

From Finding Beauty in a Broken World

Terry Tempest Williams

In 1950, government agents proposed to get rid of prairie dogs on some parts of the Navajo Reservation in order to protect the roots of sparse desert grasses and thereby maintain some marginal grazing for sheep.

The Navajo elders objected, insisting, "If you kill all the prairie dogs, there will be no one to cry for rain."

The amused officials assured the Navajo that there was no correlation between rain and prairie dogs and carried out their plan. The outcome was surprising only to the federal officials. The desert near Chilchinbito, Arizona, became a virtual wasteland. Without the ground-turning process of the burrowing animals, the soil became solidly packed, unable to accept rain. Hard pan. The result: fierce runoff whenever it rained. What little vegetation remained was carried away by flash floods and a legacy of erosion.

Who Will Cry for Water?

Rob Eller-Isaacs

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"Little help for prairie dogs ", the banner headline read.

There used to be prairie dog towns all along the front range of the Rockies but the land there is quickly being developed. 98% of the Front Range prairie dogs are gone, their habitat destroyed, their fragile communities have vanished in the face

of progress. Does it really matter? Prairie dogs are cute but are they necessary?

Naturalist and teacher, Terry Tempest Williams, in her marvelous, challenging book, Finding Beauty in a Broken World, looks closely at the lives of prairie dogs. The book begins this way.

We watched the towers collapse. We watched America choose war.

The peace in our own hearts shattered.

How to pick up the pieces?

What to do with these pieces?

I was desperate to retrieve the poetry I had lost.

Standing on a rocky point in Maine, looking east toward the horizon at dusk, I faced the ocean.

“Give me one wild word.” It was all I asked of the sea.

The tide was out. The mudflats exposed. A gull picked up a large white clam, hovered high above the rocks, then dropped it. The clam broke open, and the gull swooped down to eat the fleshy animal inside.

“Give me one wild word to follow...”

And the word the sea rolled back to me was, “mosaic.”

The book begins in Ravenna, south of Venice along the Italian Adriatic coast. It was there in the year 402 of the Common Era, that Rome and Byzantium established a new capital. Rome was in decline. Byzantium was rising. It was ten centuries before the flying buttress made the great stained glass windows of the gothic period possible. The purpose of great churches then and now is to enshrine and teach the old strong stories. In Ravenna the stories are pieced together as mosaics, Williams calls them “a dazzling narrative of cut stones and glass.” She has come to Ravenna to try to learn to use the ancient tools, the hammer and the hardie as an apprentice in a workshop where one learns to make mosaics.

Sixty pages in we leave Ravenna and find ourselves transplanted to Bryce Canyon down in Southern Utah. Williams, who is the Anna Clark Scholar in Environmental

Humanities at the University of Utah, has joined a team of naturalists who are making a study of the residents of one of the last wild Utah prairie dog towns. It's located in the sacred precincts of Bryce Canyon National Park. For a hundred and seventy-five unrelenting pages, she shares her detailed daily observations.

“5:20 pm P-dog # 70 running west-robins singing in the ponderosa pines. Unmarked p-dog is standing on burrow NW...4:50 pm I love how these prairie dogs ratchet themselves upright as though there is a little hydraulic jack that cranks up their spines, vertebra by vertebra so that they can see better.

Her observation of the nearly extinct prairie dogs becomes a meditation on consciousness and on community as well.

There is something terribly broken when, almost without even noticing, we crush other species under the boot-heel of so-

called progress. Could it be we've grown so disconnected from each other, so devoid of true community ourselves that we don't recognize the value of the ground beneath our feet.

What are they good for anyway? What is their work? What do they do all day? "If you kill all the prairie dogs," the Navaho elders insist, "there will be no one to cry for rain."

By the end of the second section of the book Williams uses the terms prairie dogs and prayer dogs interchangeably. She writes,

"Clay-colored monk
dressed in discrete robes of fur
stand as sentinels
outside their burrows, watching,
watching as their communities
disappear, one by one,

their hands raised up
in prayer.”

Now I am no romantic. I know that species wax and wane. And though I do respect and understand the moral stance of the strict vegetarians I am not one myself. I eat meat. Still, as the merging of waters suggests, we are truly bound together in one living whole, inseparably tied to one another and to all living things. It may well be too late to save the prairie dogs. But contemplation of their habitat, consideration of the complex communities they create may yet shed light on something vital we ourselves are on the verge of losing. Just as every drop of water is kin to every other, we ourselves are kindred. We gather here to be reminded of that fact. We gather here join our voices with those clay-colored monks who, with us, raise their hands in prayer. We gather here to cry for rain.

In the third and final section of Finding Beauty in a Broken World, Williams serves as scribe to a team of artists who travel to Rwanda to help to design and build a genocide memorial in the village of Rugerero near the town of Gisenyi on the border of the Congo. She writes: *“ Rwanda. I didn’t want to come. I didn’t want to be in a place so familiar with Death. I had seen enough in my own family. I was also scared. The only thing I knew of Rwanda was genocide and the weight of that word. 1994, the year we Americans turned our backs. No, I would not go to Rwanda. I said yes. I said yes to Lily Yeh, a Chinese American artist who understood mosaic as taking that which was broken and creating something whole. She helped create the Village of Arts and Humanities in Philadelphia from the poorest of neighborhoods. She stood in the center of an empty lot littered with glass, picked up a stick, and drew a circle*

around her. One by one, a curious community came to see who this tiny Chinese woman was and what she was doing. She invited them to pick up shards of glass and together they began making art. Mosaics. A Tree of Life was constructed on the standing wall of a building otherwise destroyed. It was the first of many mosaics to restore beauty to a place of violence and abuse.”

We gather here in the midst of so much beauty. Our hearts are full. Our spirits soar. And even and especially in moments of such joy we have to pause, if only for little while to ask not only what has already been broken but also what we might yet have to break if new beauty and new life is to take hold again. That’s what we do together friends. It is holy work. It is our calling. It is our obligation. It is our true vocation. And so in gratitude and gladness we now take it up again.

May it be so and Amen.