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 Arlington Street Church  
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## **Carpe Diem**

I was running in the woods on Tuesday morning when something caught my eye off to the right, in the shallows of the beaver pond – not a little something, like a blue jay taking flight or a mallard gliding on the surface, but a sudden and big something, a kind of a flash. I stopped. It took a moment for my eyes to sort out water and scrub brush and trees and ... something. The brilliant yellow-orange of his long, slender bill gave him away: a Great Blue Heron.

I love them. Over four feet tall with an almost-six foot wing span, the Great Blue has a white face with a white crown and a black plume extending down the back of its head. Its body is blue-grey with black shoulders, and it has a long, S-curved neck that folds into its back in its improbable flight.<sup>1</sup>

I watched it feed for a while, thrilled, and then picked up my run. As a couple came toward me, I slowed my pace; I couldn't wait to tell them about the heron. "There's a Great Blue down the hill to your left," I said. The gentleman scowled. "I have a koi pond," he growled. "You think you've found something great, but you haven't."

I passed them, taking – I'll admit it to you – some small pleasure in hearing the opening volley as his female companion let him have it for his rudeness, her choice adjectives surprising me and then making me laugh as they faded into the distance.

I thought again of Wendell Berry's *The Peace of Wild Things*:

When despair for the world grows in me  
 and I wake in the night at the least sound  
 in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
 I go and lie down where the wood drake

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<sup>1</sup> The Great Blue Heron's wing span is seventy inches, according to [www.tigerhomes.org/animal/great-blue-heron.cfm](http://www.tigerhomes.org/animal/great-blue-heron.cfm). Also, they weigh just five pounds (their bone structure is hollow)!

rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
 I come into the peace of wild things  
 who do not tax their lives with forethought  
 of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
 And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
 waiting with their light. For a time  
 I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.<sup>2</sup>

I *had* found something great, but my crabby companion in the woods didn't know it. He was too worried about his beloved koi, his carp, whom the Great Blue apparently love, as well. He was miserable – streaming misery – and missed something great.

Here's where my thinking went:

First: Maybe he could cover his carp pond with a net, with holes large enough for tasty insects but too tiny for the Great Blue.

Next: The Japanese also love koi, introduced to them by the Chinese. Selective breeding has resulted in their varied, brilliant colors. The emperor's gardens are full of koi ponds; the Japanese regard them as good luck. Surely they know how to protect carp from Great Blues.

And then: Carp are common freshwater fish. I'm sure Mr. Crabbypants doesn't know that the U.S. Department of Agriculture lists several kinds of carp as invasive species. Worldwide, large sums of money are spent on carp control.

Okay, that wasn't very nice.

I had arrived at the limits of my knowledge of carp. When I got back from my run, I looked them up. I meant to type in C-A-R-P, but I added an E at the end. C-A-R-P-E ... Carpe. *Carpe diem*.

*Carpe*, meaning “to pick, pluck, pluck off, cull, gather” and *diem*, meaning “day.” Horace, the leading Roman poet during the reign of Augustus, in the first century before

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2 Wendell Berry, “The Peace of Wild Things,” from *Collected Poems* (North Point Press, 1985)

the common era,<sup>3</sup> coined the phrase: *Carpe diem*. Seize the day.<sup>4</sup> Actually, there's more: it's *Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero*: Seize the day, putting as little trust as possible in the future. It's all about right now: all we can know, and all we have to live.

So now I'm off on an entirely new tangent, following the prodding of the spirit or, simply, my typo ... which I'll take as one and the same. I'm thinking about the crabby man, missing the greatness of the Great Blue, and then, as he is berated for his rudeness, missing the restorative sweetness of a walk in the woods. I'm thinking about the ways we are offered the gift of a day, each day; the ways we seize the day, but then drop it; or forget that we've seized it, and accidentally let it go. I'm thinking about the ways we let our lives be disrupted far beyond the moments of disruption.

For example, I spent more time on Tuesday morning thinking about the carp man than about the Great Blue Heron. How can we train our minds to return – as it were – to the heron, to “come into the peace of wild things” who “do not tax their lives with forethought of grief?”

Author Norman Maclean's father was a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman. In his autobiographical novella, *A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean writes, “On Sunday mornings, my brother, Paul, and I went to Sunday School; and then to 'morning services,' to hear our father preach; and in the evenings to Christian Endeavor; and afterwards, to 'evening services,' to hear our father preach again.

“In between, on Sunday afternoons, we had to study *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* for an hour, and then *recite*, before we could walk the hills with him while he unwound between services. But he never asked us more than the first question in the catechism: 'What is the chief end of man?' And we answered together, so one of us could carry on if the other forgot,

'Man's chief end is to glorify G\*d and to enjoy Him forever.'

This always seemed to satisfy him, as indeed such a beautiful answer should have, and besides, he was anxious to be in the hills, where he could restore his soul...

“As a Scot and a Presbyterian, my father believed that man by nature was a mess, and had fallen from an original state of grace. Somehow, I early developed the notion that he had done this by falling from a tree. As for my father, ... he certainly believed ...

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3 Quintus Horatius Flaccus was born in Venusia on 12/8/65 BCE and died in Rome on 11/27/8 BCE.

4 According to Charlton T. Lewis (1890), the Roman poet and author Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso, 3/20/43 BCE – CE 17 or 18) used the word *carpe* in the sense of “to enjoy, seize, make use of.” I know you're holding your breath for this reference: Please see *An Elementary Latin Dictionary* (American Book Company, currently available on Craig's List for \$200).

that only by picking up G\*d's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty. Unlike many Presbyterians, he often used the word 'beautiful'....

“My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe,” Norman Maclean concludes. “To him, all good things – trout as well as eternal salvation – come by grace, and grace comes by art, and art does not come easy.”<sup>5</sup>

To seize the day is to pick up the divine rhythm, to practice an art that yields the grace of power and beauty. To seize the day is a practice – a spiritual practice, like studying catechism or fly fishing or walking the hills ... or something harder, much harder, like waging holy war against dissolution and degradation, depression and death.

Amma Syncletica, one of the third century Egyptian hermits known as the Desert Fathers, said, “In the beginning, there is struggle and a lot of work for those who come near to g\*d. But after that, there is indescribable joy. It's just like building a fire: at first, it's smoky, and your eyes water, but later you get the desired result. Thus we ought to light the divine fire in ourselves with tears and effort.”<sup>6</sup>

To seize the day is an art that comes by practice. If we are very lucky, the yield is grace, as when a Great Blue Heron stops us in our tracks. Grace: being under the influence of the divine. The relationship between spiritual practice and grace is a mystery, but I'm willing to wager my life on the possibility that spiritual practice makes us more available and more accessible to grace ... more accessible to grace, and less accessible to Mr. Crabbypants, in all his distressing manifestations.

Do you remember Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*? Shug says, “More than anything, G\*d [loves] admiration.” Celie asks, “You saying G\*d is vain?” And Shug answers, “No, not vain. Just wanting to share a good thing.” G\*d is not happy, she says, “when you walk by the color purple in a field and don't notice.... Everything wanna be loved.”<sup>7</sup> To seize the day is to notice; to remember to pay attention.

What is it about that first question in *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* – *What is the chief end of man?*<sup>2</sup> – what is it about that question that is just enough, the only question, really, that any of us has to answer? Let's reframe it, question and answer. Question: What is our purpose? Answer: To fulfill our divine calling, and to savor the gift of life. *Everything wanna be loved.* We answer the question of purpose with our lives: we practice

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5 Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*, pp. 1-4

6 Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, ed, *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*, p. 66

7 Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

the answer by seizing the day, returning to this present moment, over and over again, not dissuaded, derailed, or discouraged from our divine calling.

One of my favorite Zen stories comes from a time of civil war in Korea, when “a certain general led his troops through province after province, overrunning [everything] in his path. The people of one town, [hearing of his approach,] fled into the mountains. The general arrived in the empty town ... and sent [his troops] to search [for those] who might have stayed behind. [They returned with the report] that only one person remained, a Zen priest.

“The general strode over to the temple, [stormed] in, [drew] his sword, and said, 'Don't you know who I am? I am the one who can run through you without batting an eye.'

“The Zen master [bowed to him, looked deeply into his face, and responded, calmly,] 'And I, sir, am the one who can be run through without batting an eye.’”

Hearing this, “the general ... bowed, and left.”<sup>8</sup>

Beloved spiritual companions, as we run through our days, may we be blessed with a Great Blue Heron – with something great – in our path. When Mr. Crabbypants, or worse, starts in about his carp, may we bow, and add the “E” to carp: leave him behind, and *carpe diem*, arriving in this present moment over and over again. By giving ourselves to divine rhythms, practicing returning to our purpose and our divine calling, we will gain and regain power and beauty and meaning. May we remember to notice – everything wanna be loved. May we know grace.

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8 Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, *op cit*, pp. 54-55