

13. Chen's Mountain Flowers

CHINA, SEVENTH–NINTH CENTURIES



HEN WAS a laywoman who traveled far and wide, visiting famous masters. After she realized enlightenment, she composed the following verse:

Up on the high slopes, I see only old woodcutters.
Everyone has the spirit of the knife and the axe.
How can they see the mountain flowers
reflected in the water—glorious, red?

JOANNA MACY'S REFLECTION

Laywoman Chen has seen a lot of the world in her journeys from one spiritual master to another. She has kept her eyes open. She's noticed what's going on. Even up on the high slopes, where the trees grow sparse and vegetation thins out, she sees what people are up to, busily hacking away at anything that can serve as fuel.

The old woodcutters are only doing what's been done for generations, taking from Earth whatever can be used. They've grown so accustomed to sawing and chopping, it's how they define themselves and their purpose for existence. Their tools—knife and axe—shape their perceptions, direct their movements, become, in a sense, who they are.

I love how Chen observes this. I am moved that her quest for enlightenment has not closed her eyes to what is being done in and to the workaday world. It still summons her attention, even after she finally realizes enlightenment.

I appreciate this because my attention, too, is so preoccupied with what we, collectively, are doing to our world. I cannot drive it from my mind. My spiritual practice calls me to come to terms with the destruction we humans are causing. I wouldn't want an "enlightenment" that would keep me from knowing and feeling the ways our actions are unraveling the very web of life. I want to be present to the suffering that comes with "the spirit of the knife and the axe"—the spirit of bulldozer and chainsaw, of deep sea drilling and mountaintop removal, of factory farms and genetically modified seeds.

There are different ways of responding to this hacking away, and my customary response is one of outrage and opposition. I want to make these actions stop. And in order to stop them, I'm ready to harangue those involved, to shame them and show them how wrong they are, and try to take away their tools and their funding. I don't think to aim for anything more. And indeed, outrage and opposition do save some mountain flowers.

How different is Chen's response. Instead of staying riveted on what the woodcutters are doing, her mind turns to what they are missing. The mountain flowers are right there in full view. The blossoms are real and red, glorious to behold. See how the water repeats them in its quivering mirror. Chen returns us to our senses. And that is what she wishes for the woodcutters: to see and feel the life around them. Look! Right here on a branch of this tree you're chopping, see the bright flowers! As she snaps them awake from their habitual behavior, the world comes into focus.

That's the kind of "stopping" she aims for. That's the kind of stopping where one comes back to oneself—and oneself is the place where real change can occur.



Is it possible to enter and witness the wilderness without taking something away from it? Why is it so easy to forget to pay attention to the beauty all around us?