

Our Lady of the Strays

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No ground is too far from sacred.

Service Program

Invocation.....	2
Hymn.....	3
Scripture Reading.....	4
. Sermon.....	5
Benediction.....	16
Call to Action.....	17

Invocation

In the spirit of Awakening,

Guide me through the space where grief becomes holy.

Let me know peace through acceptance. May I know
comfort as I rest in the rhythm of the cycle of becoming, of
rupture and repair, within the fabric that contains all things
past, present, and future.

Hold me in the weave of this pattern.

Amen.

Hymn

It Echoes

I sing for the heavens,
 I sing for the flame,
 I sing for the silence,
 For the driftwood left
 unclaimed.

I sing out while waiting.
 I sing myself to sleep.
 I sing to wake myself
 again,
 To release and to keep.

There is call, there is
 response
 And it echoes
 To the marrow it
 resounds
 And it echoes

It plays when we are
 listening.

It plays when we are not.
 It plays both at the
 forefront
 And as rhythm to our
 thoughts.

We hum along to
 memory.
 We hum with ache and
 grace.
 We hum for all we have
 lost
 And what we still
 embrace.

There is call, there is
 response
 And it echoes
 To the marrow it
 resounds
 And it echoes

Scripture

From *Heraclitus: Fragments* written by T.M. Robinson. Heraclitus was a pre-Stoic Greek philosopher who originated the concept of Logos, that there is a rational order of the universe observable at both the cosmic and human level. This concept underpins Heraclitus' philosophical beliefs in the unity of opposites and the constant flux of the universe. Unfortunately, the written work of Heraclitus has been lost to time, and all we have of his thoughts are quotations, the fragments, referenced by later philosophers and historians.

Below are three of these fragments that we will consider:

Fragment 10

Things grasped together: things whole, things not whole; something being brought together, something being separated; something consonant, something dissonant. Out of all things comes one thing, and out of one thing all things.

Fragment 78

Human nature does not have right understanding; divine nature does.

Fragment 114

Those who would speak with insight must base themselves firmly on that which is common to all, as a city does upon its law – and much more firmly! For all human laws are nourished by one law, the divine law. For it holds sway to the extent that it wishes, and suffices for all, and is still left over.

Sermon
I want to believe.



I was driving my daughter to her preschool when I passed the poster pictured. "Jesus heals the broken heart," it promised. And, oh, how vulnerable I was to that promise of redemption.

Reading that sign, I felt distraught because I longed so profoundly to accept its offer.

How lovely it would be for my heart to be unbroken.

How lovely it would be to be saved.

How lovely it would be to be loved unconditionally by another being, and to feel that unconditional love.

How lovely it would be to enter a space and have instant community around my daughters and me, gathered in shared faith, shared love, and shared belonging.

And it pained me in that moment to long so deeply for its promise which I could not accept. Like wandering lost in a desert, and then coming across a spring. But you find its water is saltwater. *How lovely it would be to have a drink.* Even parched, your tongue draws on its last reserves to salivate at its want for the water. Your mouth, your throat, your gut ache for the water. You can see other life is sustained by the water. But you know that it will not, *cannot*, sustain you.

The church is my saltwater spring. It does have a function. It may provide relief, as it cools the skin; it may provide comfort, as it allows one to float peacefully on its surface. But what *I* need to survive is hydration, to be replenished. Saltwater cannot do that for me. In this analogy, the needed replenishment is life force for the body. In real life, the needed replenishment is life force for the soul.

I have nothing against religion. This "project" -- this zine, this cause, this whatever-it-may-come-to-be -- is not religion. Nor is it anti-religion or incompatible with religion. If you, dear reader, believe that Jesus, or any other divine being, will save you (and hopefully the rest of us,

too), then, yes, go to church. Follow that path. You can believe in that, you can participate in that, and you can still find resonance in these Songs of the Strays.

See, I personally would be a fraud to walk into a church. I respect the community. I admire the moral scaffolding Christianity in particular (only because it's what I learned as a child) offers. I believe in doing good unto others, uplifting the vulnerable, practicing humility, living honestly. And I would say my heart is wide open to receiving some sort of transcendental guidance and to living my life in alignment with those values.

But I don't believe there's an omnipotent Entity, a God or gods, who sits above all that is. And to have your heart healed by Jesus, you must first believe in Jesus. Then, and only then, can He heal you.

I do believe in something, and I do believe that something is much bigger than me or you or all of us combined. I believe there is a way, a meaning, and a resolution for all things, animate and inanimate, grand and infinitesimal. And to achieve serenity as an individual, and to foster harmony among all things, we must accept that there are greater forces that shape us, like water and wind shaping a canyon. Accepting this is accepting the ultimate ethereal truth of existence. It is to find not the saltwater spring, but the tree that grows beside it, with its fruit that quenches your thirst and nourishes you.

What is this ethereal truth? We'll walk through it as an argument:

Premise One:

Nature, meaning the ever-expanding universe and all its components, is neutral.

Premise Two:

Its laws are fixed, their interplay dynamic but harmonious.

Premise Three:

Its laws are part of a process, evolving with consistency and precision.

Premise Four:

As you are part of nature, its laws operate not only around you but also within you.

Premise Five:

You and all the rest of nature are interconnected variables that both shape and are shaped by its laws.

Argument:

To place absolute trust in the laws of nature is to claim your power. Truth itself becomes the foundation for your action, not luck or superstition or hope. You can trust the laws. You can follow the laws. You can use the laws, humbly but with intention. And in doing so, you navigate through life

without fear of senseless consequence or arbitrary harm.

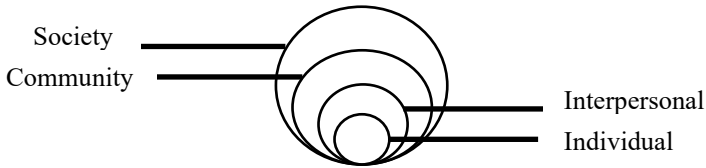
In fact, this belief in the cosmic structure is not unlike a belief in God. Really, a belief in God, or any Great Entity, is to give form to the formless, to anthropomorphize the order of the Universe. A belief in a divine Higher Power centralizes the natural laws into a single figure or a pantheon that authors and manages them. The appeal of translating the cosmic structure into a religious system is that it softens the most challenging truth of all: absolute acceptance does not mean absolute understanding.

It's impossible to know the why, the how, or the very origin of natural laws. And, for many, it's easier to place faith in a divine being that operates with will, however mysterious, than it is to place faith in impersonal, disembodied laws.

That argument outlined above is part one. It is the core philosophy of *Our Lady of the Strays*. Part two is its application to the smaller universe that we inhabit here on Earth. Our society, our systems, and our day-to-day lives. Just as the natural laws have shaped the Universe, there are more human-scale laws that shape our world (and they are, of course, themselves shaped by the pervading natural laws). These human-scale laws exist in the

circumstances around us that influence the course of our lives.

In public health terms, this is illustrated by the Socioecological Model (SEM), which looks like this:



The purpose of the SEM is to map the influences that surround an individual, identifying risk and protective factors across multiple levels. The innermost circle examines the condition of the individual himself: his genetics, temperament, beliefs, and home space. The next examines the interpersonal: his family structure, his relationships. The third layer examines his community: its geography, its local infrastructure, its resources, its culture and norms. The final circle examines the societal level: government policy, dominant ideologies, economic systems, historical legacies.

For example, take a person vulnerable to suicidal despair. At the individual level, he may carry a genetic predisposition for depression. At the interpersonal level, he may come from a family with a history of suicide. Maybe he also is socially isolated since moving to a new town for work. At the community level, he lives in an area with few social opportunities that feel welcoming to

newcomers. Waitlists for professional counseling make therapy inaccessible in the near term. At the society level, until recent years, men's emotional vulnerability has been stigmatized or ignored.

The SEM helps to map these factors, and it helps us to recognize their interaction across the different levels. That long waitlist for therapy might exist because the field lacks professionals trained in men's mental health since that subject has been systemically deprioritized. Meanwhile, the man's genetic and psychological makeup increase his barrier to take initiative to build relationships, which feeds his isolation, which feeds his despair.

While the SEM is designed to understand the etiology of public health issues and to plan interventions, it is also an elegant way to understand the how and why of any human behavior, even down to the most mundane decisions that one makes in a day:

Why she chooses to eat or skip breakfast.
 Why she does or does not apply for a job listing.
 Why she craves or avoids intimacy in a certain way.
 Why she feels hopeless about her future or driven to strive harder.

Our circumstances shape us to the point of creating a phenomenon quite like determinism. Over time, as experience compounds upon experience, the future

begins to narrow. The boy who is shaped by rejection becomes the man afraid to ask for love. The girl deprived of mirrors becomes the woman with an unstable identity. In our example of the suicidal man, his risk factors tilt the scale toward hopelessness. From hopelessness, the path toward maladaptive coping and then more despair and then collapse is almost inevitable.

Almost inevitable. This is where we arrive at part three.

If cosmic laws govern nature, and those laws echo through our society and selfhood, then the question becomes, *can we live within the cosmic structure on purpose?*

We are not entirely victims of our circumstances when we choose acceptance. No, not acceptance that because of risk factors A through C we are doomed to outcomes X through Z. Rather, acceptance as awareness. Awareness of the circumstances surrounding us, and of how these circumstances intertwine. Awareness of how, because of the interconnectedness of all things, our lives are part of the ecosystem actively shaping the lives of others. It's this awareness that allows us to appreciate our barriers, our motivations, our possibilities, our inheritance, and our impact. We begin to appreciate our role in the cosmic process.

Self-disclosure. I'll ground all this theory back to the real-life example of healing my broken heart. Resulting from a host of risk factors, most benign and a few extraordinary, I've made some horrific choices in the pursuit of romance. So horrific that those choices bordered on self-harm. Those bad choices begat bad experiences, which in turn deepened my woundedness, reinforcing more bad choices which begat more bad experiences, and so the cycle went. The "end" result (not a true endpoint, since life continues) is I became a single mother of two young children. My heart is broken from abandonment. My heart is broken from sorrow that my daughters will one day wrestle with their complicated identities and fractured family story. My heart is broken from the guilt of my role in creating that future for them.

This is why I grieve. And that grief is necessary. Grief is a portal into awareness, into acceptance, and empowerment, the power to participate consciously in shaping what comes next.

I am aware now of the layers of circumstances that led me to crave male validation, to chase love in the wrong places, to debase myself for the want of feeling wanted or needed. And I am aware, too, that as a mother I am situated in the interpersonal tier of the SEM. I am part of the social surround shaping my daughters' selfhood. They will be molded by how I orient toward men, by the way that I grieve, by the way that I support them in their grief,

and by the habits that I form in response to grief. This is the cosmic process unfurling, as my life trajectory bends theirs. I am a lesson for my girls. And they, in turn, will be a lesson to their friends, their future partners, their communities, and, possibly someday, their own children.

You have found this zine because you, too, have found yourself astray. You, too, have led off course by complicated circumstances. By sorrow, by longing, by some things outside your control. You feel lost, forsaken, broken.

But you are none of those things so long as you are alive and breathing and therefore still capable of acceptance. Acceptance not as surrender, but as awareness. Awareness of your place in the cosmic structure. Awareness that you, too, are part of the unfolding process. And with that awareness comes empowerment to flow, humbly but intentionally, with the process.

It's okay to grieve. You must grieve to move forward. But let that grief be holy. Let that grief, like all emotions, be *functional*. Know that your feelings, your story, and your very place in the world are part of something larger. And know that this larger process, even in its pain, moves with neither malice nor mercy.

Even in pain, even in tragedy. Think of the worst things that could happen. Think of a boy who drowns when the footbridge beneath him collapses into the river.

Grief-stricken, the townspeople rebuild the bridge. But this time, they elevate and reinforce the bridge, adding a memorial plaque with the boy's name. Years later, that same bridge, now much stronger, saves six pedestrians stranded by a flash flood. The boy's death, in a cosmic sense, was meaningful. It catalyzed a life-saving improvement as it transformed loss into resilience.

But you are not tragedy, nor must you wait for tragedy to define you.

Grieve whatever it is that has broken your heart. Let that grief become sacred. Let it lead you into reflection, into awareness of the why and how of your life's circumstances. Accept how those forces have shaped you and continue to shape you still.

And then accept yourself as a participant of those forces. *You* are a catalyst. *You* are a lesson.

Because that is indeed what you are. To your children. To your lovers and friends. To strangers who you will never know. You are part of the great cosmic process, and you hold inherent power to influence how it unfolds.

So, grieve, yes. We will grieve together. But we will grieve with reverence and with the knowledge that our healing is not only for us but for everything both contemporary and proceeding us.

Benediction

Now it is so:

The same Universe that birthed the stars to light their
solar systems;

That shaped the giants of gas, of rock, of ice;

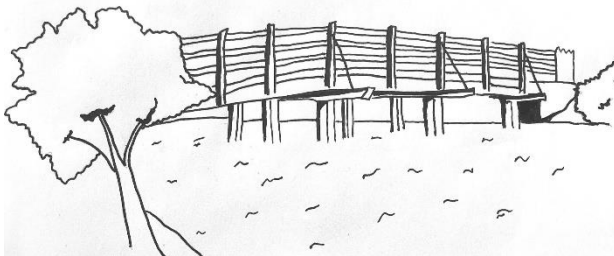
That stirred life upon this rock of the Earth,

from the humble Prochlorococcus of the sea
to Man, with his woe and his triumph,
who summits the highest mountain peaks.

So, too, were you born of that Universe,

with purpose stitched into your being and the
insight of all things of all Time woven with your
breath.

Amen.



Call to Action
Go forth

[illegible]

In receiving the hardcopy of this zine and the grief kit, you now have my contact information. You can reach me via snail mail (PO box) or email.

If you feel so moved, please share a glimpse at your reflections. I would love to read your prayers, see a picture of your altar, or to generally connect! I am here.

Until next time,
blessed be your journey.

