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In the Fury of a Storm

I suppose everyone has a story about a moment in their lives in which something powerful and fleeting, something beyond reality and reason, briefly touched them, yet left an indelible impression on their lives and their souls. I am no exception to that rule, and my own experience with the unnatural happened in a most amazing place at a most unlikely time, but a time when I had needed it more than ever. In Jane Goodall's essay, *In the Forests of Gombe*, Goodall describes a similar life-altering experience that she has while spending time with her beloved chimps, mourning the loss of her husband to cancer. She journeyed into the forest for the day, because she claims that "in the forest, death is not hidden... or only accidentally by the fallen leaves..." (Goodall 537). By escaping into the forest, Goodall hoped to face her husband's death and find some comfort in being with nature. She did not, however, expect the powerful epiphany that she found. During my own experience with the supernatural, I was in a little town called Assisi, a most beautiful and holy place for many people. Upon reading Goodall's essay, I was struck by the similarities between our individual situations, and by the way that we were both able to find some peace and solace in nature when we needed it the most.

Situated on the top of a small mountain, Assisi looks out over endless miles of valley, with the foothills of the Apennine Mountains framing the other edge of the serenely beautiful grasslands. The sun shone down bright and clear every day we were there, dancing on the glittering waters of the lakes and streams miles below us and warming the air which was already rich and heavy with the almost hypnotic scent of lemon and olive groves. In the evenings as the sun was setting across the valley, a tolling of bells could be heard from St. Claire's Cathedral down the mountain, only to be answered moments later by the bells from St. Francis' Cathedral right in our own little town, creating a harmony that made even the oldest and most stoic residents of Assisi stop and close their eyes in reverence until at last the age-old melody echoed into nothingness, and a silence heavy with peace lay upon the little town.

While this may sound like a absolute dream place to spend one's time, I was so preoccupied with my own problems that I was blind to the beauty that surrounded me, unable to see and hear the gifts that renewed themselves with every passing morning. Goodall likewise

describes in her essay a feeling of detachment from the beauty of nature while she is preoccupied with her own internal struggles. Personally, all I could think about was how I desperately wanted to be home, to get away from the person I was traveling with, to get away from the lies and the dishonesty and the vile words that had been so generously and unexpectedly thrown at me since the first few moments of the trip. At the time I was in Assisi, I was at the end of this horribly stressful “vacation”, but only had a eighteen hour plane trip home, complete with eight hour layover, to look forward to. I could hardly bear it. A friend I was traveling with was also horribly stressed, but with a different situation, and like me, all she wanted to do was go home. Together, we made quite a reluctantly miserable pair.

Our last night in Assisi, and indeed our last night in Italy, was somewhat of a bittersweet one. On one hand, we were thrilled to be heading back home after two terribly upsetting weeks, yet we also were sad that we had not been able to enjoy our much anticipated vacation because of circumstances beyond our control. As Goodall says, we were, “exhausted and longed for peace...” (Goodall 539). Because we had to leave Assisi at three in the morning so as to catch our flight to Germany for our dreaded and indeed torturous layover, we decided to simply stay up until that time. After everyone had gone to sleep, we quietly stole out to the deck of the hotel. Sitting down with our mugs of hot chocolate, we hardly noticed nor cared about the absolutely magnificent scene spread before us. We talked about how disappointing our trip had been, how we wished that it could have been different, and how happy we were to be going home in the morning. Together we sighed, and our conversation fell silent, both preoccupied with our own thoughts and problems. It was in this silence that something changed.

Like a curtain had been lifted from our eyes, we both saw, actually *saw* at almost the same moment, the breathtakingly beautiful scene that had waited so long to present itself to our tortured minds and hearts. It had suddenly and unexpectedly become, as Goodall describes her own scene, “a most sacred place to [us]...” (Goodall 539) It was enough to stop a person in their tracks, to bring tears to their eyes, to cause them to gasp softly at the absolute perfect beauty of what lay before us. The stars glittered in the ebony black, moonless sky, like distant beacons that something greater than what we know was indeed watching us and smiling down at us from somewhere far away. The endless valley that lay before the little mountain where we sat was dotted with the lights of a hundred small towns and country villages spread out over the miles of farmland and rolling hills. The gentle wind that whispered across the plains made the lights

shimmer and dance like diamonds catching sunlight, and was by far the most amazingly beautiful and utterly indescribable phenomena that either myself or Maura had ever witnessed. One could barely tell where the sky began and the earth ended, but it hardly mattered. It was as if someone had come and laid shawls of peace and happiness over our shoulders bent with our heavy burdens, and it seemed that perhaps someone, or something had. At that very moment as we looked out upon this gift that had been revealed to us with speechless awe, the harmonious voices of a hundred monks could be heard from the cathedral up the hill, as they softly sang the ancient hymns of their midnight vespers with, like the birds Goodall hears in the forest, “notes so sweet I was amazed...” (Goodall 539). We were utterly “lost in the wonder of [our] experience...” (Goodall 539). The music, the wind, the stars, the lights... we knew that this was not coincidence, but rather a gift from something greater than us, to give us a few moments of peace in the midst of such vicious turmoil, like a whispered prayer does in the fury of a storm. It was at that moment that we knew we would be all right, and that all of the pain and stress and tears that we had shed together over the past two weeks were all worth it for these few precious hours on a deserted porch in the middle of the night.

The time eventually came for us to leave the porch, and by that time the sky was already turning grey with morning light, and the stars and shimmering lights had begun to fade as another day was beginning, a day that we knew would again try our emotions and patience. But after such a spiritual and peaceful night, however brief in the grand stage of life, we both were not afraid of what lay ahead. Never again would we be afraid of the morning, because we remembered, and would always remember until the end of our days, that peace exists, even after you have given up looking for it. As Goodall so elegantly states, “There are windows in which we humans can look into the world around us... not only into the wondrous beauty of the world, but also in its darkness and ugliness...” (Goodall 540). For myself, finding peace in such a painful time was simply choosing to ignore the hatefulness, and find another window to look out and this time, smile at its beauty and perfection.

Jane Goodall, in her essay *The Forests of Gombe*, experiences a similar life-changing event while spending time in the forests where she devoted herself to her life's work of studying primates, a world “that dwarfs yet somehow enhances human emotions”(538). Goodall, while wandering through the forest, finds herself in a sudden tropical rainstorm during which she takes shelter with the apes. It is in this moment of kinship that Goodall experiences a moment of total

unity with nature, when it seemed that “self was utterly absent: [Goodall] and the chimpanzees, the earth and trees and air, seemed to merge, to become one with the spirit power of Life itself...” (Goodall 538). Much like my own personal experience with such a mind blowing phenomena, it often takes a drastic event to occur, in Goodall’s case the death of her beloved husband, to help one become more aware of the precious gifts that surround us every day, and help us not dwell so much on what we have lost. Goodall mentions that “the whole [of life] is, in fact, greater than the sum of its parts.” (Goodall 539) Every day we are granted the opportunity to either dwell incessantly on our present troubles and let them dictate our lives completely, or we can choose to rise above the ashes of our losses and failures and instead look ahead to new horizons, ones that are bright with healing and understanding.

As soon as I read Goodall’s *In the Forests of Gombe*, my mind was immediately sent spinning back to that amazing night that I spent in Assisi with my dear friend. The healing that Goodall found in the forests of Africa was very similar to the solace I was able to find when I least expected to find it, but most desperately needed it. I firmly believe, and so does Goodall as she states in her essay, that a greater power was responsible for allowing us to find solace at a time in our lives when it seemed so impossible. Our own separate experiences, while we may never have such a powerful epiphany again, were and always would be “[sources] of strength that I could draw on when life seemed harsh or cruel or desperate...[and] the spiritual power that was so real in it had given [us] a peace that passeth understanding”(Goodall 542). I have found, both through my own personal experience and through the words of Jane Goodall, that finding peace in turmoil is not about hiding away allowing oneself to be blind and ignorant to their pain and difficulty. It’s simply a matter of opening your eyes.

Works Cited

Goodall, Jane. "In the Forests of Gombe." Dreams and Inward Journeys. New York: Pearson Longman, 2007. 537-542.