

Lord of the Worms

I almost always wake up feeling happy. Sunrises are gorgeous and showy, and I enjoy the play of light some mornings, but usually I'm out the door as night is still receding. Walks are my greet-the-day ritual. I'd like to say I have a woodland path to tread on, or a pristine beach, but I don't. I step on the concrete sidewalks of my southern California pastel tract home neighborhood, a 2.5 mile circuit in and out of cul-de-sacs, up and down modest hills, daily passing several hundred houses with their sprinklered lawns, queen palms, and diverse inhabitants. I can go clockwise or counterclockwise on this ambit; on a good day when I take the time and my knee doesn't hurt much I might do both. Today I choose clockwise.

It must have lightly rained in the pre-dawn hours. The air is showered clean, and I imagine if plants had audible voices I'd be hearing cheery, excited conversations. I try to listen. It's usually pretty quiet this time of morning. The neighborhood sleeps, largely unaware of its own soft loveliness. The dampness has driven a gazillion earthworms out of lawns and planters onto the pavement, each blindly seeking to escape drowning, I suppose, but many simply ooze their way to an equally terminal fate under foot or hot sun later.

I pass Peggy's house. Behind the curtains she's probably up, dusting her spotless furniture, feeding her cat. It's been three years since her husband Jim quickly died of cancer, and something of Peggy left with him. Jim, life of the party, the dancing Greek, evoked life and spontaneity from everyone who knew him. As Peggy knew it must be and as Jim would have had it, his wake was a celebration. We drank toasts and told stories, thankful for the rich gift of just knowing him. They'd been married 44 years and had expected to enjoy a few more. My wife and I have Peggy over for dinner pretty often these days.

Maybe in your neighborhood, like ours, younger couples display cars, trucks, boats, toys, living the good life or hoping to, making their payments. A little more frequently this year I see "For Sale" signs. People move on, some happily, some not, some burdened by debt, others trimming their lifestyles. New folks move in, eager to build their lives, raise their children. This is life, of course: people come and go all the time.

Humberto nods hello as he picks the plastic bagged newspaper off his driveway. My Spanish isn't bad, but he never seems eager to engage in any language beyond the universal signing of nod and gesture. I think Ana, probably his mother, is amused by a talking gringo, but I don't see her very often.

Apparently certain about his direction in life, an earthworm expends copious mucous sliding the wrong direction, across the sidewalk toward the curb and the vast sea of asphalt beyond. His chances are slim, I muse. I want to help him, not sure what that would be.

Landscaping of the slopes and borders is maintained via our homeowners' association dues. Dense shrubbery provides no cost housing for rabbits and quail, opossums, mice, birds, and innumerable other small creatures, to whom human world events matter not at all. Here we are occupying the same territory and everybody seems perfectly fine with it. I confess I sometimes wish for fewer spiders, but then there'd probably be more insects.

This time of year the jacaranda trees are in bloom. Their periwinkle petals carpet the ground around them. Funny how some neighbors enjoy the natural decorating, and others sweep the fallen blooms away like so much litter. The rain last night dropped more than usual to the ground---Nature's leftover confetti from a great party while we slept. It doesn't snow at this elevation, but I grew up with it. To wake up to snowfall was always magical, and I consider jacaranda blossoms as pretty substitutes, and slower to melt.

We early walkers are a small group, and we see each other just often enough to miss one another if we don't. We pass, and exchange brief greetings at most. The walkers I see regularly I call iPod Lady, Samurai Gentleman, Dog Walker, and Too Serious Grandma, but none of us have ever really met. Maybe they'd be great people to get to know. Maybe we're even destined to do great things together. Who knows? I won't, unless I introduce myself and walk with them instead of past them. It's possible I could get arrested for that in this state, too, but sometime I'll risk it.

I nearly step on a wrong-way earthworm. Impulsively I bend over, pick him up, toss him gently on the grass, and wipe the slime on my pant leg. I wonder if he's now better off for my playing the savior in his life. Has the soil dried enough for him to return to its safe darkness? What if some kid were to have come along a few minutes later, put the worm in his bait box, and catch a fish with it that afternoon?

I really think about such deep issues while I walk. I look at the expanse of sky, breathe deeply, enjoying the upwelling of fine feelings, just happy to be here. We light beings animating these carbon-based life units really have it good on this earth. We get to be here in all this richness, and all we have to do is be. I smile warmly at iPod Lady as we pass. "Greetings, Fellow Light Being! My, we are radiant today!" In my mind I address her as if she were royalty, confident I won't be arrested for just thinking and feeling. And she actually smiles back as if she somehow heard me.

Nearly all the lawns in the neighborhood appear well kept and green year around. A dinner guest once asked if I had a lawn mower, and I replied, "Yes. And his name is Ignacio." Ignacio and his brother come every Saturday afternoon and mow, blow, and go in fifteen minutes, leaving the yard neat and tidy. Unlike neighbors Humberto and madre Ana, Ignacio is delighted to converse in Spanish, my modest skill in his language being greater than his in mine. We talk a few minutes about deep topics like weather and hydrangeas before he's off to his next client. He is a man with a sunny heart who loves life. I think of him as a visiting Zorba, dancing a blessing in our yard once a week, blending smells of newly cut grass and sweat with a crooked smile and obsidian eyes beneath a grimy baseball cap. One time he came by in his pickup with his wife and two of their children. I know why he works so hard, and it's easy to pay him more than he

asks, though he may not know it's in appreciation for his natural lightness more than his lawn tending.

Just a few steps ahead an especially large earthworm slimes slowly across the sidewalk. He wriggles impressively as I get my fingers around him. Maybe my touch feels threatening? But I am Lord of the Worms! I'm lifting you into a better life, don't you see? His wriggling continues as he lands in the flower bed and rather quickly manages to submerge himself in the light dirt. Go, and stray no more!

I approach Dave who is standing in his yard watering a tree as if it hadn't rained the night before. Dave's on our homeowners' association board and usually has a new unilateral "Didjahear?" comment to make. He and his partner Bob get along like an old married couple, probably because they are an old married couple. Dave's kind of a lovable junior curmudgeon; Bob's a full-fledged version. "Didjahear my blood pressure's down? Looks like I may not be dying this week after all." As always, Dave's grin belies the potential seriousness of his words. He's one of the most genuinely caring people I know, but he habitually masks it with a pseudo-gruff exterior. I see him peeking through, though.

A second generation Vietnamese couple, Tatch and Trang---engineer and architect, respectively---opened Lá Tre---“bamboo,” in Vietnamese---and, along with their only waiter, Gerardo, endeared their Asian delicacies and themselves to hundreds of our townfolk. Had it been thousands, the restaurant might still be open and Tatch, Trang and their two boys still be in the neighborhood instead of in Michigan. They loved their loyal customers, taking second jobs to support their family when Lá Tre couldn't, not wanting to close, not wanting to fail, not wanting to disappoint anyone. Both cried—Gerardo too--at the closing party they threw. We all signed Tatch's chef's whites with our best wishes, hugged goodbye. Tatch and Trang are two among many, many human beings who just naturally uplift the world they live in without being much aware of how strong and beautiful they are themselves.

I pass their vacant, unsold house. Humans bring inanimate structures to life by living in them, imbuing them with a substance that makes them warm, comfortable, home. Without its residents the house stands vacuous and uninviting. The koi pond sits fishless, perhaps predators having enjoyed its colorful, serene inhabitants. I could have tossed a few earthworms in this morning had there been fish to feed. Such is the omnipotence of the Lord of the Worms.

We tend to measure our lives in cycles---hours and months, births and deaths, walks around blocks. We appear from out of nowhere in this world, celestial drop-ins left to figure it all out. We arrive vertically, then look all over horizontally for our meaning, where it isn't. It's the character we express that defines us in the world. A new neighbor expounded on his birthday, “I'm fifty! How come I don't know more?” I think we can get too heady about this stuff. What if we each came with all our meaning already built in, and the trick in life is to let it out? It's true.

Like most folks I know---but you have to ask them to find out---I realized in early adulthood a newly profound appreciation for my parents. They wanted a baby. I wanted to be here. Looking at it now, that worked out pretty good all around.

“Have you seen Petey?” implores the photocopy taped to the communal mailbox. Every eight or ten houses share an outdoor aluminum pedestal mailbox, complete with locked pigeon holes for each homeowner’s mail, and a slot for outgoing. Petey is a green Amazon parrot, 9” tall according to the flyer with his almost life sized image. I’ll keep an eye out for the Kelly green fellow as I walk the cycle the next few days. Where do suddenly freed flyaway parrots go? I feel more empathy for Natalie, the 11 year old owner to whom Petey is obviously dear. I hear that escaped parrots sometimes return voluntarily after they’ve had enough adventure. There’s plenty of breakfast available for Petey on the sidewalks this morning, but I think he’s ve gan, preferring seeds to worms. Natalie’s probably sprinkled sunflower kernels on every windowsill.

Amare and his sister carry their books, walking cool to the bus stop. Amare’s already tall and a good player on his junior high basketball team. He emulates Dywane Wade of the Miami Heat. Whatever happened to Michael Jordan? Generations pass quickly, new heroes appear. We need heroes, not just in sports, to remind us that excelling is normal. We each just need to discover how *we* excel, and be that. Years ago the corner sundry store clerk near where I once lived had a most compelling way of greeting everybody---a full-faced, 500 watt smile that tangibly radiated warmth, easily remembered all these years later. I never learned his name, but he was a bright hero. Heroes evoke greatness in others.

Amygdala is not a town in Afganistan. According to the dictionary, it’s an almond-shaped neural structure involved in producing and responding to nonverbal signs of anger, avoidance, defensiveness, and fear. They say it’s a primitive arousal center in the human brain central to the expression of negative emotions. It’s the old “fight, flight, freeze, appease” mechanism. We all have one; it comes factory installed with the carbon-based life unit. I once stepped into a London street having looked only my habitual American direction, which is precisely wrong in England. I must have sensed more than saw the car as it almost hit me, and my body reacted to get out of the way before I even knew what was going on. From that moment forward I had new gratitude for my amygdala.

Passing Helen and Dave’s... Dave is a quiet guy with a cat, Helen a drama queen. To her, everyday events like finding what she’s looking for in the supermarket or getting her car washed are experienced as if her very survival were at stake. She imagines the world is out to get her---convinced of it, in fact. Continual crises followed by escape and collapse are sure signs that her amygdala is running the show. I’ve never seen the real Helen put in an appearance, except for once when she was holding a neighbor’s baby. No lights in the windows...

“Mazeltov, Jeffrey and Bernice, on the birth of your boy!” I bet Jeffrey’s not 30 yet, but rapidly balding. It helps him look wise. Like new moms and dads everywhere and

everywhen, they worry and fuss about getting the parenting thing just right while their son blissfully grows his earth equipment. Incarnation is a lifetime of arrival, of showing up more and more fully, until we realize we're all here. Until then we're not all here, and consequently the world looks a little crazy.

Today is one of those occasional mornings when as the Earth rolls eastward, making the sun seem to rise, the moon is yet suspended in the opposite sky as if reluctant to say adieu for a few hours. The influence of our planet extends at least as far as the moon, or the satellite wouldn't stick around. Likewise, the sun's heliosphere envelopes the Earth protectively, and keeps us orbiting at just the right speed and distance. These are not mechanical relationships. All the little events in our lives happen in this celestial context, whether we're paying attention or not. This morning I pay attention. Life is so cool, just wonderfully filled with wonder all the time. I look down from my divine height at the worms on the sidewalk and know that their comings and goings are all okay, part of a larger order that I sense enough to know it's real.

My clockwise course this morning takes me up a straight hill and I pick up my walking pace, feeling leg muscles complain a little, then relax in the new rhythm. Here's Amy and Daryl's home. Daryl's retired, he says. He is one of our five-member city council, elected by the townspeople. He's a substitute teacher too, most months. Amy is a sparkly, energetic woman with a soft Dallas accent. Their respective children are grown and gone, and they're always out and about, staying in touch. If you want to know anything about anything in town, they can tell you. Daryl walked so much since taking public office that he wore out a hip and had to have it replaced. We continued our occasional vinotherapy sessions during his convalescence, just as before, and since. Daryl works to make his world a better place, one agenda item and one schoolchild at a time. They both have an unerring sense of fairness and a wonderful generosity. They tend to see more good in people than the people see in themselves, and that is a profound gift all around.

Just as I reach the Johnson's I hear female voices, loud enough to reach the street on this otherwise calm morning. The front door explodes open, and out rages the teenage daughter, mother in brisk pursuit. "And here's your lunch!" Just as mother mightily flings a Tupperware container at her, daughter turns and is struck full in the face, the container bursting open to spray her with noodles or leftover spaghetti. They both freeze, shocked, but the comedy of the moment must have struck them as it did me. They each begin to laugh, a little at first, then more, the argument defused, the situation disarmed. Their laughter rises in volume as they go back into the house, arms around each other, sticky noodles falling in slow motion. The event may have taken all of 5 seconds, and I'm glad they seemed not to notice me witnessing from the sidewalk. Funny trumps mad when given half a chance.

There are mocking birds in the neighborhood, and I often hear but seldom see them on these morning walks. Birds sing their songs with all their little hearts, voicing their parts in the cosmic choir. It's real, unpretentious music. That's why it moves us. For several years now a dove pair has nested under our backyard deck, and this year they raised two little families in the same summer. Didn't know they could do that. It's got so they trust

us enough to let us stare at them while they bird. Our young grandson watches them for far longer than any toy can hold his attention, pointing and pursing his lips to make a “b” sound but not quite yet able to form the “ird.”

“It’s A Wonderful World.” The lyrics I remember to Louis Armstrong’s hit song of decades ago waft through my mind, and the sweet melody is clear. I look around, the air still and clean, natural colors everywhere. Who says heaven is somewhere else? *It is a wonderful world!*

Our home is not far ahead, and the end of this morning’s ambulatory course. Stirring now will be Pamela, my wife, who went back to college after a hiatus of nearly 40 years and just completed her degree requirements for public school teaching. Now she’s about to begin her next career with passion, enthusiasm, and clear intent, just as she starts and finishes everything she does. To me, she is, was, and always will be Wonder Woman.

Brightening sunlight is quickly removing the evidences of last night’s shower, and most of the worms are already gone, back to their places I imagine. We’ve all been around the block a few times, and most of us will go around plenty more. Besides being Lords of the worms, we are Lords of our everyday circumstances, Lords of our personal carbon based life units. Of course you have to believe that to see it, but why not? Seeing the world as a light being changes everything. And every cycle starts and ends at home, like these morning walks.

You know, the knee’s feeling pretty good this morning, and I’ve got time. I think I’ll go around twice today.

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