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Nourishing the Prophetic Vision

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I WROTE AN ESSAY TITLED "CONFORM, GO Crazy, or Become an Artist." I was keen about this subject because it touches the work closest to my heart, encouraging teachers about the worthiness of the work we do, the necessity of reawakening, if it should be sleeping, our definition of ourselves as artists and visionaries, a call that (in however humble a form) must underlie our decision to become teachers.

I still believe in the prophetic vocation of the teacher, but these days I'm a little more weary, and a diet of honey and locusts falls short of my minimum daily requirements. It occurs to me that exhorting my fellow teachers to take risks every day, to head for the artistic edge, might be enough to do us all in. Prepare your classes; teach school; read student papers; make helpful comments on them; keep office hours; meet with committees; spend quality time with your friends, children, and partners; cut your fat intake; practice meditation; get in your aerobic exercise; and, oh, in your spare time, be a visionary . . .

So I decided to think through a different series of thoughts, beginning with this question: What are the conditions that might make it possible for us to operate at a modest level of prophetic inspiration, to bring a daily beauty to our lives, sustaining to ourselves, our students, and our communities? When I wrote "Conform, Go Crazy, or Become an Artist," I ranted against materialism and the culture of criticism as the enemies of art. It was quite a cosmic analysis. Right now, I'd like to be a little more personal. For the last few months I've been burrowing into my own experience and asking myself what I have learned about creating the conditions necessary to be an artist of whatever kind, of

whatever definition: an artist of friendship, of gardening, of making dinner, of making poems—whatever your gift might be. I don't want to preach, to say, "This is what you have to do." I'm just going to say, "Here are some things that worked for me and maybe they'll speak to someone else's condition."

Let me try, first, to establish a frame for thinking about this business of being an artist. I mean it in a very communal and inclusive way. I collect folk art, especially the subclassification called "visionary" art. I started my collection years ago when I taught crafts in a psychiatric hospital. The artwork people made and gave me was strange and beautiful. It *had* to be made. I like art that has a feeling of "I had to make this or die. I had to make this so badly that it didn't bother me that I don't know color theory." So my first question of you, if you wish to begin this inquiry, is "What do you *have to* make? What can only you make?"

Of course I am speaking of visual art in a metaphoric sense. You don't have to start painting on velvet. I am not going to pronounce that over-worked word *creativity*. *Creativity* has for me overtones of superficial activity: frosting on the cake of life. What I'm hoping for is something deeper than that. How can we find our prophetic vision? How can we do what only we are called to do? Bharati Mukherjee, in her book *Jasmine* (1989), talks about how in the Hindu tradition, we might come to earth merely to perform a single minor action essential to the great tapestry of creation: to raise a window or draw back a blind, "to move a flowerpot from one table to another" (53). "The incentive," Jasmine says, "is to treat every second of your existence as a possible assignment from God" (53–54). But what if we miss the moment? What if we are grading papers when we are needed by all the forces of humankind to move a flowerpot? How, given the noise of our lives, can we listen to our deepest call?

Some years ago I spent a sabbatical in a contemplative Quaker community that pretty much unfitted me for the academic world I had left behind. When I came back to my university, I was as confused and befuddled as some kind of alien from a neighboring galaxy. In the year after my sabbatical, I would stare at a photo from the science museum called "Pink Nebula in Orion," a splatter of rosy light, and long for home like E.T.

The problem was, nothing I had learned on sabbatical had fitted me to sit at a desk. In fact, I had not come back from sabbatical. Somebody had come back, but it was not the person who left. Still, I had hundreds of things to do, inherited from the person I used to be and no longer was. Teach school, for example. That person had a contract.

I tried very hard to do the work left behind for me by this woman who had gone away and not come back, but the harder I tried, the more I became

physically or metaphysically in my body, lectured four days a week and down the hall. When I got my chest started to hurt and a smothered breath and got faint. It had no my helpful colleagues suggested expected to deliver, and my voice

I was no longer able to because I didn't know what that had been quite sure.

What are you doing? What sense of call? Your true vocation (director) in the contemplative week after week, and I had come might mean. To find out what quickly became aware of what shmoozing at academic cocktail (some of which were contractual like a heart attack. Heart break sense of call, especially if the call a living and gaining prestige. I work. I was confused about doing. I couldn't possibly get whose contract bore my alias, no matter what I had accomplished

Somewhere in the middle description for myself occurred that reflected my clearest sense else got screwed up, I had been I wrote on a three-by-five-inch helped me to pull my days together mittees meeting, students lining needs to happen is peaceful listening me. Since not too many people university, I could take up a little

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physically or metaphysically ill. That woman, the former inhabitant of my body, lectured four days a week, three hours a day, just like her colleagues up and down the hall. When I opened my mouth to deliver her lectures, my chest started to hurt and a smothering sensation came over me. I ran out of breath and got faint. It had nothing to do with "getting used to it again," as my helpful colleagues suggested. I just didn't believe the words I was expected to deliver, and my vocal apparatus refused to make the sounds.

I was no longer able to tell my students what they needed to know, because I didn't know what they needed to know, though only a year ago, I had been quite sure.

What are you doing? What are you *really* doing? What is your deepest sense of call? Your true vocation? My "consultant" (something like a spiritual director) in the contemplative community had asked me those questions week after week, and I had come to a vague answer. *To listen*, whatever that might mean. To find out what it might mean. On reentry to this galaxy, I quickly became aware of what it did *not* mean: lecturing on Joseph Conrad, shmoozing at academic cocktail parties. These activities and a few others (some of which were contractual obligations) brought on symptoms that felt like a heart attack. Heart break, maybe. It's easy for me to resist my deepest sense of call, especially if the call interferes with my ambitions about making a living and gaining prestige. But you can't teach school if your lungs won't work. I was confused about priorities, about what I was supposed to be doing. I couldn't possibly get through all the work delegated to the woman whose contract bore my alias, and I was going home every day feeling that, no matter what I had accomplished, I had not done the right thing.

Somewhere in the middle of this crisis, the idea of composing a job description for myself occurred to me. I decided to write down a sentence that reflected my clearest sense of the task. Then I could feel that, whatever else got screwed up, I had been faithful to some inner light. *Peaceful listening*, I wrote on a three-by-five-inch card, and tacked it over my desk. The phrase helped me to pull my days together. When all the phones were ringing, committees meeting, students lining up, I could tell myself, "The only thing that needs to happen is peaceful listening." This turned out to be a useful role for me. Since not too many people were listening to anybody, ever, around the university, I could take up a little slack.

Lecturing, and even the form of pseudo-lecturing called "leading discussion," yielded place to peaceful listening. I began to ask students what they wanted to know. They were willing to tell me. I—the energetic pacer—began to sit down in the classroom, talking to small groups, sometimes talking to one or two students, sending others off to pursue this or that and report

back. Gradually I learned to breathe again. Things still piled up on my desk like one of those Welsh mine tips that occasionally slides down and buries a village. But I felt I was doing my job.

I have read that, in a time of crisis, the old myths tell us to *loosen our strings*. "When a woman has reached that dark moon land of No-Return," writes the Jungian analyst Nor Hall, "this would be the time for her to undo every knot on her garments, unlock the doors, open windows, uncork bottles, untie shoelaces, unbraid her hair, set the cows out of their stall, free the chickens, free anything that is tied!" (1980, 102).

Had I not followed some instinctive wisdom, let my academic chickens roam, I would have missed rich lessons. I learned a great deal that year about the dialectics of speech and silence, doing and being. Of course, I've blown most of it, as I inevitably do. I've decided, once again, that I know what my students need, I'm ranting away about my latest theories. I have stopped yearning after strange galaxies. I hardly ever listen to anybody.

But in a few years I will have another sabbatical.

At about the time I returned from the *Galaxy Far Away*, one of my students died. This happens from time to time. A student dies, a teacher dies. Often we don't think about it much. Where I teach, a professor died a few years ago and most people didn't get to the funeral. We had a very important committee meeting. But when this student, Eileen, died, she helped me to think about it because she shared a lot of her dying with me. She was a middle-aged student—my age, that is—who was being sent to the university by the company she worked for as a condition of being promoted. To the company's surprise, the college required her to take English as well as finance and accounting.

When she was diagnosed with an incurably advanced lung cancer, she told me, her main response had been to read her English texts over and over. Marketing and finance became less relevant. I was happy that she found John Cheever and Virginia Woolf important; but, for my part, I had to ask myself whether Eileen had gotten, in English class, anything she needed to face the fundamental questions of her existence. How had my choice of texts helped? How about my assignments? That year I spent chatting with Eileen about her impending death made me think about what kind of writing I was asking students to do. We think a lot about preparing students for the next level, for their major field courses, for graduate school, for the job. Do we prepare them for *today*?

In Minnesota, in the spring, I often think of the mayfly, who only lives one day. It had better be the right day. In the long sweep of things, I am a mayfly and so are you.

I have a poster of Pablito in mayfly terms lived to be "Resist doing things that I advise that can give you a drink on the street, and, as for me, I'll be friends with me and the color."

After you figure out your own chair. He or she will probably be there.

Maybe not. In an ideal world in terms of discerning each work most beneficial to self, a department chair would be a rare find. I have been fortunate in work. Instead, so often we hitchhike. Clydesdales run races and send people: *your* deepest business. Some years and years of concern.

My next suggestion: keep the office of a local Hasidic rabbi around in Jewish festivals and celebrations ready to erupt, or a daughter was raised in the days are equal and all to be celebrated much. Business excitement starts, with the workers. On Saturday noboc with his prayer shawl on, looking like a prairie Quaker. We looked something in it.

A couple of months ago, an Episcopalian. She told me that you mean?" I said. "What do you mean?"

She said, "I just get up and pray. I eat breakfast in or out of calling. I write a letter if I'm in a cornfield. Whatever. All day."

What is the point of it? Obviously, this is not the plan to take a sacred tradition and make it impossible to hear a

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I have a poster of Pablo Cassals on my office door, the great cellist who in mayfly terms lived to be very old. The poster has a quotation that reads, "Resist doing things that have no meaning for life." This is scary advice, advice that can give you a difficult and interesting life. You could wind up on the street, and, as for me, I hope that if I wind up there I have a few musical friends with me and the collected poems of W. B. Yeats.

After you figure out your job description, publish it to your department chair. He or she will probably jump for joy.

Maybe not. In an ideal world, we might define the administrator's task in terms of discerning each individual's gifts and guiding them toward the work most beneficial to self and community. How happy, in this world, your department chair would be to know who you really are (and, for my part, I have been fortunate in working under such a benevolent administration). Instead, so often we hitch race horses to pull wagons, or make those big Clydesdales run races and so on. But let's put aside the judgments of other people: *your* deepest business is to know what kind of horse you are. It took me years and years of concentrated attention to even begin to figure that out.

My next suggestion: keep a Sabbath. My youngest daughter works in the office of a local Hasidic Jewish food service, so we are always wrapped around in Jewish festivals and holidays. It seems that there is always a celebration ready to erupt, or a meaning to be affirmed and witnessed. My daughter was raised in the Quaker tradition; we have a testimony that all days are equal and all to be celebrated—which means that in practice nothing gets celebrated much. But she loves the Hasidic Sabbath. On Friday the excitement starts, with the rabbi—who runs her company—blessing all the workers. On Saturday nobody works and we see the rabbi on his front porch with his prayer shawl on, looking very different than he does on weekdays. We prairie Quakers looked at this for a while and decided there must be something in it.

A couple of months ago I talked to my friend Emily, who is an Episcopalian. She told me that she takes a Sabbath every Monday. "What do you mean?" I said. "What do you do on that day?"

She said, "I just get up on Monday and spend the whole day without a plan. I eat breakfast in or out, or skip breakfast, I call the first person I think of calling. I write a letter if it occurs to me. I drive to Iowa and sit in a cornfield. Whatever. All day. Every Monday."

What is the point of making one day so different from the others? Obviously, this is not the place to reflect theologically, but neither do I want to take a sacred tradition and put it to a merely secular use. I will simply say that it's impossible to hear a subtle call if you do not create a conscious time

to listen to it. Who are you and what are you doing here? How do we even *begin* to answer this question? With our heads? With our hearts? One of my friends recently told me that he used to figure things out with his head, but that led to overly intellectual decisions. Then he tried his heart, but that led to overly emotional decisions. "Now," he told me, "I reason with my feet. I look at where I've been walking. Where I tend to turn up. I figure that this might be where I'm going."

With her Monday Sabbath, Emily is, over a period of time, gently watching her feet. After awhile, this may tell her important things about who she is and what she is doing: how she feels without breakfast, who it is important to keep in touch with, what kind of landscape nurtures her spiritually. She is training her intuition.

When I am in my analytical mode, if someone tells me to follow my instincts they might as well tell me to follow a scent like my dog, Shep. If my hind brain ever knew how to do this, it has forgotten. But I think that Emily is following a syllabus for intuition. When you simply follow your feet around for twenty-four hours, you become sensitive to the tiny nudges of spirit.

"I have a feeling I'm wrong about my thesis," one of my students told me in the course of a writing conference.

"What does that feeling feel like?" I asked, really needing to know.

"Like a little mouse tooth, gnawing away," the student replied.

I think we have to give some space and time to learning to see and feel the subtleties of the world around us. Or maybe they are not even subtle, these instincts, intuitions, and visions we shut out. When I take an afternoon of retreat, or even an hour staring at nothing, it's as though a parallel universe comes at me with a sound like the rush of trains that used to go by our house at night.

Maybe you don't have one day a week to practice Sabbath—I think you should talk to my daughter's rabbi—but maybe you have an hour a day or an hour a week. There are lots of mini-Sabbaths around, if you know where to seek them out.

Here's a slightly different kind of Sabbath.

Several years ago I went canoeing with my friend Robin, who used to work for the Department of Natural Resources. I hate canoeing, because the very idea makes me tired. But Robin lured me onto Lake Pokegama with some promise of visiting a heron marsh and soon I was busy flailing around and feeling like a fool. And getting tired and ready to whine. It was at that moment that Robin gave me a very important piece of information: *rest in the stroke*. He said, "The reason you are getting tired is that you keep your paddle moving all the time. There is an almost imperceptible rest that you

have to take at the end of every stroke. You have to rest in the stroke. You have to paddle for hours. Rest in the stroke."

This advice doubled my respect for my professional conduct: When can I rest in the stroke?

It is possible for us to manage, say, moments of rest, moments of working so hard in my garden that I never notice my pruning shears that I never notice anyway? I am able to walk to work and I couldn't tell you what kind of landscape that I don't notice who has changed. In the Buddhist tradition, *this* geranium, *this* weathervane, *this* Sabbath.

In struggling over time, I realized that one of the reasons I struggle is that I hold a lot of unnecessary things. Let me give you an example. I used to be a pick-up artist. I used to be a father. I used to be a teacher. My spiritual quest in those days was to be a pick-up artist, and I brought tremendous energy to it. I was at Pendle Hill, that conference center, and the cooks had a lovely curriculum of feeding fifty people a day. I was a different dietary fad—she worked. Usually this was a game on the radio, or a coup d'état. I used to give the impression that it was a changed thing. It called us to

I brought home the changes though the changes took a long time to let go of my tension when I was at scratch. This is no great accomplishment. I learned an ethnic tradition where it learned, let me put it this way: I came to love the practice of using everything: the corn, the top of; I loved the feeling of

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to paddle for hours. Rest in the stroke."

This advice doubled my stamina. It also gave me a new way of looking
at a lot of physical and metaphysical processes. It's the Garfield school of pro-
fessional conduct: When can I take a little nap?

It is possible for us to miss lots of naps in the course of the day. Or let's
say, moments of rest, moments of vision, moments of beauty. I am capable
of working so hard in my garden, whipping down a row of geraniums with
my pruning shears that I never see or smell them. Why am I growing them
anyway? I am able to walk to class so full of what I'm going to say that I
couldn't tell you what kind of day it was. Of teaching with such a fix on ideas
that I don't notice who has dyed her hair magenta, or who has a new nose
ring. In the Buddhist tradition, practicing mindfulness is the whole point of
life: *this* geranium, *this* weather, *this* student. Each moment of attention a lit-
tle Sabbath.

In struggling over time with the practice of mindfulness, I've discover-
ed that one of the reasons I get so tired out teaching school and living life
is that I hold a lot of unnecessary tension in my body, and that it is possible
NOT to do that. Let me give you a couple of examples. One of the most hell-
ish times in my day used to be the hour when, as a single parent, I left school,
picked up my children from day care, trundled them home, and made sup-
per. My spiritual quest in those days was simply to get food, any food, on the
table, and I brought tremendous physical tension to the task. Now when I
was at Pendle Hill, that contemplative community I talked about earlier, one
of the cooks had a lovely custom. When she was feeling pressured by the
demands of feeding fifty people—and each of them would be practicing a
different dietary fad—she would light a candle and put it on the table where
she worked. Usually this was a raucous kitchen, one that might have a ball
game on the radio, or a couple of Swedish fiddlers playing—I don't want to
give the impression that it was a pietistical environment. But the candle
changed things. It called us to attention.

I brought home the candle custom, and it changed our kitchen, too,
though the changes took about five years to effect. I learned to consciously
let go of my tension when I lit that candle. I learned to make tamales from
scratch. This is no great accomplishment for some people, but I come from
an ethnic tradition where it's a big deal to make turnips from scratch. I
learned, let me put it this way, the spiritual practice of making tamales from
scratch. I came to love the process of stripping the corn out in my garden, of
using everything: the corn, the husks, the cobs to steam the little bundles on
top of; I loved the feeling of solidarity with the ancient world of women.

Years ago I used to toss hotdogs to children who snapped them up like puppies. Today, by contrast, we practice something we call The Religion of Food and Beauty. My friends constantly tease me about the hours I spend in the kitchen and they tell me how they send out for pizza and how their freezers overflow with frozen dinners—and that's OK, because everybody's idea of rest will be different—but I'm telling you I am *born again* about this Religion of Food and Beauty. Last week we made a cherry pie, from real cherries, that we talked about all week in theological terms.

I am saying, if you don't have time to breathe, if you are run off your feet, try spending twice as much time as you usually spend on a task. It may rest you very nicely. I *try* to light the candle sometimes over my freshman essays (resisting the obvious temptation to set them on fire). It may take me another seven years to establish a religion about this, and by then I'll be ready to retire. But here is one thing I've discovered. I used to spend a lot of energy arguing in absentia with my freshmen and scolding them, which does not promote the tranquil mind. "You dummy, I told you to put your name in the upper left-hand corner. I'll bet you were stoned when you wrote this." And so on; if, by contrast, I cultivate an attitude of friendly visiting as I grade freshman essays—you with the red hair, you with the nose ring—it takes longer but it's twice as restful. And I feel I have done less tearing at the web of life.

My new mantra, then, is "it takes as long as it takes." Some shortcuts complicate life enormously. There's an archetypal Peace Corps story about a young engineer who worked in Africa. He saw the women walking miles every day to the well and decided to help them by digging a well in the village. But when he did so the culture of the village immediately began to decline. The children started to fight. Families stopped speaking to each other. Finally the village picked up its houses and moved two miles away from the new well. That daily walk was essential to shaking out the troubles of the group, offering sympathy and friendship and solutions. I have a young Senegalese friend named Nambé who likes to come to my house for the tamales, and she says, "I just don't understand Americans, they don't take time to make dinner, they don't take time to make love . . ."

Making love and making dinner take time, but they also give you back.

These are sabbaths of spirit: taking the time to ask, "Who am I and what am I doing here?" following, if only for an hour, your intuitions, resting in the stroke, taking twice as much time.

When I was eighteen I started studying yoga with a Catholic monk who stood on his head every day to remind himself that the world could be seen from a different perspective. I have never mastered standing on my head, but I think each of us needs to remind ourselves daily that we are seeing only a

very limited reality. The poet writes four and writes a poem. Some good poem every day, Bill. W my standards." Three great le your standards, and claim a the bourgeois idea of reality, who immediately began gettin Berkeley. "It shakes up your changes things better than Pr

The point here is not th is a bottom-line question: *wh* of whatever kind in the aca sacrifices are big. One of the on the line, for example, is ac pause here to think about a gained, think about the art w moment on what that blessin and she said, "I'll give you self blank]." Insert here what yo overflowing heart, for your clearly, as they seldom are in l

In Minnesota if you wan you, "Well, you have to go into you will hear a *fossegrim*, a kir fall. That's where they live. If your fingers and pull them. It be a hardanger fiddler."

So get up at four A.M.; it

Let me conclude with a with being an artist. I'll call th That Wants to Live in your H ing, again with my friend Rc near his house. By the side of mal, covered in white hair, eye I have raised baby animals pr to look at this creature. After its tail, I reached a fatal conclu Side of St. Paul, where we do I think I saw an r-a-t in the ba not like this animal. So I said t

10 snapped them up like pup-
 5 we call The Religion of Food
 10 about the hours I spend in the
 15 r pizza and how their freezers
 20 , because everybody's idea of
 25 *born again* about this Religion
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170 oga with a Catholic monk who
 175 lf that the world could be seen
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 185 daily that we are seeing only a

very limited reality. The poet William Stafford used to rise every morning at four and write a poem. Somebody said to him, "But surely you can't write a good poem every day, Bill. What happens then?" "Oh," he said, "then I lower my standards." Three great lessons here—practice your art every day, lower your standards, and claim a time or place or an attitude that will challenge the bourgeois idea of reality. Four A.M.! I told this story to my friend Peter, who immediately began getting up at dawn. He called me long distance from Berkeley. "It shakes up your whole soul," he said of that time of day, "it changes things better than Prozac."

The point here is not that you should be getting up at four A.M., but it is a bottom-line question: *what are you going to give?* To function as an artist of whatever kind in the academy, or to make tamales from scratch, the sacrifices are big. One of the first and obvious things you might have to put on the line, for example, is academic prestige. But, indeed, each of us might pause here to think about an important piece of self-knowledge we have gained, think about the art we do, or the art we live. Now let us reflect for a moment on what that blessing *cost*. Suppose you met a witch in the woods and she said, "I'll give you self-knowledge, but you have to give me [blankety blank]." Insert here what you gave, blindly or with no choice, or with an overflowing heart, for your best knowledge. With the options presented clearly, as they seldom are in life, most of us would say, *no thanks*.

In Minnesota if you want to be a hardanger fiddler, the old guys will tell you, "Well, you have to go into the woods and when you come to a waterfall, you will hear a *fossegrim*, a kind of troll, playing his violin behind the waterfall. That's where they live. If you apply to the troll for lessons, he will take your fingers and pull them. It will hurt unbearably, but in the end you will be a hardanger fiddler."

So get up at four A.M.; it's an easy way to placate the trolls of art.

Let me conclude with a final koan that seems to have something to do with being an artist. I'll call this story "Somewhere There Is a Great Mystery That Wants to Live in your House and Change Everything." I was out walking, again with my friend Robin, the naturalist, on the university campus near his house. By the side of the road, we came upon a tiny, newborn animal, covered in white hair, eyes closed, moving feebly. Now both Robin and I have raised baby animals pretty successfully, so we paused a long moment to look at this creature. After awhile, as I looked carefully at the contours of its tail, I reached a fatal conclusion. I spent part of my childhood on the East Side of St. Paul, where we do not even *say* a certain word; we spell it, as in "I think I saw an r-a-t in the basement by the drain." On the East Side, we do not like this animal. So I said to Robin, "I think it's an r-a-t." With that piece

of labeling we left the animal and walked on.

Later that same evening, I visited my neighbors up the street. This is a minister's family who have for years been famous in the neighborhood for their absolutely fastidious behavior. It's the kind of house where you take off your shoes at the door, where the furniture is covered in plastic, the car is always washed, the bushes are pruned, etc. On this particular evening, as I stopped to pass a few moments, my neighbor the minister wanted to show me the wonderful thing he had literally up his sleeve: their pet squirrel. Now I had heard about this squirrel. In fact the whole neighborhood was talking about it. The family had found it in their yard after a storm—a tiny baby then—and they had been raising it for a year. What the neighbors were saying was, "Do you believe the transformation at the preacher's house? This squirrel has the run of the place. It goes up and down the drapes. It eats from its own little dish at the table. They let it leave its little messes all over and they just laugh." With great pride, the minister showed me his squirrel. Now you see where this story is going. The little animal was enchanting, and tame as a kitten. And as I looked carefully at it, observed the way its ears were set against its skull, the lie of its tail, I knew what I had walked away from earlier in the day.

Or had I? This is a koan. How do we tell a transforming miracle, an angel unaware, from an r-a-t? And would my catalyst for change be the same as the minister's? Surely not, as I need an angel of order rather than an angel of misrule. One of my friends huffily told me, "A squirrel is just a dirty rodent anyway. You're always making everything into a big metaphor." There is no simple moral to this story. It's yours. Take it home if you want to, or let it be.

But *somewhere* there is a great mystery that wants to come live in your house and change everything.

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