

Elisabeth Dearborn: Seized by the Power of a Great Affection

A sermon for Seekers Church

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Elisabeth Dearborn

Seized by the Power of a Great Affection

"Seized by the power of a great affection" is a Baptist term Gordon Cosby used some 20 years ago to talk about call. We go numb, he said, in the midst of a society filled with violence, and we need – in the face of that numbness – to be so moved that we break through to a place of divine power. It is divine energy living inside each of us that can speak truth to power, divine energy that we as a community can enable in each of us, divine energy that the world needs.

In the scripture lesson for today ([Mark 10: 46-52](#)), we have the story of Bartimaeus crying out to Jesus. Like Bartimaeus, I have cried out, "Teacher, let me see again." Like Bartimaeus, I have been given the gift of a new way of seeing. I wonder if this is not what Gordon meant when he spoke of being seized by the power of a great affection.

We have heard in the last two weeks [Kate](#) and [Sherri](#) testifying in their own lives to the movement of the Holy Spirit. They have invited us to dialogue with them about new understandings, and I come today with a similar message. I believe that the moving of our physical space as a church is a catalyst for moving each of us inwardly. I rejoice in being

community with you at a time of inward and outward shift! I want to share some of what has been arising thanks to the persistent efforts of the Holy Spirit.

For the first thirty years of my life, the God I knew was a God of the mountains and the night sky, a God of nature in her vast, unpredictable mystery. In my early 30's, I was opened to the God of the church and to issues of call and faithfulness. These two Gods, the God of nature and the God of the church, are demanding a conversation. How does my spiritual life support my love for the planet? How does my love for the planet inform my spiritual life?

I see that we all live on a planet that is in grave danger. The call to serve her is not optional. It is not like other calls. She gives us the foundation of life. She gives us the manifestation of creation. She gives us both literal and spiritual ground of being. She is losing species, soil, forests, air, clean water. Are we, too, losing parts of ourselves? I find myself increasingly centered on these questions and wondering how to explore them in ways that are life-giving. I see that loving the earth is essential to our own wholeness.

Tempter: I am too busy. I cannot possibly take on one more thing. Doesn't this woman know I am already out too many nights? I am numb in those deeper regions. Let me stay numb.

I have asked The Tempter to come along today because no call is worth its salt without a good challenger.

The Tempter: Challenger? The environmental movement is a pit. People who get involved in it become obsessed – and angry. They are devoured by their concern. Forget it.

I am not going there.

Let me talk about love. Hundreds of praying mantises were born

in our upstairs bathroom two Advents ago – the mantis being the symbol for God to the Kalahari Bushmen and a totem animal for me. I was awed. I watched over months as the many mantis became just three. We fed the mantis herd pinhead crickets and they lived in an aquarium. By spring Patton, Eisenhower and Bradley had separate aquariums. Just before Mother's Day, the survivor, Patton, unfurled her silky green wings after a final metamorphosis. We released her at dusk to the by now warm enough spring nights out of doors. I love the praying mantis. This love found me, not one I went looking for. How do I let that love which in some ways is so small become big? How do I let the passion for the mantis – and all that the mantis has meant to generations of Bushmen – transform me?

The Tempter: Of course we love the earth. Why is she harping on that? We all care. We just do not know what to do. What is the point of touching the love if it is all too big to do anything about? It is too overwhelming. I am not going there. As I said, it is a pit.

Six weeks ago, my journey with the mantis mother took me to an intensive training with international environmentalists, led by Joanna Macy. Powerfully overhead was the sound of the helicopter as it refueled for a logging operation in Ramsey Gulch one mile away. A 70-degree slope prevented traditional methods. Local laws were in conflict with state laws; the current situation in California over logging redwoods is tumultuous. Young people with forest names – Sage, Blackbird, Ivy, Hog Farm – Earth First – activists – were sitting in some of these ancient trees; they had set up a village of rope walks and platforms protecting a grove of 80 or so trees. We were organizing in support of them – to bring supplies directly into the site, to create a media alert, to contact local community folks about ongoing support. We were coordinating a public demonstration in front of the business office of Roger Burch, the owner illegally logging Ramsey Gulch. \$8000 per tree for second growth, \$100,000 for old

growth: it's not heard to imagine why Roger Burch who lives nowhere near Ramsey Gulch was murdering its watershed, its habitat, and these ancient trees. As an absentee landlord, he doesn't appear to care about the potential flooding downstream in Watsonville; he cares about results in monetary terms; he runs helicopters 12 hours a day 6 days week pulling out the maximum load on his timber harvest plan. He is a product of the Industrial Growth Society.

I have never been an environmental activist. This time I felt like the latest in a long evolutionary line of redwoods, this time with hands and feet and a brain, but a consciousness that was the ancient trees. No, it said, very simply, inside my brain. I was on the front line of this demonstration with a set of leaflets talking to people as they pulled to the stoplight in front of Roger's office. "Would you like to know more about the redwoods? " Alternatively "This is a local issue we're concerned about. Would you like to know more?" Or, trying in a few moments to create connection, one driver said,"

"I come from a long line of loggers." Oh-oh, I said to myself. Then she went on, "And I hate these modern methods. The old style loggers always cared about sustainability."

It was an experience of revolutionary expansion for me, of moving from a place of love so old and so ancient. I have never touched anything like it. Had a part of me been woken up doing the work with Joanna to name the grief, to feel it fully, and to unleash the power of love that comes when you integrate what you have been repressing?

Joanna's work gave rise to my experience of activism and to my recognition that I wanted to devote my life to The Great Turning. By that, I mean The Great Turning from an Industrial Growth Society to a Life Sustaining Society. The Work That Reconnects; it is about reframing the despair that arises when we begin to look deeply at environmental realities. Therefore,

before I say more, I want you to turn to someone near you and, for a moment, touch your own heart. Make a pair. Person A should tap person B. Person A should answer with two open sentences: "What I love in nature is _____". "What I feel about losing this is _____". Then Person B: "What I love in nature is _____". "What I feel about losing this is _____".

This love we have for the redwood trees, for the mantis, for our own Potomac River: this love is something much bigger and more interconnected than I have ever realized. It moves through us and between us creating a giant web. We all have this call to serve the earth. We are sitting on it. It is not optional. How do we all begin to live from a place of connectedness to the earth? In our own community, how do we begin to see this connection in all we do and ask each other the questions that arise from this connection – questions like

Do we need paper products every Tuesday we have the School of Christian Living dinners?

Have you tried carrying a bandana and not using paper towels anywhere?

Other questions – How do we enable the shift from idea to action? What rituals of grieving can clear our minds and hearts of the numbing? I was aware that we touched this together for the first time for me in this community in the class on Spiritual Direction, sharing the scars on our bodies and their meaning to us; we could as well share the scars on earth's body that each of us carries. What kind of teaching would really turn us into a school for everyday prophets? How do we create a nourished planet?

Joanna teaches inner tools for people who care about the earth, who want the love and the interconnectedness to flow and who want to support each other in not staying stuck in the inevitable numbness and too much-ness. That is I. Maybe that

is you, too.

Is "despair" the modern day word for sin? Is it time for us as a community to engage in a conscious effort to shift consciousness?

The Tempter: Of course people are in despair. It takes 240,000 years for the plutonium our Dept of Energy disposed of in American soil to become non-toxic. We are poisoning our own nest. The polar cap will be reduced 50% in size from 1950 to 2050. What kind of tools could you possibly have for that kind of reality?

What would enable such deep joy in you that you could look at the deepest of suffering and know that you have great hope? What would enable such a deep trust in the interconnectedness that you could look at the deepest of suffering and know that you have great heart? What is it for you to be seized by the power of a great affection?

Relax; close your eyes. Open your awareness to the fellow beings who share with you this planet time...in this town, this country, in other lands. Now, let your awareness open wider yet to encompass all beings who have ever lived of all races and creeds and walks of life, See the vast vistas of these fellow being stretching into the distance, like successive mountain ranges...Now consider the fact that in each of these innumerable lives there was a gesture of generosity, a gift of love, an act of valor or self-sacrifice. From these beings arose actions of courage and kindness, of teaching and healing. Let yourself see these many and immeasurable acts of goodness. Use your hands. Pile them up. Pat them into a ball The Great Ball of Goodness. Hold it now and weigh it in your hands. Rejoice in it, knowing that no act of goodness is ever lost. It remains forever and always a present resource, a means for the transformation of life. So holding the Great Ball of Goodness in your hands, open your eyes and turn make a

partner with a person near you, remaining silent:

You are about to behold the uniqueness of this particular human being. Look at them seeing the gifts this person is not even aware of, powers this person could use for the healing of the world if believed and acted upon. Let yourself become aware of the pain, the sorrows and failures of this life, hurts beyond telling, recognize that your capacity to be with your partners suffering is compassion. Look again and see how good it would be to work together on a common project, share the joy in each other's joy! Give to each other the Great Ball of Goodness you hold in your hands and take from them their ball. Let your awareness drop within you like a stone, sinking below the level of what words can express – to the deep web of relationship that underlies all experience, the web which interweaves us through all space and time – see the being before you as if seeing the face of one who at another time was your lover, your parent, your child, and now you meet again on this brink of time, knowing that your lives are as inextricably interwoven as nerve cells in the mind of a great being. Out of that vast web you cannot fall. Nothing can ever sever you from that Great Love. Out of it we can act, we can risk anything; we can let every encounter be a homecoming. Close your eyes.

To regard the poisoning of the earth as beyond us suggests that we do not take seriously the injunction to love. We are called to take heart. We are called to hope. May we begin to see each other and each person we meet in this new way, releasing each person gifts for the healing of the world, releasing in him or her powers that can resound to the joy of all beings for all time. May it be so. Amen.