the concept of a transcendent God outside of nature is an idea that lends itself to human beings' claiming exclusive knowledge of the character and capricious rules of this God. Such a claim is supported by a traditional definition of nature as "all that is not human." All that is not human has had a way of becoming "less than human." For centuries, groups of human beings have claimed an exclusive hold not only on divine truth but also on what constitutes being human, on what are acceptable human behaviors and characteristics.

There also is a secular version of this form of dualism. One can reject any notion of a supernatural God and instead put oneself, one's country, one's race, or one's rigid rationalism on the throne of supernatural transcendence and still keep the mechanisms of oppression going. The dualism that demeans nature relative to any claim of transcendence located outside of nature has been appropriated by human beings as justification for all sorts of wars and atrocities, all kinds of oppression among human beings and of the planet, in the name of supernaturalism, nationalism, racism, sexism, homophobia . . . the list is long. It was a supernatural god who was named as justifying the atrocities of September 11, 2001, and it is a similar kind of dualistic pitting of nature against transcendence that guides much of the military response to that tragic day.

I am with Emerson in thinking that "the ordinary course of nature is endowed with divine significance." Partly because of my particular history, I am at home using *God* as a name for the sacred, the divine. The divine significance of nature is that it is the ongoing birthing of the universe and of the details of our days and consciousness in a way that gives rise to new life.

God, for me, is also the divine capacity of nature, in that evolution, to be made new by the transforming power of love, as Brian Swimme (1984) portrays it—existing everywhere and always: the love evident in the spinning of the galaxies; the love that binds us to one another and is present in our joy and sorrow, in our gifts and needs; the love that calls us into the world to heal bodies, minds, injustice, and cruelty.

God, for me, is radically indwelling, immanent, as the evolution of the cosmos, of biological life, of human consciousness and culture. The immanent and the transcendent are not opposites. *Immanent* in its roots means to stay, to remain. The holy remains in our everyday experiences of

love and new life as well as in our struggle to find words for the meaning of life and in our wonder at the night sky. *Transcendent* is the term that we use to point to that which is beyond our comprehension, larger than our human experience but not different in kind from it.

When I thirst for transcendence, I am not thirsting for something outside of and higher than the natural universe. I thirst for those experiences *within* nature, within cosmogenesis, where the understanding of *transcend* from the 1300s comes into play—where I can climb beyond or over the barriers and the defenses that keep me from encountering and from helping to create the holy in all that is. I thirst for transcendence where the sacred, as nature, breaks through my everyday world, as the love that brings new life.

Do I thirst for something more in life? Yes. I thirst for nature. I thirst for the transcendent experiences of encountering and being awake to the incredible love this universe pours out for us, through us.

Whether we are talking about nature as the birth of all that is, or nature as encounters with the nonhuman, or encounters with nature as the flow of relationships and events that brings newness to our daily lives or healing in the form of justice—in all of these ways, I believe, nature is “enough” as a source of personal and social transcendence. There is a power in nature that is enough to carry us to the next unfolding of who we are, to that which we and our world long to become.

#### ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

As I was pondering the meaning of the word *enough*, I remembered a story from about thirty years ago when nature was enough, both as encounters with the nonhuman and as the unexpected flow of serendipitous events, to get me to where I needed to go. It is also a story in which the word *enough* itself figured prominently in that stage of my journey. This story captures the significance, for me, of that word in our title. I call this story “Enough Is Enough.”

I married at the age of twenty, as a neophyte convert from supernatural theism to the God-as-the-ground-of-all-being theology of Paul Tillich. I had grown up very culturally determined, with little opportunity to experience the natural world (especially that of the body and that of the non-human) and my place in it. I was naive, shy, a goody-two-shoes, a teetotaler, and a virgin. In the first month of my marriage, I also became a seminary dropout in order to put my husband through graduate school.

My husband was an atheist, a brilliant and self-assured intellectual, and a merit scholar, among other things. Just before completing his Ph.D., he argued with his advisors over his dissertation and withdrew from the program. We then moved from northern New Jersey to Cape Cod in Massachusetts, where we had vacationed in the summer, and both took public school teaching jobs.

It took just two years in that idyllic coastal setting for me to realize that I might not want to remain in my marriage. Hippies had settled in the area to live off the land, and these natural folk were instrumental in my awakening. The way had been paved somewhat, before we moved, by my involvement with hippies in the antiwar movement, but meeting these back-to-nature people gave me a whole new understanding of the embodiment of the holy.

I learned not only to delight in the ways of embodiment but also to be strong. As I came into closer contact with the nonhuman forms of life and processes of existence, I began to appreciate the human form and experience of embodiment and the transcendence that nature can afford when one is open to the birth of new experience. I learned how to fish, and not only that—I learned how to catch and bait live eels and blood worms; I learned how to gaff a thirty-pound striped bass, take it off the hook, and later how to clean and cook it. I learned how to surf-cast, and how to do many of these things in the middle of the night. I learned how to hunt, clean, and eat game and how to dig clams. I learned how to raise vegetables, and I personally shoveled and plowed into the ground the much-too-large mountain of turkey manure I had had delivered to enrich our sandy soil. I also taught school and did all the housework—and, when necessary, the extra things, such as climbing up on the roof of the house to fix the TV antenna.

I learned that adults have parties where they sing and dance and generally carry on, I learned about homemade wine and beer, and I learned that what one wears can be determined as much by flair as by uniform cultural expectations.

And so one day I decided that we should host a party. It took place in the late afternoon and early evening, and I made the setting as much like the parties I had been to as I could. I cooked a variety of homegrown or self-caught dishes, bought some beer and wine, and played the records I had by The Doors, Bob Dylan, Cat Stevens, and The Rolling Stones.

Somewhere in the midst of the festivities, a game of tag was initiated. I don't remember all of the details, but I do recall that water was somehow involved, that my husband was off in a quiet corner somewhere, and that a group of us were running around and in and out of the house and sun porch. I was barefoot, and in my twenty-seven-year-old wisdom I had chosen to wear what I was sure no one would recognize as actually a nightgown—a white cotton shift with a red strawberry on the front. The strawberry had a big bite taken out of it.

The door to the sun porch had screening in the top half and glass in the bottom. During one of the gala dashes around and through the house, someone—it might have been me—slammed the door too hard, and the glass shattered. Glass and bare feet everywhere, in the midst of play, laughter, and rock 'n' roll.

I was surprised but was focused on cleaning up and carrying on when suddenly I heard my husband say, in a deeply authoritative voice, "All right, everybody! Enough is enough!" His words reverberated in my entire body as I remembered that those were the exact words I had heard as a child every time I got excited about something or talked too much.

That was the end of the party, the first and last party we had—and the beginning of the events that led to our separation. What I had been experiencing, as, finally, "enough" of an experience of transcendence, he saw as too much chaos.

As I think about it now, the smashing of the glass, almost like the wedding ritual of smashing a glass, seemed like a kind of natural break with the past and a leap into the future. In some gradual, almost imperceptible way, using even the difficult circumstances of my overly constrained youth, nature had carried me into a deeper relationship with the ground of being, into a deeper love of what is, to the new life that can spring from what is if we but open our minds and our hearts and declare, "This, this is enough."

The thirteenth-century Sufi mystic Rumi thought of words both as the embodiment of our longing, our thirst, to know and to return to the source from which we came, and as a sign that we are separate. As we search for words to describe the meaning of the sacred, let us not forget to open our minds and hearts to the things, to the silence, of the sacred as well.

This is Rumi's poem "A Thirsty Fish":

I don't get tired of you. Don't grow weary  
of being compassionate toward me!

All this thirst equipment  
must surely be tired of me,  
the water jar, the water carrier.

I have a thirsty fish in me  
that can never find enough  
of what it's thirsty for!

Show me the way to the ocean!  
Break these half-measures,  
these small containers.

All this fantasy  
and grief.

Let my house be drowned in the wave  
that rose last night out of the courtyard  
hidden in the center of my chest.

Joseph fell like the moon into my well.  
The harvest I expected was washed away.  
But no matter.

A fire has risen above my tombstone hat.  
I don't want learning, or dignity,  
or respectability.

I want this music and this dawn  
and the warmth of your cheek against mine.

The grief-armies assemble,  
but I'm not going with them.

This is how it always is  
when I finish a poem.

A great silence overcomes me,  
and I wonder why I ever thought  
to use language.

(Barks 1995, 19)

### THE PRACTICE OF STORY

I stood one day on a cliff above the Pacific, looking down at a sea otter that bobbed in the surf far below. The otter floated happily and busily on its back in the water, holding an abalone in its forepaws and cracking the abalone's shell open with a rock.

. . . The little animal was constantly being moved this way and that by the water, but seemed to pay no attention to this movement as it concentrated on its task. And I thought, how different from mine its experience of life must be, living in a medium in such flux and so unlike the hard ground on which I stood.

But as I thought about it further, I realized that the medium in which I live is far more turbulent than anything the sea otter could ever conceive of—because, as a human being, I bob about in a sea of symbols, an ocean of words. . . .

In the long time scale of evolution, we are still new to this symbolic medium. We don't yet know how to get around in it very well. We hardly even know we are in it. We repeatedly create symbolic systems of meaning—religions, political ideologies, scientific theories—and then forget that they are our creations; we have a devilish habit of confusing them with the mysterious nonhuman reality they were meant to explain. . . .

For centuries, some of our greatest minds have sought to comprehend the nature of this symbolic universe—to make us see, first of all, that we live in such a medium, and then to show us its limits and its possibilities. This has been going on for a long time: it is some 2,500 years since the Buddha had his moment of profound insight into the illusory nature of human experience. . . .

A mere couple of centuries ago, most societies recognized a single official reality and dedicated themselves to destroying its opposition. You could get burned at the stake for suggesting that there might be more than one version of reality. Today, in some intellectual circles, you can get into trouble for suggesting there might be only one. . . .

We do not comprehend what a stunning—and yet still incomplete—upheaval of thought has occurred in the recent historical past. . . .

We can see, if we look closely at the ideas and events of the postmodern world, a new sensibility emerging—a way of being that puts the continual creation of reality at the heart of every person's life, at the heart of politics, and at the heart of human evolution. . . .



. . . life is a matter of telling ourselves stories about life, and of savoring stories about life told by others, and of living our lives according to such stories, and of creating ever-new and more complex stories about stories—and . . . this story making is not just about human life, but is human life. (Anderson 1990, ix–xiii, 102)

Nature, the ongoing birthing of all that is, is enough to satisfy our thirst for transcendence. If we but open the arms of our minds and hearts, nature can carry us to an experience of new life, to a knowing of the love this universe pours out, to wisdom about how we are to live our days in order to be of use ourselves in carrying that love and new life to the world. In knowing nature as the birthing of all that is, we also may know nature in other more specific ways—as the nonhuman forms and processes of the universe or as all the various forms and experiences of human living. For me, *God* signifies the capacity of life, of nature, to be made ever new by the transforming power of love.

In this section I reflect on a particular method I have found helpful in making these ideas a deeper part of how I live my life and suggest it as one sort of spiritual practice we might consider helpful on a personal, communal, or even a political level. This is the practice of *story*.

A significant part of the work of IRAS conferences in recent years, as well as of the whole science-and-religion dialogue, has been to frame nature, cosmogenesis, the epic of evolution, as a story. People have expressed in various ways that the scientific story of the evolution of the cosmos is now understood to be so relational, and evolution such a continuous dynamic from the cosmic to the cultural, that narrative and the arts, in addition to science, have become important tools for appropriating the significance of this understanding. It has gradually become more and more clear that there is religious and moral significance to the scientific epic and that we have responsibility to appropriate it for the good of the world.

Among the persons who have lifted up the narrative quality of the epic of evolution are some who are very familiar in the IRAS community—Loyal Rue, Ursula Goodenough, and Philip Hefner. Rue is hopeful that our evolved neural structures for constructing coherent and emotionally textured narratives of ongoing experience will enable us to make use of the scientific account of how things are and which things matter by telling it in a compelling story fashion. He writes about the epic of evolution becoming *Everybody's Story* (Rue 2000), and Goodenough writes of the story as one “beautifully suited to anchor our search for planetary consensus, telling us of our nature, our place, our context” (1998, 174). The epic of evolution is a grand story that affirms that nature is enough.

But Hefner, a theologian and leader in IRAS for decades, has reflected on this endeavor with a slightly different emphasis. I have heard him acknowledge that the epic of evolution tells us of the interconnectedness by which every atom of our bodies has been somewhere else, as far away as the stars. However, he thinks it may take us a couple of centuries to sort these

things out. I have heard him say that love is the only myth that will do and that the epic of evolution doesn't quite make it in that regard. He would make the epic the loom, the way things are, and our stories of faith and love the description of what matters that we weave on that loom.

By storytelling I do not mean finding and reading and telling the stories of faith and love written by others in books, although this too can be a very meaningful spiritual practice. I mean recognizing moments of encounters with faith and love on our spiritual journey and putting a little frame around those moments. It's creating a personal scripture from our life experience to which we can return again and again for sustenance of our faith and wisdom about how we are to be of use.

Sam Keen, in his book *To a Dancing God*, wrote of a correspondence between our stories of faith and the universe story:

[An] article of faith hidden in the act of storytelling is the confidence that the scale of Being is such that a human being can grasp the meaning of the whole. Personality is not an epiphenomenon in an alien world of matter ruled by chance and number but is the key to the cosmos. [The human] is a microcosm; thus, in telling [our] stories, [we] may have confidence that [our] warm, concrete, dramatic images are not unrelated to the forces that make for the unity of the macrocosm. (Keen 1970, 97)

In Old French, the word *story* for "a floor of a house" is the same as the word *story* meaning "tale" (perhaps because of "storied" windows, a legend for each floor). The related word *store*, the verb, in its history means "to begin with, repair, replenish." The word *knowledge*, in its history, includes the meaning of "quaint, familiar."

If, as Walter Truett Anderson says, life is a matter of telling stories, perhaps it is because through our stories we come to be at home in the universe, because we are able to make nature familiar in story and, in doing so, to know the repair and the replenishment that enable us to transcend that which keeps us and the world from being bearers of new life.

I stumbled gradually, and late in life, into the discovery that I had within me sustaining stories of faith and love from my own experience. Once I made this discovery, I began to make not just the telling of my stories but the listening to others' a central part of my ministry. Always, for me, in the telling of or listening to a story is the question, What does this story say about my own, or the other's, belief?

And always, for me, that is the hard part. Often, as I listen to another's story and then ask, "What is this story telling you about the sacred?" it is hard for the person to respond. Why is this?

It has occurred to me in the process of writing (and avoiding writing) these chapel reflections that the reasons we avoid personal or public *writing* on matters and stories of meaning are similar to the reasons we avoid personal or public *telling*, and that the differences are simply a matter of degree of fear and trembling. For example, I find more similarity than

difference between the feeling I experience while *writing* public reflections or personal stories on matters of faith and the feeling I imagine is taking place when I sit with a couple I'm going to be marrying and say, "So, *tell* me something about how you share the spiritual dimensions of your lives." The response is almost always some version of dead silence, followed by extensive throat-clearing, nervous glances at each other, at me, and at the ceiling, and giggles.

I recently read a book by Canadian author Margaret Atwood called *Negotiating with the Dead—A Writer on Writing*. She says,

[My] hypothesis is that not just some, but all writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead. . . . Narration—storytelling—is the relation of events unfolding through time. You can't hold a mirror up to Nature and have it be a story unless there's a metronome ticking somewhere. (Atwood 2002, 156, 158–59)

It occurs to me that, whether you are a famous writer like Atwood, seeking to reach a large public audience with stories of the meaning of life, or a person seeking to share your thirst for transcendence with a loved one, you are likely to encounter both great motivation and great fear. The storytelling that goes into such sharing brings to awareness our mortality and vulnerability, because narration is always accompanied by the ticking of the metronome.

Atwood tells of a conversation with friends in which she observed that this process of seeking a word of immortality in narration and instead finding stories that drag us through the depths of our finitude before offering up any hope of replenishment has been going on for a long time. She mentions the Babylonian creation myth:

Gilgamesh was the first writer. . . . He wants the secret of life and death, he goes through hell, he comes back, but he hasn't got immortality, all he's got is two stories—the one about his trip, and the other, extra one, about the flood. So the only thing he really brings back with him is a couple of stories. Then he's really, really tired, and then he writes the whole thing down on a stone. . . . Going into a narrative—into the narrative process—is a dark road. You can't see your way ahead. . . . The well of inspiration is a hole that leads downwards. (Atwood 2002, 176)

I can relate to Atwood's description of Gilgamesh's experience. Ministry is among those roles where you set yourself up to offer a word about the secrets of life and death, the secrets of nature and transcendence. You go through hell, you come back, and all you've got is a story, and you write it down on a scrap of paper, but the question of whether or not the story is of any use feels like a stone in your heart.

A similar thing can happen in our personal relationships. Most of us thirst to have a word with loved ones and friends about the secrets of life and death and how we are to be of use. We go through hell trying to figure

out a way to talk about these things without feeling foolish and vulnerable, so maybe, maybe, we finally screw up our courage and tell a story. But the story is scary because in every story there is a clock.

As I was pondering the value of telling particular stories of faith and love in order to elucidate and internalize the epic of evolution, in order to know the transcendent in nature as the birthing of all that is, I thought about the resistance we experience at times when we go on the hard journey, down the dark road, into the well from which these stories emerge, and I came across something, or something came across me, that helped.

It was the book *God Is a Verb—Kabbalah and the Practice of Mystical Judaism* by Rabbi David A. Cooper. He discusses the development of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's idea that God is a verb:

The kind of verb that represents God-ing is different from the ones we have in our ordinary language. Most of our verbs are considered transitive, which require a direct object, or intransitive, which do not. . . . God-ing is a mutually interactive verb, one which entails an interdependency between two subjects, each being the object for the other. . . . Communicating could be such a verb. . . . My verbal communication is dependent upon a listener; it cannot be a one-way street.

We can relate to God as an interactive verb [God-ing]. Moreover, from this perspective, creation should not be treated as a noun. It too is an interactive verb; it is constantly creation-ing. And . . . you should not treat yourself as a noun—as Joan, or Bill, or Barbara, or John. With regard to God as an interactive, you are also verbs; you are Joan-ing, Bill-ing, Barbara-ing, or John-ing in relation to God-ing. (Cooper 1997, 69–70)

I find courage in this perspective. It is a reminder that, just as much of science has shifted recently from the concept of the cosmos to the concept of cosmogenesis and the birthing of all that is, so the personal religious language we use to point to what matters in this scientific account of what is should keep pace. One of the things our personal particular stories can do is to help us recall that our stories of what matters must now be stories of relationships, of emergence, of waiting for life to evolve.

In other words, if God is no longer a being with certain set characteristics, and if the cosmos has now become one eternal and infinite experience of being in labor, then we have no right to continue to claim ourselves as things. We are, rather, more obviously a work in progress, birthing what we can.

This really takes the pressure off. Imagine if you had 15 billion years to come to consciousness. We don't, of course, but we do have many chances in our existence as verbs to try and try again. I recognized this opportunity when, some seventeen years ago, I remarried. My spouse, Frank, and I used this quote from Tom Robbins (1980) on our wedding invitation: ". . . people are never perfect, but love can be. . . . We waste time looking for the perfect lover instead of creating the perfect love."

If we are, in fact, mutually interactive verbs, then we've got each other. So if you have a story to tell of faith and love, of what matters to you, or a

story of a time or a way you felt overwhelmed by human finitude and your own mortality, for God's sake go ahead and tell it. The story doesn't have to be perfect; the love behind the telling will birth new life.

"THE CHAIR THAT GOT STUCK IN THE STAIRWELL"

I close with a story of my fear of telling and of how thinking of God and myself as verbs enabled me to remember the essence of nature and to transcend my stuckness. I call the story "The Chair that Got Stuck in the Stairwell."

I began thinking about my role as chaplain speaker at this conference during the church year, when, as I mentioned earlier, I co-led an adult program on the conference theme. Along with the group members, I did some reading and wrote a few sermons related to the theme. But it had been a challenging church year, and I still had a mountain of reading I hoped to get through before putting pen to paper and actually committing myself to a few words about our mortality, nature, and transcendence.

At the beginning of July the clock was ticking, and Frank offered me three weeks alone on Cape Cod to work. We have a fixer-upper house there in Orleans, an old house on a beautiful acre of majestic evergreens, all kinds of flowers and birds and other assorted wildlife. Frank offered to keep our child, Isaac, in Arlington and let me have some solitude. "Only thing is," he said, "I want you to write and not get involved in fixing up the house, gardening, and all those other things you do."

I listened to his words but said to myself, "He doesn't understand that I can't possibly begin to write until I've cleaned the house from the winter, weeded the flower garden, reestablished my self-care routine of going to the gym, set up a work space in the house, read all these books I'm taking with me, and gone through my previous writing for Star Island to make sure I don't repeat myself."

The day I arrived with a van full of boxes of old sermons and books it was about a hundred degrees, and humid. As soon as I completed the task of unloading, it was time, of course, to take a swim in the ocean. The next day's priority was buying and setting up fans and figuring out where my writing spot would be. My usual spot in that house is in an unfinished second-floor room, which, when it's over eighty degrees, is unbearable.

So I proceeded to rearrange the house and set up a space elsewhere. The couch at one end of the living room had to be moved into the bedroom so that I could have a desk and chair in that area that would be okay for long hours of sitting, and this change necessitated moving several other pieces of furniture.

After a few days I had the space all set up, but I noticed that my back was killing me from all the furniture moving, and this necessitated several visits to the chiropractor. In the midst of that self-care, I began to realize

that if I had kept myself in better shape during the year, and gone to the gym more often, I probably would have been able to move the furniture with ease, and so I began a routine of going to the gym in the mornings.

After a week or so I finally felt that I was ready to begin the reading that might lead to the writing, to the telling. But the chair I had put in my work space for reading, my grandmother's old wicker rocker, was not quite right. My back bothered me as I sat in that chair. So the next project became selecting a new chair from those in the house. Somewhere in the midst of this frantic moving about of chairs between the main level and the attic room leading to my usual study, a chair got stuck in the stairwell to the attic.

That stairwell is narrow, which I had not realized until I had already made up my mind that a particular armchair was *going to* get to the second floor. The chair was straight from the fifties, with a white plastic one-piece sloped seat and back and black painted one-piece arm and leg units on each side.

I got the chair into the stairwell, sacrificing a bit of the door molding along the way and tearing up my poster map of Harvard Divinity School, which decorated the stairwell. But (perhaps because of my renewed strength from going to the gym) I pushed so hard to get the chair up the stairs, where it refused to go, that I couldn't get it out.

The chair filled the stairwell. There was no way to get around it. The lights were on upstairs, and there were things up there I needed for my writing, and the windows were open, and if there were a storm everything would get wet, and what would Frank say when he came down to the Cape and found a chair stuck in the stairwell?

Somewhere in the midst of this hour of pushing and pulling and trying to force an answer to the problem, somewhere in the midst of being near tears at the awareness of my own foolish procrastination in writing a word about matters of mortality and meaning, I began to wonder whether I could find something positive in the situation. I remembered that I had not done my upper-body exercises at the gym the last time, and so perhaps I could see this push-pull experience as a make-up session.

Then I remembered the book *God Is a Verb*. Well, I thought to myself, here I am—Barbara-ing in my usual way. But that means I can change. I'm a reality in motion, in emergence, in evolution. And so is this chair. I actually began to imagine the chair as a sacred part of nature that was itself becoming, chair-ing, and I began to pay attention to what it would tell me do.

It spoke very clearly once we started being interactive verbs paying attention to our sacred relationship. "Go get the screwdriver," said the chair, "and unscrew my arms and legs." I had not noticed that the arm and leg units were removable. I followed the chair's advice, it got to where it needed to go, and after that I did indeed get down to work.

We need to speak with each other not only of how things are but also of which things matter. We need to be emboldened to construct many emotionally textured narratives, stories of faith and love, that might bless our days and guide us in being of use. The use of our particular stories of faith and love can serve the purposes of healing, of beginning again, of replenishment in the world. Stories from our own experience can sustain us specifically in the face of our immortality, our finitude.

I conclude with a reading about story that is familiar to many of you. It is found in the beginning of Elie Wiesel's novel on the Holocaust, *The Gates of the Forest* (1966):

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer." And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.

Wiesel concludes that God made us because God loves stories.

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