

The Pull of This World

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It begins...with a pull.

Maybe it comes from your solar plexus, or like something wrapped around your heart. Perhaps it's a collection of strands coming from your body that meet at one point and move forward from there. A couple of weeks ago here, when the oboist was playing during the Sunday service, I felt it in the way the intense and focused tone of the instrument pierced me and drew my soul upward to join the notes careening through the rafters. I had no choice but to go.

Longing isn't just a construct of the mind—it's an embodied experience.

In the Hebrew scriptures, Psalm 42 begins:

- ¹ As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When I think about times I've been thirsty—really thirsty—it wasn't theoretical. My brain didn't calculate that I'd only consumed this many cc's of liquid, and therefore I should replenish my fluid level. No. Every cell cried out for a tall glass of cool water as clear as the air, and that longing wouldn't let me go until I did something about it.

I moved here at the end of August from California, which has been experiencing its worst drought on record. Lakes are disappearing, reservoirs are drying up, wells are empty, crops are failing, and some communities are running out of water entirely. The Minnesota rainstorms felt like a miracle: I'd look out the window at another blustery day and nearly weep with gratitude. I knew how parched the land out west had become, but I hadn't realized how viscerally **I'd** been affected. I hadn't known that **I** was parched as well.

And I've probably made you all thirsty now. But that's not necessarily a bad thing. Because it means your body knows about that pull, that reach towards something necessary for life.

There are lots of words that we use to describe the kind of sensation I'm talking about, but "longing" is especially apt.

Now, I'm a certified nerd when it comes to language. Sitting on my desk right now is a copy of the Oxford English Dictionary, which I could get lost in for weeks. I love looking at the etymology of words, their origins, because I always uncover something intriguing. It's like visiting the childhood home of a friend: you get a glimpse of something that helps you see the person in a new light.

And while I usually let etymology just enrich the background of what I write, this time it seemed important to bring it out explicitly. Because with all these words—to yearn, to want, to desire, to long—I learned a lot while flipping through their old family albums.

Yearn, for example, derives from *eager* and is connected to the German word *gern*, meaning gladly or willingly. I picture *yearn* standing there with a smiling, energized anticipation for the thing it seeks.

Want, on the other hand, comes out of lack, deficiency, abandonment. I see it desperately trying to fill a hole with whatever it can grab, a look of near panic on its face.

Desire may harken back to the Latin *de sidere*: “from the stars.” It’s connected with wishing, demanding, expecting. I imagine the word pinning its hopes on something far away, mournful eyes searching out the unknowable.

And then there’s *longing*. It’s literally about growing longer, lengthening. But embedded within the idea of growing longer is that there’s a point that remains fixed, some baseline from which growth is measured.

The reason I like the word *longing* to describe this sacred sensation we’ve been talking about this month is because it doesn’t just focus on what’s out there. It’s not just about what’s up ahead, down the road, at some future point that may never arrive. It also requires me to be right here. It requires me to have a home base from which I measure my growth.

As Lilian Moore writes in “Letter to a Friend,” the text for today’s offering music:

Come soon.

Everything is lusting
for light,
thrusting
up
up
splitting the earth,
opening flaring fading,
seed
into shoot
bud
into flower
nothing
beyond its hour.

Like seedlings that reach for the sun, I must remain rooted in my life as I stretch upward. It’s tough to come unmoored and still continue to grow.

I was thinking about all this on a day when the Northern Lights were expected to be visible in this part of the state. Seeing the Northern Lights is pretty much the last item on my bucket list. There’s other stuff I certainly want to do, but this is the last one that has that compelling something special about it.

And so I bundled myself up on a cold night in early September to stand outside, and watch, and wait. I found a spot where I could see a decent swath of the sky, clear of trees and as dark as a city was likely to get. I soon realized that I didn't actually know which way to look, or if there even was a way to predict where the shimmering curtains of light would appear. Since they're called the Northern Lights, I mainly faced north for lack of a better plan.

As I turned up my collar against the unseasonably frozen air, I pondered longing and desire and yearning and all their subtle differences. But even as I sought out something among the stars—*desidero*—I knew that the aurora borealis was something that I *longed* for.

I long for it because it's one way that the invisible becomes visible. Suddenly, things that are normally beyond what human eyes can see—solar wind and magnetic fields and atoms of oxygen and nitrogen—they become these breathtaking displays of otherworldly color and movement. Yet they're displays we get to see right here on earth.

When it comes to seeking out what has been hidden, our psalmist was pretty bold:

When shall I come and behold
the face of God?

Now, that's kind of an audacious thing ask. Plenty of people in the Hebrew scriptures see an angel of God. Or signs from God—sure. They even hear the voice God. But the *face* of God? There are a few stories of folks who are said to have seen it, but at one point, God says to Moses, “You cannot see my face and live.”

But this psalm was written from exile, where the longing for home felt more acute and immediate than the mere survival.

The psalm goes on:

³ My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”
⁴ These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.

And later:

⁷ Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.

All these images of water—moving, flowing, pouring, thirsting. For the psalmist, seeing the divine was as essential to life as water.

But water is not to be trifled with. There's a reason it's one of the four elements invoked by earth-centered traditions—it's **powerful**. And we can easily get lost amid the thunder of a waterfall, or worn down by the constant churning of waves. If we're feeling lost at sea, disconnected from our lives, overwhelmed, wondering what happened that drew us so far from shore in the first place, we might cling to whatever's at hand. We might try to stave off our panic or suppress our mourning by filling that gap inside however we can. Any port in a storm.

For some people, that might mean alcohol. Others buy more and more things they think they need in order to be happy. For some people, busyness becomes a way to scurry around the edges of an emptiness that they don't want to look at.

But those are external solutions to an internal ache. Those are distractions from the god-shaped hollow. Because after all, it's not an easy thing to keep looking for the face of the holy. But if we're really going to live, it's a *necessary* thing. It's necessary for life. Otherwise, we lose ourselves in the void. Otherwise, we get caught up in all the elaborate twists and turns that life can take instead of finding the thread that leads us out of the labyrinth.

And that's where that pull comes in. The one that grabs your heart or pierces you through. The one that draws your soul forward out of exile and leaves you no choice but to go.

In his poem "The Way It Is," Willam Safford writes:

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

When we're really present to what we need—even if in that moment, what we need is just an acknowledgment of our suffering—when we're fully present, when we can remember what a miracle it is to be here on this beautiful planet Earth breathing air, when we drink in cool clear water and quench our deepest thirst, then we're connected to Source even as we move along our path.

As our anchors to this sacred earth, our bodies can help us recognize our sacred longing. Perhaps it'll feel like an inhale all the way down to the soles of your feet. Or like an invitation across a threshold into an expansive sky. Maybe every cell in your body starts to hum. You'll know it's your sacred longing—rather than the desperation of *want* or the simplicity of *yearning* or the distance of *desire*—because it makes you come alive right where you are. It won't let you go until you do something about it.

And when we surrender to the pull, when we trust it enough to let the transformation happen rather than digging in our heels, when we allow it to lead us along the path illuminated just for us, when we don't ever let go of the thread, then we find certain qualities start showing up in our lives.

Courage. Gratitude. Acceptance. Contentment. Enthusiasm. Depth. Hope.

That which had been hidden starts to emerge. The invisible becomes visible in our lives. And whether you call it divine mystery, or soul satisfaction, or a life well-lived, or the face of god, we experience something vast and unique. We begin to live every day like people who have just been rescued from the moon.

It begins with a pull. But it doesn't end there. We stretch, sometimes beyond what we thought we could handle. We expand. And lengthen. We make the place where we are *home*, and then reach for the warmth of the sun or the coolness of a flowing stream. And our longing becomes that space where we get a shimmering glimpse of something breathtaking.

Ashe, amen, and blessed be.