

Walking with Eileen

Jim Aitken

*‘When I go from hence, let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable.’ -
Gitanjali, Rabindranath Tagore.*

Sometimes I would go out for a walk on my own and sometimes Eileen would go for a walk on her own, but most of the time we would go for walks together.

When the news of the virus first broke I decided to stop my classes. I had been teaching a course called *Scotland in Union and Disunion* with Adult Education, along with a course on *Rebellious Women* with the Outlook Group for people with mental health issues. I also had to stop my course on Creative Writing with my Community Education class for older, vulnerable adults. I stopped these classes not just because I was worried about my own health but because of all the other people in the classes maybe catching the virus.

For the first few weeks of the pandemic we hardly left the house and our faithful son, James would bring us our groceries. At other times Eileen would order what we needed online. Slowly we gained confidence to go out, armed with face masks and pocket hand sanitisers. On our earliest walks around our local park and nearby gardens we noticed the buds on the trees beginning to burst. This haiku managed to express our new situation:

‘Spring 2020’

Coronavirus

spreads its deadly contagion

as the first buds burst.

While the human world saw itself in the starkest of terms with a pandemic raging against it, the more private and separate world of flowers and trees, birds and other wild life carried on as before, oblivious to what was happening in our world. A case of worlds within the world. This

world we entered into on our walks and talks became the non-medical antidote to the world of Covid-19.

Of course, these worlds are linked inextricably because of the way we have plundered nature; abused nature by destroying habitats and capturing wild animals for sale in markets. Something had to give and what was given was Covid–19.

As the medical professions and front-line workers kept life going, there were fewer aeroplanes in the sky or cars on the road and this was giving planet Earth some respite. And our respite from the grim daily broadcasts was to wander in wonder:

‘Embankment’

*The long grasses on the embankment
flow to the side as the breeze blows
and look like green hair trailing in the wind.*

*And amid it all the oxeye daisies
follow the long grass stalks with their own,
looking back at us with a hundred yellow eyes.*

Trees came alive as the leaves came out, creating the greatest of all fashion shows in every shade of green. Some of the taller trees – the horse chestnut and copper beech – had an aristocratic air of aloofness about them. They brought to mind the same comment made against Tagore but as we passed by the trees each day I began to think that maybe Tagore’s detractors had it all wrong about him. No matter how we observed the trees and watched how they were at all times and in all weathers, they remained remote from us yet their very existence was enabling us to breathe. They were not aloof but simply detached from us. This was what Tagore’s critics unknowingly detected – a detachment that is the very essence of Hindu practice. These trees seek the light and that is why they are tall, reaching higher each year for the light and the higher they go in their search the more majestic and aloof from us they become. Rather than conclude that the apparent aloofness of such trees – or of someone like Tagore – is in some measure

condescension toward us, why not seek to emulate both trees and Tagore by seeking the light ourselves?

And the trees were totally inclusive in all that they did. Often we would detect birds sitting on their branches, all kinds of birds, insects and squirrels. The trees made no signs to say *No Crows or Blackbirds Here*. They were a welcome stopping post for all regardless of colour or feathers. We detected asylum seekers and migrants perching on their branches, resting their wings after long flights and no questions were ever asked and no passports required. And all trees play their part in this way showing us the folly of our ways.

In America another virus was raging. It was the virus of racism. With the death toll mounting due to Covid-19 and due to millions of Americans howling at the moon, their view of the world divorced from nature and from light, violence was the result. The foundations upon which this nation was built were beginning to creak. The near genocide of native Americans and the long dark shadow of slavery and racism saw the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement. Doves and blackbirds had no clue about this and carried on being doves and blackbirds. And swans swimming in the pond may have looked up and seen a few crows fly above and simply considered them birds like themselves and carried on swimming.

What was going on in America made me think of those villagers in ancient India who prayed to Lord Shiva. With murder and mayhem going on around them they asked Shiva to intercede on their behalf. The demon of ignorance, *Apasmara Purusha* had created this chaos in their lives and they begged Lord Shiva to rid them of this demon so that they could live lives of peace and harmony.

Shiva danced the dance to end all dances with arms flailing and mesmerising the demon of ignorance. In no time at all Shiva had the demon underfoot and stability was restored to the lives of the villagers.

But with the world today in a similar kind of chaos once experienced by those ancient villagers, *Apasmara Purusha* must have hid behind some rock for thousands of years before creeping out again to cause his customary chaos.

With wars waging and bombs falling, with moronic T.V. screening all over the world and in Tagore's own nation a form of Hindu nationalism was rampant that he would have loathed. For him Hinduism was India's great gift not just to India but for all who sought light. There was

nothing narrow or confining about this great system but this new nonsense was spreading across continents and in America it had become a serious menace. It was a country spiralling out of control through a combination of greed, need and ignorance.

As the wet summer made its way into golden autumn we attended each day new fashion shows. This time the colours had changed into red and gold and yellow. The silver birches seemed to merit our attention most with their long, thin bodies standing like upright pencils with their paint work flaking. But more than this, much more than this their falling leaves fell like soft, golden coins and made us a carpet of burnished gold to walk upon.

One night, feeling restless with all that was going on, I got up and went into our kitchen. I heard two owls calling each other and after returning to bed and rising in the morning, I remembered the owls from the night before and came up with another haiku:

‘Owls’

*Two owls were calling
in the early morning dark.
That made three night owls.*

Our walk that day involved the spotting of a couple of tree creepers scouring the barks of a tree in our nearby gardens. We noted their delicately hooked beaks that were rounded like the tops of broken off finger nails. The roads were slippery that day with ice and snow and the river near our house was running fiercely.

And a running river is the image of the way the world and ourselves within it have always flowed. Sometimes it can be fierce and at other times it can be tranquil or maybe even sluggish. If only we could clear all the debris from its path it could run all the more smoothly. And if only we could clear all the detritus from our minds then our lives - and the nature of our world - could be so much clearer and so much better.

All our lives are like rivers flowing into the vast oceans where we all merge and maybe what moisture remains of us will be soaked up into the clouds to fall back down on the rivers all

over again. And to fall on all those we loved and left behind, their wet faces the kisses we give them with our immortality.

Only a few devotees of *Apasmara Purusha*, greedy and divisive in their pursuit of the illusions of power and wealth, clog up the river of our underlying and unrealised Unity. For we are all One despite them and one day it can surely be realised that there is only the one race, the human one, existing in the one world we should all be looking after.

The naked trees along the riverbank, their branches at their tips like coral, stood and waited for new life to emerge. They were plastered in the most beautiful frost:

‘Winter 2020’

*The branches are white
with a thin coat of silk gloss
as the frost glistens.*

And as we noted the first new buds and snowdrops of 2021 we realised we had been witness to *unsurpassable* sights. We had entered into a wonderfully welcoming world outside our house and like Immanuel Kant, who took the same walk each day through Königsberg and thought great thoughts, walking with Eileen led to the recognition that our time here is precious as we are ourselves.

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