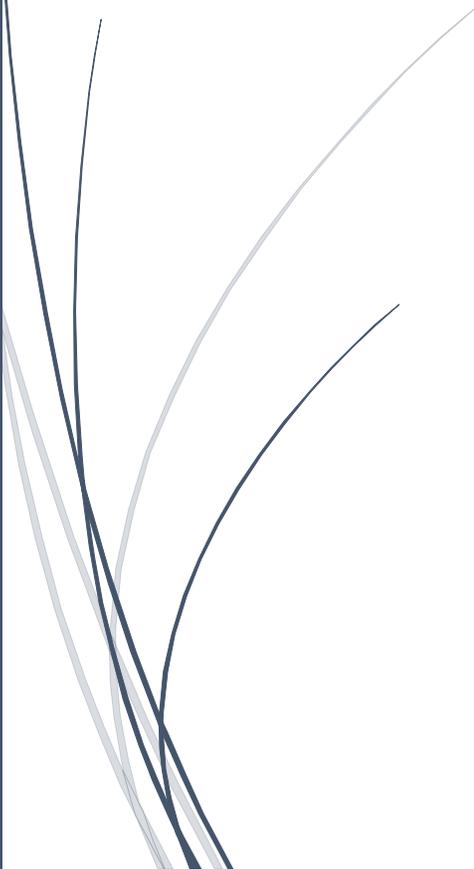




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The Gift of Being Thunderstruck

Part 3 in the Series: "Gifts of the Dark Wood"



Pastor Brad

When I was a kid, I wasn't very good at team sports. In fact, I was pretty awful at anything that had anything to do with a ball. Baseball? My one historic year in little league saw me on a team called the Iroquois -- the 11th place team, of 11 teams. So I wasn't alone, anyway! Basketball? "You're tall - you must be a good basketball player!" I learned early on that stereotypes aren't always accurate. Those red rubber balls we used to use in dodge ball and my face became pretty intimate before I became an expert at the dodging part of dodge ball.

However, I did discover that I had one talent when it came to team sports. I could kick. As long you kept me away from the outfield, kickball was something I could do. To this day I try to hire a kid to stand in for me in the outfield! In middle school, there was a yearly field goal kicking contest and -- I don't know what got into me -- I went out for it. Me, of all people -- me, known to be one of the worst athletes in the school. I couldn't throw a ball to save my life, but I could kick -- and I actually won the thing! The ball made solid contact with my foot and not my face. Finally, I could humiliate the ball instead of the other way around! I'm not sure, but I think the moment I felt the call to enter the contest was a 'thunderstruck' moment. I could've missed it.

In ancient Near Eastern mythology, the voice of a deity is almost always portrayed using the elements of lightning and thunder. It doesn't matter if you're talking about our monotheistic ancestors of ancient Israel worshipping Yahweh, or the Mesopotamian pagans who worshipped Marduk. Picture Zeus of the ancient Greeks and his famous lightning bolt. It's the same with Tahundi and Ivriz, gods of the Anatolian culture, as well as the Canaanite god, Baal. These cultures' deities all speak most centrally to their worshippers through lightning and thunder.

Remember the reading we just heard from the Hebrew Scriptures:

*Listen, listen to the thunder of his voice,
And the rumbling that comes from his mouth.
Under the whole heaven he lets loose,
And his lightning to the corners of the earth.
After it his voice roars;
He thunders with his majestic voice...*

Although nowadays it's usually considered superstitious or primitive -- or even foolish, the gift of being thunderstruck was widely recognized by the ancients, Ancient cultures developed a highly advanced vocabulary to describe patterns in the natural world

that have since been lost to us. It was their mythological imagination that helped them to negotiate their life paths.

Have you ever experienced a sudden flash of insight – an awareness that rocked your whole world – that changed everything? I don't know if I've mentioned this before – I probably have -- but when I had been sober for about a year – which is an interminable length of time for an addict – I hadn't been sober for a whole year since I took my first drink as a teenager!

There I was at my job, surfing the internet -- like a good employee -- having prayed every day for God to show me what I should do next. "It's been a year, God, when does the good stuff start? When do I get a real life?" I was looking at schools because the idea had come into my head that I should maybe finish my degree, when all of a sudden I came across a small university about five blocks from my office that offered adult education classes in the evening. Most schools like that offer a business degree or a degree in "Organizational management" (whatever that is) but there, right in front of me was a Christian school offering not just business degree, but a BA in Ministry. Ding! There it was! I immediately knew that was the degree I needed.

Why do we call these moments "seeing the light" or "Sudden flashes" when there's nothing to see? Why do we claim they "rock our world" when the world around us is perfectly still? It's because we are still forced to interpret and explain our interior phenomena – to describe the indescribable – using concrete, physical metaphors.

That's what the whole thunder and lightning thing was for the ancients. They were describing the indescribable, the inconceivable, and in the 21st century we've become too sophisticated – or so we'd like to think – to realize it. The voice of the divine often comes through momentary flashes of intuition or awareness that, as Elnes puts it, "trigger sensations that reverberate within us like rolling thunder."

As a pastor and seminary student, the topic often comes up as to why God doesn't speak to us "like in the Bible" anymore. But, most people have had an experience of having the "light bulb" come on, or that 'aha' moment; we know what it means to say that something 'clicked,' changing our lives, and I've often talked about a brief moment of clarity before getting sober. Are you really so sure that God doesn't still speak to us 'like in the Bible' anymore? The UCC has adopted as their slogan, "God is still speaking."

One interesting thing that Elnes points out that I hadn't really noticed until now, is that while sometimes we can easily miss the lightning, the thunder tends to be easier to identify. Think of one of those thunderstorms where the lightning is too far away to see but you hear the thunder continuing to reverberate as it rolls across the landscape from miles away.

The lightning is quick and soundless but even quiet thunder is hard to miss. We forget or we overlook the original flash – the moment of clarity that triggers the thunder but the ongoing reverberations can last for years. When I was 18 my mom said, “You’d make a good pastor.” That was it. I didn’t pay any attention. Twenty five years later the reverberations came rolling back to me as I was surfing the internet looking for my future.

The fact remains that God never speaks in an audible voice like Morgan Freeman – or even George Burns (remember?) “like in the Bible” any more. But let me say that I don’t think God ever did speak out loud the way we’d like to imagine. Sure, the Bible is chock-full of God speaking to this person or that person; but the writers were trying to convey what they heard in their hearts -- within their inner selves. You’ve heard of your mind’s eye, well I call it your mind’s ear. They were describing a light bulb moment before there was electricity!

Lightning and thunder -- An ‘aha’ moment followed by a reverberation that lasted for weeks or months, maybe sometimes for rest of a person’s life. Since their whole lives revolved around God or gods, it was only natural to begin the story with “And God said...” This wasn’t a lie or an exaggeration. The ancients simply couldn’t conceive of a time like ours when mythological imagination would be such a distant memory, that people would take their writings so literally.

Let’s not forget that the people writing all that down back then were still people – flawed imperfect people prone to misinterpret the significance of their flashes of awareness just as much as we are. They might misinterpret the meaning but not the means by which the deity spoke. Nearly every religion and culture has the same ways of describing how the voice of the divine comes to us. It came in flashes – flashes of lightning and rolling thunder.

In Chapter 4, Elnes talks about the world within the world – an invisible geography created by ancient myths and stories that humanity has used – not as a way of teaching history and science -- but through the ages to avoid life’s dead ends, leading to a place of freedom. Since it’s an “invisible” map, travelling this world within the world is a bit like journeying into darkness. So the metaphor of traveling into the dark wood makes a lot of sense. We negotiate the internal landscape of the Dark Wood more with intuition and imagination rather than through direct perception. (p 66) – Remember the frog last week who’s impressive escape was made possible not by his fear but by his God-given ‘frog-ness’?

In the Dark wood of our interior journey, when lightning flashes and thunder reverberates powerfully, over and over, in the same places, it’s a sign – an honest to God sign that maybe we should pay attention. Maybe we should make move in the direction that it’s suggesting to us, sometimes subtly sometimes not so subtly. We feel draw to move in this direction – it calls to our deeper selves. It feels more natural. Elnes uses a quote from a

movie called “Adaptation” based on a book by Susan Orlean called *The Orchid Thief*. In the movie, an unorthodox orchid hunter reminds us of what it’s like to sense the call, describing an attraction between a bee and a very specific orchid that it pollinates:

There’s a certain orchid that looks exactly like a certain insect so the insect is drawn to this flower—its double, its soul mate—and wants nothing more than to make love to it. After the insect flies off, it spots another soul-mate flower and makes love to it, thus pollinating it. And neither flower nor the insect will ever understand the significance of their lovemaking. I mean, how could they know that because of their little dance the world lives, but it does. By simply doing what they’re designed to do, something large and magnificent happens. In this sense they show us how to live, how the only barometer you have is your heart; how when you spot your flower you can’t let anything get in your way.

Maybe you’ve met someone whose passion, joy, justice, and art is reflected in them and in everything they do, as they work in jobs that aren’t usually considered religious, or even spiritual. My financial advisor could be fooling me completely, but I get the sense that she is genuinely investing my tiny nest egg for me as if she were investing for Jesus himself.

I know a mechanic who is clearly following his call when he fixes cars. He gets the job done and he gets it done right for a fair price. No recommendations for unnecessary work! You almost want your car to break so you can take it in. This mechanic isn’t particular religious – just a normal guy who’s responding to an inner sense of joy, love, humility, and service that most religions can only hope to cultivate. But his spirituality isn’t written in Scripture and Sunday school as much as it is in carburetors, spark plugs, and oil pans. By following a path that brings him to his fullest human-ness his life demonstrates characteristics indicating a life touched by the divine.