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How to keep your own soul safe in the dark

More and more I find it hard not to ask the question I have spent my adult life avoiding: What is the point of even trying?

A few days before Thanksgiving, my husband and I finally moved our indoor plants back indoors. In years past we brought them inside in late September, just to be safe, because in those days frost often fell in early October, and a killing freeze inevitably came by the end of the month. This year, the first killing freeze finally came on 30 November, our latest first freeze in history. My indoor plants have become outdoor plants for all but four months of the year.

The day we dragged the indoor plants inside, our backyard oak was clinging to the last of its russet leaves, but the maples had long since dropped their bounty of red and orange and gold. Their leaves still blanket the yard, making a refuge where insects and their larvae will overwinter. Left outdoors all fall, the potted ficus had acquired its own blanket of windfall leaves. I didn't brush them away before moving the plant inside. I figured their mouldering would make good food for this aging tree, which I bought for my college apartment in 1983.

Those leaves at the base of the ficus were sheltering an invertebrate resident, too, it turns out. Perhaps confused by the warmth of our family room, a small white moth soon climbed out of the leaf litter and crawled to the edge of the pot. I made a hollow of my hands, careful not to touch its powdery wings, and carried it outside, setting it down in a potted plant that stays outdoors all winter, its own leafy blanket intact.

I didn't recognise the moth and didn't think to take a photo of it, either. Trying so hard to get it outside safely, I didn't even pause to look it over carefully before scooping it up. Identifying it later without a visual referent proved impossible. Was it a fall webworm moth? A white flannel moth? A satin moth?

I still don't know, so I couldn't tell you how rare the moth I saved might

be. I know I didn't save it for long. Most moths in Tennessee overwinter as eggs or pupae or caterpillars; the adults die with the first freeze. You could ask why I took such care to rescue the tiny hitchhiker at all, and it would be a fair question. My yard should have gone cold weeks ago. That moth had already outlived nature's allotted time.

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I have spent 63 years trying to cultivate hope, but my thoughts wander in this direction too often these days. Why protect the wildflowers that grow in our yard when all the emerald yards nearby are drenched in herbicides and when their purely ornamental shrubs are drenched in insecticides? Why trouble myself to keep the stock-tank ponds filled with water when every spring there are fewer and fewer tree frogs who might need a nursery for their eggs? Why turn off the lights to protect nocturnal creatures when all around me the houses are lit up like airport runways? Why bother to plant saplings when a builder will only cut them down later, after my husband and I are gone, to make room for yet another foolishly large house that glows in the dark?

In the aftermath of an election that will return a climate denier to the White House and a climate-denying party to control of Congress, it sometimes seems impossible to keep going. Every effort feels Sisyphean. Any possible change for the better is about to be demolished by the outrageously unqualified industry toadies whom Donald Trump has named to run the agencies that protect our wilderness, our air, our water. Our future.

More and more I find it hard not to ask the question I have spent my adult life avoiding: What is the point of even trying?

Recently I read an old essay by the Kentucky author and farmer Wendell Berry, who has been writing for more than six decades about the need to heal the separation between human beings and the natural world. In his essay 'A Poem of Difficult Hope', which appears in his book *What Are People For*, Berry argues that the success of any protest should not be measured by whether it changes the world in the way we hope it will.

'Much protest is naïve; it expects quick, visible improvement and despairs and gives up when such improvement does not come', he wrote in 1990. 'If protest depended on success, there would be little protest of any

durability or significance. History simply affords too little evidence that anyone's individual protest is of any use. Protest that endures, I think, is moved by a hope far more modest than that of public success: namely, the hope of preserving qualities in one's own heart and spirit that would be destroyed by acquiescence.'

I am reminding myself that any backyard moth is a rarity to be treasured in its hidden places, to be nurtured in its silence, for however many nights the hot world gives it.

At my lowest, I have never entirely given up my faith that good people working together can change the world for the better. When I have been downhearted in the past, I have always explained to myself that I am not alone in my efforts to cultivate change — by writing, by planting, by loving the living world in every way I can find to love it. Individual efforts gather momentum through the individual efforts of others.

Men in power did not wake up one morning and decide to give women the vote. White Southerners did not wake up one morning and decide to dismantle Jim Crow. Those things happened, if imperfectly and still incompletely, because hundreds of thousands of people worked together for years to make them happen.

But where preserving biodiversity is concerned, we don't have years. Where stabilising the climate is concerned, we don't have years. Once a species becomes extinct, it remains extinct forever. Once the climate hits an irreversible tipping point, it will tip. In that context, the Republican takeover of Washington is a catastrophe that is hard to reconcile with a plan to plant more flowers and install more nest boxes.

So I am taking comfort from Wendell Berry, who has lived a life of ceaseless protest against the desecration of the earth and its creatures (most recently in an essay for The Christian Century called 'Against Killing Children'). Even at 90, he is not asking himself what the point is.

And I am reminding myself that any backyard moth is a rarity to be treasured in its hidden places, to be nurtured in its silence, for however many nights the hot world gives it. I am luxuriating in the sugar maples in our yard that this fall put on a golden show the likes of which they have not done in more than a decade, and in the flock of cedar waxwings that has been visibly dwindling, winter after winter, but is suddenly back in numbers I've never seen before. I am grateful, too, for the dark-eyed juncos, who are here again this winter to scratch among the fallen leaves.

In saving the leaves for the moths and the fireflies and the dark-eyed

juncos, I am still trying. And in the trying, perhaps I can save my own soul.

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