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*These words are a gift from the land and from the Divine. Please feel free to share them with others as you see fit.*

## SPECIAL BIRTHDAY EDITION

### MAKING PEACE

Even though I try to avoid media news, I cannot escape hearing reports of big events that literally shake the globe. Nor would I want to. When the earthquake and resulting tsunami hit the Indian Ocean on the day after Christmas, I started following the news off and on. After all, the earthquake's impact was so great it caused the Earth to wobble on its axis and changed the shape of the map by moving small islands and even the tips of peninsulas. I cannot ignore phenomena of this scope.

Even when the death toll was estimated in only the tens of thousands rather than the six figures to which it has since risen, I sat on the couch in front of the television and cried. I did not weep for the dead, but for the living. Some sources are saying that the true death toll will never be known. I try to fit these too-big losses into my tiny frame of reference.

One way of looking at it is that December 26, 2004 was evidently a good day to die. On average (and not taking tsunamis into account) you can expect to be accompanied by 153,417 other souls on the day you die, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's World Vital Events (the numbers, of course, are always changing). That's currently 6,392 deaths per hour, 107 per minute, and 1.8 per second. These figures likely doubled on the day of the tsunami. Stephen Levine offers this perspective in his book *A Year to Live*:

It is said if we could see the whole truth we would, on any given day, be able to witness hundreds of thousands of spirits departing earth like so many lightning bolts reaching outward. From deep space this is said to look like a fireworks display on a well-celebrated Independence Day.

Who has seen this from deep space, I wonder? What a sight that would be! I assume that births create flashes of light as well, in which case there are approximately 353,437 additional points of light passing through our atmosphere each day. This makes me smile. I picture souls flashing at one another in passing, sparks from the Divine Light coming and going, blinking *fare thee well* and *enjoy your stay*.

I'd much rather think along these lines than take the tack I've heard a time or ten, that helpless lament of *why, oh why?* and *how could God do such a thing?* Annie Dillard was quite blunt on this point in *For the Time Being*:

God is no more blinding people with glaucoma, or testing them with diabetes, or purifying them with spinal pain, or choreographing the seeding of tumor cells through lymph, or fiddling with chromosomes, than he is jimmying with floodwaters or pitching tornadoes at towns.

The very least likely things for which God might be responsible are what insurers call "acts of God."

I was discussing this whole tsunami-related maelstrom of thought with a friend of mine and she articulated the belief, which I'm inclined to share, that our souls have agreed to come here into these bodies with a divine contract for the work we're going to do on earth and likely also an agreement as to how and when we're going to leave the body behind. "What I'm curious about," said my friend, "is why so many souls chose to leave in one big group." I wish I knew. I wonder what the odds are of a common thread in so varied a group of souls: thousands of people from the 11 countries directly affected, and upwards of 6,000 visitors from 33 countries all over the world, reading like a roster of the United Nations. What a diverse and colorful collection! And what lights they must have given off as they exited Earth's atmosphere!

Such large-scale events are inevitably referred to as disasters, *a sudden or great misfortune*, and indeed they are, but not for the dead, I don't think. The weight of disaster lies heavily only upon the living: the homeless, the sick, the suddenly parentless children and childless parents. And also upon those who think, perhaps grandiosely, that they could have averted the event. Even with the growing number of things we can measure and predict, there will always be matters that are beyond our ken and out of our hands. That's as it should be, I think.

There are things that can be done in the aftermath - brave, generous and noble acts that do not reverse the losses, but that help to slowly restore balance in a world thrown topsy-turvy. These acts of caring and compassion, which quickly reduce love to its lowest common denominator, are often referred to as *humanitarian aid*. This strikes me as a misnomer, for do we not rise at these moments into the parts of ourselves that are least human and most divine? *Divinitarian aid* has a ring to it.

I have a radical idea that is based on my understanding of how energy works. I've seen the principle in action in families when the adults are in the middle of fighting about something and then, say, a frozen water line behind the washing machine bursts or a kid falls off a bike or someone discovers the dog is missing, and suddenly the focus shifts and everyone is working together for a common goal, for the good, and the fight just dissolves, resistance softens and is displaced by love and a sense of purpose.

So here's my idea: if I were President of the United States, I'd pull all of our troops out of the war in Iraq and redeploy them to the eleven countries on the Indian Ocean. I'd no doubt have to do this against the protests of my military strategists, but my peace strategists would be whooping and cheering. Can you imagine how such an unexpected move would shift the dynamics on the entire planet? Huge quantities of resources formerly funneled toward war would be redirected to healing. Our troops wouldn't need any of their weapons, but their hands and hearts would be of tremendous value.

This seems so much more practical and personal than pledging billions of dollars we don't really have just to save face in what amounts to an international monetary pissing contest. Excuse me, I get a little wound up when I see us stuck in traffic at the intersection of pride and money, going nowhere, when we're needed at a much more important destination.

There's been a great deal of talk about the failure of early warning systems to prevent loss of life along the Indian Ocean, but this, as I've mentioned, assumes a responsibility that may not be ours to bear. Just as an example, there are some very interesting stories on the wire about the people who didn't die in the tsunami. Children and fishermen and animals were among those who seemed to be differently attuned to what was

coming their way. And sometimes lives were spared by just plain miracles.

Two intriguing stories emerged from the village of Veerampattinam in India. A mysterious spring erupted at the temple above the village at 7:15 a.m., which drew a great number of curious villagers to safety just before the tsunami hit their beach. Those who did not make the hike up to the spring were also offered a reprieve. A fisherman named Mani was working on his boat when he saw the water begin to rise. He first warned the other people on the beach (a group of women who jumped into a nearby boat and rode the tsunami right over the top of their village), then broke open the locked public address system and alerted the rest of the village. Of the more than 6,200 residents there, only one villager died as a result of the tsunami.

Either it's time to go, or it's not; that's what I think.

But just for the sake of discussion, if we want to perfect our early warning systems, I would like to volunteer my chickens. Just kidding...I thought it might be time for a little levity. But seriously, it has long been speculated that animals have a sixth sense, especially birds. Other sources suggest, and reasonably so, that animals just do a better job than we do of using their five senses, that the daily challenges of living more closely to nature keep those senses more acute. This is a distinct possibility.

Birds in particular have been credited with a special sensitivity to minor fluctuations in Earth's magnetic field. Theorists also suggest that other animals have learned to look to the birds for their early warning system; when the birds flee, all the other animals follow. This, however, doesn't take into account the huge number of stories about family pets other than birds who have saved their human loved ones from danger. I expect you've heard

the story about the mother who had a difficult choice to make as the tsunami rushed toward shore. She had three sons and only two hands, so chose the two youngest to carry to safety. She was dismayed when her 7-year-old ran to the family's hut, his only frame of reference for safe harbor, which happened to be right in the path of the oncoming wave. The family's dog went in after the boy, whining, nudging, pushing and finally dragging the boy uphill to dry ground, just in time.

I think we all have similar capabilities and finer instincts, if we'd but sharpen them. I love the science of meteorology, but I still think it's a good idea to step outside after you watch the weather on television. That fisherman in India got his weather report firsthand and helped to save his village. It's just good sense to check the sky, feel the ground, listen to the wind, keep an eye on the water, take a cue from the birds. Our advancing technology is a blessing, but in some ways it also puts us at a disadvantage; we so easily become passive, dull and over-dependent on information coming from outside of ourselves and our immediate surroundings. Not so the creatures who have only their senses upon which to depend for critical information.

This was borne out in the Cuddalore district in India where 600 people were killed by the wave, but scarcely any of the area's many free-roaming cattle, goats or dogs. The priest of Holy Family Church was quoted in an AP bulletin as saying, "My three dogs were barking and howling with no reason at around 7 a.m. on Dec 26. I asked them to keep quiet but they continued barking and were restless." Those same dogs were not fooled by a later tsunami alert that turned out to be a false alarm, during which they were "absolutely calm."

Sri Lanka's 391-square-mile Yala National Park, the country's largest wildlife reserve,

has also turned out to be an interesting proving ground for theories about animal-sense: trees were uprooted, a hotel destroyed, and 200 people killed in the park as the tsunami swept inland, but the elephants, wild boar, deer, water buffalo, leopards and other animals evidently sensed the wave coming and headed for higher ground. "This is very interesting," said Gehan de Silva Wijeyeratne, whose hotel in the park was destroyed. "I am finding bodies of humans, but I have yet to see a dead animal."

As I make my own peace with these earth-shaking events of reverberating consequence (think of the widening ripples of losing something like one-third of a generation of children), I turn for refuge to the things that give me comfort and bolster my hope.

I telepathically send my good ideas to the President.

I picture flocks of birds leading the way as 200 Asian elephants and an assortment of other wild animals resolutely march to safety in Yala National Park.

And I imagine 150,000-some souls - once citizens of 44 different countries, now borderless and free of earthly restraints - rising and sparkling like fireworks on Independence Day.