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Packing Light

The ferry is approaching the harbor and will load and leave too soon. I rush around looking for my things; find my sketchbook, remember my toothbrush is at the other end of the house, run for it, lose my sketchbook. I see my favorite shirt; try to squeeze it into the suitcase. My house is a thrift store and I am in search of the deals, in search of the deals while the ferry draws closer. I know these are better deals than I'll see again: silky dresses and elegant but earthy ceramics. I smell the spring wind of a shopping coup. I've lost my favorite shirt. My house has turned into the best deal finding thrift store ever. I've lost my toothbrush and my sketchbook. The ferry is going to leave. Where are the kids? I see their bags. Are they on the ferry? I might miss the best deal of my life. I am panicked about the ferry. Where are my kids? My suitcase won't close. The deals won't fit. The deals are junk. My house is filled with junk, except for my lost children, somewhere close, I think. My treasures are gone and I'm missing the ferry.

Until I was old enough to flee my insecurities and the East Coast I spent every summer on an island near Connecticut. Days were punctuated by the coming and going of the ferry. It brought our groceries and our friends. My uncle arrived on it for his last visit to our family before he died. Just after the bachelor buttons bloomed every year, the ferry carried us away to our other life: back to school and the darkness of being inside with my parent's recriminatory marriage. At the ferry's painted rails, I mentally packed away driftwood, shells and my first boyfriend, dumbfounded that the sea still glittered while my world closed down. At twenty, I stood stoic and waved to my sorrowful mother from the red metal deck of the last ferry to meet the last train to Boston, where I would

join my alcoholic sweetheart. The engine vibrations always helped me to shut down, don't think, shut down, don't think. Twenty eight years later, when I smell diesel and low tide, I am overtaken by a pang of longing which reminds me of what I have lost with all my leaving. I got away, and I want to go home.

It is no wonder, then, that my recurring packing nightmare funnels to this boat. It is no wonder to me that in Greek myth, travelers making their final journey—the crossing of the River Styx—traveled by a ferry. I wonder if they have packed what they needed. Or if they tried to pack too much, missed their ride and were lost between the worlds.

I suffer from a tendency to fill every waking minute with a project: turning an old skirt into a scarf, starting a summer camp, reorganizing the kid's winter boot pile, painting a poem I love, saving a starved Mexican puppy, getting a master's degree, saving the world. That this penchant springs from a well of wonderful and creative ideas is scant comfort when I realize I've been too busy to call my best friend for six months. That I seldom see my children's faces when I speak to them, because I am talking over my shoulder as I rush to the next list item. That my husband would like to read to me at bedtime, but I am trying to get a better price on e-bay.

This Yuletide I topped out. I had just installed a fifty artist exhibit in the gallery I manage, was turning in final papers for the quarter, packing for a visit to my in-laws, photographing my painting portfolio, and indulging in the usual against-my-better-instincts-create-the-perfect-holiday-by-fulfilling-their-wildest-dreams gift melodrama (my husband insists I give the kids too many presents, and he's undoubtedly right). Variations of this scenario play out in my home and the homes of many women every year. It is the stuff of advice columns and "How to Simplify and Survive the Holidays"

articles in every women's magazine I've ever read at the dentist's office. So I thought I had a handle on it. I was ready this year. I had said "no" to the gingerbread house that would be better than the one we created of the Onceler's rickety abode in *The Lorax* several years before, and "no" to the annual wreath making party, and "no" to the frothy purple velvet dress my daughter wanted me to sew (she would never be nine and this sweet in velvet again, but I, with resolve for appropriate boundaries, said "no" anyway).

Then the car with the molded plastic baseball hat pulled up next to us, and the kids said, "Wouldn't it be fun to dress up the car in a Santa suit!" I was caught off guard. And that is why my music loving kids and I were in the fabric store at the dark edge of town buying extra wide yards of red marine vinyl as the much anticipated winter street celebration of music peaked and passed without us.

The workaholic is the hero of the post-millennium American paradigm; having to pencil in lunch three months away is a flag of achievement. We stay frantically busy, often to numb pain and avoid confronting losses. I recognize this foolishness, yet there I was with the yards of red vinyl, the special needles, the matching white fluff, and the disappointed children. The hat for my car was stuffed in to a day already overfull, and we missed our chance to be carried beyond this world divisions and distractions by the transporting power of our community making music together.

Gary Snyder offered these last lines in his poem, "For the Children":

"To climb these coming crests

one word to you, to

you and your children:

stay together

learn the flowers

go light.” [1]

As I approach my fifty’s I have studied up on the ways and gifts of the crone. The labrys is the double-headed axe which symbolized the Goddess in ancient Crete. With it, the crone can cut out what is unnecessary. She can choose what to keep and what is no longer needed for life. It is this choice that lies at the heart of my growing into a simpler life.

The difficult part: how to make the choice that emanates from the best part of me—that which is most creative, loving, grounded in my connection to the divine? How to avoid the choices based on fear and its destructive ancillaries: avoidance, guilt, perfectionism.

Mary Oliver’s poem, “Wild Geese”, offers guidance. It begins,

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees

for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body

love what it loves. [2]

A lifetime ago, when my first child was a baby, and I was still a perfect mother, I read *Your Childs Self Esteem* by Dorothy Briggs. I can still see the picture of the supremely happy Buddha-bellied baby on the cover, sitting on spring grass, grinning in the fullness of himself. This hopeful and realistic book counseled, not surprisingly, the importance of really listening to your children. Acknowledging the challenge, especially when you are already tired of the joke, or the whine is grating on your nerves, or you are

scared by emotional intensity, Briggs offers an antidote: *look*. Look carefully and closely at your child. Notice, at a minute level, the details of this beloved's face: how the little hairs spread at the inner edge of the eyebrows, how the eyes widen and spark with humor, see the tiny wrinkles at their corners which will become the laugh lines of a well lived life, pay attention to the exact shape of the tiny scar on the cheek. [3] If I am studying the faces of my children, I cannot shut down, turn away to the next list item. I stay to watch, to simply love what I love.

When I make the time to go to Anusara Yoga, I am reminded to breathe my heart forward instead of habitually slumping my shoulders over the center of my fears. Founded by John Friend in 1997, Anusara means "flowing with Grace," or "following your heart". The poses in Anusara Yoga are considered to be heart-oriented, and are expressed from "inside out". Instead of only trying to control the body and mind from the outside, the poses originate from a deep artistic feeling inside. There is an emphasis on remembering spiritual purpose, which includes reconnecting with our innate goodness, power, and beauty, thus expressing ourselves from that divine place. [5] When the heart's joy and wisdom lead, we can choose to love what we love.

I am more able to choose form the heart when I stop and recall my deep joy in the slick and stick of paint on canvas. When tempted by yet another project idea, which will take me away from my painting, I remember Shaun McNiff 's words in *Art as Medicine: Creating a Therapy of the Imagination* "These images arrive whenever the soul opens to itself". [4]

I remember that good painting and good music depend as much on their open spaces as their vivid color or precision of tone. It is the placement, the rhythm that makes

the mark lucid, the note precious. Syncopation and flow are gifts of Jazz; silence between the notes is another instrument.

Matisse, that master of composition, often changed the position of visual elements, even after starting a painting, in order to create a feeling of space in his work. His simplified forms are complete without customary features. He touched the canvas lightly and, relying on the optic principle that color spreads when next to white, considered work finished when some areas remained completely bare of paint. Some of the most lyrical landscape art ever made are the elegantly spare Japanese woodblock prints by Hiroshige. Even Jackson Pollock, infamous for the apparent chaos of gesture painting, left patches of bare canvas in the record of his motion.

Good living is the same. We create rhythm by choosing what to keep. We make balance by shifting the position of a thing until the whole pleases. We leave some spots unfilled, and remain open to what comes in to the space.

The crone represents the last stage of life, the preparation for transformation to a life beyond. Death as the ultimate limit is also the final preparation for renewal. I read once, in a book called *Death and the Creative Life*, that there is a characteristic held in common by many whose lives were marked by highly realized creativity: a concrete belief in the reality of death.[5] Until we really, truly, believe that our time is limited; we may fail to accept the double-edged gift of choice. The ferry is entering the harbor. The suitcase stands open.

Resources:

[1] Gary, Snyder, *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1969), p.86.

[2] Mary Oliver, *Dream Work* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), p.14.

[3] Dorothy Briggs, *Your Child's Self Esteem* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975)

[4] Shaun McNiff, *Art as Medicine: Creating a Therapy of the Imagination* (Boston: Shambala, 1992) p.19

[5] <http://www.anusara.com/about/>

Also see: Cristina Sell, *Yoga from the Inside Out: Making Peace with your Body through Yoga* (Prescott, Arizona: Hohm Press, 2003)

[6] Lisl M. Goodman, *Death and the Creative Life* (New York, New York:Springer Publishing Company,1981)

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[1] Gary, Snyder, *Turtle Island* , New Directions Publishing, New York, p.86.

[2] Mary Oliver, *Dream Work*, Atlantic Monthly Press, Boston, 1986, p.14.

[3] Dorothy Briggs, *Your Child's Self Esteem*, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1975.

[4] Shaun McNiff, *Art as Medicine: Creating a Therapy of the Imagination*, Shambala, Boston,1992, p.19.

[5] <http://www.anusara.com/about/>

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[6] Lisl M. Goodman, *Death and the Creative Life* (New York, New York:Springer Publishing Company,1981)

