

Quintessence*

BY TOM JABLONSKI

Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* tells the story of a son's struggle with a request from the ghost of his father to avenge his death by killing his murderer. The disgruntled spirit reveals that the murderer is Hamlet's Uncle Claudius who has since married Hamlet's mother Gertrude and assumed the role of the King. When the gravity of the request sinks in, Hamlet finds himself contemplating suicide and asks, "To be or not to be: that is the question . . .?"¹ The issue Hamlet faces is rooted in the wise advice given earlier in the play by Polonius to his son, "This above all: to thine own self be true."²

As Hamlet struggles with understanding who he is to be, he exclaims, "What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! . . . in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!"³ In this oratory, Hamlet points out the downfall of many of us, the mistaken belief that humanity is the pinnacle of creation. Hamlet catches himself and asks another question, "And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" In this moment, he seems to realize that he is the same stuff of the rest of the cosmos, simple stardust. As the story unfolds, Hamlet forgets this awareness and returns once more to a pursuit of vengeance passed on to him from the dysfunctional ghost of his father. By the end of the play, all of the major characters are dead. Their quest for control via dominance, greed, lust, or revenge results in the typical ending of any game of hierarchical pursuit.

Dealing with the drama of the death of a father at the hands of an uncle is not something many of us face, but conjured spirits visit us regularly with their temptations. Mary Oliver speaks of these temptations in her poem "The Journey" where she writes, "the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice. . . . 'Mend my life' each voice cried."⁴ When we fall into the trap of living our lives to satisfy someone else, we in essence commit our own spiritual suicide by

veering from our truth. The voices of distraction creep in many times, often so subtle that we may not be sure we really hear them, or cannot tell from where they come, or perhaps prefer to deny that they exist. Beginning to understand who we are requires acknowledgement of the source of the voices. Then we can mend our own lives.

As a child, I used to spend time in a small patch of woods behind the house where I grew up. Those woods were a place where I felt connected; the sound of the poplar leaves vibrating with the wind, the sound of a great horned owl hooting through the trees, or a chickadee calling out in a soft "chick-a-dee-dee-dee" call—these were the voices of clarity. Somewhere along the way, I stopped walking into those woods and began a quest for an easy fix to the troubles in my life. I took many wrong paths, but I learned that there is more to life than simply taking the easy way. Eventually the woods from my childhood were cut down, paved over, and a shopping complex was built in their place. When I go back to my hometown, it seems that a piece of me was paved over along with the other creatures that inhabited that patch of woods. This is the piece that I need to reclaim if I want to achieve my own sense of being.

Later in life I found myself in a career as an environmental engineer, a job that was essentially about cleaning up the messes of humanity. The patch of pavement that was my old neighborhood was a small precursor of the devastation that continues to occur throughout the larger world. This devastation includes the likes of global warming, extinction of species, contamination of ground and surface waters, pollution of the air, and urban sprawl. Our lifestyle and its side effects create endless "opportunities" for environmental engineers. Like the Rolling Stones song, my work was a place where "I [couldn't] get no satisfaction,"⁵ for no matter how hard I tried, there was always more seemingly meaning-

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Jeremy Hylton, (Boston: MIT Univ., n.d.), Act 3, Scene 1; available at <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/full.html> (accessed May 18, 2008).

² Shakespeare, Act 1, Scene 3.

³ Shakespeare, Act 2, Scene 2.

⁴ Mary Oliver, "The Journey", *New and Selected Poems*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 114-115.

⁵ Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, The Rolling Stones, "(I can't get no) Satisfaction," *Out of Our Heads*, ABKCO, 1965.

less work to be done. Looking at the world as an endless source of resources and a bottomless sink for dumping our wastes resulted in my calling being warped into one that was mostly about enabling our communities to continue their habit of using the natural world as one more fix for the lack of meaning in our lives.

The dysfunctional spirituality that pervades the world distracted the engineers who paved over my old sanctuary in the woods. This voice continues to tell us that humanity is indeed the pinnacle of creation. Thomas Berry points out the roots of this view that include: belief in “a transcendent, personal, monotheistic creative deity”; belief that “the natural world is material, we are spiritual”; a focus on “redemption” which tells us “we are not for this world”; and the idea that “with technological invention, humans are able to surpass the natural limits.”⁶ These beliefs allow us to separate ourselves from the rest of creation, and continue the quest for what Berry calls “WonderWorld.” We can reach this place by finding the right prophet, product, pill, or practice. This obsession with finding the next fix digs us deeper and deeper into a world that is becoming more and more toxic and uninhabitable. Our competition to control the limited resources remaining places us at odds not only with the natural world, but also with our fellow human beings. Wars, terrorism, poverty, disease, addictions, and crime—these are the consequences that we face when we play our own games of hierarchical pursuit.

So what is the way out of “WonderWorld,” back to a place where we can coexist with all the creatures? Mary Oliver tells us “little by little, as you left their voices behind, the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds, and there was new voice which you slowly recognized as your own.”⁷ Robert Greenleaf described such a cloud-burning experience he had while looking through the 100-inch mirror of a telescope at a great nebula in 1923. “What a sight! I shook with awe and wonder at the majesty of all creation. This primitive unstructured feeling, the powerful sense of

awe and wonder, is to me the source of religious feeling at its greatest depth.”⁸ Perhaps this cloud of cosmic dust, this birthplace of stars pointed Greenleaf towards his philosophy of servant leadership.



Greenleaf revisited that awe forty-three years later in the essay he wrote for the Alcoholics Anonymous publication *The Grapevine*. The intended audience of the essay was quite familiar with a lifestyle focused on fixes that kept them from finding themselves. Greenleaf’s essay addressed the universal question “Who am I?” as follows:

There is another “me”: a timeless, unchanging level of consciousness that is at one with the cosmos; a level at which all is one, where there is no uniqueness. It is that aspect of me that stands in awe and wonder before the mystery and the majesty of all creation⁹

Greenleaf understood the role that worldviews play in our lives. In his essay titled “The Institution as Servant” Greenleaf wrote, “Conscious religious concern is a part of the gear of civilization—a means to heal humanity’s alienation, which our ‘civilized’ state has brought about. The word religion, at its root, means ‘to rebind,’ to rebind humans to the cosmos.”¹⁰

⁶ Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), 25-28.

⁷ Oliver, 114.

⁸ Don M. Frick, *Robert K. Greenleaf: A Life of Servant Leadership* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2004), 61.

⁹ Robert K. Greenleaf, “Choose the Nobler Belief,” *The Grapevine*, Oct. 1966.

¹⁰ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 93.

When I struggle with hearing my own voice, I have found that I can revisit the natural world to find that sense of oneness. One summer evening while I struggled with returning to work as an environmental engineer, I walked down to the park a few blocks from my house. I sat by a storm water pond on an overturned tree that had recently been felled by a beaver who took up residence in the pond. Looking out over the water, I was startled by a loud slap and then the beaver revealed itself as it swam in circles in front of me. Eventually the beaver moved on and I sat listening to the echoes from the slap of that engineer of the natural world. That voice reminded me that if I were to be true to myself, I would need to find a way to coexist with the natural world in the same way the beaver did. This might mean that work as an engineer could be a way to help humanity to

harmonize with the natural world. The challenge of how to do this remained, but there was a moment of connection as the insects buzzed, the ducks whistled, and darkness settled over the land; and then the first star of the evening revealed itself.

There is a revelation that occurs when I spend time in the natural world—that I too am stardust. Finding this awareness can be difficult, and once found it is easy to lose it behind one more patch of pavement. However, the time I spend in these natural places are times of healing. It is that healing that will be needed for me to continue to see the stars, to experience that awe that Greenleaf talked about. That awe allows awareness that the universal “quintessence of dust” that makes up the cosmos is our common bond—our authentic being.

