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Meditations at Spring's End: Snow Leopards, Pope Francis and Earl-Grey MarTEAnis

"The farmers were here!" my daughter squeals from our back door.

We come running from various corners of the house, huddling around the unexpected box from the farm, waiting for it to reveal its treasures. Food stripped down to its elements: the A and the B and the C. Bags of whole wheat flour and cornmeal, turnips, carrots, green grass I think must be chives, glass jars of buttermilk, yoghurt and raw milk, ground beef wrapped in brown paper, eggs, beets, sauerkraut, butter, onions, purple potatoes, lamb chops, soap. And a whole chicken.



Instantly, our New York City apartment smells of earth and grass and blood and the homemade soap tied with string. How my kids' little noses fondle that soap. I am instantly returned to the day our piano arrived a few years ago. The children stared at it with silent anticipation, as if they might catch it breathe. They watched the tuner for two straight hours, as he exposed the guts of the thing and brought it to life. A gust of new energy blew through the house, a spark of life that has remained ever since.

According to my friends Kristin and Mark Kimball, the peepers have sung; the time for spring planting is upon us. The Kimballs founded [Essex Farm](#), an organic, horse-powered community farm in upstate New York, and they have delivered us a surprise – their own kind of music in a carefully-packed brown box. I glance again at one of my favorite passages in Kristin's glorious, inspiring memoir, *The Dirty Life*, which chronicles the Kimballs' first year of falling in love and building a farm:

As much as you transform the land by farming, farming transforms you. It seeps into your skin along with the dirt that abides permanently in the creases of your thickened hands ... A farm asks, and if you don't give enough, the primordial forces of death and wildness will overrun you. So naturally you give, and then you give some more, and then you give to the point of breaking, and then and only then it gives back, so bountifully it overfills not

only your root cellar but also that parched and weedy little patch we call the soul.

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That night, I continue reading Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* – a National Book Award winner I'd started after hearing of its author's death this April. There is something poignant about reading a newly-deceased author's work – a hyper-awareness that we keep him alive by reading the words he wrote. Some day, I count on some stranger to do the same for me. Matthiessen's words exhale their wisdom into my brain and beg it to bear fruit. I find myself longing to write like him, to fuse his voice with mine.



After his wife died of cancer in the 1970s, Matthiessen headed off on a pilgrimage to Nepal, where he hiked the Himalayan mountains in search of blue sheep and the rare snow leopard. He and his wife had begun a spiritual journey in Zen Buddhism together, and he hoped to continue their quest by seeking enlightenment from the Lama of Shey at the shrine on Crystal Mountain. *The Snow Leopard* is the diary of his journey.

Matthiessen pushed himself to the limits, both physically and spiritually, on the trip – hiking treacherous paths for days on end, with little food or rest, enduring frigid temperatures and deep snows with nothing but his daily meditation, a worn-out tent, a sleeping bag, a rather silent friend and a rag-tag team of Sherpas. At the trek's most dangerous point, when Matthiessen felt great fear, he realized, "It helps to pay minute attention to details—a shard of rose quartz, a cinnamon fern with spores, a companionable mound of pony dung. When one pays attention to the present, there is great pleasure in awareness of small things."

His book is full of perfect, careful observations of the landscape, the local people, his own moods and self-doubts, and the wildlife. ("An owl hoots, deep in the black needles.") Matthiessen shares what he knows of Buddhism. ("The Universe itself is the scripture of Zen, for which religion is no more and no less than the apprehension of the infinite in every moment.") His book does not come to some final, grand conclusion. There is no snow leopard to be found. The book is instead a quiet one, and this quiet suits my soul – my soul that is still perching on a branch after this long winter, awaiting its moment to unfurl.

My husband and I share an Earl Grey MarTEAni, a wonderful concoction invented by Audrey Saunders of Pegu Club, which my husband has copied to perfection. The white of an Essex Farm egg lends the cocktail its frothy body. Tonight, the froth perfectly unites and

engages the disparate ingredients inside our triangle of a glass: the Earl Grey of morning infused into the gin of night, the tart of the lemon into the sweet of the simple syrup.



I read beside my husband on the couch while he watches “McConkey,” a documentary about Shane McConkey, the skier who longed to fly. McConkey painted curves down the mountains with his skis; long, fleeting tracks that draw me from my book with their beauty, with the things they seem to understand that I do not. I am transfixed as he takes to the sky – looping big arcs before engaging a parachute charged with saving his life. We watch him BASE jump all around the world, peak after peak, line after line, in love with the air around him. We watch him embrace, balls-out, the cathartic heights and the inevitable plummets of life. We watch his three-year-old ski to him, making pizza pies with her little skis; we watch him dance with his wife, his arms wrapped around her completely. And we watch him fall to his death in the Dolomites. Equipment failure. It takes less than ten seconds for him to reach the ground. He was thirty-nine.

Matthiessen speaks often of the unity in all things; he explains how we all “commingle in a common pulse of being.” As I continue reading, I hear McConkey’s voice narrating *The Snow Leopard* to me:

Upon the path, in the glint of mica and odd shining stones, lies the yellow and gray-blue feather of an unknown bird. And there comes a piercing intuition, by no means understood, that in this feather on the silver path, this rhythm of wood and leather sounds, breath, sun and wind, and rush of river, in a landscape without past or future time—in this instant, in all instants, transience and eternity, death and life are one.

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My mother uses the Kimball’s buttermilk to make pancakes. They are tarter than our usual fare, thinner, more like crepes. They taste fresh, like lemons, and we top them with mounds of blueberries. The syrup tapped from Essex trees runs watery and sweet.

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There are no mountains to climb here in New York, but McConkey and Matthiessen, Mark and Kristin, have made me long to find earth spirit, to commune with it, whatever that means. I head to the only available temple. Central Park on a warm, sunny day.

As soon as I “summit” the steps into the reservoir, the leaves turn over, exposing the distinct lime color of their undersides. The sky opens. Sun turns to cloud. And heavy, determined drops begin to fall. A surprise shower that sends people running for the park edges, under the canopies of trees. Umbrellas of the prepared rise.

It is exhilarating, this rain. In thirty seconds, I am soaked. I swear off umbrellas forever more. This is too good. I run faster, racing to meet the drops. I taste them on my lips; I feel them find friendship with the tears in my eyes. The clouds obscure everything in the distance – the man-made towers, the hum of traffic – leaving only the reservoir, only the Norway maples and fragrant lindens, only my fellow runners who look flushed and happy.

The wind arrives. A wind of great, playful gusts. It makes jokes with the umbrellas, and brings fallen Yoshino cherry blossoms back into the air, to swirl and dance once more.

I recognize this wind immediately. It is the same that swept down from the statues of the apostles on St. Peter’s Square during the Pope’s weekly audience back in February when I was there for a family wedding. I’d barely stepped inside a Catholic church in at least a decade, and yet somehow, I found myself a stone’s throw from Pope Francis, marveling at the aura around him just like everyone else. The Italians and tourists and pilgrims, clutching rosaries and enormous Lucite crosses to be blessed, the old ladies crying into their cellphones, *E il Papa! Il Papa!*, the people in wheelchairs and babies wrapped in blankets awaiting the singular touch from the newly anointed Father. In that moment, we were all one, all longing to connect to something greater, to BASE jump our souls into enlightenment.

Before the Pope spoke, the wind, so whimsical and commanding, lifted the *zucchetto* from his head. Of many beautiful moments in Rome, this was my favorite. The simple white cap sailed through the air, suspended for a breath, before falling to the ground on St. Peter’s square. The Pope made no note of its going. He just let it free, without so much as flinch, not even a glance in the cap’s direction. He seemed to have no care for such human trappings, and was just taking things in – God descending upon the crowds before him perhaps. And, yet, that cap flying off his head was distinctly human. It could have happened to any of us.

I leap over a puddle in my Nikes and think of the Lama of Shey. When Matthiessen first met him, he was so human that the writer didn’t even recognize the lama in him. He saw only a “cripple in strange rags of leather,” “curing a goat hide in a yellow mix of goat brains and rancid yak butter.” Imagine his surprise, much later, when someone informed him this cripple was the very spiritual leader he’d hiked mountains to find.

The wind dies down as I near the park exit. I can no longer pick up the scent of the early blooms; the air holds its gifts more furtively. The rain has stopped and the sun emerges again. I am sorry for its return, for its directness. A moment feels lost forever, and I am aware of the passing of time, of the ache in my bad knee.

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We make a parsnip mash – scrubbing vegetables of their dirt, shaving their outer layer and steaming them until they are soft and pliable. We puree them in the blender to work out the kinks. We add a bit of farm butter – daffodil yellow and slightly salty. The kids want nothing to do with them. But I have rarely tasted anything so fine. I can only guess at what the earth contains in the parsnip fields of Essex Farm, but whatever it is, its flavor holds the ancient. I roll it on my tongue and think of Matthiessen’s trip: “There are no roads west of Pokhara, which is the last outpost of the modern world; in one day’s walk we are a century away.” I eat the leftovers straight from the pot before doing the dishes, until my stomach bursts with parsnip, until I am a century away.

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For Mother’s Day, we take the kids to the top of Kent Falls. At points along the climb, the kids lean a little too far over the rocks, balance above the water, then ask what would happen if they were to fall in. Would they die? We send rocks and sticks over the edge instead and watch them disappear into all that rushing, rushing. My son complains the hike isn’t rugged enough. He doesn’t care for the man-made steps and much prefers the hike down the other side of the falls, through the woods. We must climb over an enormous fallen tree, and I land deep in springtime mud. My fall delights the children.

I tell them about the cairns throughout the Himalayas – the prayer walls where travelers place their own stones, giving thanks for their safe arrival to that spot. The children love the idea. They pick up rocks and leave them in piles all over the trail. It is a wonderful excuse to bring some home too, to pile at our own front door. The stones sit instead on my kitchen counter for days, as I wonder how wrong it would be to throw them in the trash. Instead, I make a plan to reunite them with their long-lost kin in Central Park, their brothers from another mother.

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The lamb chops require nothing but a little salt and pepper. A swish of olive oil. They bake quickly and we relish them, wishing for more. The purple of the potatoes deepens after cooking, a purple I’ve never seen before but imagine I might find in a night sky some day.

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My six-year-old and I read *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett before bed. She heard it first at school and is so taken with it that she asks me to read the whole novel again. As you may remember, Mary and Colin, the book's main characters, are two sickly, lonely children who grow without parental love, under the tutelage of servants who spoil them just to stop their cries. They discover a secret abandoned garden as winter turns to spring. They learn to dig and pull weeds and plant seeds and coax the soil to yield roses, delphiniums and columbines. The very act of nurturing a garden causes them to grow healthy, strong and kind. They learn to love and be less selfish. The fresh air brings color to their cheeks and warmth to their hearts. Colin exclaims:

‘When Mary found this garden it looked quite dead ... Then something began pushing things up out of the soil and making things out of nothing ... What is it? ... It’s something. It can’t be nothing! I don’t know its name so I call it Magic ... Sometimes ... I’ve looked up through the trees at the sky and I have had a strange feeling of being happy as if something were pushing and drawing in my chest and making me breathe fast. Magic is always pushing and drawing and making things out of nothing. Everything is made out of Magic, leaves and trees, flowers and birds, badgers and foxes and squirrels and people. So it must be all around us. In this garden—in all the places.’

My daughter has no grown-up cynicism; she believes in this magic completely. We are both swept up in it, and I believe it’s in me too.

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A week after Kent Falls, my son gets the rugged hike he wanted. His book club goes to Bear Mountain in Harriman State Park on a father-son adventure. Each boy has picked a poem about nature to read on a suitable cliff. The hike is harder than anyone expected, and the boys feel the satisfaction of having tested themselves. They sweat and talk of the naps they will take later.

I am impressed that the fathers succeed in getting the boys to read their verses. It requires some coaxing, and attention is not always paid. But each boy reads out loud, and that is something. My son has picked the Carl Sandburg poem, “**Wilderness**”:

There is a wolf in me ... fangs pointed for tearing gashes ... a red tongue for raw meat ... and the hot lapping of blood – I keep this wolf because the wilderness gave it to me and the wilderness will not let it go.

On the way down, the boys find a plump, green caterpillar. They smush the lovely, little fellow, breaking him in two. They watch his guts ooze out. For a long stretch, they debate whether this taking of caterpillar life was right or wrong. They wonder why they did it. Sides are taken. They feel the wolves inside them.

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In a discussion of how all religions meet in common points, Matthiessen explains that “As in the great religions of the East, the native American makes small distinction between religious activity and the acts of every day life: the religious ceremony is life itself.”

Thinking of this, I chop two heads of cabbage in half – one red, the other white. I show their insides to my children, our fingers tracing their curving pathways, like veins. “Can you believe this intricate pattern of leaf and color emerged from a tiny seed?” I ask. “Feel how heavy it is now, how solid.” They say they won’t eat it, and I chide them like my mother would have done and I’d sworn I’d never do, asking them to remember all the work that went into these two heads of cabbage, all the soil and sunlight and rain and care upon harvest and cleaning and boxing and traveling that Essex Farm undertook just to feed us tonight.

They look at their dad with pleading eyes, “How long are we going to have to hear about this farm stuff? We get it. Blah, blah, blah.”

Still, I keep shredding, making long, thin ribbons that I spread across the counter over kitchen towels to dry. I have always loved homemade coleslaw, and I use Ina Garten’s recipe this time. Short on mayo, long on celery seed. It is delicious and crunchy.

I think how, this spring, everything relates. I place one of the stones from Kent Falls beside our bowl of cabbage, giving thanks for having made it to this moment, this infinity.

Photograph courtesy of Essex Farm.

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