

Saying Grace

from the book "Small Wonder" by Barbara Kingsolver

I never knew what grand really as until I saw the canyon. It's a perspective that pulls the busy human engine of desires to a quiet halt. Taking the long view across that vermilion abyss attenuates humanity to quieter internal rhythms, the spirit of ice ages, and we look, we gasp, and it seems there is a chance we might be small enough not to matter. That the things we want are not the end of the world. I have needed this view lately.

I've come to the Grand Canyon several times in my life most lately without really understanding the necessity. As the holidays approached, I couldn't name the reason for my uneasiness. We thought about the cross-country trip we've usually taken to join our extended family's Thanksgiving celebration, but we didn't make the airplane reservations. Barely a month before, terrorist attacks had distorted commercial air travel to a horrifying new agenda, one that left everybody jittery. We understood, rationally; that it was as safe to fly as ever, and so it wasn't precisely nervousness that made us think twice about flying across the country for a long weekend. Rather, we were moved by a sense that this was wartime, and the prospect of such personal luxury felt somehow false.

I called my mother with our regrets and began making plans for a more modest family trip. On the days our daughters were out of school, we would wander north from Tucson to revisit some of the haunts I've come to love in my twenty years as a desert dweller transplanted from the verdant Southeast. We would kick through the leaves in Oak Creek Canyon, bask like lizards in the last late autumn sun on Sedona's red rocks, puzzle out the secrets of the labyrinthine ruins at Wupatki, and finally stand on the rim of that remarkable canyon.

I felt a little sorry for myself at first, missing the reassuring tradition of sitting down to face a huge, upside-down bird and counting my blessings in the grand, joyful circle of my kin. And then I felt shame enough to ask myself, How greedy can one person be, to want more than the Grand Canyon? How much more could one earth offer me than to lay herself bare, presenting me with the whole of her bedrock history in one miraculous view? What feast could satisfy a mother more deeply than to walk along a creek through a particolored carpet of leaves, watching my children pick up the fine-toothed gifts of this scarlet maple, that yellow aspen, piecing together the picture puzzle of a biological homeplace? We could listen for several days to the songs of living birds instead of making short work of one big dead one. And we'd feel lighter afterward, too.

These are relevant questions to ask, in this moment when our country demands that we dedicate ourselves and our resources, again and again, to what we call the defense of our way of life: How greedy can one person be? How much do we

need to feel blessed, sated, and permanently safe? What is safety in this world; and on what broad stones is that house built?

Imagine that you come from a large family in which one brother ended up with a whole lot more than the rest of you. Sometimes it happens that way, the luck falling to one guy who didn't do that much to deserve it. Imagine his gorgeous house on a huge tract of forests, rolling hills, and fertile fields. Your other relatives have decent places with smaller yards, but yours is mostly dust. Your lucky brother eats well, he has meat every day – in fact, let's face it, he's corpulent, and so are his kids. At your house, meanwhile, things are bad: Your kids cry themselves to sleep on empty stomachs. Your brother must not be able to hear them from the veranda where he dines, because he throws away all the food he can't finish. He will do you this favor: He's made a TV program of himself eating. If you want, you can watch it from your house. But you can't have his food, his house, or the car he drives around in to view his unspoiled forests and majestic purple mountains. The rest of the family has noticed that all his driving is kicking up dust, wrecking not only the edges of his property but also their less pristine backyards and even yours, which was dust to begin with. He's dammed the river to irrigate his fields, so that only a trickle reaches your place, and it's nasty. You're beginning to see that these problems are deep and deadly, that you'll be the first to starve, and the others will follow. The family takes a vote and agrees to do a handful of obvious things that will keep down the dust and clear the water—all except Fat Brother. He walks away from the table. He says God gave him good land and the right to be greedy.

The ancient Greeks adored tragic plays about families like this, and their special word for the Fat Brother act was hubris. In the town where I grew up we called it “getting all high and mighty,” and the sentence that came next usually included the words “getting knocked down to size.” For most of my life I've felt embarrassed by a facet of our national character that I would have to call prideful wastefulness. What other name can there be for our noisy, celebratory appetite for unnecessary things, and our vast carelessness regarding their manufacture and disposal? In the autumn of 2001 we faced the crisis of taking a very hard knock from the outside, and in its aftermath, as our nation grieved, every time I saw that wastefulness rear its head I felt even more ashamed. Some retailers rushed to convince us in ads printed across waving flags that it was our duty even in wartime, especially in wartime, to get out and buy those cars and shoes. We were asked not to think very much about the other side of the world, where, night after night, we were waging a costly war in a land whose people could not dream of owning cars or in some cases even shoes. For some, “wartime” became a matter of waving our pride above the waste, with slogans that didn't make sense to me: “Buy for your country” struck me as an exhortation to “erase

from your mind ,what just happened.” And the real meaning of this one I can't even guess at: “Our enemies hate us because we're free.”

I'm sorry, but I have eyes with which to see, and friends in many places. In Canada, for instance, I know people who are wicked cold in winter but otherwise in every way as free as you and me. And nobody hates Canada.

Hubris isn't just about luck or wealth, it's about throwing away food while hungry people watch. Canadians were born lucky, too, in a global sense, but they seem more modest about it, and more deeply appreciative of their land; it's impossible to imagine Canada blighting its precious wilderness areas with “mock third-world villages” for bombing practice, as our air force has done in Arizona's Cabeza Prieta Range. I wonder how countries bereft of any wild lands at all view our plans for drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the world's last immense and untouched wilderness, as we stake out our right to its plunder as we deem necessary. We must surely appear to the world as exactly what we are: a nation that organizes its economy around consuming twice as much oil as it produces, and around the profligate wastefulness of the wars and campaigns required to defend such consumption. In recent years we have defined our national interest largely in terms of the oil fields and pipelines we need to procure fuel.

In our country, we seldom question our right to burn this fuel in heavy passenger vehicles and to lead all nations in the race to pollute our planet beyond habitability; some of us, in fact, become belligerent toward anyone who dares to raise the issue. We are disinclined as a nation to assign any moral value at all to our habits of consumption. But the circle of our family is large, larger than just one nation, and as we arrive at the end of our frontiers we can't possibly be surprised that the rest of the family would have us live within our means. Safety resides, I think, on the far side of endless hunger. Imagine how it would feel to fly a flag with a leaf on it, or a bird—something living. How remarkably generous we could have appeared to the world by being the first to limit fossil-fuel emissions by ratifying the Kyoto agreements, rather than walking away from the table, as we did last summer in Bonn, leaving 178 other signatory nations to do their best for the world without any help from the world's biggest contributor to global warming. I find it simply appalling that we could have done this; I know for a fact that many, many Americans were stunned, like me, by the selfishness of that act, and can hardly bear their own complicity in it. Given our societal devotion to taking in more energy than we put out, it's ironic that our culture is so cruelly intolerant of overweight individuals. As a nation we're not just overweight (a predicament that deserves sympathy); I fear we are also, as we live and breathe, possessed of the Fat Brother mindset.

I would like to have a chance to live with reordered expectations. I would rather that my country be seen as the rich, beloved brother than the rich and piggish one. If there's a heart beating in the United States that really disagrees, I've yet to meet it. We are, by nature, a generous people. Just about every American I know who has traveled abroad and taken the time to have genuine conversations with citizens of other countries has encountered the question, as I have, "Why isn't your country as nice as you are?" I wish I knew. Maybe we're distracted by our attachment to convenience; maybe we believe the ads that tell us that material things are the key to happiness; or maybe we're too frightened to question those who routinely define our national interest for us in terms of corporate profits. Then, too, millions of Americans are so strapped by the task of keeping their kids fed and a roof over their heads that it's impossible for them to consider much of anything beyond that. But ultimately the answer must be that as a nation, we just haven't yet demanded generosity of ourselves.

But we could, and we know it. Our country possesses the resources to bring solar technology, energy independence, and sustainable living to our planet. Even in the simple realm of humanitarian assistance, the United Nations estimates that \$13 billion above current levels of aid would provide everyone in the world (including the hungry within our own borders) with basic health and nutrition. Collectively, Americans and Europeans spend \$17 billion a year on pet food. We could do much more than just feed the family of mankind as well as our cats and dogs; we could assist that family in acquiring the basic skills and tools it needs to feed itself, while maintaining the natural resources on which all life depends. Real generosity involves not only making a gift but also giving up something, and on both scores we're well situated to be the most generous nation on earth.

We like to say we already are, and it's true that American people give of their own minute proportion of the country's wealth to help victims of disasters far and wide. Our children collect pennies to buy rain forests one cubic inch at a time, but this is a widow's mite, not a national tithe. Our government's spending on foreign aid has plummeted over the last twenty years, to levels that are—to put it bluntly—the stingiest among all developed nations'. In the year 2000, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States allocated just .1 percent of its gross national product to foreign aid—or about one dime for every hundred dollars in its treasury—whereas Canada, Japan, Austria, Australia, and Germany each contributed two to three times that much. Other countries gave even more, some as much as ten times the amount we do; they view this as a contribution to the world's stability and their own peace. But our country takes a different approach to generosity: Our tradition is to forgive debt in exchange for a strategic military base, an

indentured economy, or mineral rights. We offer the hungry our magic seeds, genetically altered so the recipients must also buy our pesticides, while their sturdy native seed banks die out. At Fat Brother's house the domestic help might now and then slip out the back door with a plate of food for a neighbor, but for the record the household gives virtually nothing away. Even now, in what may be the most critical moment of our history, I fear that we seem to be telling the world we are not merciful so much as we are mighty.

In our darkest hours we may find comfort in the age-old slogan from the resistance movement, declaring that we shall not be moved. But we need to finish that sentence. Moved from where? Are we anchoring to the best of what we've believed in, throughout our history, or merely to an angry new mode of self-preservation? The American moral high ground can't possibly be an isolated mountaintop from which we refuse to learn anything at all to protect ourselves from monstrous losses. It is critical to distinguish here between innocence and naiveté: The innocent do not deserve to be violated, but only the naive refuse to think about the origins of violence. A nation that seems to believe so powerfully in retaliation cannot flatly refuse to look at the world in terms of cause and effect. The rage and fury of this world have not notably lashed out at Canada (the nation that takes best care of its citizens), or Finland (the most literate), or Brazil or Costa Rica (among the most biodiverse). Neither have they tried to strike down our redwood forests or our fields of waving grain. Striving to cut us most deeply, they felled the towers that seemed to claim we buy and sell the world.

We don't own the world, as it turns out. Flight attendants and bankers, mothers and sons were ripped from us as proof, and thousands of families must now spend whole lifetimes reassembling themselves after shattering loss. The rest of us have lowered our flags in grief on their behalf. I believe we could do the same for the 35,600 of the world's children who also died on September 11 from conditions of starvation, and extend our hearts to the fathers and mothers who lost them.

This seems a reasonable time to search our souls for some corner where humility resides. Our nation behaves in some ways that bring joy to the world, and in others that make people angry. Not all of those people are heartless enough to kill us for it, or fanatical enough to die in the effort, but some inevitably will be—more and more, as desperation spreads. Wars of endless retaliation kill not only people but also the systems that grow food, deliver clean water, and heal the sick; they destroy beauty, they extinguish species, they increase desperation.

I wish our national anthem were not the one about the bombs bursting in air, but the one about purple mountain majesties and amber waves of grain. It's easier to sing and closer to the heart of what we really have to sing about. A land as broad and green as ours demands of us thanksgiving and a certain breadth of spirit. It invites us to invest our hearts most deeply in invulnerable majesties that can never be brought down in a stroke of anger. If we can agree on anything in difficult times, it must be that we have the resources to behave more generously than we do, and that we are brave enough to rise from the ashes of loss as better citizens of the world than we have ever been. We've inherited the grace of the Grand Canyon, the mystery of the Everglades, the fertility of an Iowa plain—we could crown this good with brotherhood. What a vast inheritance for our children that would be, if we were to become a nation humble before our rich birthright, whose graciousness makes us beloved.