

*Looking for God's
Infinite Plan
in the Footprints
of Wolves*



BY KATHLEEN STOCKING

There's a faint bluish cast to the day, a Delft blue, like the blue of the sky in Vermeer's paintings, blue like moonlight, but in the day.

In my mind I see footprints through the snow, out across the ice to the island. I think they are wolf tracks, but how would I know? My mind works, most days, by what poet Walt Whitman calls "the law of divine indirections."

The first wolf I ever saw was in the line outside the Vermeer exhibit in Washington, D. C., in 1996, the boon companion of a male scientist. The man tells me, as we stand in line at 5 a.m., that once he'd had to go on a research expedition and left her with his mother and his companion stopped eating while he was gone and was near death when he came home. He never left her again.

We don't understand love, except to know that it's real. It seems to be the mysterious core of us. But what is its purpose?

The Icelandic band, Sigur Rós (pronounced sigroz), has an unusual sound that, to me, calls up snow. There's a song, Svefn-g-englar (pronounced shep-keeenglash), Sleep Walking Angels, or Angels of Sleep. The music is ethereal. The band is very Reykjavik. They sing and the snow falls and I dream of wolves.

When Ernest Hemingway was in the First World War and his motorcycle was blown up – and he lived – he told his first wife, Hadley, that he felt that he had died but was still alive. I have felt that. My car was totaled in an accident and I lived, but I felt like I was two people, not schizophrenic, just like I was me and also outside of me, watching me. There's a word for this: post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD.

Experiencing two worlds at once is a theme in a new novel by Karl Knusgaard and in another one by Joy Harrow where a character asks, "Do you ever feel that you have died

and are walking among those who might have died as well but aren't telling?" Just when you think you're the only one who's experiencing something, you find out other people are feeling the same thing. It's surely got something to do with COVID.

We are a species in crisis. We have reached a tipping point. We are living in what the Greeks called, *kairos*, the right time for a metamorphosis of the gods, according to Carl Jung who said, "This peculiarity of our time, which is certainly not of our conscious choosing, is the expression of the unconscious man within us who is changing. Coming generations will have to take account of this momentous transformation if humanity is not to destroy itself through the might of its own technology and science." But he said this in 1958 and according to philosopher and mythologist, Mircea Eliade, the end of the world has been predicted endlessly throughout history.

Here's another thought: what if we have lived, not just this lifetime, but millions since the earth began? Was I a leaf

in a past life? What if, and here's the central question, we are truly part of everything that lives? Is it possible that there is no boundary between us and the world? Is this all about a new realization of the vastness of our responsibilities? Are we responsible for everything?

When times are hard, like during a plague, sometimes people regress. I'm in Oryana West one day, talking to Phil Deering, an old grade school classmate. I ask Phil if he remembers science. He laughs. "Mr. Bolton's class. I loved science." We wonder what Mr. Bolton would think of people taking horse de-wormer to protect them against the COVID. Phil says he has a small hobby farm and he can't get horse de-wormer for his animals. "Now they're hiding it behind the counter," he says, "So people who need it for their animals can still get it."

It's normal to try to go back toward something familiar when we're in uncertain times. If what is happening is too horrible to face, we want to believe anything but the evidence in front of us. We insist that we can remain as we always were even when we are facing the unknown and can

feel ourselves separating from what we had always believed to be real. Joan Didion, in her book, “The Year of Magical Thinking,” about her husband’s death, writes, “There was a level on which I believed that what had happened remained reversible.”

COVID has not so much changed our sense of ourselves, as revealed it. We are social creatures. We love nature. These things are undeniable. The proof is everywhere. It’s visible.

Everywhere I look I see people standing out on loading docks during their fifteen-minute break, looking at their cell-phones, deeply engaged with screen messages indicating someone cares. You see them standing on street corners – housewives, businessmen, teenagers, office workers – waiting for the light to change, checking their messages.

I see the cars at the trailheads. Every hiking trail in Michigan during COVID had a bunch of cars parked at the trailhead. We cannot live, or we do not want to live, without the out-of-doors.

Jane Goodall, the woman who worked with the apes,

was recently profiled somewhere, maybe in Time or Newsweek. There's a photo. She looks old, but still beautiful. She's sitting outdoors, maybe on a rock, staring into the middle distance, and the photo caption is, "When you are alone, you are closer to nature." We love the living world around us. We need to see it. We do not want to stay in our sterile man-made homes or our cars. We want to see squirrels. We want to see sunlight in shafts through the pines.

E. O. Wilson, a famous Harvard scientist, believes human beings have evolved not just longer legs so we can run down our prey, and a larynx that is somewhat different from those of apes so we can talk, but we have evolved to love the out-of-doors, a living world. "Our deepest needs stem from ancient and still poorly understood biological adaptations . . . Among these is the rich, natural pleasure that comes from being surrounded by living organisms . . . a diversity of plants and animals that live in gardens, woodlots, zoos, around the home and in the wilderness." Wilson, now in his nineties, was once a little boy growing up at the

edge of an Alabama swamp. He wanted to understand the swamp. He became a scientist. "To explore and affiliate with life (out-of-doors) is a deep and complicated process in mental development. Nature is part of us, and we are part of nature."

This notion of our oneness with nature came slowly to Wilson over his years studying biology, but it's an idea that's been around a while. A priest on the shores of the Adriatic, the mystic Symeon, back in 949, more than a thousand years ago, wrote, "O Light, that none can name . . . how do you mingle yourself with the grass?" Among the Māori in New Zealand, a Māori woman and professor, Dr. Kelly Tikao, of Ngai Tahu, Ngati Manoe and Waitaha ancestry, says, "When you believe the land is yourself, the last thing you want to do is kill it."

In other words, the soul of the lake and your soul are the same. Eat a fish, with gratitude. Be a fish, with gratitude. You are the universe and the universe is you. Don't worry. Everything is what it's meant to be, even if you don't under-

stand it. There's mystery in beauty, in a crescent moon, in an old man on the bus, or a child fascinated by an ant. Focus on that.

Intuition is the key to creating and discovering new knowledge, according to Barry Lopez, author of "Of Wolves and Men." He and his wife raised wolf pups (but advise against it for practical and moral reasons), and studied wolves in the wild. "We are going to have to find a way," Lopez writes, "not necessarily to esteem, but to not despise intuition in the scientific process." And he believes that natural scientist Charles Darwin, physicist Albert Einstein, and astronomer Johannes Kepler would agree. The smartest people are the least reductive.

We think we are like wolves. And we are, in some ways. Our ability to love and nurture our offspring. Our ability to fight whatever we think is going to harm us or our families. But we are way different, too. We live about 10 times as long. "Humans have about 33,000 genes [Wikipedia gives 25,000-20,000 genes, but Fisher studied this and I'm going with her

number.],” according to Helen Fisher, an anthropologist at Rutgers University, “about a third of them construct and maintain brain function. And although we don’t have many more genes than apes, just a few hundred more can mean a qualitative difference in how the brain operates because genes interact, exponentially increasing the number of combinations.”

And the same is true for human beings, not just within the individual mind of each person, but as a group: we share information. We communicate with words. Developing the ability to talk happened fairly recently in human evolution and it took a long time. We may have started talking as recently as 50,000 years, maybe 200,000 years ago, maybe a few million years ago; estimates vary wildly – and knowledge was cumulative, slowly accreting. Symbolic language and jewelry, it’s speculated, probably came along about the same time because both involve metaphors, letting something stand-in for something else to indicate something beyond the image, the difference being that we have found the

jewelry because it's substantive and we can only guess about the unsubstantial. The sounds, we think, will never be found (but I wouldn't rule it out). About 6,000 years ago, we got writing – with sharp sticks on wet clay – then maybe 5,000 years ago, books made of vellum, paper, then 700 years ago, the printing press, then 50 years ago the Internet, then 30 years ago, cell phones. And through all of that, our brains, inside our skulls, changing and growing and developing, too.

We have minds that go everywhere. Backward. Forward. We calculate and compare. We strategize. We think about thinking. It's called metacognition: thinking about thinking. No other animal, as far as we know, does that. That's why wolves are innocent in a way people cannot be: they do not, we feel, reflect.

We did not always have the capacity for self-reflection. Long ago, the two sides of our brain, our bicameral mind, were not connected. The two sides, even today, don't join until puberty – which is why juveniles can't be tried as

adults: it takes both sides of the mind to weigh right and wrong. Michael Gazzaniga's book, "Tales from Both Sides of the Brain," ponders this.

In "The Origin of Consciousness and the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind," Julian Jaynes writes that the maddening crowds in the Bible, storming the gates of the city, screaming that God told them to do something or other, were people where the two sides of the mind were not connected. His analysis of the Bible, the Old Testament, leads him not only to place the origin of consciousness 2,000 years before Christ, but also to hypothesize the existence of an older non-conscious mentality that he calls the bicameral mind, referring to the brain's two hemispheres. These people, according to Jaynes, believed some of the voices they heard were coming from a supernatural place but it was just the other side of their head. Eventually, most of those people died out; today there are vestiges of this in schizophrenics and other varieties of madmen, sometimes people who are susceptible to strong leaders because their own ability to think is not fully

developed.

The Dutch writer and thinker, Rutger Bregman, has a dense huge book that basically says people are a lot nicer than we've always assumed. If Darwin's theory of evolution and ideas about survival of the fittest have seemed at times to give us an excuse for unbridled selfishness – *but I'm just trying to survive here, folks, don't blame me* – then Bregman has posited that human nature is as biologically geared to cooperation and kindness as competition and war.

Hundreds of years ago in China, the poet Tu Fu wandered in the mountains, worried about the Mongol hoards, conscription, the starving children, his wife's too-thin dress and her sobs as he was leaving to fight the barbarians on the border, "Nothing in ten thousand kingdoms but war." But it's his love for his wife and children that one remembers.

I'm interested in evolution, but not the usual kind, about bones and bodies. I'm interested in our moral and spiritual evolution and our ability to love, like wolves, which influences our brain's development. "We've become a society,"

Dr. Suzanne O'Sullivan explains in "The Sleeping Beauties," her new book, "that privileges biology without understanding the interconnected relationships between the body, the brain and the society that surrounds us."

We learn that there are "mirror neurons" inside our heads that are activated by love in infancy and throughout our lives. When children are left in orphanages and not picked up and held and talked to by other human beings, they fail to develop mentally and even physically. Now with DNA there's talk of testing people to see if they have genes for cancer or, maybe, like Einstein, genes for math that will help us solve difficult equations, and then designing babies so they don't have cancer genes and they do have math genius genes. Further, we can develop artificial intelligence and design robots that can do chess better than people can. Yes, that's all possible, but what about the ability to love?

"If you are one of the majority of infants born to a loving home, a consistent, nurturing caregiver – say a mother or a father – will be present and repeatedly meet your needs.

Time and again, one or both parents will come when you cry and soothe you when you're hungry, cold, or scared," writes Bruce Perry and Maia Szalavitz in "The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog". "As your brain develops these loving caregivers provide the template that you use for human relationships. Attachment, then, is a memory template for human-to-human bonds. This template serves as your primary world view on human relationships. It is profoundly influenced by whether you experience kind, attuned parenting or whether you receive inconsistent, frequently disrupted, abusive or neglectful care."

Throughout COVID, I read about wolves. Wolves in myths. Wolves becoming extinct. The wolf pack on Isle Royale. The wolves reintroduced to the Rocky Mountains. The female wolf written about in the Smithsonian magazine who traveled 3,000 miles to find a mate; she had a chip in her, so that's how they knew how much territory she'd covered.

"We are alone. The animals are gone," a character in

Charlotte McConaghy's "Migrations" says as she stands looking out onto the icebergs in the Arctic, scanning the sky for storm petrels. It's fiction about the extinction of species. But in reality, it's not fiction at all. We can imagine a world without anything but us because scientists estimate that 150-200 species of plant, insect, bird and mammal become extinct every 24 hours.

There are too many people on the planet. We are destroying the life around us, the living earth, in order to stay alive, a project of increasingly diminishing returns. Our culture values ownership of material things and so we narcissistically name things after ourselves, even stars which we can't literally own but because we've named it after ourselves, we feel we do. Louise Erdrich, the Native American writer, has a character in one of her books who says, "The Chimookman [white people] are naming everything after themselves so we don't know what anything is anymore."

We are also, at the same time, simulating life because we have no time for real life. The simulation started with TV in

the 1950s, then went to cell phones, then with the virus, exploded into Zoom. We are working too many hours and we are letting the TV and the video games raise our children. We are all starved for reality. We want to see real trees, not simulations. We are hungry for human touch, too, not just pictures on a screen.

Wolves nurture and teach their pups, just like people do. They play with them. They teach them how to hunt. People and wolves hooked up sometime long ago and wolves became dogs.

Look at the body language of your family dog someday. See how your dog will paw the ground as an invitation to play, roll on its back to show submission, wave its tail in greeting, and circle around, trying to find the right place to lie down, all the while lining up with the earth's magnetic field. I had a big, white wolf-dog once; he would put his head on the edge of the bed, near my pillow, and look into my eyes; slowly I would close my eyes, and he would breathe with me when I was falling asleep. I've heard of other wolf pets doing this.

Wolves sit deep in the human subconscious. Some men want to kill them, to have that trophy. Others want to study them because in wolves' ways of working together and loving each other, they are like us. They live and die for each other.

Death. Five million people have died from the coronavirus. In "Journal of the Plague Year," from the 1600s, Daniel Defoe writes about the carts coming through the streets to collect the dead, the sound of the huge wooden cart wheels on the cobblestone road, eerily echoing through the empty town; the cartman, who one is surprised to realize is somehow alive, but who has aspects of something unreal, like a creature from another world, calling out, in a ringing, sonorous voice, "Bring out your dead." The sweetish smell of rotting flesh fills one's nostrils and clings to one's clothing, inescapable, and, still, one cannot complain because things are so much worse for others. Defoe writes about "the brutal courage of the poor" and how they take the worst jobs, eagerly, to feed their families and do not complain.

My friend's mother died. A schoolmate's wife died. Five million. We all know someone. But it isn't just the deaths from the pandemic. It's the pilot who is now driving a bus. It's the single mother of three who had a stroke and had to put her children in foster care and is now herself in adult foster care. It's the migrants and their children in the forests of Belarus, freezing. It's the children in Yemen, starving. It's the Haitians and their children drowning in the river. It's the wildfires, the droughts, the floods, the famines.

You think you're reading Revelations but it's the daily newspaper. We are all going through all the stages of grief all the time: shock, anger, depression, denial, bargaining, acceptance. Not always in that order, but always in waves. That's how grief comes. In waves. Everyone describes grief this way, as coming in waves.

So that's the water in my grieving mind's image, frozen, and the tracks will lead to land. In Native American mythology, in some of the tribes, the wolves are a brother to man. In other groups, ancient ones, the wolves were the link between

life and death. In the European legends, the wolf was the one Little Red Riding Hood needed to fear.

“This is the time for reflection,” Chilean author Isabel Allende writes during COVID, and asks rhetorically, “What kind of world do we want?” And then she answers her own question, “We want a world of beauty, we want a civilization based on mutual respect, and respect for other species and for nature. We want the kind of world where peace, empathy, decency, truth, and compassion, prevail. Above all, we want a joyful world. Together we can achieve it.”

One rainy evening a friend and I escape the plague. We drive to Interlochen and find our way through the dripping pines to Interlochen’s Dendrinos Chapel, the one with all the organ pipes. The conductor is lively, moving like an athlete, mostly his back to us, firing up his singers. The students on the stage are in formal black choir attire, all different, everything from evening wear to shorts over tights, and black masks. How can they sing in masks? They do. Their youth alone is a song. They sing “Heaven Unfolding,” and “Our

Light in Our Night,” and “Veni Sancte Spiritus,” songs to give us hope. Hope is a form of love.

“It is an unnameable boon love hauls down, that people rightly prize as the best of life,” Annie Dillard writes in a story set in the dunes of the Atlantic Ocean in winter. “Not only will a cave-dwelling pair cull food and kill so kids thrive, but their feeling for each other, not to mention for the kids, brings something beyond food people need.” We are smarter because someone loves us and takes care of us, like wolves, a little. But we live longer.

Love makes the brain work better. All those endorphins. All those neurons. Or whatever is up in there. But you don’t need to understand the science to know that love is good, all kinds: brotherly love, God’s love, romantic love, love of beauty. Out of love we make music, make families, make planes, make art, make poetry, make meaning, make what is best about us.
