

There's a chunk of hours in a confined space, in seats designed for the undernourished if you fly often. I'm just sayin'.

On one trip for my niece, across the aisle sit three women, one holding an infant. She caught herself saying a silent prayer, "Please!" It was a short prayer.

The young woman reaches over and hands her a small plastic bag. "Hope this makes your flight easier," she says to me. In the bag, a small notebook and pen and munchies and chocolate and earplugs. And a note, "Hello! My name is Byron! I am 5 months old and very excited to meet my baby cousin! I'll try to be on my best behavior, but I apologize in advance if I get scared or my ears hurt. My mom and grandma are more nervous than I am, so they made this goodie bag for you! Hope you have a great flight!"

Thank you, Byron. You did her heart good and mine to hear the story.

From Parker Palmer, "As I engage with people wiser and braver than I to push back on hard realities such as these, I'm learning (again) how life-giving it is to stay in touch with realities of another sort. Here are a few examples from my weekend... The sunshine on the back step where I drank my early morning coffee... The wildflowers in the ditches along the back roads, the cherry soda I had in a small town—first one since I was a teen at the soda fountain—and the tragicomic parade of passersby who came there seeking life, just like me, the gaggle of pre-school kids cavorting in a nearby park, crazy miniature human beings whose antics warm my heart, the waxing gibbous moon that rose in the eastern sky Sunday night. Every time I focus awareness on these small, ordinary blessings of my small, ordinary life, I say to myself, 'This, Too, Is Real.' It's a mantra that helps me remember that

'reality' is a vast and infinitely varied assemblage that includes much to be angry about, much to be mourned, and much to be celebrated. I will be of more use to others if I keep trying to see it steady and see it whole... When it comes to celebration, this famous e.e. cummings poem is one of the all-time favorites, and this is one of my favorite lines: "i who have died am alive again today". Let's do all we can to stay alive to life—and let's live our lives that others may live. This, too, is real..."

Byron's note (and gift bag) is such an invitation: in this time of division and suspicion and discord, let us remember that "this too is real" and we can stay alive to life. To live unafraid of vulnerability. To embrace the sacred in the present.

I confess. These days it is easy to be lulled into shut down or numb mode, fueled by apprehension or fear. Each week someone tells me they've started a 'news fast', and I get it.

So, it is no surprise that we, more often than not, can live asleep. Without knowing it, we are emotionally and spiritually de-hydrated. Let's just say, Byron softened my heart and Patty's.

Staying alive to life. Glennon Doyle Melton's reminder, "I'm not a mess but a deeply feeling person in a messy world. I explain that now, when someone asks me why I cry so often, I say, 'For the same reason I laugh so often--because I'm paying attention.'"

Staying alive to life. It is what I learned talking with the geese at the beach.

One day, when Covid brought life as we knew it to a standstill, I stopped and talked with the birds. Two of the mamas had new twins. Yes, they were adorable. That morning, it felt like church, so I gave them a little talking to. Not too long. Seven minutes or so. I told them that some days I don't want to read the news. At least not until after lunch. I told them our world convulses

with uncertainty and anxiety. I told them that people are on the edge (money, jobs, bills, family members sick or dying), and you may never know the whole story. I told them I don't know what to write for Friday Grind; I have trouble finding the words. They stared, seeming to listen to me, but with a passive gaze.

And yet... here's what I do know: They did my heart good. I watched the little ones cuddling and nestling and sheltering up to their mamas, so very glad to be alive. I continued my walk carrying these gifts from my morning congregation, living vicariously and wholeheartedly through their joy, and very glad to be alive.

Here's my prayer: I want to be awake, in this life, in this moment, the very one I am living today. Precarious? Indeed. Which is why this life is so much more precious.

There is power in words. We used to talk about the need to free up time. Now, there's a paradigm shift; we can embrace time as a sacred gift.

I'll tell you what replenished me today. The feathered friends didn't ask about my bank account or bills not getting paid, or when and if I would be normal again. Or, about when life would go back to normal like I ever was. And as we learned, waiting for "normal," the sacred is still alive and well. And the ordinary is the hiding place of the holy.

Where we learn that there is nothing ordinary about the gift of the ordinary. Rediscovering wonder takes root in the soil of the simple sentence, "I never noticed that before." I am welcoming, inviting life in, not allowing internal censors and judges to scrutinize, making certain that this moment passes muster. In moments of amazement, we render our internal scorekeeper mute. There is a good deal of conjecture about who merits

this streak of luck and why. Some people get all the moments of astonishment. Or perhaps, they've allowed themselves to see.

Either way, these moments—let's call them Byron's gift bag—sustain us. They create a fabric in our soul which absorbs daily miracles.

Does our world still need voices for justice and inclusion and equality and empathy and healing? Voices for "good trouble" (borrowing from John Lewis) in a world where inequality too often wins? Amen and yes, indeed. But here's the deal: we bring these voices to the table, moment, encounter, when we are awake.

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The Eastern Association of the MI Conference Committee on Ministry has announced the Ordination of Traci Bartell at 3:00 on August 7, at the First Congregational Church of Rochester. Any and all are invited to participate.

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