
Lessons of a Starry Night

A RACHEL CARSON ESSAY TEACHES A NEW MOTHER HOW TO
IMBUE HER GROWING CHILD WITH AN AWE FOR NATURE

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A FEW MONTHS AFTER MY SON was born in August 2009, I read Rachel Carson's essay "The Sense of Wonder." Written in 1956 and published in *Woman's Home Companion* magazine in July of that year, the essay offered suggestions for fostering connections between children and nature, something I hoped to do with my son, and I looked forward to hearing more from a woman and writer I so admired. Carson never had any children of her own, but in "The Sense of Wonder" she shares memories of time spent with her young nephew: a nighttime visit to the ocean, a rainy walk in the woods, listening to soft whispers of wind and insects. She designed the work to be a kind of instruction manual for parents, assuring them that even if they didn't know the difference between a sandpiper and a plover, they could work to instill an appreciation for nature in their child. As with most of her writing, a discomfort lingers just beneath the surface, a warning. I hadn't expected a sunny children's story, but the darkness was unsettling.

According to Carson's essay, "A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood." At the time I read these words, my family was splitting our life between Manhattan and rural northeastern Pennsylvania, and in the beginning years of making a home in the country, I'd felt the natural instinct and awareness Carson talks about slowly return to me. Our small 1860s farmhouse is in the middle

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of hundreds of undeveloped acres full of soft hemlock forests and ferns, rambling rock walls and thorny wild roses, nut-brown grouse and barn swallows. During the 10 years I'd lived in the city full-time, my life was all dark angles, hard surfaces, sharp shadows. But after a few days in the country, it was as though my brain snapped open and color flooded in—the shock of the shimmering gold heads of the skinny poplars in the pasture out back, the soft, salmony newts with their purple, diamond-studded backs darting through the leaves, the electric lime of the new grass under the last of the melting snow all arriving in a magnificent sensory rush.

The winter I was pregnant, I marched on fresh snow around our front field in my boots and heavy coat while my husband pattered in the barn, the large sliding door cinched open, the first floorboards dusted white. I was just big enough for my stomach to get in the way of things, grazing the steering wheel or the edge of the washing machine as I bent in to pull out a load of clothes. I missed my body, or rather, I missed being certain of my body, of where it began and ended. It no longer moved as quickly as I commanded. I tromped around, feeling fidgety, and finally flung myself onto my back into the snow.

I felt the cold on my neck and thighs and watched the gray sky, clouds moving fast. From my spot in front of the barn I stared into the branches of a cherry tree arching over me, the frozen buds enclosed in ice. I shut my eyes and let the hard metallic smell of the snow into my lungs. When the wind blew, a sound like pencils snapping echoed through the air, the tree cracking its thin frozen shell.

After a while, I could hear my husband tamping ice, then smelled the sawdust as

he spread handfuls of the curled yellow shavings out near my car so I wouldn't slip. I placed my hand on my stomach and imagined I could feel the heat of my belly through my thick coat, a small furnace working hard. I thought of things I hadn't thought of for a very long time, like igloos and hot chocolate, mittens linked together with a string, the magic of snowflakes and icicles. For so long, winter had just been something to shovel out or drive through. Sinking down into the hillside, I remembered how, as a child, those hours playing in the snow felt unwavering and enchanted, as if winter would last forever, time suspended and caught in a snow globe. I looked forward to returning to this time through my own child's eyes.

In her essay, Carson suggests, "Exploring nature with your child is largely a matter of becoming receptive to what lies all around you. It is learning again to use your eyes, ears, nostrils and finger tips, opening up the disused channels of sensory impression." Pregnancy is a good exercise for this state of hyperawareness. When a craving was satisfied—the tart squirt of a wedge of grapefruit or a mouthful of bitter arugula—I felt as if I'd doused a fire. I could smell everything: a student's coffee from across the classroom, the spit of beer left in the bottom of a can in the recycling bucket, the first flowering of milkweed on the hill. I felt as though I had both my son's and my own senses coursing through my body.

The morning of his birth, I sat in the bathtub and traced the knob of his elbow beneath my stretched skin. Understanding that today would be the day I'd get to see that elbow, I began to mourn his absence within me. Never again would we be so close, so safe. And yet, even after our cord was cut, we'd remain tethered. What Carson felt between her own fingertips and nature, the opening of that disused channel of sensory impression, was the same. A connectedness that exists whether we want it to or not, even if we've lost our ability to see it.

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WHEN MY SON WAS FIVE MONTHS OLD, my car hit a patch of ice not far from our house. It was early January and the first day that snow wasn't falling after a long stretch of storms. The sun was bright and the sky blue, but as I rounded a corner between a pasture and bog, I came upon a section of road where snow had drifted over, hiding a slick scrim of ice on the blacktop. I felt the back tires go out first, a horse losing her hind legs. I turned the steering wheel, thought I'd come out of it. But then the car spun and I was backwards until the driver's side hit the bank of snow on the edge of the road and I felt the car go over. I thought to myself, "So, *this* is happening." I gripped the steering wheel hard and closed my eyes as the car rolled and rolled and rolled.

The first thing I heard was silence. The first thing I smelled was the woods. I opened my eyes and slowly understood that I was hanging upside down by the strap of my seatbelt. My arms were still locked straight out in front of me, hands still gripping the

steering wheel. The sharp trunk of an evergreen had broken through the windshield and nearly impaled the passenger seat beside me. The loamy smell of sap was thick in the air, and I heard the crack of thin ice breaking, the sound of a winter walk through the woods, boots crunching through the frozen mud of a trail. I looked above (below?) my head and saw the moon roof, still shattering, spidery breaks crisscrossing the glass, opening to the darkness of the ground.

When I finally released my belt and crawled out the back of the car, pushing aside my son's empty car seat dangling limply upside down, I stumbled out into the snow. Minutes had passed—maybe five? 15?—and no one had arrived. No other cars were on the road when I careened off, and no other cars had gone by since. I took a few steps through the deep snow, my legs heavy, my head cloudy and off-balance, and fell into a drift. I stayed there for a moment and went through a checklist: legs? arms? I seemed fuzzy, but fine. My glasses were still on my nose—not even a scratch. The top of my head ached where I'd smashed into the metal roof again and again as I rolled, my body bouncing up and down like a pogo stick, but when I reached up I was surprised to feel no blood there, only the soft tassel of my hat. The wind blew over me, and I watched the top of a nearby pine push slowly to the side. The silence, the smell of the pines and the snow, the deep dark green against the bright white; everything seemed amplified, preternatural.

I reflexively placed my hands on my stomach, but the flatness there was quiet as the wind through the pasture. My son was home, a few miles away; I'd left his father with a kit to make a mold of the baby's feet and hands, a craft project while I spent the afternoon with a local library reading group. This was the first time I had been in the car without my son, one of the first times I'd even driven since his birth.

Later, at the hospital, I lay on a bed for hours until the MRI machine was free. My husband and son were in the waiting room. Mind swimming, breasts swelling with milk, I wondered how much time had passed, and worried about the baby who must be so hungry, just a few hundred feet away.

But my husband had thought quickly, swiping a bottle and two packs of emergency breast milk from the freezer, stuffing them into the baby bag along with an extra outfit and diapers.

They were fine in the waiting room without me.

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I COULDN'T DRIVE FOR THE REST of winter. We passed the scene of the accident whenever we went to town; over time, the cracked tree sank into the snow, its needles turning from green to brown and finally falling from the limbs until the pine resembled some broken carcass, a pile of bones on the side of the road.

We continued to go back and forth between the city and our home in the country. In Pennsylvania, I found myself staring out at the stretch of white, the frozen landscape

reflecting my own fear while I waited for both to thaw. I found comfort in Carson's words: "There is something so infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter." But only when early-morning birdsong returned to the dark woods did I truly believe spring would come again.

By April, the snow finally melted in Pennsylvania. We started returning to the country more often, and I assumed I'd start driving soon, and planned to bury my car keys—the only part left of the totaled black Subaru—next to the skeleton of the fallen tree once the ground thawed. Then one day the tree disappeared. All that remained was a crooked stump. I tried to drive, but just wound up sitting in our pickup truck in the dirt driveway, saying, *After the next song, I'll go. Okay, after the NEXT song.* In July, I noticed from the passenger seat that some daisies had pushed up alongside the stump, a small ring of white. The scar on the ground left by the car was nearly healed. The wooden marker, the simple flowers, the mounded earth all reminded me of what I'd narrowly escaped. My breath caught in my throat each time my family drove past.

Returning to our farmhouse late one night, having tried not to look at the broken space in the pines as we passed the accident site, I lifted my son out of his car seat while my husband took our bags inside. I pulled his small body out into the deep darkness and let his head droop against my collarbone like a folded flower. He was not afraid of the night, but in the space between the darkened porch and the blue silhouette of the barn I tried not to guess how many pairs of eyes stared at us from the forest or to think about the coyotes calling from the swamp. I forced myself not to calculate how many steps it would take to get to the front door, how much time I would need to fish the keys from my pocket. I worked hard to not let him feel my fear.

I thought of Carson's essay instead and cupped the back of his head in my palms so we could both look up. The sight of the stars washed across his face like a splash of yellow from a flashlight. I listened to his breathing, felt his heartbeat through his back. We looked quietly into the night sky, the kind you get only when far from the man-made blaze of cities and towns, more stars than sky nearly, like a spray of flour on a cutting board. I whispered to him about the ghost swirl of the Milky Way, the blinking satellites, a planet glowing pink above the barn. My face close to his, I watched him watch the stars until he saw them, really saw them. Finally, he lifted his small arm and pointed to the sky, turning his amazed face to mine, as if to say, "Have you seen this, Mama?"

Near the end of "The Sense of Wonder," Carson writes, "Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts." But whose life did she mean? In 1957, the year after she wrote the essay, Carson's young nephew Roger, who is the center of her story, became her charge when his mother died. And one year after that her own mother, with whom Carson had lived for most of her adult life, also died. Cancer would take Carson herself in 1964. I imagine the two of them in Maine before this, though, newly motherless daughter and newly motherless

son, standing on the rocks between her cottage and the ocean, breathing in the salt and sea, staring into the bright night sky, speaking to each other the names of the shells and birds dotting the shoreline, feeling less alone than we might assume.

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IN THE FALL, I FINALLY DROVE for the first time. Not far, but far enough. We started talking about staying in the country full-time, but for a while continued to go back and forth, and I realized that a year would come and go and then it would be winter and I'd just have to try to drive again in spring. The three weeks preceding the crash, including my son's first Christmas, had been wiped out of my brain from the concussion I'd suffered when my skull cracked against the car roof over and over, and I was slowly accepting that the memories would likely never return to me.

Instead, I used Carson's essay as a blueprint to create more memories, to help with the heartbreak that lingered when I thought about how nearly I and not just my memories disappeared because of that crash. I thought of my boys sitting in the hospital waiting room, wondered how long the cache of frozen breast milk would have lasted, what my son would have remembered about me, if anything at all. My family was safe now, I would remind myself, but I knew we would never really be as safe as on that faraway morning in the bathtub, my son's small body curled inside me, my husband asleep upstairs.

And so I concentrated on building a trail of breadcrumbs, as Carson suggested, using the natural world around us to establish a channel of connection. My son was young, barely a year old, but I hoped somehow, if and when I was finally lost to him, he might be able to see my hands in the soft brown of the garden's soil, know that I would still be there in the strands of honey wheat waving, in the feathery fingers of the hemlocks at his collar, and in the blaze of stars in the open night sky I showed him when he was just a baby.

In October, as my husband and I tucked small ear-shaped cloves of garlic into the ground, the season's first snowflakes began to fall. We celebrated, relieved to get the garlic covered just in time, and then turned to our son, who had been sitting contentedly at the edge of the rows, dwarfed by the tall fence circling the remnants of our summer vegetable garden. He was looking up, smiling, mouth open. The flakes were huge and movie-white: snow-globe snow. I squatted next to him and held out my hand, and his eyes followed one of the large flecks of snow as it landed on my dirt-covered palm and disappeared, melting into my skin. He stared at my hand, then looked into my face. Do it again, Mama. And we sat there, the two of us, snow swirling in the small circle space enclosed by our garden fence, my husband humming as he covered the mounds of dirt with leaves so the crows wouldn't tease out the garlic; our son staring at us both, working hard to understand, to remember; and me with my hand out, trying my best to hold onto the idea of wonder as I caught flake after flake in my open palm. ●