

CHAPTER 11
CELESTE N. SNOWBER

Leaning Absolutes

Honoring the Detours in Our Lives



Moss and lichen drenched the trees leaning over the Burrard Inlet as my black lab and I did our daily walk. It was a lavender gray winter day, and light rain fell on my shoulders as I brought my still-recovering body around the inlet. I was captivated during the whole walk by the thought that the Creator who formed these hundreds of arched trees had been perceived for so many centuries as a God of absolutes. I tried to find even one lone tree standing perfectly straight. It was not to be found. Straight trees did not exist in this landscape. All were bent, crooked, ultimately leaning their torsos toward each other, toward the salt water's edge, and toward myself. They seemed to be in an ever-present conversation, their branches waving in the gentle wind; alive, vibrant, and bowed. I briskly walked, breathing in my own paradox of not being able to live in the absolutes set before me, the continual choices of either/or, both large and small.

Creation leaned too much on the erotic side to be able to think of a straight God. What a concept, a straight God, or a straight curriculum for that matter, or is there a crooked God or is it about having a sensuous God? Is it about a Creator that delights in the sensuality of creation, moss, lichen, and mud—a God of mud. Yes, we were made out of the earth, the mud earth, dust-to-dust, clay-to-clay, tree-to-tree, and leaning-to-leaning. We walk the earth as well, straight up and down, but dare I say we ever really walk perfectly straight?

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Leaning into creation, letting creation lean into me. The ongoing dialogue of bodies leaning: body of tree, body of flesh. The trees' leaves have shed, and their naked trunks and branches stretch in glory. They all stretch, none holding back, all leaning in communion, an order all of their own. How could anyone think that we as mere humans could impose an order on the eros of creation? Respecting its own internal order, its own rhythm, it has much to teach us about being and living. Of course tribal peoples established these connections from the beginning of time. Do those trees resist the way they lean, or do they just lean proudly, elegantly? Absolutely leaning. My dancer body craves leaning, stretching, bending, reaching, in the open space. It never thrived in classical ballet, although it was all good foundation to relate to gravity, and to ultimately know how to lean. My body needs flamenco now.

The path, the journey, whatever metaphor one uses for the roads we take in life, is filled with curves, detours, branches of eros leaning out to us in all directions. As much as we plan the curriculum of life, the book, the lesson plan, the marriage, the family or career, they all have lives of their own. In fact, one thing is for sure, the plan will mess up, and we may even be invited into a spirituality of messiness. There is a whole other path we follow apart from the external realities in our lives. It is a path of soul, but a path of body, too. In essence, paying attention to soul is paying attention to body. Paying attention to body is paying attention to soul.

The tradition of Buddhism has a cherished word, "meitri," which ultimately means to have compassion for everything that comes in our lives. Rumi (1995) tells us to welcome everything, even the uninvited guests, in his poem, "The Guest House": "Be grateful for whoever comes . . . as a guide from beyond" (p. 109).

In the same vein Jesus said, several centuries before, to entertain strangers, for they may be angels. Angels, strangers, and uninvited guests come in many forms. Could eros be an uninvited guest? Do we push it aside so we only see it articulated in the objectification of flesh and perhaps miss the life-giving movements of our own hearts and gestures, the feel of a leaning tree, or in a child squirming at a desk?

How can we lean into the uninvited guests of our lives whether that is people, experiences, illnesses, broken plans, or both the delight and limitations of our own bodies? It takes strength to lean. Endurance. I come to leaning into my own changed dreams. The earthquake of the soul has brought shifts; what propelled and fueled me at one time in my life does

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not now. Before teaching in a Faculty of Education I taught for many years in theological graduate schools, and in fact was one of the few women teaching. I had my heart set on integrating the artistic and bodily ways of knowing into spirituality in this context. However, as the years passed I increasingly did not fit into the boxes of the institutions I was involved in, and in fact the last place I ever thought I would find myself is in a secular institution working with teachers. I can now say that I have more freedom to live from the center of who I am and teach, research, and write in ways that honor me as an artistic, bodily, scholarly, and feminine human being. I presently work with more students exploring ideas of spirituality than I probably would have in the more rigid boundaries of a theological context. I went on a detour and found home. This does not convey the many hours and years of turmoil, leaving a world I had grown to love, even in the midst of its difficulties and limitations.

I can only lean from my old dreams so I can recover or uncover new ones. I wait. It has been partially revealed, but not totally. I perhaps have not leaned long enough. I planned the course, yet the course planned me; a detour, a curve, an invitation to watch the green moss caress the tree, to delight in bringing the body to the practice of teaching, ultimately the practice of engaging life. What do the recurring detours have to teach me? I ponder how many times I have tried to push myself into environments that really did not suit me in the first place. Mechthild of Magdeburg tells us from medieval times that a fish cannot drown in its own water. How long does it take to find our own water? Leaning into life, we may find it. I keep hoping the path may be straighter or smoother, actually less messy. Somehow this does not happen and I wonder why I am still surprised by the detours and curves along the path. However, it is only a matter of time when suffering teaches us to let go, release the very absolutes that are grasping at the freedom of our body-souls.

I ask myself how I honor the detours in my life. The unexpected curve, the surprise angle, the disappointing turn. Are the detours actually the path to the life that really wants to live in me? In us? Are the detours the way of migrating to the heart of my own life? I never see detours this way in the beginning. Only from afar do I see their wisdom, do I see their intrinsic beauty, the beauty that almost begins with terror as Rilke so provocatively says. Detours are like the wind. One never knows when they will come, arise out of the destined path. They come unannounced. Even if there are signs along the road, we never truly know what to expect. Other-

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wise they would not be a detour. I can think of all the times there has been a detour while I have been driving, and I had no idea which neighborhood I would be taken into, or how I would get out of there for that matter. Detours sing with curvilinear sounds and diagonal gestures. They are often necessary, but I'd rather avoid them. Detours in my life are even more of a bother. I have been so schooled in persisting in a linear fashion that even a spiral interruption is troubling at times. Even though I would consider myself a spiral thinker, a spiral dancer. I live and dwell in the spirals. Nothing is usually straight. However, I still have some preconception that the road will be smooth. A direct path. Even so, I hate direct paths. I like nooks and crannies, unforeseen rocks and stones, foliage spilling out and interrupting the soil.

There is a time to have deep compassion on all our detours.

Detours are what artists do when they create.

They often happen in the middlings of things.

It is where imagination erupts.

It is where life erupts

and we are born

anew.

I keep returning to the wisdom that there are a thousand ways to frame a life. And yet perhaps it is about living a frameless life. How do we get to the life that truly wants to live in us? We sometimes need to cross passes, a mountain pass of the soul, leave that which has even been carved out as precious: jobs, relationships, countries. These leavings are sometimes by choice, and other times by life's circumstances. They are happenstances, the paints on the canvas of our lives. In my own life, it is loss and grief that has been a recurring theme of a detour. It is the loss of how "I thought life should be." I have come to see that what I need to lose most is my prescribed way of looking at how I think life should turn out. What causes pain, over and over again, is the way I frame my own story, the way I frame the curriculum of my life.

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Life means continuous education. We are schooled in the soul of life, a form of education that is not much different from the classroom. Where life is a classroom of formation for growth, the classroom is a formation for life—if we let it. However, it may not always turn out as we expect. I tell my student teachers that no matter how good their education, how amazing their mentors, and how well thought out their curriculum plans may be, ultimately they need to rely on their resources within them to be effective teachers. Teaching is a bodily act, and we must engage every part of the knowledge available to us: kinesthetic, cognitive, intuitive, artistic, perceptual; the list goes on and on. No one can predict the course of life's events, universally or personally, which will affect the learning experience. I am invited into leaning into different ways of understanding my own life and the elements that comprise it—my teaching, writing, and parenting. I need to reframe the way I see, the way I hear, the way I understand my life.

Frames and Fragments

Frames
 Borders
 boundaries of clay
 impression marks
 of flesh

There is life
 and there is
 the way we see life
 They are not
 the same.

I have frames
 for the way I see my life
 Stories of interpretation
 layers of hermeneutic
 madness and discovery
 of how it is
 how it should be
 how it was

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What does it take to
reframe the way I see
the way I be
the way I live
the way I teach, write, dance, love,

Pain is our greatest teacher
My old way of seeing
the narrative of "myself"
has exhausted its term.
I am not served by it.

Perhaps I should take my own "story"
and rewrite it,
paint it with different colors
ochre instead of red
prose instead of poetry
hope instead of despair
spaciousness instead of closure

How can we look at each other with "new eyes"
l u m i n o u s compassion
unless we look at ourselves with different lens,
light of early morning
where all is magical -
first born
tenderly wild

I want to step through my own frames
my own interpretation of stories
fall into deep listening
unclench into heart space
soften the gaze onto myself
l i v e
frameless
borderless
with frames of love
borders of love
towards myself
and others

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a place of no judgement
of endings/beginnings/middlings
stop picking at the back of the tapestry
noticing only cut threads and knots
but relish in the new colors forming

new designs shaping
fresh textures emerging
see the beauty of back and front

Cherishing the fragments
little stories go into
the bigger story
the one we all weave together
of absolute complexity and paradox
of dwelling as earthlings
among garlic and amethysts
dirt and diamonds
weeds and wisteria.

Perhaps all we do is
bear fragments
of love and life
partial and full
beginnings and endings

Even a fragment of old woven cloth
can be stunning
if it is framed beautifully
with lots of space and clear glass

I want to view my life
with new eyes
the tattered fragments
with precious hues
this may be really
what the beginning is.

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I wrote this poem in a time when I really needed to find compassion on my own life. After a twenty-year marriage dissolving, and the years of grief for the layers of loss that shake and shape the soul, I needed new ways of seeing. However this is not a one-time act, a one-time poem. I usually dance this poem, sometimes with someone only reading the words, and at other times with someone reading it and accompanying me with an instrument. I also include an artist's frame and literally dance through the frame, break the frame, and eventually loosen its hold on my life. The visceral act of dancing the words is an ongoing invitation for the words to become flesh. I am remade in the words, for my own trap is to continue to go back into the old stories, which hold me from finding more inner spaciousness in my life. I have danced this for a variety of audiences, including teachers and preservice teachers, a concert setting, and even in the middle of a sermon in a church. It is a timeless truth, and as a practice I need to find ways to physically and spiritually honor the detours in my own life. We all do. We need to tend our lives with tenderness. Tending the stories with new stories, new frames, ultimately new eyes.

I have been pondering the relentlessness of gentleness these days. How reshaping our ways of seeing is truly an act of gentleness, a way of tending the earth, and the flesh of our spirits. I have learned that it is often much easier to find acts of random kindness, acts of gentleness, toward others than myself. Those of us who are in the academy can be particularly hard schoolmasters on ourselves. Responsibility is not one of our problems, if anything we are too responsible. We have forgotten the art of play and pause, passion and paucity. It is true, even in realms of education and spirituality we are better "human doings" than "human beings." One of the aspects of my own character that propels me from "doing" to "being" is impatience. Even though some might say, "I'm a patient person," I have come to see that this is really only looking from the outside. It is as if it is almost always easier to be a good parent in public. One only needs to ask one of my three boys to see how patient I really am. Coupled with the fact that impetuosity lies at the heart of my soul, I am not given to getting an award in the area of patience. This aspect works great when I am performing or teaching improvisation, but not always in cultivating and tending tenderness in my own life. It may still be decades that I keep learning in the school of patience.

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Many of my lessons in life come from my intimate connection with nature. Creation is a lover to me, and I partake of this visual and sensory feast daily through walking. Walking has become my spiritual practice; my litany where I rediscover the textures of the earth's soul. I walk the path daily around the Burrard Inlet in Port Moody, British Columbia, and it is here where I enter the earth as libation. I slow my mind down and loosen my grasp from the one hundred thousand details of balancing motherhood and university teaching. I walk the curvilinear path to disrobe the details of "doing" and enter "being." Walking the inlet's curve I smell the earth as lover, I drink in the scent of green, and I am summoned to human beingness.

I have walked the Inlet's curves and sinews for almost a decade. I know where the path rises and falls, is moist and dry, where there are secret spots for looking at wild birds. I sometimes walk it as a woman with a mission, a vigorous stride toward the torso of earth. At other times I walk it as a foreigner, a visitor on the moss, longing for a spot of comfort and meander off the trail. On other days, I allow my mind to get out of what has been called "monkey mind" and settle down to the place where I begin to hear the soft voice of spirit, the place to hear my own voice, the voice of vision and heart, the voice imbued with intuitive tenderness. Walking is my prayer, the place of deep listening. Simone Weil (1952) has said, "absolutely unmixed attention is prayer" (p. 106). In walking I attend. I attend to the nuances of the creation in the external world, and I attend to the nuances in my internal world. I used to try to choose between meditating and walking, and now I see that my walking is my meditation. It is in moving that I find stillness. Not a frozen stillness, but a stillness that is deeply alive. A stillness where soul resides. A stillness where essence is smelled. It is a water walk, an edge I saunter on which hugs water life, waterfowl, the sea's jewels.

One of the jewels to me since last summer is my recurring encounter with a blue heron. This blue heron stands and waits with fierce elegance. It is vigilant in being in what I would call a moving stillness. I am learning patience from the blue heron. The capacity to have "patience with presence" as my friend Wilbur said in a conversation the other day. I am schooled at the edge of the sea in what I need to know.

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Crane Light

Crane me with your light
breathe elegant openings
of gray green
teach me simplicity
waiting blue heron

I watch you
minor shifts in moving
I've already squiggled
a dozen times
while you peer tall
on barnacled stage

I never saw
stillness so refined
sea ballerina
extension time
I unravel moments
of worry
you are pure being

The heron has become my teacher.
I could sit every day in heron's presence.
Regain feminine strength to wait.
Wait for the wind that turns the head.
Soften the glance unto oneself.
Remember the heron's dance
an adagio of quiet.

What would it be like to welcome all of life with extended arms, open palms, expansive chest, wide eyes, relaxed heart? What if, just what if, the detours of our lives were the way of the universe to direct us to our own true path? How would we then look on our shortcomings, failures, or limitations? How does all of that work into evaluative methods or how we look at our colleagues or our students? It certainly does not work into the tenure process or report cards.

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I am coming to see that it does not just take an honoring of new ways of seeing our own stories, really an honoring of a spirituality of messiness, but a compassionate patience with all that happens in our lives, even the places of discord and paradox. Moreover, it does not mean that we may be smiling, because I know I am a feisty gal and there is no way anything comes easy to me. However, I can be invited into the school of tenderness, the school of gentleness, but not a gentleness that is meek, but one of strength and elegance.

Ultimately this process takes a theology of suffering, something we are not so good at in the throes of a culture of immediacy, so typical of western culture. I am drawn to cultures who hold suffering and even grief as an avenue for spiritual formation. Our capacity for joy and suffering all come from the same font. It is our capacity to engage richly in this world with all its splendor and horror, to feel what we need to feel. It is not an easy path. It is messy. In order to create anything of beauty an artist needs to get messy. The painter will get paint on the shirt; the dancer will get injuries to the body; the musician may also have a physical injury. It takes hours of just messing around with the stuff of art in order to create beauty, even if that beauty is dissonant. This is why kids are so good at doing art. They are not yet afraid of getting messy. They think this is part of the glory of the process—and it is—until adults tell them otherwise.

So I am proposing that we think about a spirituality of messiness: to let our classrooms get messy enough to delve into life, delve into paint, delve into the body; to let our friendships get messy enough to let conflict reside; to live with incongruence; to let our hearts be open enough to hold the inconsistencies that many spiritual practices and religions offer; to bring the tend back into tenderness; to truly nurture what is calling out to us; to migrate to our own life. Follow the detour and thus follow the heart. It just may happen through the detour of the body. After all, the soul and body really need each other.

I have been invited to lean into new frames, new questions, and ultimately new answers. In this place, there is more spaciousness for paradox, and it is here where I return again and again: Paradoxicalness; in praise of paradox; in the heart of a spirituality of messiness is paradox. Mystery keeps beckoning me to its shoulder. I leave in wonder for the leaning absolutes.

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