

Intersecting Worlds: On Grief, Clair-Sentience, and Place

The sun was just coming up at five a.m., the sky, a finger-painting of mauve and tangerine, when my guide deposited me at a lone cabin atop a hill. My expansive vista included overgrown and wind-torn grasses as well as the churning sea below, the few other buildings so far as to be almost out of view. Finally, after several cancellations and delays due to the unusual storm season in the first days of January 1996, my plane had landed in Seattle. We had just driven the two hours to Port Townsend through a raging wind jostling the compact car from lane to lane, passing huge downed trees and sodden areas of flooding. Flashing a weary smile, the young woman handed me some maps and papers, a check for the month's food and we said good night, or more appropriately, we laughed, *good morning!* I had traveled from Boston and she had waited up patiently more than half the night to deliver me to The Centrum Foundation for the Arts where I had been offered a month long writing residency.

The complex of Centrum's buildings and land is located on the grounds of an old W.W.II fort which looks out over the Pacific ocean. From my cabin window I could see the edges of a small town a mile away in the distance tucked into the fanned curl of beach. I flicked on the electric space heater recessed into the knotty pine wall and hastily unpacked. Disregarding the hour, I set up my computer, determined to dive into my writing after some decent sleep, despite the howling winds outside.

I hadn't been asleep very long that first night when I awakened to a crash in the next room and crept out of bed with my flashlight, tiptoeing into the living room to find the drapes and curtain rod had blown off the four small windows of the front of the cabin. The gusts were so strong the thin little house was shaken to its foundations. Briefly I connected this crash with another a few years back. The glass suction-cup vase, in which I kept a few ivy cuttings, shattered one night, having fallen from a mirror in my dining room. That night I had been dreaming of my deceased father when I was abruptly brought to consciousness. And so this night, 3,000 miles from home, half-asleep I barely noted my unbidden thought: *Well, Daddy's here, and maybe this time I'm ready.* I went back to bed and slept until mid-afternoon.

I had come across country to the state where I was born with the intention of writing poetry about the subject I had avoided since my sixteenth birthday. At Centrum I entered one of those seamless zones which transcend time. Within the first few days I submerged myself in my interior world for long periods, sustaining a waking dream where my psyche was emptied and replenished. I'd look up and see the windows darkened when I'd planned an afternoon walk and lost track of myself. I was solitary, not lonely, experiencing one of my most nourishing phases.

For thirty years I have meditated twice a day. This practice has opened many channels, the most powerful, a clair-sentience to my environment, I dare say an extrasensory intuition where I can feel shifts in the energy of a room. This new sensation arrived slowly over the years but I noticed how much it intensified from the moment of my arrival on the west coast. I believe there were multiple intelligences around me, the spirit of living organisms, perhaps other writers who'd occupied this cabin, perhaps the ancestors of the land, insects in the walls, my father himself, or maybe it was only my belief in these correspondences that eased my writing. Still, I was conscious of subtle changes in my immediate external environment too. I wished I could test the validity of these newfound senses like Darwin playing piano notes for the earthworms to test their sensitivity to sound. Yet I had only my personal reality and the phenomena of my humming ears, my breathing skin.

I needed to recall my own trauma around my father's sudden death, and though the fragments, ribbons and confetti that tossed about deep in my memory well were bittersweet, when they surfaced they found forms within the poems and left me free. And there was also something more occurring at Centrum, something primordial in my tactile senses, something beyond my usual creative process.

I think now the spaciousness of the west was more conducive to stirring these dazzling, already open senses. Somehow the silence, the sudden communions with nature which took place on my daily walks in synch with the unraveling of poems all provided a private covenant with *otherness* that transcended my own subjectivity. In my heart and mind, a shift in consciousness, an intimacy with the inhuman as well as a heightened sensitivity to the biosphere will forever be intertwined with the green grounds of Fort Worden.

Every morning over my oatmeal out my kitchen window I'd watch five or six deer still as statues on the chartreuse lawns. It seemed I never saw them move, though I would look back minutes later and they'd be gone. Evidently they knew when the world around them slept and like dreamy apparitions they disappeared into the dawn. Beyond that bluff, the distant blue-black waters slowly cinched in the January breakers lapping the shore, leaving a six foot wide path of tangled seaweed. If I left the cabin at the right time I could walk all the way to town along the scrubby beach.

Port Townsend was a bedroom community and reminded me of villages in northern Massachusetts and southern Maine. There were several wonderful bookstores, cafes and whole-food grocers I could explore. Every few days I'd follow the tide into town, do my marketing and return on the bus laden with bags of organic veggies and grains, corn pasta and different pastes. Though the village was "quaint," it was upscale. And as in Maine, I noticed the gap between the picture-perfect postcard of the men on the wharves hauling their nets, and the wealthy denizens of the town who had modernized it.

I'd sit on a bench overlooking the fishermen with my parka open, my scarf loose, warmed by the sun on the waterfront which was often radiant despite what I had heard about Washington winters. Slicing kiwi fruit over rice cakes, I nibbled on goat cheese and almonds, red peppers and pita pockets. The beach stones, the winter ocean, the hills and gulls put me in a mindful state. I was so pleased just *to be*, and realized how rarely I experienced peace in my quotidian routine at home, running to survive my schedule, weekends meted out as if two days of rest could even penetrate the shutdown senses, or alleviate accumulated layers of city-stress. Here a sensory reciprocity enveloped solitude. I could simply look and listen, allowing the sounds and images to hover in my subtle body; later words would appear.

I couldn't avoid my sorrowful thoughts about the fact that Richland, Washington, the town beyond the mountains in the desert area of the state where I had spent the first six years of my life, due to the burial of radioactive waste, had since become dangerously polluted. Many of my parents' friends made permanent homes there after 1945. And many died of cancer in their fifties and sixties. Some of my siblings and I have been contacted regarding our health by the corporation, Hanford Industries, a plutonium production complex which is involved in law suits with the Department of Energy and the EPA.

The physicists of Richland had a role in the production of the atomic bomb and there was something incongruent now about my reverberations with the natural landscape and my knowledge of the contaminated land where I was born. Like many, I have adapted to cement beneath my shoes, and in imperceptible increments, lost actual contact with the land itself, the potent power pulsed along the ley lines beneath the soles of our feet. Like the natives of many primitive cultures, I believe the land holds the field of the stories and emotions of all the creatures who had ever inhabited it. I had only slowly become aware that the powers of our conscious earth are at stake in modern civilization.

At different moments on the quiet paths around Fort Worden I stilled myself like the deer, focusing with all my senses opened, grounding this new energy. I tried to tune in on the faint buzzing I was becoming accustomed to in my body, attune to currents sprung along my own acupuncture meridians. For the first time I could relate physically to the interdependence between humanity and the living organisms of soil and rock. Though I'm not sure I understand the phenomenon I experienced, I know that in that place at that time new senses arrived within me.

And I thought a lot about my father's life, how he had come out here to Washington as a young doctor before the climax of W.W. II, uninformed of the secret atomic project he was assigned to. How he and my mother in their mid-twenties made lifelong friendships with the physicists and physicians who lived next door in government housing, a makeshift village in the desert. How when he revealed his suspicion to one of the physicists, he was told never to mention it. How my East coast parents, still young and adventurous, and in no hurry to leave their new friends, extended their stay for ten years after the war ended. My brother and sister and I were all born there.

In the late forties and early fifties my parents skied at Sun Valley and summered in Priest Lake, Idaho as the town of Richland grew up around them. There were barbecues overlooking the Columbia River which bordered our back yard. I remembered the coyotes howling at night and how Kayo, our collie, learned to mimic them. I recalled the witchy tumbleweeds that frightened me, and the cowboys who yodeled from my parents' monophonic console. How I would hold the album covers in my small hands and how delighted my father was when I memorized the words and gurgled the sounds. I remembered the blue and yellow snapdragons and my father's rose bushes of all types and colors. How the corals were my favorite, how careful I was not to touch the thorns, and how I picked bouquets for my mother, prancing around the lawn in my lavender sun suit while she raised her freckled arms to hang the wash. It seemed there were fairies there too among the evening fireflies and when my family still teases me about the "imaginary" friends of my early childhood, I am forced to think twice about the ambiguity of my experience. We still have the home movies and slides that helped imprint these images, and I felt during this writing retreat, that I was reawakening to the magical child I was.

In 1954 my family came east to New York where my father's Italian clan were rooted. Until my stay at Centrum, the closest I'd felt to nature was on the beaches of Maine, in the other far northern tip of the country. I'd married a "Maine-iac" and in my twenties I'd spent many summers with my butt in the sand, drawing with a stick, playing with my son, a toddler then. I sometimes needed to sit on the actual earth, not the blanket or towel. I didn't mind the sand stuck up my bathing suit and I'd take my son into the shower with me where we'd peel off our suits, rinsing our limbs, watching the sand clog the drain.

In the blustery turbulence on the plane from Boston, I'd called on the keepers of the universe to steady the wings, and I addressed my deceased father personally, pledging to set us both free. Two years after recovering from a breakdown, he died unexpectedly in 1963, three weeks after JFK, a week before Christmas and my sixteenth birthday. I came to Centrum with an intention to confront the subject that intimidated me. I had read Plath of course, and who could say it better? Yet it no longer mattered to me how well I could say it. I must say it, whatever fears came up. I visualized him from a number of images that have always remained with me, casual snapshots; Daddy talking on the phone; Daddy paying bills; Daddy on the den couch watching live television with me the morning Lee Harvey Oswald was shot; Daddy driving and crooning Sinatra on our many family road trips; Daddy leading a family march through the living room to the soundtrack of *The Music Man*. I reveled in these happier times before my father's breakdown, before I entertained the darker images I felt I must penetrate as well.

After each writing session, I imaginatively drew a figure eight of white light around his head and slowly enlarged it, cranking it brighter and brighter until it spun around the complete image. I had used this technique over the years after attending a workshop on healing with imagery and energy. When I did the visualization on my father, I would discover swells of sorrow trapped in my chest, as if unexpressed grief were incarcerated in the cells of my body. I'd tear up, sigh and breathe deeply. I knew the "pain-body" existed and I knew my own troubled relationships with men were somehow activated by my father's passage during my adolescence. In 1963 I knew nothing of the need to mourn but followed my stoic mother who had courageously gone on. Although in therapy twenty years later, I intellectually explored my past, I needed emotional repercussions to rattle me physically into healing. We do not heal psychologically through our "understanding" but by reexperiencing emotions through concrete images shifting the ingrained neuron paths or thought processes. I believed I could alter the images that had wounded me, or at least put them to rest.

There was only one other resident at Centrum, a visual artist from Seattle. I visited her studio where she was working with silk screen prints of glyphs and spiritual symbols, birds, hearts, the palms of hands. I knew a lot of poets and artists back East who lived perfectly well without sharing my interest in evolutionary consciousness or energy bodies, yet surprisingly she actually spoke my language. Together we enjoyed an evening poetry reading by Sam Hamill, the publisher of Copper Canyon Press which is housed on the fort grounds. Poet, translator, practicing Buddhist, social activist, Sam is brilliant and committed. I had lunch with him in an old fisherman's restaurant on the waterfront the next week. But other than those few activities, I immersed myself in Centrum's natural world, long walks through the damp, gamey woods around the fort, the warm January light, splendid rows of poplars and pines.

One day in the thicket of paths, I stumbled upon "Memory's Vault," the sculpture installation Sam told me about. A misty afternoon, fog skirting my feet, grace hovering in the atmosphere--I was astonished by the site. It's a meditation in itself. There before me lay a Zen garden on a bedding of green and tawny rocks. Two imperious stone thrones preside adjacent to a modern Stonehenge a few yards beyond. Here five monolithic slabs are engraved with beautiful human longing: Sam Hamill's five poems of sea and rain, animals and air. I felt his call to the sacred, suddenly deeply grateful for the central tragedy of my life, my father's passing. I realized it had gifted me with an unconscious treasury and made me a poet. I thanked him, and Sam, and the quiet wind of this deeply luscious world, the air, rich in texture even in January. The trails zithered and chirped with invisible creatures. Light drifted across clusters of fresh holly, wild pachysandra and patches of lime, mosses draped in the crannies of bald branches clinging to bark in the storm-downed birch.

The woods, having been beaten by winds due to the unusual storm season, now seemed to savor its own existence. Its worn paths were obscured by the tangled foliage, but I was beckoned in farther by huge ferns, gloss on wet leaves, scurrying ants carrying cargo. Once I stopped dead before the distant end of a passage where a cylindrical crystal seemed to shine in the dying sunlight. But as I approached closer, I saw a spider web beaded with dewdrops, a deep pocket with a numinous glow rimming it inside and out. A cup I felt I could drink from, a spider web grail. I changed direction and found the steps of the fort's banks, climbed them and peered into the ghostly dungeons, rooms where old admirals kept their plans. Descending the stairwells that led to a crossroads on the bluff, I walked and I walked, lost for awhile in the scent of mud, the fertile climate nesting its breath in my hair. I knew I couldn't wander forever as the sea would appear on one side or another eventually, so there was a freedom in getting lost I found exhilarating. These woods were a sanctuary for emptying my day-world mind, a kinship with the communal mind of nature, that realm where the unconscious rejoins its first organic source, its home before civilization's forgetfulness and alienation.

When the sun lowered itself and the clouds were tinted violet, I headed back to the cabin to meditate. Once I stilled myself, I was immediately aware that the *chi* around my body had thickened and I underwent a fresh sensation, as if a whole blanket of stretchy, netted energy surrounded me. I could extend my hand out in front of me and push the field of air around my palm almost like static from a balloon stuck to my hand. I have no way of truly understanding these sensations. I merely felt them.

Once, for only a few seconds during the meditation an image appeared. In one quick flash, I remember seeing an intricate, complicated machine precisely zoom into focus; strangely, I saw it in black and white. It looked like an M.C. Escher sketch. There were pulleys and ropes elaborately laid out, something we might see in a surreal manufacturing plant. I couldn't find any associative meaning and I can only speculate about its symbolism. Was this my projection of the moving energy field around me, one based upon quantum physics, that hypothesized connection between science and faith, the machinations that made me aware of invisible dimensions? Could my unconscious mind have given me an image of "The Butterfly Effect" with its understructure showing the interdependencies of intersecting worlds? Was I influencing my own reality by projecting British physicist Rupert Sheldrake's idea of "morphic resonance," where the present overlays the past? Einstein helped us understand that time is only a construct, past, present and future are all happening at once in the Now.

"String Theory," or the "Unified Theory of Everything" (as a recent *Nova* program on Brian Greene's book *The Elegant Universe* called it) posits that we may live on a membrane surrounded by parallel universes inside higher dimensions. These strings vibrate in patterns like those of a cello or violin and there appear to be worm holes where there is access between the dimensions. These physicists theorize that the Big Bang stretched the fabric of space and that layers of reality may be piled up in "super symmetry." Or was my mind merely selecting from the store of familiar images I knew from art? *What the BLEEP do I know?* . . . But I couldn't help but think there were relationships between my uncanny experiences, my intentions, and the fields of power around me which were both tactile and visual, both intimate and impersonal.

My sensations continued daily and I'd like to think my father was among a team of energies processing my dormant grief into pictures and words. I was closer to my father's spirit here in the west where he had grown into his prime, his artistry, his surgery. He wrote poetry as I do. And here in Washington, ironically on an assignment from the government, he'd been both successful *and* happy. I wondered if the charged density in my *chi* had to do with my long overdue receptivity to the writing. I suspected also that the rainstorms had charged the air with more negative ions which helped produce my sensations. Mystics would agree that *all that is* is interconnected. I knew that many factors must coincide to produce what psychologist Stanislaw Grof calls a "spiritual emergency," where one is initiated to a world within the world.

When I recall this miraculous place, I see the rows of aspen lining the paths of the grounds against the blues of Puget Sound. Ferry boats trudging towards the sprinkling of islands in the distance, their triangular white wakes like veils trailing behind. Even under the overcast skies there was a kind of cleansing. And when the clouds did clear, the days were warm, the sun magnificent. Tucked away in a northwest corner of the country, standing on land closer to my birthplace than I'd been in forty years, I felt mutually rooted, both literally and metaphorically, with my young father. And through my perception of an associative empathy, I felt I was offered a palpable connection to the most basic nurturing sources.

The physicists tell us energy cannot be created or destroyed but only changes form. They speculate about parallel worlds, and I would swear my father's spirit was among the layers of energy I encountered in that phenomenological field. Before I left my small cabin I improvised a ceremony to release the blaming, the self-pity and the longing that had haunted me, and possibly, my father as well. I lit candles and sage and invited him in while I read my poems aloud. Though I'm now distant from the traditional Catholicism I grew up with, I have always had a deep faith, an a priori knowledge of eternal existence. Though muted for many years, I had extrasensory intimations since childhood. The homemade ritual helped ground my intentions.

On the flight back I thought about my father's transition into the afterlife. Since his death was induced by what appeared to be an unintended overdose, I viewed the crossing as rough. I wondered if my own pain had held him back through the years. I had read about near-death experiences, how unresolved grieving could, for a time, keep a soul tethered to its most recent earthly identity. The second year after his death my mother and younger siblings each had a separate vision of him on the same night. I told myself he heard my call and we could now free ourselves from pain. I believe that psychic poet William Blake's "doors of perception" will open the more we unconsciously inhabit the *belief* that they will. That the sacredness of our environment can speak to us. That by developing intuition in stillness we allow our bodies to relay information.

The search for the lost father is archetypal, and many of us who've lost a parent early in life are marked forever. Some of us are turned into artist and writers attempting to express what is bottomless. Perhaps there is no difference between what we do and what we imagine to do with the presence of that absence.

Editor's note: The following year DeNicola was awarded a poetry fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts for the poems she had written while at Centrum.

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