



# The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

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## *drawing on alone*

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*Finally, we begin to envision some neurophysiological basis for at least two kinds of mental processes. One kind includes seemingly quiet periods when we can still be aware, relaxed, responsive. The other includes those all too rare peak moments of insight that thrust us upward. It is these quiet and peak moments, each working with the other, that generate a fresh mental topography, form new troughs and plateaus, new contours of experience in the brain during the long creative process.*

James H. Austin, *Chase, Chance, and Creativity:*

*The Lucky Art of Novelty*

I am a fiction writer and a visual artist with a deep interest in the brain, mind, psychology, spiritual practice, and how all this works together. For the past six years I've been living alone on a small island in a rather monastic setting, mostly self-directed in my quest, and now I think I have something to say that will benefit people who are drawn to meditation, but simply cannot sit still. Or to those who feel the maker-of-things in them and don't know how to begin. I have been able to find, as Daniel J. Siegal writes in *The Mindful Brain*, "...the stillness that permits the mind to 'settle,' [when] it becomes possible to be aware of the subtleties in the fine structures of the mind's function. Stillness is not the same as a void in activity, it's more like a stabilizing strength", in

## Greetings

The Wise Brain Bulletin offers skillful means from brain science and contemplative practice – to nurture your brain for the benefit of yourself and everyone you touch.

The Bulletin is offered freely, and you are welcome to share it with others. Past issues are posted at [www.wisebrain.org/bulletin.html](http://www.wisebrain.org/bulletin.html)

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To subscribe, please contact Rick at [drh@comcast.net](mailto:drh@comcast.net).

my own sustained drawing practice. The way of drawing I have developed is a kind of mindfulness, using mark-making as an aim and sustain contemplative practice. This practice has helped me to learn self-regulation and awareness of awareness, something until recently I was

the end of 1996 I had the answer. A small shift in temperature, as little as one degree, turns a few inches of rain into several feet of wet snow, bringing trees down left, right and centre, immobilizing everything, from traffic to power grids. It only took one major weather event for me to realize that my reaction to the forecast of a snowstorm had a lot to do with expectation and attitude. I had to change mine a lot over the next decade, about *everything*. I was in store for massive life upheavals that required a real attitudinal tuning to negotiate, something I would never have predicted.

Along the way, I moved over to a small Gulf Island between Vancouver and Vancouver

somewhat familiar with, but did not know how to talk about, much less know how it might work.

When I first moved to Vancouver Island with my family in 1994, I laughed at how the locals panicked when snow was forecast. I was forty years old, a hardy Canadian well seasoned in long winters, but had not yet spent one in this corner of Canada that enjoys the mild climate of the Pacific Northwest. I thought all it did was rain here. What's the harm in a little snow? By



*Oracle, 2005*

Island and became one of the locals who thought *oh no!*, when snow was forecast; never more so than one January morning, when I woke up, all alone, knowing there'd been a bad storm in the night, and wondered a scared, jittery little *uh-oh, now what?*

***How we pay attention promotes neural plasticity, the change of neural connections in response to experience.***

Daniel J. Siegal, *The Mindful Brain*

Back in my early 30s, when I was a second year visual art student at a small university in Saskatchewan, severe weather was simply a feature of living on the prairie, and rarely did life come to a standstill because of it. We simply grumbled over the humps of it. My daughters' elementary school was nearby, and my husband and I each had a 4 x 4. We hardly missed a beat in the bad weather days.

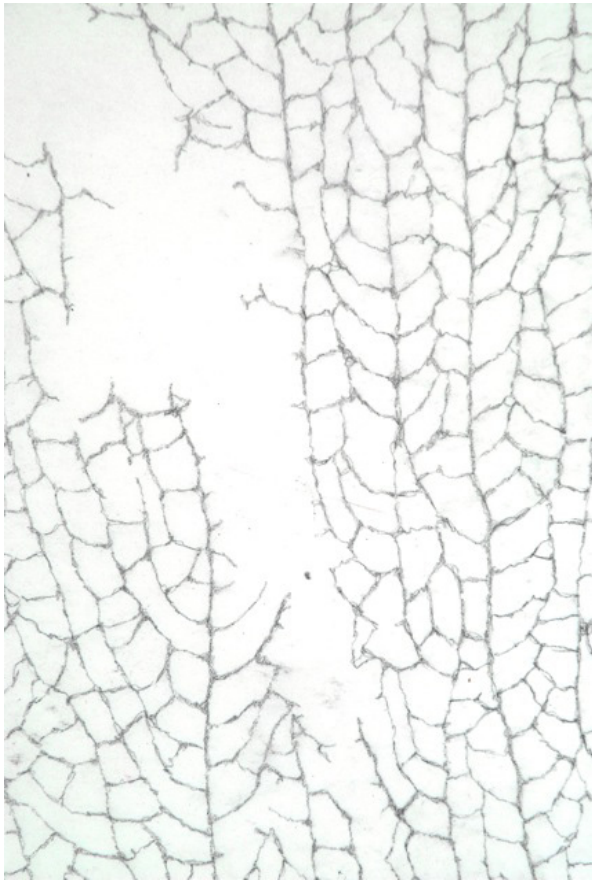
I was deeply engaged in my new studies. In second year, there was a retrospective at the MacKenzie Art Gallery of the work of Joyce Weiland, a Canadian artist with an international reputation. She made everything from paintings to giant plastic quilts to performance and film. She was an activist, feminist. A force. You name it, she did it. Added to her mystique was the infamous break-up with her long-time husband, the film-maker Michael Snow.

When Weiland came as a visiting artist my drawing instructor invited her to take our class on a private tour of the retrospective. On the far back wall was a series of pale color pencil drawings that seemed apart, so different, from the rest of the show. The catalogue described them as Weiland's experience of the mystical quality of light in her bright upstairs studio. They were Blakeian, mythical. My young hot-from-New-York instructor thought the drawings had no place in the show. She claimed they were weak; not up to the standard of the edgy, ground-breaking stuff.

I did not agree with this dismissal of the work, but I was unsure of myself. Mesmerized by some quality of the drawings that I couldn't name, I found a private moment to ask Weiland about them. Her face went soft, she got really close, and said, "It's all I could do to make those first faint marks. My heart was broken. Making these drawings healed me." The intimacy of her words and the look on her face imprinted somewhere in my heart and brain.

Fifteen years later, in 2002, the year I turned forty-eight, those words came back to support me as I sat with a drawing board on my knees at the edge of the cliff in front of my little house with a 2B pencil, and faintly drew a leaf skeleton in fine, tender, knitting-like





*detail, All I Can Do*

strokes on a sheet of velum tracing paper. I wanted to paint, but this was all I could do.

Four months earlier, my thirty-year marriage had suddenly ended. My oldest daughter left her husband of five years and trained to go abroad and teach ESL. My younger daughter was freaking out with all the change and decided to take a year from university and join her sister. Even my German Shepherd companion of eleven years had to be put down. With everything flying apart I felt like the faded contrail of a jet plane in the endless blue sky. After the draft of a novel was

sent off to a publisher, and all the furniture in the house re-arranged, I had this great gaping sense of *me* with no purpose, no future. Evenings were okay, I had a boyfriend of sorts – it was a pretty loose arrangement – but I did not know how to proceed with the hours of the day. The garden limped on by itself in the September heat with its weeds and deadheads, foliage crisped and curling in on itself. I felt anxious and adrift.

Usually I could settle my mind reading fiction but nothing was fitting the bill, so I turned to non-fiction with the recently published *Color: A Natural History of the Palette* by Victoria Finlay, thinking it would give me a boost to get painting again. What it gave me though, right in the preface, changed the way I thought about the world.

***What is important to remember about 'chemical' coloring is that the light***



***actually does affect the object. When light shines on a leaf, or a daub of paint, or a lump of butter, it actually causes it to rearrange its electrons, a process called 'transition'. There the electrons are, floating quietly in clouds within their atoms, and suddenly a ray of light shines on them. Imagine a soprano singing a high C and shattering a wineglass, because she catches its natural vibration. Something similar happens with the electrons, if a portion of the light happens to catch their natural vibration. It shoots them into a another energy level and that relevant bit of light, that glass shattering 'note', is used up and absorbed. The rest is reflected out, and our brains read it as 'color'.***

Victoria Finlay, *Color: A Natural History of the Palette*

I read this not as a metaphor for what I was experiencing, but as a kind of truth, an accurate summation of how I was feeling. From then on when asked how I was doing with all the changes in my life I had a good answer: "All of my electrons are being rearranged. Some days it feels good and some days it feels like hell."

I thought about this as I sat at the edge, not just the edge of my property, but the edge of panic. I had not drawn with the simplest of materials - pencil and paper - for many years. I could not believe how much energy it took to look deeply, and keep my hand moving. I

realized I had forgotten how to draw in the years I had been writing. I was learning all over again.

I drew for refuge, to keep the electrons from flying out of the orbit of my body. I looked at the colors in the landscape, especially the water, and thought about my brain, reading and rereading every nuance of wave, wind, tide, with clouds passing by, giving me this clear picture, all filled in, with no gaps, no holes. I felt received by the landscape. I thought about the mystical quality of light spoken about in Weiland's work. I was not drawing that light, but I felt in that light. I felt welcomed. I have since wondered about the mystical quality of recovery.

***When we start the journey to attune to our own minds by pausing into stillness we enter a new realm of experience that can produce surprise in each moment.***

Daniel J. Siegal, *The Mindful Brain*

I now know that I was activating the parasympathetic nervous system -

***"...mental activity has greater direct influence over the ANS than any other bodily system. When you stimulate the parasympathetic wing of the ANS, calming, soothing, healing ripples spread through your body, brain, and mind."***

Rick Hanson, *Buddha's Brain*

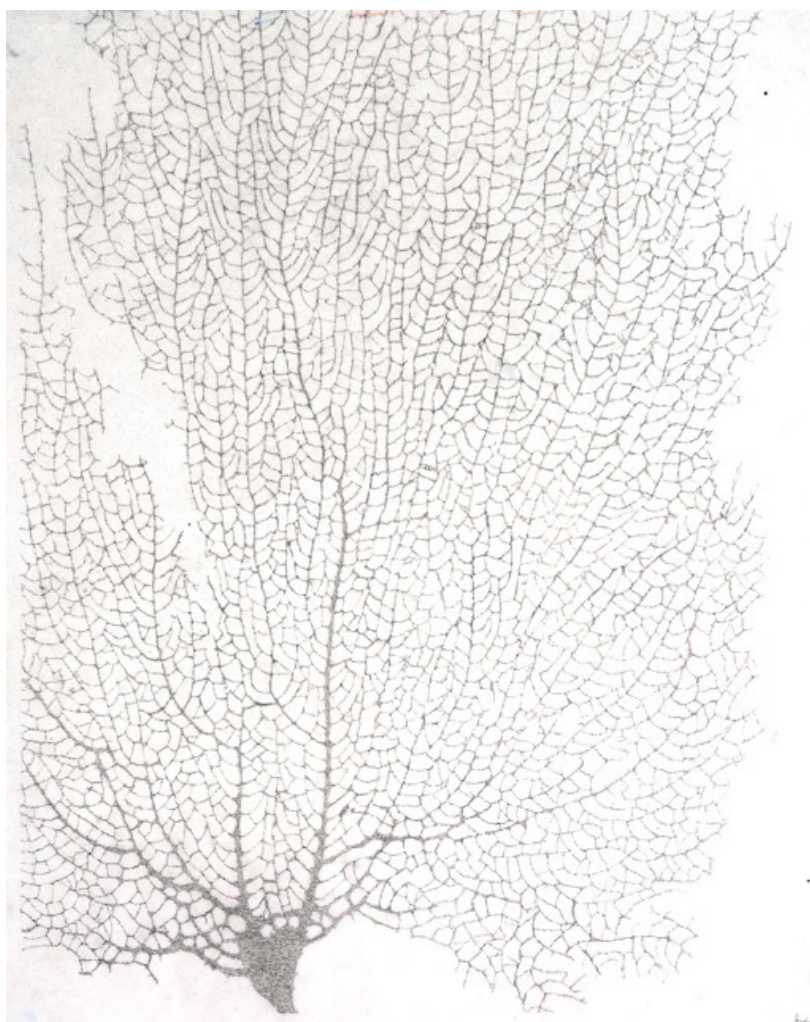


I was not a stranger to contemporary academic ideas in the humanities or sciences. At art school I took some post-modern theory, so I knew that the self is “constructed”. I have a lively reading mind and had read Dennet and Pinker, Brian Greene’s *The Fabric of the Cosmos*. These ideas left me a little cold but well informed. I was very curious about how the brain fills in and how neutrinos fall right through us, but this almost knowing was so different from the knowing I was experiencing now, this knowing pierced me. It knocked holes in the architecture of my thinking; yet, oddly, helped me to feel a little bit more *okay* about my personal situation. I kept drawing and reflecting, reflecting and drawing. Eyes on the page, eyes on the water. Looking in, looking out. Letting go of intrusive, nagging thoughts and doubts about my future as they arose.

When finished, I made a second drawing of the same image on rice paper, with darker, stronger strokes. Then I was ready for color and as the rainy season approached, I went inside to my studio, and made the same image, larger, in color, going for

that *shimmer*. I kept this practice up for more than a year. It was a kind of panic-retardant, the laying down of not only imagery, but the strengthening of neural substrate. Art-making offered a place of stability, it kept me in the present in a time of upheaval, and set the neural foundation for a major project coming in the future.

*...think not so much of something ‘being’ a color but of it ‘doing’ a color...I saw what I understand to be transitional color only once, on a journey to Thailand to undertake a ten-day fast... I was walking through a garden when suddenly I stopped in amazement. In front of me was a bougainvillea bush...shimmering*



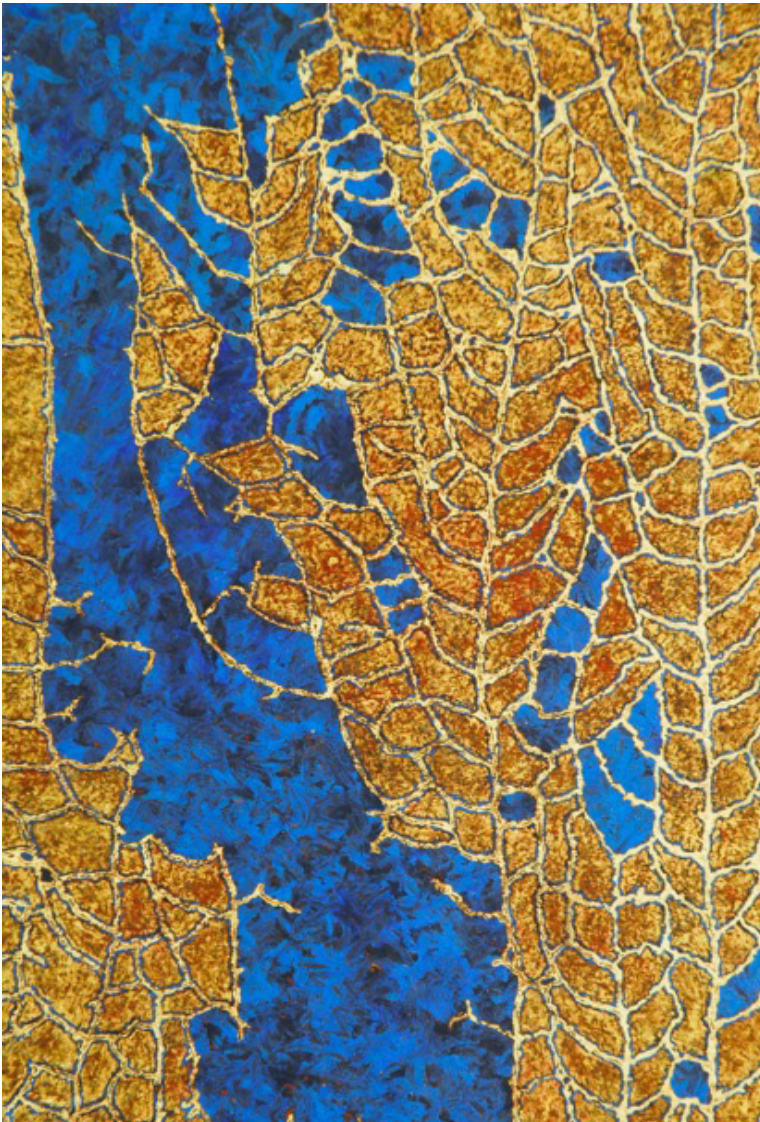
*All I Can Do, 2003*

*- almost as if a heartbeat had been transformed into something visible. I suddenly understood with my eyes and not just my mind how the phenomenon of color is about vibrations and the emission of energy.*

Victoria Finlay, *Color: A Natural History of the Palette*

I write this as if I consciously understood what was happening in my life, or what the work was *drawing me* into. I did not. (Rarely do we get to see the narrative arc in our lives

*detail, INLET, 2003*



as it is happening.) I was simply putting one foot in front of the other.

By the fall of 2004 I had a publisher for my novel. Drawing was put aside. The boyfriend gone. I had made the tough choice to be alone. My days were focused, happily filled with restructuring the manuscript. But at night I doubted *everything*. The rearranging electrons running up my spine felt like they were one fire. I was afraid of disintegrating. So I decked out on the couch and with one eye watched HBO, while eating baseball sized pomegranates, one seed at a time, to help quench the flames. With the other

eye, I watched my old, hardy, conditioned self, flame out. I listened to the winter rains on the flat roof. I wanted it to keep raining.

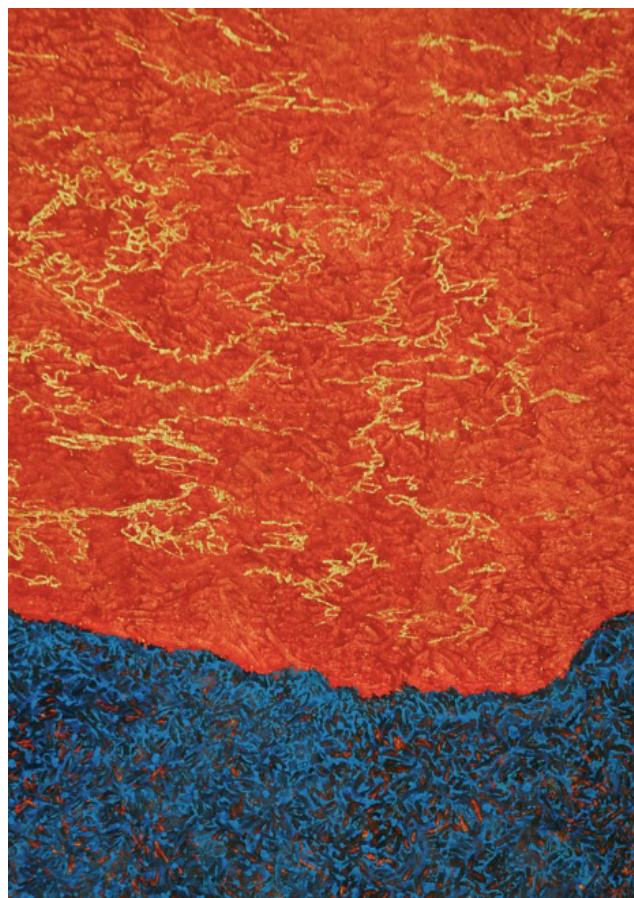
I got something else. On the morning of January 12th, 2005, I put one bleary eye on the clock by my bedside and registered... nothing. I had been disturbed in the night by high winds. Outside all was white. Now I was wide-awake, bringing all focus to the situation. It was snowing. The power was out. This is a first dart. (First Dart is the expression Rick Hanson borrows from the Buddha, being the inescapable physical or mental discomfort of existence.) This didn't



feel temporary. It felt like the power outage in December a few years ago when the roof leaked after the snow melted and the ceiling was flooded...oh god, what calamity... six weeks of restoration...That was bad.

THIS IS BAD. Now came the Second Darts (adding our reactions to first darts, darts we throw at ourselves.) These thoughts, these second darts, wanted to get on a trampoline in my head.

I was getting ready for a descent into hell when somehow I pulled this one out of the hat: “super-highway to the amygdala.” This was from Daniel Goleman’s *Emotional Intelligence*. I did not want to go down that superhighway. Like eating the pomegranate seeds, this thought gave me time to access my executive functions, it cut through the trampoline, long enough to assess what I needed to do: get up and feed the woodstove before the fire died. Draw water before



detail, *Current*, 2003

the pressure tank conked out. Dig a path to the woodshed. Drag the barbecue out of the garage and put a kettle of water on the side-burner. All day, as the storm raged and branches whipped off the treetops, I kept busy assessing and doing; keeping the

chorus - *you're all alone, abandoned, unloved, unwanted* - off the trampoline.

There was also that great big gap of lost expectations - I was supposed to be in the Caribbean, sailing, with someone I loved - hovering at the edges





of all my thoughts. I brought in snow to melt so I could flush the toilet; heated some up to wipe down the counters (thankful I had turned the dishwasher on the night before) and give my face a wash. As a matter of fact, I found it very helpful to list all the things I was grateful for: I had lots of food and drinking water, I was warm, my good friend Jean was just next door, a couple of hundred feet away. I had the cats that were all too happy to stay in and keep me company. This was an inconvenience, not a tsunami. I'd practiced a lot with tonglen in the previous weeks during the news coverage of the Sumatra tsunami. I decided to give myself some of this new practice.

But at five o'clock when it was completely dark again, the reassessment went like this: I have no power, a cedar tree brought my telephone line down, my 350 foot driveway is braided by alder and fir, that stupid ex-husband of mine must have taken the battery-operated radio...I'm never going to get out of here...on and on. Then words of wisdom I had heard or read made me stop. Is this true I ask myself? Part of my self wants to whine but it knows the answer is not going to get out of here SOON. I gave that part of myself one ounce - and one ounce only - of single malt

scotch, left over from the boyfriend days. The rest of me read Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* by candlelight, like a long prayer, my back to the wood-stove.

*When we reach our limit, if we aspire to know that place fully - which is to say that we aspire to neither indulge nor repress - a hardness will dissolve. We will be softened by the sheer force of whatever energy arises - the energy of anger, the energy of disappointment, the energy of fear. When it's not solidified in one direction or another, that very energy pierces us to the heart, and it opens us.*

Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart*

By the afternoon of the second day the wind shifted to the north, bringing bright, clearing skies. The light -- reflected from the snow-cover -- that spilled in from the flank



of west-facing windows was so achingly beautiful that it invited the maker in me to engage with it. And I wanted out of the story in my head -- what Siegal calls the top-down influence -- and into the world, to engage the bottom-up.

***Top-down processes...are put into action via large-scale groupings of neurons... including limbic, parietal, and frontal regions. These areas and their higher level representations embedded in both implicit and explicit memory (facts and autobiographical memory; beliefs and mental models) can continually influence entrainment (or activation/ coordination) of the processing of new perception and new information. As these activities are “entrained” they are literally shaped in the patterning of their activations of top-down effects. This is enslavement.***

Daniel J. Siegal, *The Mindful Brain*

It helps in a situation like this to know yourself well enough to make a good choice about activity. Some people might have gone out and shoveled the driveway, but I knew I had to conserve enough energy in order to keep the place from freezing up. Still, I had to keep my mind engaged. So I stopped all doing of chores and entered my freezing

studio (which was now being used as the fridge) and grabbed some pencils, a sharpener, a drawing board, a piece of velum, and an image I had found months previously in the woodshed, and wanted to work with.

(I write this as if it took no big effort, no huge amount of courage, to cross that threshold to get started on something new. Sometimes I wonder that I didn't just sit there in stunned misery, staring out.)

***...bottom-up would refer to a more primary sensory experience that accesses ipseity, our more basic core***



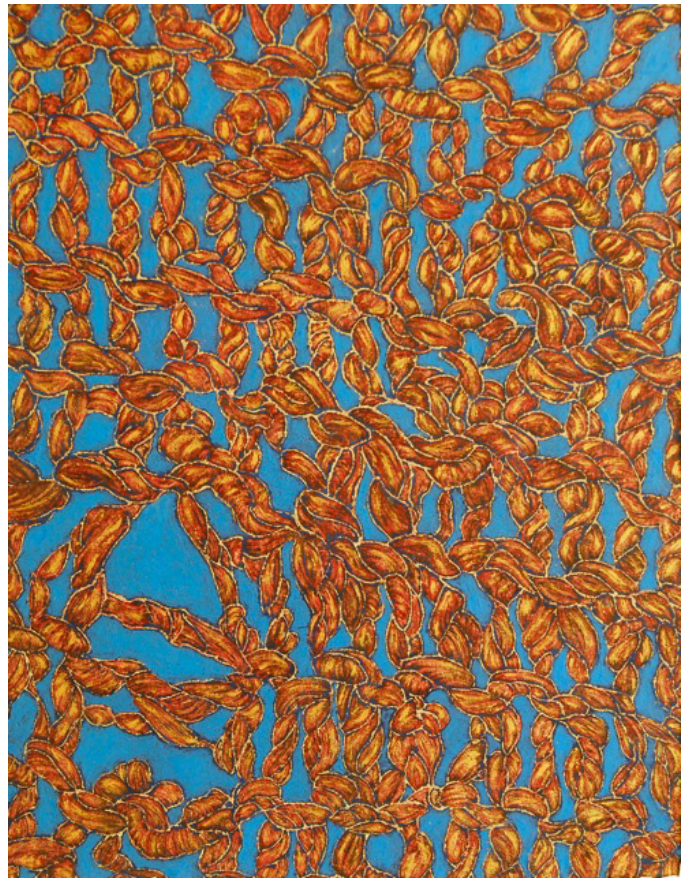


*self experience...The receptivity, self-observation, and reflexivity of reflection each help dissolve top-down influences.*

Daniel J. Siegal, *The Mindful Brain*

The thing about a long power outage in the dead of winter is that it brings novelty, as well as solitude. I had no idea how I was going to approach the image I wanted to draw. I had no idea what it would look like when (or if) I ever finished. With no goals in mind I simply sat by the window and thought about something my favorite drawing instructor, Leesa Streifler, had said years ago when watching me draw. “This is your mark. This belongs to you. Remember it.” I looked out at the dazzle before me and knew that there was something, some ground of being, some essence of me, and not just the stitched up collection of experiences -- those I judged to be good and bad -- that had been my life so far.

I don’t know how long I sat there until I began. I watched the birds, and at some point I simply start making marks -- my marks -- on the velum. I gave way to the sensation of my hand moving the pencil across the paper. Each mark I made was a chance, and another chance, to be with my experience, just as it was. A chance not to disintegrate, a chance not to be afraid. A chance to be one with the situation and not simply fight it or suppress it. A chance to welcome the



*Ground, 1998*

“uninvited guest.” Allowing thoughts to come and go with as little commentary from “me” as I could manage. Mark after mark, building up a drawing, building up strength -- finding a new visual language for myself -- building up the structures in my brain that allow me to not only get through the power-outage days, but through the nights.

Although the marks were a projection of my self, the slow building up of the image brought me into resonance with that background “other” that is my basic self, in connection with the environment as it arises, moment-by-moment. I believe that this created a profound state of reflective coherence, a kind of intrapersonal attunement, achieved through the drawing

strokes, much how counting in and out breaths primes the brain, as Siegal writes, for the emerging “horizon of the future.”

*...the vision of YODA’S SOCK: the idea that “You Observe to Decouple Automaticity” -- observing enables you to distance yourself enough such that you can meet any mental processes at the door of your mind “laughingly.” The SOCK is a balance of Sensation, Observation, and Conceptualization that leads to a mindful sense of nonconceptual Knowing.*

Daniel J. Siegal, *The Mindful Brain*

*Although each part of the neuro axis works with the others, two regions in particular are hubs, sending out neural spokes in many directions: the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) and the amygdala...the ACC is at the centre of top-down, deliberate, centralized, reasoned motivation...closely connected to the supplementary motor area, where new actions are planned. Moment to moment, the amygdala spotlights what’s relevant and important to you: what’s pleasant and unpleasant, what’s an opportunity, what’s a threat...When you get motivated in any significant way, it means the subcortical regions that connect to the amygdala have synchronized with each other.*

Rick Hanson, *Buddha’s Brain*







HEART, 2005

By late in the afternoon of the fifth day of the power outage, I could not make one more mark. Cloud and warmer air moved in quietly. I had been stilled. I went outside to smell the change in the air. It was so quiet.

When Jean and her husband left for town to get some food, I went over to check up on their cat. I stood on the path between our places and listened. The wind started to pick up again.

When I got back to my place the refrigerator kicked in. I knew instantly it was over. I was

simultaneously relieved and a little sad.

Something had changed during this power-outage -- a kind of retreat I would not have signed up for; I had an encounter with myself unlike any other, I learned something about surrender that was not resignation.

By the afternoon of the sixth day my telephone line was restored. On the seventh a friend came with a chainsaw and spent the afternoon clearing my driveway of the fallen trees. I could have left then but I didn't. I was a little reluctant for the experience, hard as it had been, to be over.

On the eighth day I got in my car and drove across the island. So many trees, their branches and tops, had come down. All I could see was the devastation. This is so eerie, I thought. But in reflection, I think what was eerie, was me. The island was being itself, devastation and all. But I had learned, at least for a time, how to put a part of me, the - *I don't like this, I don't like that* - aside a bit. I had let in more space for all those neutrinos to fall through! That weather event became a founding event in my journey of learning how to live alone.

In the years since, I have learned how the forest self-prunes in storms and regenerates, and have built on the drawing practice I learned in the "retreat." There has been a great accumulation of marks. I read more and more books about Buddhism, psychology, and emotions. I got "sitting" instructions. I took on greater drawing challenges. Became less anxious. All feelings of disintegration subsided. And one day, when I was working on a really complicated structure, I realized that I had changed my brain in a fundamental way. Then I got really interested in reading about the brain.



I realized that the sense I'd experienced after reading Finlay's book *Color: A Natural History of the Palette* of all my electrons arranging and rearranging themselves, was not far off the mark. But it was probably my neurons and neuro-chemicals shunting around, being clipped off, and sprouting anew that I was feeling. All that chaos of change. The constant usurping of my mind by the amygdala, the developing patience by effortful control of the ACC, and the millimeter by millimeter growth of the long tendrils of the PFC reaching back into the lower structures of my brain: how they all came together, one drawing stroke at a time, one written word

at a time, one picked-up stick at a time, one breath at a time, in that dance of dances, neural coherence.

I have to admit that I am much more inclined to draw than sit in meditation. I have wondered about this. Siegal writes that, "*Bottom-up can be achieved through direct focus on any of the eight senses, but perhaps the most effective early steps are to begin with the body...within this rhythmic cycle of life, this ever-present interface of our body with the outside world, we bring awareness and create a resonance of connection between attention and corporeal self.*" He is talking about the breath of course, but I wonder if an art practice like mine might





detail, *REMAINDER*, 2008

just do the trick. I'm not making a case against sitting meditation, more of a case for drawing as a contemplative practice with durable benefits.

*To use contemplative practice as an example...what about people today who are used to much more stimulation, particularly those at the spirited end of the of the normal range of temperament?*

*I've seen people like this give up on meditation because they just couldn't find a way to do it that would fit their brain.*

Rick Hanson, *Buddha's Brain*

These days I feel more integrated. Less reactive. The day came when I knocked over

a favorite vase in the sink and when it shattered, I didn't. I just looked at it and said, "oh, you are broken; in some sense you have always been broken." And then I knew that about myself. Very, very, gently, I said to myself, "you're also broken." But unlike the shattered vase in the sink, I am putting myself back together. I'm an ongoing process. My electrons will always be moving, but they are a lot more resilient.

*Nonreactivity reveals a central aspect of resilience...Resilience can be learned through experience. Affective style is not fixed in cement by genes or early experience, but can be seen as a skill that with training can be moved in the direction of well-being.*

Daniel J. Siegal, *The Mindful Brain*

This is not to say that I don't ever run off at the mouth or get annoyed, or gloomy, or whatever. I do. But I am surely not as irritable as I used to be! When too many thoughts in my head begin with a grumble, I know it is time to stand back. I know it is time to figure out what is going on. I know I can name most of this stuff. I also know that none of this is unique to me. It can be learned. I can teach it.

My story of the five-day power outage hardly accounts for a drop in the ocean of natural and unnatural disasters we have witnessed

in the last decade. Disasters that hardly seem imaginable, but the thing is, my story is imaginable. It came about because of one degree difference or so in temperature. I'm thankful I had an art practice, and a few really good books, to get me, well, not only just over the hump, but into a new way of being.

Everything is available out there: teachers, therapists, books, art supplies, and certainly there is no shortage of "opportunity" to practice. But get going now, start something you've always wanted to do that will help you get in touch with your basic self and practice practice practice, don't wait for the lights to go out!



### ***Exercise***

At its most fundamental level, making 2D art is simply a matter of breaking up space. Take any piece of paper, any mark-making tool (pencil, pen, sharpie) and randomly, but quickly, divide it into an arcing or geometric pattern. Choose one of the divisions and

break that space down. Working with marks from that space, move to the next, and the next. Go back into each space and break each space down further. Don't let your thoughts disturb you. Keep going, it can be endless fun, and you will feel better too!

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All photographs and artwork

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**Karen McLaughlin** lives on a small island in British Columbia and enjoys fast cars, gardening, and walking with her cat. She has won the Steeple Artworks Artist's Society scholarship and the EM/Media Scholarship, among other honours. She has a BFA from Alberta College of Art and Design and has studied at the University of Regina and Saint Mary's University in Halifax.

*From This Distance*, her second novel, can be purchased at <http://www.cormorantbooks.com> or <http://www.amazon.ca/>



# *Grateful Wonder:*

## *Origins*

© HSWiseheart, June 2010

*Just today I read  
we are made of  
stardust,  
all atoms present  
when this  
solar system  
formed,  
a super nova  
freeing us  
to fly,  
wander  
the sky,  
form  
chance liaisons,  
gathering ourselves  
as we are now,  
like  
magnets  
on metal  
sticking to earth,  
making small  
leaps*

*by dancing,  
jumping,  
trampolining,  
attempting to  
take off  
again, only a few  
of us  
authorized  
to soar, ensued  
and rocket-propelled  
into  
weightlessness.*

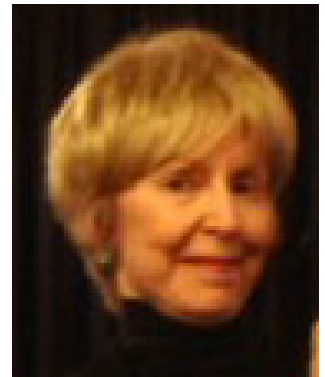
*And I remember that night  
long ago on the coast, coming  
home tired, out for wood to feed  
the stove, suddenly stopping*

*by my woodpile,  
looking up at the night  
sky and its twinkling  
beacons,  
thinking  
“my real home,  
up there.”*

*At that moment of  
bright remembering  
all cells buzzed, all  
gravity  
fatigue lifted,  
crinkling  
into night air, a sea breeze  
sweeping through my soul  
every fibre  
singing  
to those incandescent ancestors  
so far away, so visible, and,  
at last,  
recognized.*

Hannah S Wiseheart is a prize winning poet and writer from the United States who now lives in England and is a member of Fire River Poets <http://www.fireriverpoets.org.uk/>

Ordained in the mid-90s as a lay member of the Order of Interbeing led by Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, she has led communities of practice in Virginia and New Mexico, and has based her Global Executive Coach Education Programme on mindfulness practice under her professional name Hannah S. Wilder ( see [www.advantara.com](http://www.advantara.com)). She has taught mindfulness practice in person to coaches at international conferences in Switzerland, Spain, and the United States and worldwide online through her educational programmes. Hannah is a singer, dancer, and musician of British and American traditional music and lives with her husband in Somerset, UK.



# *The Power of Imagery To Convey Emotional Truths*

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Unlike many of the Wise Brain Bulletin readers and contributors, I have not had a traditional or formal meditation practice nor had the ongoing support of a contemplative community. However, as a mental health practitioner and social worker of thirty years, mindfulness in the form of “conscious use of self,” has been a basic tool of the trade. Since my college days, I’ve been a passionate learner and I’ve felt a pull to expand my understanding of the mind and human relationships. Most of the knowledge that I acquired in early adulthood was of a conceptual nature and for the purpose of helping others. As a result, like most people, many pockets of dissociated self-knowledge endured out of sight, until the proverbial “stuff hit the fan” in my personal life. I entered therapy and a new realm of discovery as I began visiting my childhood emotional burial ground.

Healing work brought lasting benefits in the form of self-compassion, self-worth and relaxation of anxiety about the safety and well-being of others. Nonetheless, this progress was followed by years

of family life dynamics that triggered and baffled me. At this point, I couldn’t foresee or understand the variations on the theme that my amygdala was capable of tracking down. Also, I didn’t have the wisdom to understand how one could be, at the same time, both a “lion and a lamb.” My amygdala had a field day.

Over time, as I learned about attachment, trauma, neuroscience, family systems and mindfulness meditation, I developed a broader and deeper range of material to observe and from which to learn. My home life, as well as my clients’ lives, provided ample grist to reflect upon. With greater receptivity and an increased ability to postpone judgment and action, came the awareness and insight that enabled me to feel more grounded, compassionate and able to befriend “what is.”

Another current in my development of consciousness evolved as I began practicing Emotionally Focused Therapy for couples and EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Retraining), a trauma treatment. Both approaches



are based on attention and attunement to emotions, body sensations, imagery and deep beliefs about self and other. Both involve the client and therapist being mindful of experience in the present moment. Through the increase in my own stillness, trust in the unconscious process and attunement to my own and my clients' emotions, physical sensations and imagery, there has been growing access to the powerful, integrating and intuitive non-verbal gifts of the right hemisphere. This imagery has helped my clients connect with their deepest visceral experience and its personal meaning. It also adds color and vitality, making their learning more alive, rich, and memorable.

This past year, my mind and heart have produced a book that represents the culmination of all I've learned so far, personally and professionally, that contributes to physical, mental, emotional, relational and spiritual health. What has given me the greatest delight in this creation is that it spontaneously arose with the best that my left and right hemispheres had to offer. The book is organized, linear, logical and scientifically-based. At the same time, it is liberally sprinkled with vivid image-filled language. The following are excerpts from *Peace in the Heart and Home: A Down-to-Earth Guide to Creating a Better Life for You and Your Loved Ones*. [www.peaceintheheartandhome.com](http://www.peaceintheheartandhome.com).



## Healing

The brain is plastic; it has the capacity to change its shape and form. The synapses between neurons that were created in childhood may be like dead end streets where we get mugged, but new synapses can be formed that lead us to feelings of self-worth, safety and self-efficacy. As you'll soon see, this is not pie-in-the-sky thinking. This is scientifically-based, clinically-proven reality. And if you'll pardon my far-from-scientific analogy, this path to safety is forged by heading directly into our disturbing emotions, like Dorothy, the Tin Man, the Lion and the Scarecrow heading straight for the Wicked Witch's castle. When we have a safe enough holding environment, we can dare to face emotional experiences that can show us what we are made of. Dorothy and her fellow travelers had each other and the Good Witch to provide a sense of community and safety. Contemporary travelers have psychotherapists. Dorothy and her friends were rewarded for exercising their courage, intellect and heart. So can we.

In fact, these are the very requirements for overcoming trauma: the cognitive, rational intellect of the brain's left hemisphere; the emotions, body sensations and imagery of the right hemisphere; and the courage and wisdom of our heart and gut.

Neuroscientists have recently discovered that the heart and intestines are surrounded by thousands of neurons, making them significant sources of intelligence along with our brain. Talk therapy does not elicit all these sources of experience and intelligence, which is why it merely processes the tip of the iceberg. It is good at creating insight, but insight without peace is the booby prize.

Over the last few decades, the field of psychology has become increasingly aware of the importance of integrating mindfulness of thoughts, imagery, emotions and body sensations into any treatment.

This is especially so when the condition has trauma and insecure attachment at its root, which, as I've said, is the case for most people.

The approaches that rely primarily on teaching new behaviors to solve problems and changing thoughts to reframe perspective, alter emotion and manage impulses are called "top down."

The approaches that go directly to the body and process what is felt there are called "bottom up." I see top down approaches as equivalent to a salmon relentlessly fighting a powerful current. I see

### **Perspectives on Self-Care**

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.



bottom up approaches as turning off the current. Phew, can't you just feel the difference? It's the difference between struggling to stay on top of an issue and there being no issue.

The process of healing and change is spiral, not linear. That means you're likely to take two steps forward and one step back, and then three steps forward and another step back. As you begin to move forward, healing one trauma at a time, it's as if you're coming into a clearing within a deep, dark jungle. You begin to feel less suffocated; you begin to feel the sunlight of hope. Then, you reenter another part of the jungle, become disheartened and wonder, "Will I really ever get out?" Then, as you labor on, you eventually come

to a bigger clearing and experience relief and peace. To keep moving forward requires courage, because you need to keep reentering the jungle and facing another threat. But after you have healed all your past traumas, you have truly come out of the jungle once and for all.

The new neuronal pathways that are created through repeated, mindful, courageous walks will become your brain's new default position. The old paths will now become overgrown from lack of use. This is what it is to "grow oneself up" again; rewiring the brain, removing harmful software and rediscovering the program that is our birthright.

Our True and Higher Self exudes calmness,



confidence, courage, clarity, and loving compassion for self and other. There is a genius and wisdom within us that gets tapped through the healing process. It far surpasses what our cognitive brain alone can offer.

When we integrate our adult reason and perspective, our unconscious healing processes and the traumatic memory lodged in the emotional brain, what we end up with is beyond the combined conscious intellect of the client and therapist.

“Integration” is the key word in healing and thriving; bringing together and valuing both the *yin* and *yang*, top down and bottom up, reason and emotion, uplifting information and disturbing information, body and brain, strengths and weaknesses, awareness and what has been hidden, courage and fear, adult state and child state, self and other. Crossing from the painful side of the river to the peaceful shore requires going into the swift current. As we wade deeper into the difficult waters, and hold onto our hats, we gradually expand our comfort zone. The less left that

frightens us, the more we feel safe in the world.

The more the world is our oyster.

## ***Mindfulness, Higher Self and Being***

What does it take to feel most alive; to have the sense that we really are showing up for this trip called Life? What gives us the feeling of operating on all cylinders and thriving rather than feeling cornered by lions, stretched on a rack, hanging off a cliff clutching a loose vine or merely going through the motions? First of all, we need to be fully conscious, awake and in touch with our bodies and senses. That means not drifting in and out of a coma and not being lost for hours in our heads, electronic screens and virtual realities. We need to have adequate affect management skills to allow our emotions to come in the front door, share their messages and move on, having been treated with respect. With those skills, the emotional circulation provides vitality. Without the skills, we tread water with our nostrils barely above the water line or develop emotional phlebitis.

### ***The Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom***

The Institute is a 501c3 non-profit corporation, and it publishes the Wise Brain Bulletin. The Wellspring Institute gathers, organizes, and freely offers information and methods – supported by brain science and the contemplative disciplines – for greater happiness, love, effectiveness, and wisdom. For more information about the Institute, please go to [www.wisebrain.org/wellspring.html](http://www.wisebrain.org/wellspring.html).

What separates humans from animals is our ability to be self-aware. Both animals and humans have consciousness, but only humans can be aware that they are aware. While we have this capacity, it is tremendously underdeveloped and this chapter is about



cultivating our distinguishing faculty. When we are merely conscious, we look but don't really see, touch but don't really feel, hear but don't really listen and move without being moved. We get the details but miss the full picture and meaning. Without a well-developed self-awareness, we are at risk of being in a trance in which we live out our past again and again like some Twilight Zone episode.

We need to observe and reflect on our life so that we can recognize the patterns in our thoughts, perceptions, beliefs, complaints, urges and habits that keep us in our fatalistic ruts. We need to be able to fully realize when disturbing thoughts, memories and fantasies have invaded the present and not let them hold us hostage. We fear the future because we're still feeling vulnerable and helpless from the past. We fear we are going to be hurt again if we don't control everything. We don't trust ourselves, others or the world enough to feel safe. Our preoccupation with the past is because it has been boarded over alive like Edgar Allan Poe's Tell-Tale Heart. It's imperative that we be proactive in resolving the past with a trauma treatment, such as EMDR, so that we can catch up to today, relieved of the ghosts that have haunted us and the burden of carrying yesterday.

Without energy being invested in resisting the unwanted or dueling with fears, we have more

energy and attention available for noticing not only the disturbing, but also the wonderful. When we have faced and worked through our unresolved memories, the radar screen of our attention broadens tremendously and a new reality presents itself. When we're not fixated on threat and defending ourselves, when we're not exhausted and burned out from chronic stress, we are able to see the daily evidence that we are in the midst of a mind-blowing miracle called Life. We now have the chance to live according to the words of the contemporary spiritual teacher Ram Dass, "Be Here Now." Then we will experience breathtaking, heart-rippling moments that counterbalance every trial and tribulation. When we're fully conscious of the universe's artistry and generosity, who needs psychedelics or Prozac?

Functioning at our best means processing emotional experiences as they arise, rather than creating a backlog. It entails keeping ourselves open to experience, even when we've been put through the wringer. Many years ago I attended the funeral of a very young family member. A few days later, I decided to go to Longwood Gardens for the day. Being in the presence of abundant and sublime beauty was tremendously helpful to me, so inspiring and reaffirming of life's fundamental goodness. We never can predict what gifts will be laid before us if we keep our eyes and hearts open.

Re-experiencing and acknowledging your childhood relational history is most certainly a courageous task: the emotional equivalent of scaling Mount Everest. As you face the challenge, one step at a time, your sense of self expands and strengthens. As you reach each peak along the way, you gain perspective on how far you have traveled and you come to know your inner fortitude and dignity. You also discover the wide world that couldn't be seen while your mind was glued to the threats that dominated your

awareness. You wake up from a nightmare and feel relieved to find that reality is far more benign and sweet than you could ever have imagined.

## ***The Paradox of a Perfectly Imperfect Self and World***

A major premise of Peace in the Heart and Home is that we need to recognize that most of what people bring to medical, mental health

and marriage and family practitioners are *symptoms*, the tip of an emotional iceberg that requires our looking under the surface and dealing with the reality of what's there. If we just scrape off the tip, we are going down like the Titanic. Fortunately, human "sinkings" don't have to be the end of the story, for we have the capacity to discover our vulnerabilities and become stronger in what had been the fragile places. Human beings are resilient and can resurrect, like the phoenix from the ashes, with the help of loving





compassion, courage and awareness.

M. Scott Peck wrote in *The Road Less Traveled*: “*Mental health is an ongoing process of dedication to reality at all costs.*” That means employing a minimum of defenses and cultivating the courage to face our fears and blind spots, to overcome our fear of the dark. Anais Nin knew this well when she wrote, “Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.” We all have a dark side and that’s alright. It’s pretending it’s not there that is not alright.

“Welcome to the human race” can be a comforting insight. It helps to put our shame to rest. Apparent imperfection is what makes a universe possible and worth existing. Without our wounds, conflicts, personal and interpersonal challenges, trials and tribulations, without the struggle, humility, dignity and glory of joining with others to face and overcome our difficulties, what use would there be for a world? A heavenly existence with non-stop beauty, peace and contentment would eventually become meaningless and boring. The basic dynamic of existence is what the ancient Chinese philosophers called the yin and yang. Contemporary Quantum Physics confirms it. Life is about co-existing opposites, each having inherent value because it is essential to the whole.

You can’t have one without the other: particles and waves, light and dark, inhale and exhale, joy and pain, dreams realized and crushed, vitality and deterioration. It’s about the ride, not just the destination. It’s touching the earth and the divine.



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***Fare Well***

***May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.***