



Save or Savor?

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From Jack Gilbert, "A BRIEF FOR THE DEFENSE."

*Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies are
 not starving someplace, they are starving
 somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils.*

*But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants.
 Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not
 Be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not
 Be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women
 At the fountain are laughing together between
 The suffering they have known and the awfulness
 In their future, smiling and laughing while somebody
 in the village is very sick. There is laughter
 every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta,
 and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay.*

*If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction,
 we lessen the importance of their deprivation.
 we must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,
 but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have
 the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless
 furnace of this world. To make injustice the only
 measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.*

*If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down,
 we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.
 we must admit there will be music despite everything.*

*we stand at the prow again of a small ship
 anchored late at night in the tiny port
 looking over to the sleeping island: the waterfront
 is three shuttered cafes and one naked light burning.
 To hear the faint sound of oars in the silence as a rowboat
 comes slowly out and then goes back is truly worth
 all the years of sorrow that are to come.*

This sermon was inspired by a quote attributed to the author E.B. White, “I arise in the morning torn between the desire to save the world and the desire to savor the world. It makes it *hard* to *plan* the day.”

This suggests that upon awakening we ask ourselves, “should I pray, or petition? Meditate, or march? Write in my journal, or teach someone to read?”

And of course, the answer is *yes*.

But I think a lot of us wake up torn between the necessity to get out of bed and the desire to stick our head under the pillows. And as for being torn between whether to save or savor the world, I fear that we are in danger of the sin of doing neither. That we will give up on the world *and* on ourselves.

Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere.

The images in the Gilbert poem are harsh—but we’re *inundated* with images of misery—terrorism and war, starvation and disease – what with 24 hour news and satellite broadcasts and internet communications the vast incomprehensible suffering of humanity is ever present. The world is too much with us.

It is easy to become so overwhelmed by the world’s need that we don’t know where to begin. And so sometimes . . . we don’t. We despair; we disconnect. It’s *hard* to engage.

We’re not going to save the world. Why try?

Part of my creative process is to google phrases, that is, enter it into a search engine, and see what pops up. For instance, “save the world.” Who or what will save the world? The first article suggested Love, a perennial favorite, but there were several others. Among the top ten were nuclear power, killing whales, corporate management, mushrooms and algae.

Nuclear energy by reducing greenhouse gases. This argument brought to you by the nuclear power industry.

Killing Whales – because they eat so much fish, reducing the number of whales will Save the World's Fisheries? This argument brought to you by the whaling industry.

Corporate management because a new study suggests that enlightened management philosophies that empower workers can spread from the office—and change societies.

Mushrooms—mycologist Paul Stamets lists 6 ways the mycelium fungus can help save the universe: cleaning polluted soil, making insecticides, treating smallpox and even flu.

And it is good to know that *algae* can save the world—again. It cleaned up the earth's atmosphere millions of years ago and scientists hope they can do it now by helping remove greenhouse gases and by using it to create vegetable oil that can be made into biodiesel.

So where do *we* fit in?

How do we change the world? Well, how do you eat an elephant? Or, for you vegans, how do you eat a fifteen-hundred-pound block of tofu? The answer, of course, is one bite at a time.

As Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement put it, “People say, what is the sense of our small effort?

They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time,
take one step at a time.

A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples
that spread in all directions.

Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that.

No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless.

There’s too much work to do.”

Our small effort. Maybe it’s enough to make it. In fact, in researching the E.B. White quote I found an interesting thing. An alternate version states, “. . . torn between the desire to improve the world and to enjoy the world.” Hey, if we can’t save it, at least we can aspire to improve it a little!

Improving the world requires neither grand gestures nor extraordinary powers. It happens in our daily striving for love and justice; when we treat others with care and respect; when we do our work with integrity and attention.

As for enjoying, or savoring the world, it sounds easier than it is. Some of us are impeded by another sense of overwhelm —We work, most of us, too hard, our days filled with doing for others. And when we have a break, frequently we just need to collapse. We don’t have anything left over for service. Or for joy.

And of course there are those voices in our heads that tell us we should not be happy when there is so much misery in the world. We should deprive ourselves because others suffer.

*If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction,
we lessen the importance of their deprivation.*

Our Puritan forebears were suspicious of pleasure. There’s the story of the boy at the dinner table who said of the broth he was eating, “it’s so *rich*” he said. His father tasted it, said, “aye, *too rich!*” And promptly added water to it. Those same Puritans who lived in fear that someone, somewhere, was having a good time.

No, I agree with Gilbert that
We must risk delight.

This is not to say it's ok to wallow in luxury. Gilbert is quick to make the distinction:
*. . . we can do without pleasure,
 but not delight. Not enjoyment. . .*

We *must* nourish our souls – with beauty, and with joy.
 With immersion in nature and the arts.
 How can we serve others if we are spiritually impoverished?

We have a holy *responsibility* to savor the world.
*. . . we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants.
 Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not
 Be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not
 Be fashioned so miraculously well.*

That holy responsibility is reflected in the Jewish tradition, in the Talmud that states,
*“On Judgment Day
 a person will be called into account
 for every permissible thing
 they might have enjoyed but did not.*

To some extent to suggest that we must save or savor is a false dichotomy. To savor the world *is* to save it. To savor is to affirm life rather than death. Learning to love the world with heart and mind and body, in Kenneth Patton's marvelous phrase, *is* a way of saving *and* savoring the world.

Save or Savor? We must do both. As Quaker activist Parker Palmer writes, “Our drive to aliveness expresses itself in two elemental and inseparable ways: action and contemplation. We may think of the two as contrary modes, but they are one at the source, and they seek the same end – to celebrate the gift of life.... When we abandon the creative tension between the two, then both ends fly apart into madness.... Action flies off into frenzy – a frantic and even violent effort to impose one's will on the world... contemplation flies off into escapism – a flight from the world into a realm of false bliss.”

The question becomes, how do we take care of ourselves *and* take care of the world? How do we work it so that serving others *is* serving ourselves? How do we, through giving, receive — and nourish our souls?

The phrase, “turning the wheel of prayer and action” suggests a solution. Both saving and savoring can be spiritual practices. Without action, we are withdrawn; cut off from one another. But without prayer, or some way of regularly reminding ourselves of our highest values, we run the same risk — that of being so caught up in our analysis and righteousness that we become cut off from one another. Without a sense of responsibility for others, we become narcissistic. Without a sense of joy and wonder, we lose an important part of our humanity.

We can learn to be open to it all. The beautiful and the ugly. The sublime and the sorry. The entire tapestry. We can pray to keep our hearts open, without turning away, without denial. We must be able to affirm that all that is present in the world is present within us as well. “I am that.”

This is how we avoid some other dualisms. Work that we do for justice, for love, for healing must not be seen as us versus them, the forces of light battling the forces of darkness. It must not be seen even as the helper and the victim. It is us. Together.

Help us to know that our vision may be faulty. This will keep us engaged in the quality of our interactions with others, rather than using them to support some greater purpose. There is no greater purpose than how we are with each other. Turning the wheel is both action and contemplation, conversation and reflection, solitude and service, saving and savoring. Through honoring the entire continuum, we stay grounded in our highest values, and work to live them.

So slow down. Pay attention. Turn off the TV and take a walk. Find time for slow food. Watch a sundown – how many of them do you have left?

*For we must have
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless
furnace of this world.*

Let us be generous in our service and in our delight.
Let us not turn a blind eye to beauty nor to injustice.
They’re both present and both have need of us.
May we respond as we are able –

With courage – with wisdom, and with joy. May it be so. AMEN