

# “Radical Rest for Active Souls” by Kolya Braun-Greiner

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## Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

When I reflected on the themes expressed in the scriptures for today I confess that I felt disgruntled and mystified, “What the heck am I going to preach about?” I entertained a conclusion that I’d chosen the wrong week. Have you ever felt that way? So I let it sit and simmer for a week and came back to them. I then applied the practice of *lectio divina* with the question: What words or phrases shimmer? Then I found that there within the first verses of Psalm 23, the phrase “still waters” and “restores sour souls” did indeed shimmer for me. Then I struggled with “Oh dear God, the 23rd Psalm is so tired, I can’t find a way to preach about that.” But sometimes the “tired” scriptures have a new or deeper meaning to be revealed to us. Is it actually “tired” or rather, “tried and

true”?

“God leads me beside still waters and restores my soul.” I am keenly interested in those practices and disciplines that sustain us, with what I call spiritual resilience. The message of rest for our souls from a tired or tried Psalm seems relevant, for we are living in such tiring and trying times. We who care deeply about addressing all the injustices, abuses, and desecration occurring on a massive scale can easily become exhausted with compassion fatigue. One of the most common expressions I’ve been hearing from my friends lately as they listen to the news each day of not one but multiple insults to humanity and the planet is: beleaguered.

Just these past few days I heard:

- children in detention facilities are forced to sleep on concrete floors with the lights on all night and without blankets – sounds like torture to me
- the administration wants to scrap the Endangered Species Act in favor of placing priority on the economic value of the mineral or energy potential of lands which contain those species
- the Arctic Circle temperature reached 90 degrees when it’s normally in the 50’s in summer

The temptation is to just get busier. But working harder isn’t necessarily working smarter. In fact it has a deleterious effect on both our affect and our effect.

In this vein I am reminded of the wisdom of Thomas Merton, who gently admonished activists:

*There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many*

*projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.*<sup>1</sup>

“It kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.” Radical rest for radical action – radical, like the word radish, comes from the word rooted. Radical rest calls for radical rootedness, which nurtures our inner wisdom.

My own radical actions have not always been borne out of a radical rootedness. In manifesting the wisdom I heard again expressed by Margreta a few weeks ago, I will venture to express my own vulnerability. On the Enneagram, which for those of you who don't know, is a personality typing system, I am a 6, but 6's are a different animal from the other 9 types in that they manifest in two ways. The predominant passion or fixation is fear and, in broad strokes, 6's tend to be either phobic or counter phobic. I am counter phobic, which means I do easily feel fearful, but I tend to run or even rush toward those things I fear the most, so as to resolve the discomfort I feel. This can with discernment be an expression of courage, but it can also be unreflective and unhealthy for body and soul. Too much of this can lead to exhaustion and burnout.

Even the radical Jesus advocated for rest. Of course Jesus and the disciples got interrupted and their rest was deferred with Jesus compassionate response to the crowd. Nonetheless, Jesus did advocate for a restful “coming away” for restoration and we have other examples of that in his ministry. He invited them to “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” Here the word “rest” connotes a broader and deeper wisdom: cease from labor in order to recover one's strength, to refresh oneself. And the 23rd Psalm invokes a similar invocation with the Hebrew word *mnuwchah* (men-oo-

kwah) meaning “a quiet resting place,” that is, waters of rest and restoration. God brings us to these waters of rest and restores our soul and guess what?! The word for restores is *shuwb* (shuv) the root word of which is literally... “the primitive root.” What practice of rooted rest restores your soul?

Allow me to share some of my practices here that restore my soul when I too am feeling beleaguered. Those shimmering words “still waters” were footnoted with this – in Hebrew it means “waters of rest” or restful waters. A practice that I do almost daily is walk beside the waters of Sligo Creek or Long Branch of the Anacostia watershed. I have deep gratitude for the blessing of living in a neighborhood between these Creeks. Besides restoring my soul, it also fuels the faith-based watershed literacy and restoration work that I do. As I walk I listen to the music of the creek as it spills over rocks and I am reminded of the poetry of Wendell Berry who says, “It is the impeded stream that sings.”

I also realized that this practice of stream walking began when I was a teenager living in rural Michigan. I would wander down the hill and through the field to wooded place where a stream babbled and flowed into the lake behind our house. Sitting and listening to the stream gave me solace during hard times. It was also the first place I experienced what I now know to be one of the two books of God’s Word. As Martin Luther said, “God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees and flowers and clouds and stars.”

Being near water has been shown by scientific research to have uplifting and calming affects on the nervous system – an outcome that could certainly support our spiritual resilience for the times in which we live. The marine biologist Wallace Nichols coined the phrase “Blue Mind” in his book by the same title, to express the emotional, behavioral, psychological and physical connections which explain the human enchantment with water. The studies show that even thinking about water has

some positive results such as greater peace of mind, but being near water is even more effective – God lead us beside those still waters.

Another practice that restores my soul is hearing stories the bolster my hope and courage. The power and role that stories play in providing restoration is so aptly expressed by Barry Lopez:

*The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves.*

So I will offer 2 such stories that came to me which provide care for my soul with hope that perhaps they will speak to your soul as well..

The first comes from Rachel Naomi Ramen's *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, a story she also told at the Bioneers Conference a few years ago. (You can listen to her tell "Becoming a Blessing" on YouTube.) She tells this story as told to her by her grandfather, a Rabbi, and it's from the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah.

*In the beginning there was only the Holy Darkness, the Ein Sof, the source of life. Then in the course of history at a moment in time this world, the world of 1000 thousand things, emerged from the heart of the Holy Darkness as a great ray of light.*

*And then (perhaps because this is a Jewish story) there was an accident. The vessels containing the light of the world, the wholeness of the world, broke. And the wholeness of the world, the light of the world was scattered into 1000 thousand fragments of light. And they fell into all events*

*and all people, where they remain deeply hidden until this very day.*

*According to my grandfather, the whole human race is a response to this accident. We are here because we are born with the capacity to find the hidden light in all events and all people, and to lift it up and make it visible once again, and thereby to restore the innate wholeness of the world.*

*This is a very important story for the world today. This task is called tikkun olam in Hebrew, which means the restoration of the whole world. This is a collective task. It involves all people who have ever been born, all people presently alive and all people yet to be born. We are all healers of the world.<sup>2</sup>*

This story opens a sense of possibility. It's not about healing the world by making a huge difference. It's about healing the world that touches you. That's around you. This is our power. Many people feel powerless in today's situation.

These are trying times. Let's turn to Jeremiah for a few moments hearing about another trying time. The prophet lambasts the "false shepherds" who "scatter the flock." Our scripture today culminates Jeremiah's long exhortation addressed to these false shepherds, the kings of Judah who have strayed from God's mission, calling them to repent. The exhortation begins back in Chapter 22 where he declares: "Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place." He is denouncing a class of morally depraved leaders who wronged the people and have foretold peace while evil prevails. They are as the Jerome Bible commentary says so aptly "flatterers of popular passions." Sound familiar? Fast forward applying

Jeremiah's lambast today: "Woe to those who scatter the flock" with polarizing rhetoric and policies that are divisive, thinly veiled with racism and xenophobia while doing evil to the alien, the orphan and widow. Note that a media study shows that the flock members that listen to FOX news have less empathy for immigrants. A trying time of people led by false shepherds or without a shepherd at all (as Jesus expressed)

Indeed these are trying times, in which we may feel a wearing down of our resilience and a wearying of our souls. A common response I hear is apocalyptic thinking expressed through dystopian stories, troubling especially in their popularity among young people. But those stories do not restore my soul. We may need to go back, way back to traditional stories from deeply rooted cultures that provide an antidote to that train of thinking. Meaning and sources of restoration for our souls can come from the margins and the marginalized.

Another story that does this for me came to me from Michael Meade, a story about *Why the World Doesn't End*, the title of his book and was told in a talk he gave called "Holding the Thread of Life: A Human Response to the Unraveling of the World." Some of you may recall that one of my mentors, Joanna Macy, refers to these trying times as the Great Unraveling, on the way to and concurrent with the Great Turning.

This story as relevant today as it's been for the hundreds or thousands of years it's been told around the fire. Here is the story from the White Mountain Apache, adapted from his book, *Why the World Doesn't End*.

*The old people of the tribes would tell of a special cave where knowledge of the wonders and workings of the world could be found. Even now, some of the native people say that the cave of knowledge exists and might be discovered again. They say it is tucked away in the side of a mountain. "Not too far to go," they say, yet no one seems to find it anymore. Despite all the highways and byways, all the*

thoroughfares and back roads that crosscut the face of the earth, despite all the maps that detail and try to define each area, no one seems to find that old cave. That's too bad, they say, because inside the cave can be found genuine knowledge about how to act when the dark times come around again and the balance of the world tips away from order and slips towards chaos.

Inside the cave, there lives an old woman who remains unaffected by the rush of time and the confusion and strife of daily life. She attends to other things; she has a longer sense of time and a deep capacity for vision. She spends most of her time weaving in the cave where light and shadows play. She wants to fashion the most beautiful garment in the whole world. She has been at this weaving project for a long time and has reached the point of making a fringe for the edge of her exquisitely designed cloak. She wants that fringe to be special; wants it to be meaningful as well as elegant, so she weaves it with porcupine quills. In order to use the porcupine quills, she must flatten each one with her teeth. After years of biting hard on the quills, her teeth have become worn down to nubs that barely rise above her gums. Still, the old woman keeps biting down and she keeps weaving on.

The only time she interrupts her weaving work is when she goes to stir the soup that simmers in a great cauldron at the back of the cave. The old cauldron hangs over a fire that began a long time ago. The old woman cannot recall anything older than that fire; it just might be the oldest thing there is in this world. Occasionally, she does recall that she must stir the soup that simmers over those flames. For that simmering stew contains all the seeds and roots that become the grains and plants and herbs that sprout up all over the surface of the earth. If the old woman fails to stir the ancient stew once in a while, the fire will scorch the ingredients and there is no telling what troubles might



result from that.

*As the old woman shuffles slowly across the floor and makes her way to the back of the ancient cave, a black dog watches her every move. The dog was there all along. Seemingly asleep, it awakens as soon as the old weaver turns her attention from one task to the other. As she begins stirring the soup in order to sustain the seeds, the black dog moves to where the weaving lies on the floor of the cave. The dog picks up a loose thread with its teeth and begins pulling on it. As the black dog pulls on the loose thread, the beautiful garment begins to unravel. Since each thread has been woven to another, pulling upon one begins to undo them all. As the great stew is being stirred up, the elegant garment comes apart and becomes a chaotic mess on the floor.*

*When the old woman returns to take up her handiwork again, she finds nothing but chaos where there had been a garment of great elegance and beauty. The cloak she has woven with great care has been pulled apart, the fringe all undone; the effort of creation has been turned to naught. After a while, she bends down, picks up a loose thread, and begins to weave the whole thing again. As she pulls thread after thread from the chaotic mess, she begins again to imagine the most beautiful garment in the whole world. As she weaves, new visions and elegant designs appear before her and her old hands begin to knowingly give them vibrant shape. Soon she has forgotten the cloak she was weaving before as she concentrates on capturing the new design and weaving it into the most beautiful garment ever seen in the world.<sup>3</sup>*

Now Michael Meade explains, from this perspective trouble, caused by the black dog, is not fatal. The world has not ended. In fact each time, the unraveling stimulates the re-creation of the world again. So much more can be gleaned from this story, but the evidence of earth and God's Creation embodies this story, never an apocalyptic one of the total

annihilation of life. This kind of story affirms the unraveling, the falling apart, it is happening, it is real, while at the same time, always there is another regeneration is on the horizon. The old woman, ever-creating God, continues to re-weave the world. Meade goes on to say that trouble or chaos itself does not disturb the soul. The soul is imbued with strength and capacities for facing and even embracing a glorious trouble. Which brings me full circle: Trying times in which radical trouble calls for radical rest so that our souls are strengthened.

But what happens when Jesus calls the disciples away to rest? Listen for the breathless pace expressed in these phrases found in today's scripture:

- many were coming and going
- no leisure
- hurried there
- at once, and
- rushed about

Throughout the Gospel of Mark one experiences a rushing quality which I also feel in these trying times. The word "immediately" is found 79 times in the entire Gospels and half of those are in Mark's Gospel alone. Instead of rest they were followed, but Jesus responded by teaching the crowd of people. I can imagine he told them stories to restore their souls, who were living in hurried times within an empire. We too live in hurried, hurried times within an empire.

But Jesus Christ offered them peace. And Christ is our peace. As we heard from Ephesians, in Christ we are one body, without dividing wall, or need for a border wall, of hostility. We are one in Christ, no longer strangers or aliens. We are a household of God, a temple of the Spirit in so doing we also become a dwelling place for the Spirit within us.

So what are your waters of rest? Follow God's lead to restore

your soul so that the Spirit can dwell within you. Practice your own radical rest, nourishing your radical action to re-weave the world within a radical, rooted community.

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Doubleday 1966, Image Classic, reissued 1968, p 81
2. This story may be found in the transcript of Krista Tippet's March 10, 2016 "On Being" interview with Lawrence Kushner at <https://onbeing.org/programs/lawrence-kushner-kabbalah-and-the-inner-life-of-god/>
3. Michael Meade, *Why the World Doesn't End: Tales of Renewal in Times of Loss*, Greenfire Press, 2012