

In January, I was invited to offer City Council a Welcome to the New Year address.

I wrote many drafts of poems but could not find my voice. I just kept asking myself: how can I wish you a happy new year?

My children were sick on the day I was to present the cobbled-together, not-quite-my-voice new year's address, and so the date was delayed to February.

Shortly after that, a three-month fog lifted, allowing me to write this poem.

February

How can I wish you a happy new year?

How can I wish you a happy new year when homelessness, addiction and illness are rising as fast as the seas?

When isolation has driven so many of my friends to despair, to poverty, to the streets.

How can I pretend that the flip of a calendar page means any more this year than it did the last?

How can I wish you a happy new year when democracy feels more like a dream of the past?

When the ice caps shrink and the temperatures soar.

When children are being killed for the mere fact of their gender or where they were born.

How can I wish you a happy new year when a Hiroshima's worth of bombs continue to drop on Gaza?

When political allegiances blind our own leaders to:

22 thousand killed

millions displaced

lands depleted

bodies dismembered

entire bloodlines memorialized....

Eventually, I realized:

I can't.

I can't wish you a happy new year.

I can't wish you a happy new year because I, myself, am not happy.

Most days, I am not able to get out of bed.

My children get themselves breakfast, get themselves out the door.

I lay immobile for hours, waiting for the motivation to fight gravity.

Depression grinds my bones to dust.

My therapist says: "This is what grief looks like."

I started the year with illness in my family, three funerals, visits to the hospital.

I smile when I visit.

Tell good stories.

Hold my elder's hand.

I ask Jean if she wants to sit in silence.

She looks surprised. Warns me she will probably nod off.

For a minute or so, there is nothing but deep presence,

a tender hand that has been feeling for one hundred and one years nestled into my palm,

skeletal finger bones fluttering like a baby bird's new wings.

I loosen my hand.

Did she fall asleep?

Her lids float open.

Eyes full of tears.

No words spoken,

we take each other in in this way.

All grief wants from us is our presence.

It doesn't need us to pretend we are happy.
It doesn't need us to fix the problem.
What grief needs is for us to be brave enough to *feel*.

So, to all those who are struggling like I am, this poem is for you.

To tell you that your presence is beautiful. Is everything.
Your attention to the pain in the world is necessary.

I'm here to tell you that your tears are medicine.
If you can, let them fall onto the snow, let them be kissed by the wind.

When you can't get out of bed, when you can't muster a smile,
when you can't figure out why the things you used to love don't stir you anymore...

I won't tell you to feel any differently than you do.

Your sadness needs space.
Your despair needs a voice too.

And here's the thing:

The reason you are sinking under so much weight,
the reason your sadness is powerful enough to paralyze you,
the reason you *feel so much* is that

you *know* a better world is possible.

See, optimism is not a denial of the challenges that face us.
Optimism is the radical knowing that we can rise to the occasion.

When I ask my kids what gives them hope, my 10-year-old tells me:
"I don't know, Ima. I am not proud to be human."

I take that in.

Then, I begin to tell them stories.

I tell them about the years of imagining and pleading that led to fifty Tiny Homes.

About the volunteers who have cooked a free meal outside City Hall every single Monday for the last eighteen years.

About Jews shutting down Central Station, saying “Not in my Name.”

Shutting down the Statue of Liberty where Emma Lazarus proclaims:

“Until we are all free, we are none of us free.”

About how at seven o’clock this morning, Peterboroughians stood arm to arm to disarm.

Blockaded an electronics manufacturer, chanting “Ceasefire Now.”

How most of the workers turned around and went home.

I will keep telling them.

I will keep telling myself.

About the people who make things happen

that others said could not be done.

There will be no return to normal.

No end to the wildfires.

The glaciers will not miraculously grow back.

No protest will singlehandedly put an end to genocide.

But I tell my children the importance of dreams.

That all these sacrifices we make,

all these risks we take,

all these tears we cry on behalf of people we don’t even know,

These are the proof that we are all connected.

That our capacity for transformation is at least as great as our capacity for destruction.

So we paint signs together.

We say: Never Again for Anyone.

We say: A Just World is Possible.

We say: There is Enough Here for Everyone.

I may not be saying, "Happy New Year,"

but I do wish you a new hope.

A hope for a time in which all is shared,

all are fed,

and all are free.

I see you in that future.

I see you in these dreams.

And on the days I am able to rise from my bed,

on those days, my friends,

I will see you in the streets.

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