

**GRACE IN GRAVITY**, Tim House,  
First Church in Boston, March 29<sup>th</sup> 2009

[Thanks to Bill Martin and Eric Carle for their wonderful children's book, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, what do you see?*]

**PROLOGUE: Maps and Itineraries**

“Brown Bear, Brown Bear, what do you see?”

I see a red bird looking at me.”

On one of our trips in Tuscany, Ann and I had read in a guidebook about a great restaurant on a river out in the middle of nowhere, with a beautiful terrace, and we decided to go. We envisioned our leisurely afternoon, under the Tuscan sun, eating great food and drinking great wine. We set a date on our itinerary. The day arrived. We set out in our rental car, and about halfway there, it started to rain. Okay, fine, we could deal. We'd just have to eat inside. It was hard to find, but we followed the map, and after negotiating a complex network of unpaved farm roads, we at last arrived.

It was closed for a national holiday. We didn't *know* it was a national holiday. It didn't say in the guidebook that it was a national holiday. The national holidays were not on the map! But even though this was not something Ann or I were in control of, we still blamed ourselves. “How had we missed this? How could we have been so stupid?” Frustrated and feeling defeated, looking for someone or something to blame, we got back into the car, and started home. At the first turn, I went the wrong way. I jammed on the breaks, again angry with myself, and as I made an agitated three point turn, I backed right into a four-foot deep drainage ditch. We were stuck.

I took my very unhappy ego with me to a nearby farmhouse, hoping to be able to call the Rental car company. Would *they* even be open on a National Holiday? When a man answered the door, I caught a glimpse of the entire family –four generations, or maybe even five – seated around the dining table for their national holiday feast. Dessert was just being served. Embarrassed to disturb them, I timidly asked about a phone. The patriarch wouldn't hear of it. He and his son, got up from the table, put on their rubber boots and raincoats, went out and fired up the tractor, and pulled out car out of the ditch. We

didn't know how to thank them. They didn't care. They seemed happy to help us out. They waved goodbye and returned to their house.

The rain, the national holiday, the drainage ditch, the farmhouse – none of them were on the map. But, if I hadn't backed into that ditch, we never would have been in a position to receive such a wonderful gift of hospitality.

Things fall apart. And we have to address them when they do. We can't just stay in the ditch. But, there can be unexpected gifts waiting in the midst of the chaos of our lives. And they may not be on the map. We need to look up from the map.

“Red bird, red bird, what do you see?  
I see a yellow duck looking at me.”

### **Act I: Things Fall Apart**

Things fall apart. They do, don't they? Along with the times of joy and success and new beginnings, there are times of mistakes and pain and loss. And death. Nobody is exempt. Even if we get all our ducks in order, if we do all our homework, eat all our vegetables, there are still going to be times when things fall apart. We are ultimately not the ones in charge. We know this. But, we keep trying to be in charge anyway. It's part of being human, I guess. We keep looking for that “air-tight” itinerary. That perfect plan. We keep telling ourselves that it's just a matter of finding the *right* road map through life.

But things fall apart. Things come together, and things fall apart. Dreams, plans, families, relationships, careers, and for all of us, finally, bodies. And, when things fall apart, our vulnerability is exposed. Our “smallness” is revealed. And that makes us scared. So we scramble to find a way to get back in control. But, “When we try to escape from Fear by using Control,” says Declan Donnellan, “we end up more and more ensnared with Fear.”

“Ensnared.” What a word. It's got the same sort of emotional feeling as “gnarled.” Miriam Greenspan uses that word - “gnarled.” When we let that part of our ego that wants to be in charge – that wants to be the boss – that wants to be invulnerable – take over our lives, we end up ensnared in *ourselves*. But, “When we *unfurl* the gnarled fist of control, letting the hand open up to receive and to give, ... our

smallness - once the source of our agony - becomes a source of comfort." Our "smallness." Our "not – capable- of- being -in –charge- ness." Our humble interdependence with the web of all existence. What Mary Oliver called – in the responsive reading – our "place in the *family* of things." In the midst of our despair, in the midst of things falling apart, "the world offers it self to our imagination," she says. As long as we remain open to it. As long as we can "unfurl the gnarled fist of control."

## **ACT II: The Peace of Wild Things**

"Yellow duck, yellow duck, what do you see?"

I see a blue horse looking at me."

"Only he who gives thanks for little things receives the big things," wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together*. But, giving thanks for the little things takes practice, for human beings. Daily practice. In fact, Gratitude might be one of the best daily *spiritual* practices we could develop. We're not all used to giving thanks for the little things. For one thing, we're too busy. We are so focused on the *big* things - on how to get them and hold onto them - that the little things often go unnoticed. It's not that "big things" aren't important. But when the big things fall apart, boy do we need to give thanks for the little things. As a matter of fact, when the big things fall apart we might just discover that the little things are really the *big* things after all.

"Blue horse, blue horse, what do you see?"

I see a green frog looking at me."

We need to *practice* gratitude so that we can remember to be grateful, *even when we don't feel like it!* Even when things are falling apart. Even when we are afraid.

"Green frog, green frog, what do you see?"

I see a purple cat looking at me."

"It can help to think of fear like this:" says Declan Donnellan. "Fear is like the Devil. The good news is that he doesn't exist; the bad news is that is precisely why we can't get rid of him. Fear wants you to leave your true self and live with *him*." His objective is to divorce you from your true self. Fear has no power over your true self but he can make you think that your true self has abandoned you.

“Fear wants to exist, but he doesn’t. How is Fear going to pretend he exists? His first problem is Time: there exists only one real time, and that is the now, the present. In that dimension Fear cannot exist. He must invent a pretend time to inhabit and rule; so he takes the only real time, the present, and splits it into two almost identical twins. One half of this fake time he calls the past, and the other half he calls the future. And those are the only two places he can live. Fear governs the future as Anxiety, and the past as Guilt.”

Think about it. When things fall apart, what do we often say to ourselves? I don’t know about you, but I say things like, “God, if I had *only* done so and so.” Or “How could I have been so *stupid*?” And that mantra alternates with “Oh my God, I’ll never get my life back together.” or “things aren’t ever going to be the same again.”

Well the truth is, things *aren’t* ever going to be the same again in any case, and whether we should have or shouldn’t have done so and so, it’s too late to change that now. But if we allow ourselves to get mired up in the false time of the past and future, we are going to miss the opportunities – the gifts - that might be being offered to us *right now*. And, we are going to shut ourselves off from the *beauty* that might be surrounding us *right now*.

“Purple cat. Purple cat, what do you see?  
I see a white dog looking at me.”

But, if we can stay in the present, if we can keep our eyes open to everything that’s going on around us *right now*, we’ll be able to see the little gifts that Bonhoeffer is talking about.

“White dog, white dog, what do you see?  
I see a black sheep looking at me.”

The non-human part of Creation is always looking. Life is *all* in the present. Waiting for the next drop of rain. Looking for the next seed. The next acorn. The next tasty field mouse. The next *gift*. It’s all gifts. Things fall apart in the animal world, too. Creation is a scary place. But, the “wild things” face their fears in the present. Moment by moment. They take Creation on *its* terms. It’s a beautiful, chaotic, terrifying, glorious adventure. If we can learn to keep *looking*, to keep our focus outward on the *whole* of Creation – the way Mary Oliver “looks and looks and looks into the faces of the wild flowers” – we can

see it as a gift, as well, and make peace with some of our fears. Then we, too, can live in a “house called gratitude.” Even when things are falling apart.

Here is Wendell Berry’s poem *The Peace of Wild Things*:

When despair for the world grows in me  
 and I wake in the night at the least sound  
 in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
 I go and lie down where the wood drake  
 rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
 I come into the peace of wild things  
 who do not tax their lives with forethought  
 of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
 And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
 waiting with their light. For a time  
 I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

### **ACT III: We’re All Swimming to the Other Side.**

Things fall apart. Right now, in many of our lives, things are falling apart big-time. And there’s plenty to be fearful about. I’m not standing up here trying to make light of it - to turn it into some kind of esoteric argument. And I’m not suggesting that we blithely sit back and just let come what may. Of course we need to keep trying to manage our lives. We need our plans and itineraries. We need our maps. There is rent to pay and food to get on the table. There are wounds to be tended, and grief that needs to be grieved. I’m only suggesting that we not let the chaos of our lives drive us deeper and deeper inside our selves. That we not get stuck in the fake times of past and future, blaming ourselves for not being able to be “in charge” or gnarled with fear that we’ll never be able to “get things right.” You know the voices: “How could I have let things fall apart? I should have planned better. I should have been able to keep it from happening.” And “What will become of me now? What if I never get back on track.” The more we listen to these voices, the more isolated we become from ourselves and from one another. And it cuts us off from gratitude.

Instead, can we look up from the map? Can we accept circumstances as they are and give them the attention they require, right here, right now in the present, but *remember* that it's not *all* up to us. Can we remind ourselves that we *are* vulnerable, that we need one another; that we're not in this alone. Can we focus *out* of our selves - the way Mary Oliver does – to simply offer the world our attention?

“Black sheep, black sheep, what do you see?

I see a gold fish looking at me.

Can we practice gratitude: for the incredible gift of community; for having *our* place in the family of things; for our life-giving connection to one another and to Creation. Gratitude can't keep things from falling apart. But it can remind us of the eternal truths that persist *beneath* the uncertainties of our fragile lives. It can help us bear witness to those eternal truths.

Gold fish, gold fish, what do you see?

I see a teacher looking at me.”

Life will remain the beautiful, chaotic, terrifying, glorious adventure that it has *always* been. We'll keep making our plans and following our maps. And things *will* fall apart. And they will come together again, in some new way. And they will fall apart again. In the last analysis, we're *all* swimming to the other side.

We aren't in charge of that. But, we *can* “unfurl our gnarled fists.” Even as we try to manage our chaotic lives, we can accept the truth of our “smallness.” We can remember that vulnerability is the *gift* life has given us to *open* us to the search for connection - with one another and with all of Creation. We can intentionally practice gratitude, by looking up from the map. By noticing the incredible, *uncharted* miracles there are all around us. Right now. Right here in this sanctuary.

“Teacher, teacher, what do you see?

I see children looking at me.”

If we can teach ourselves to be thankful for the little things – the little gifts – we will be in a better place to receive the *big* things. And the big things are always the same, whether our lives are coming together *or* falling apart. The big things are love and connection. And they are always right there waiting for us, if we just pay attention.

It is our smallness that binds us to one another. We are all in this together. We're *all* swimming to the other side.

“When we get there we’ll discover, all the gifts we’ve been given to share, have been with us since life’s beginning, and we never noticed they were there.”

Notice. Notice. Look. See. Bear witness. Give thanks for the little things. Because the little things add up.

“Children, children, what do you see?

We see a brown bear, a red bird, a blue horse, a yellow duck, a green frog, a purple cat, a white dog, a black sheep, a gold fish, and a teacher looking at us.”

*Practice* gratitude for being part of this miraculous interdependent web of all existence. For the “smallness” that allows us to be part of one another.

### **EPILOGUE: Grace in Gravity**

Gravity: The force that draws us to this mysterious, miraculous earth. The force that keeps us grounded and connected. The force that draws every body to every other body. There is grace in gravity. As Tich Nhat Hanh puts it,

"People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child -- our own two eyes. All is a miracle."

“Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see?”

Amen.

Lyrics to the song we sang as the last hymn - *Swimming to the Other Side*, by Pat Humphries.

**Swimming to the Other Side**, Pat Humphries

{Refrain}

We are living 'neath the great Big Dipper  
We are washed by the very same rain  
We are swimming in the stream together  
Some in power and some in pain  
We can worship this ground we walk on  
Cherishing the beings that we live beside  
Loving spirits will live forever  
We're all swimming to the other side

**I am alone, and I am searching  
Hungering for answers in my time  
I am balanced at the brink of wisdom  
I'm impatient to receive a sign  
I move forward with my senses open  
Imperfection, it will be my crime  
In humility I will listen  
We're all swimming to the other side  
{Refrain}**

**On this journey through thoughts and feelings  
Binding intuition, my head, my heart  
I am gathering the tools together  
And preparing to do my part  
All of those who have come before me  
Band together and be my guide  
Loving lessons that I will follow  
We're all swimming to the other side  
{Refrain}**

**When we get there we'll discover  
All of the gifts we've been given to share  
Have been with us since life's beginning  
And we never noticed they were there**

**We can balance at the brink of wisdom**

**Never recognizing that we've arrived**

**Loving spirits will live together**

**We're all swimming to the other side**

{Refrain}