

## *On Trembling*

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MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHER WAS A WRINKLY, grey-haired lady we saw when visiting our grandparents' trailer home in Austin. We called her Gigi—pronounced with Texas twang rather than French finesse—a name which I always thought stood for “great-grandmother.” She would just sit at the table or in an easy chair, cigarette in hand, watching us play or chatting with the adults. She was the only member of the family besides my aunt Lisa who smoked. Her voice seemed devoid of any note. It had long since been reduced to no more than a grainy crackling, as if her vocal chords could no longer vibrate but could still rub against each other, creating sound through friction. Whereas my grandma's voice invoked the lowing of cattle and the playing of a phonograph and Mom's was the mellow sound of church bells and clarinets, Gigi's voice was the crumbling up of a newspaper; her laugh, the muted jingle of coins in a sock. And despite her vitality, in my memory she only shows up grey—faded, curly hair and thin, crinkly skin—despite all the colors of the trailer, its brown fake-wood-paneled walls, yellow kitchen tile, and the green southern verdure surrounding it.

Her only pastime seemed to have been periodically shouting out, “Dollar Time!”—the signal for all the great-grandkids to gather about. She would then peel dollars out of her wallet and give them one by one to each of us; we would say thank you and shuffle away back to whatever we were doing. I never knew what to do with the dollar any more than I knew what to do with my great-grandmother—we didn't seem to have all that much in common. But she got a kick out of it.

I was nearly nine when she died. My dad brought us all together and gently broke the news to us children. It was our first experience with death. My older sisters cried, but I just sat quietly and thought about what was being said. My eight-year-old mind knew that what it had been told was significant. Death was a serious matter, a permanent condition, a cause for sorrow and tears and reflection. I cast my eyes downward in mock reverence and considered my own feelings. Was I sad that Gigi had passed away? Would I cry? I thought it was a sort of test determining whether I was really a human being or not, capable of love and loss, capable of being hurt by death. I waited for some powerful emotion or deep change to come over me, like I had seen in movies before and like I now saw on my sisters' faces, but none came at that time. There was no resonating, utterly human experience, no weeping, no trembling.

*TO TREMBLE:* A VERB, not uncommon, describing the act of shaking back and forth. It is a phenomenon not unique to human beings; animals tremble, as does the earth. In writing we can personify nearly anything using this verb: candlelight may tremble as a draft crosses a dark room, the notes of a sad violin can tremble in the air, and an old house might tremble under the weight of all the history it has seen. And yet, despite its wide applicability as a word, the actual act of trembling retains its significance as an event. It can signal the body's danger and prompt life-saving action as the temperature drops. It can clue a lover in to the truer, deeper emotions a partner is hiding. Scientists faithfully monitor the planet's tectonic trembling in an attempt to predict earthquakes and save lives, while farmers and other less academic folk are sometimes clued into the same forthcoming disasters by the portentous trembling of their livestock.

Of course, the word I am using is really just one among many used to describe a whole range of actions; there are as many shades of trembling as there are colors in the rainbow. Creating a linguistic spectrum of trembles, I might begin with *flutter* and *jitter* on the light end, as they connote the slightest of vibrations, followed by *teeter*, *totter*, and *wobble* before moving into the more serious *quiver*, *quaver*, *quake*, *shudder*, *shake*, and *tremor*. The granddaddy of all trembling and the top of the scale would be the formidable *convulse*. Of course, some terms don't easily fall into the scale—such as *throb*—because they describe a slightly different phenomenon. While trembling indicates a vibration back and forth of sorts, throbbing is a sensation of varying intensity, such as when one smashes one's finger with a hammer or fights against a strong impulse. And both throbbing and trembling can occur simultaneously, as when both p- and s-waves radiate from the epicenter of an earthquake or when the pain of a physical injury is accompanied by shock. I experienced this very sensation one day as I slammed my hand in the car door, the throbbing waves of pain right at home beside the shiver of surprise that I'd damaged my body.

There are also different connotations that follow different words in the group: *oscillate* reminds me of the steady vibration of engineered electronic components, and *vacillate* of the fickle breeze of indecision. Teenage hearts flutter; old and worn ones palpitate. Sometimes news or events can be jarring enough to shake the shelves of the soul; one can almost hear the jingle of loose lids rattling on memories, poorly preserved, and though we may reorganize and reorder, we will never be the same. We could be rocked by our mothers after being rocked by the effects of a violent stomach virus. Or, I am often rocked by the power chords and three-part harmonies of Boston and Journey. The dictionary difference between *quiver* and *quaver* is almost negligible, both referring to the warbling quality a musical note may have. But to me they paint an archer of yesteryear, his arm pulling the bowstring back to its full bend, his eye sighting down the shaft of the arrow trained on the heart of an approaching rider, his hand quivering because his grip is too tight and his resolve quavering because he is unsure if the rider is friend or foe.

The jitters get me right where the ribs are closest to the skin. They feel like a butterfly or two escaped my stomach and drifted upwards,

getting trapped between my lungs and bones when I draw in too much air in anticipation of running out into the snow in flip-flops to get the mail or jumping into a cold pool straight from a hot tub. Anatomically, shudders involve the vertebrae and shoulders while wobbles afflict the knees; spasms can affect any muscle in the body. Geographically, shivers can be global but are more often localized in the jaw's isthmus or along the peninsular arms and legs. Vibrating cell phones cause us to start, sending a ripple up the spine, as can fingertips stimulating the skin gently enough to tickle. Convulsions double us over, overriding every other system in the body—we feel our insides tangle and knot in what seems an irreparable way. The resulting damage can be as difficult to read as the complex striations of a mountain's stone heart, warped and folded, broken and torn through endless geologic upheavals and constant seismic pressure.

Quaking is what the earth does when that pressure builds to a head, but it is also what happens when the created finds itself before the creator. Whether in feeling or in actuality, the presence of God induces the most poignant of responses in both the earth and those who live on it. The Christian tradition in which I was raised is rife with references to trembling and its cousins, not only at the presence of God but even at the mere mention of his person or the use of metaphors related to him. Luke reports in Acts that when Moses saw the burning bush and heard the voice of the Lord he trembled and looked away. Matthew records that when Jesus Christ died on the cross the earth quaked, and Mark says that the women who first came to the empty tomb three days later trembled at the news that he had risen. The sky, the ground, the nations and just about everything else in the Bible seem to shake at one point or another.

The Ark of the Covenant, ancient Israel's most sacred symbol, was quite enough to inspire trembling. This box, said to contain the tablets of the Ten Commandments, was in the care of the high priest Eli when the Philistines came to war about 3,000 years ago. Eli's sons took the ark from the tabernacle to the battle, creating a momentary wavering in the Philistines, who lamented that "God is come unto the camp." Meanwhile, Eli sat on a wall looking for messengers, his heart trembling for the ark of God and wondering if he had done the right thing in letting it go to war. I suppose in some way it would be like the president

letting the VP take the original Declaration of Independence to an international conference just to back up his point, but the comparison is nonetheless inadequate. The ark was where God himself was said to sit when he came to earth, maybe to spare the planet the intensity of his physical touch. A non-priest, Uzzah, is recorded to have dropped dead when he touched the ark without permission, even though he was merely steadying it as it traveled. So I imagine the feeling Eli had must've been akin to, say, how a pope would feel if he caught some neighborhood kids playing baseball in St. Peter's or how an imam would feel about a jackhammer in the Dome of the Rock. And, though the text isn't very expressive on the point, I think Eli's trembling must have been intense. The translators of the King James Version might have thrown in some more detail if they had had the license, noting the number of beats his ancient heart must have skipped, his inability to quench the nervous sweat that soaked his brow and robes, or perhaps the uneven breathing that he never could get under control. Whether all this is implied by the simple "his heart trembled" in 1 Samuel 4 is debatable; but, whatever his state, it was enough to send him toppling out of his chair at the first news of the Philistines' capture of the ark, thus breaking his neck and ending his life.

The life of Paul provides what is perhaps the most thorough example of human tectonic activity. His life was full of shaking, beginning before his conversion when he was the most zealous opponent of the early church. At that time he shook things up by finding Christians in their very homes and sending them off to prison. Surely the mention of his name, then Saul, was enough to send a shiver down the spine of any early convert. Then, on his way to Damascus he found himself trembling as a heavenly light shone on him and the Lord himself rebuked him for his actions—but again the Bible's stark prose leaves me wanting. I want to shake a bolder account from the scriptures, though please don't misunderstand my intentions. I just want to know what it was like on a personal level rather than a historical one. Did the ground shake, or did it just seem that way to Saul? Was the light warm or cold? Did the voice go right through him like a chill wind, cutting straight to the heart, or did it slam into him like a wall, crushing his red-blooded furor? At what word did it dawn on him that he was a full 180 degrees off-course; at what point did his valiant intentions turn to dross and

drop away, leaving him defenseless? What was the timbre of that voice? Was it a thunderous rebuke that sent a tremor from marrow to bone to frame, or was it the softest and saddest of vibrations that toppled Saul's zealousness and left him with nothing but the desperate reply, "What wilt thou have me to do?" How intensely am I to interpret that "he trembl[ed]"?

The only clue I see in the text is that it was enough to shake both his sight and his appetite, for he did not see nor eat for three days afterwards. And I imagine that his subsequent healing was a tremulous experience, as was his first time preaching his new faith. From there he traveled the Roman Empire, sharing his story, redirecting all his former formidable strength towards a new cause. Each retelling of his jarring vision would for him invoke the memory of his first tremble, create a new one from the sheer force of the message leaving his lips, and finally send away the audience buzzing at the power of his testimony. Each miracle he worked would leave at least one butterfly fluttering in the stomach of each witness to remind them of those things they would never be able to explain. Each letter he wrote would cause men's minds to reel for centuries at the depth and power of his conversion. Even Agrippa was almost persuaded to be a Christian by Paul's preaching—I can see him fidget uncomfortably on his throne as words he has neither power nor authority over invade his kingly heart and stir long-stilled motions within him. And I can see Paul wince whenever old friends, those who hadn't heard the news, greeted him as Saul.

BUT THIS IS ALL OPINION, no more than my personal interpretation of words and events. I'm not really engaging the act of trembling itself. The truth is I'm wary of going more deeply into it, because if trembling truly is as important to our being as I think it might be, then maybe I shouldn't be unwrapping the package all the way. Maybe I should stop typing and finish the process privately, or at least let you do so. On the other hand, I want to write a moment about the relationship between trembles and their causes, because that is where I seem to have lost Gigi. But here the issue grows more complicated. I wish it was simple—that physical stimuli caused only physical trembles and that abstract or mental stimuli caused only mental movements—but it just isn't so.

In one sense it is true, however: physical causes cause physical effects. Cold makes me shiver. Tickles make me wiggle. An unexpected touch makes me start, while an unwanted one makes me cringe. On the other hand, an immaterial stimulus like my stuttered fashion sense may cause my friends to wince when we meet, yet I remain clueless because theirs is still principally a mental response. Likewise there are times when I suddenly realize that things or circumstances aren't what I had perceived them to be, and that sudden dawning of truth shakes my mind, sometimes with agony and sometimes with joy. But this is where the simple explanation breaks down, for though that reaction begins in my mind, it is often powerful enough to manifest itself physically, an iceberg of emotion tipping the surface of the material world—though in form nothing more than a smile or a frown.

The more examples I think of, the more this crossover becomes evident. I have often woken from a terrible dream only to realize that its tragic events never occurred. I try my best to shake off the lingering feelings of dread and discomfiture, but I am surprised how deeply they still can affect my mood. More than that, there are dreams I can't remember having but that were enough to jar me awake, leaving me with only the faintest glimmer of what happened, a sour taste in my throat and a general sense of confusion that is difficult to overcome. What dream caused such a jolt, or did the jolt cause the dream, shattering it in the violence of waking? Did an occurrence from my life inspire it, or was it the result of worry or unresolved anxiety?

Thus, body and mind are clearly connected as trembling bleeds across the line that separates them.

I can remember instances when a vibration that seemed to start in my mind resonated itself right out into my body in full force. Not momentarily or surprisingly, as with dreams or sudden realizations, these experiences are often extended, to great lengths even, and often prove to be the most irrepressible trembles of all, those that no amount of deliberate breathing or concentration seem to help. But rather than say that these trembles start in the mind, I suggest that they come out of the spirit. It's a significant thing. We feel a bit of it when we stand with our hands over our hearts to sing our country's anthem. Parents refer to feeling it on the day their children were born or when they graduated from school. I trembled this way out of gratitude once, when my then-

girlfriend was finally released from the hospital after being dangerously and suddenly ill, those anxious hours ending with my body bent in sobs as the tension was released along with an outpouring of thanks. I have also trembled out of conviction when sharing the fervent feelings of my heart with a friend. As we sat and honestly expressed our thoughts, things not lightly talked about, in a moment of rare connection, I could not keep my voice from quavering, and even my body shook. That tremble lasted as long as we spoke true to our hearts, ending only—and naturally—as the conversation turned away from such things. When my dog was coming out of the anesthesia after having his leg amputated last Christmas, I watched as his body involuntarily shook as it came to feel itself again—and failed to feel what was no longer there. His physical and mental tremble incited a spiritual one in me that reminded me of the affinity that can develop between creatures. I often feel this affinity when I read—from a bright connection with Twain's wry account of Huck Finn deciding to free Jim and go to hell for it, to a solemn stirring at Atticus Finch's stalwart defense of an innocent man, done so that his kids will know right from wrong. I cannot go through the last act of *Cyrano de Bergerac* without resonating at the unflagging nobility of Rostand's snapdragon Socrates; my heart beats in time with Cyrano's for the rest of the day even after he falls on the last page.

These spiritual rumblings each vary in intensity, like any tremble, as from the smooth patter of a hummingbird's hover to the heavy beating of an eagle's wings. I have found them both strong enough to cause my voice to falter and my limbs to grow weak and subtle enough to have no more actual movement than a beam of light. Furthermore, at all these times and others, from anthem to absolution to a quiet moment alone in literature, I have felt not just that my mind was humming but that my heart was brimming also. It's like a candle held out in the dark: it illuminates the holder's face, but its light also touches their breast. Could these instances be when my own spirit's light is momentarily felt? Heart and mind, soul and body, light and music—it is hard to describe exactly where the feeling rests or what it is, but each one feels like a moment of clarity between the present and the possible. Each one prompts my thoughts to turn inward as if to try and see that light, to glimpse what it is that I really am. It is always an exhilarating event, and I find myself looking forward to the next occurrence with some anxiety

and some excitement, for although I find it a unique confirmation of my humanity, proof that there is a feeling soul within me, it is also a moment of truth where I am forced to confront and accept that humanity or turn away from it.

PUTTING THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF trembling on a continuum, I notice two things. The first is that as they move from physical through mental to spiritual they get more difficult to suppress. When I am cold and start to shake involuntarily, the mere act of thinking about the shiver is enough to pull it into my consciousness and relax it away. Only when I stop thinking about not shivering do I start again. Tickles and soft brushes on the skin are more difficult to override, but clenching one's muscles in anticipation usually does the trick. But when it's something psychological we often have to make a great effort to deaden the effect of its waves. And, as with shivering, so with grief—therapists often recommend we pull the thought to the forefront, face it, and relax it away. Conversely, broken hearts drive some people to the basketball court to sweat it out and others to the grocery store for ice cream and chocolate to eat it away; both activities seem to me to be a clenching of the muscles, an effort to disengage the mind through concentrated physicality.

In the case of spiritual shivering what do we do? I think that the only way to really shake those feelings off is to be dishonest. What I mean is that if those vibrations really are parts of our souls emanating from the center of our being, then the only way to escape them is to deny who we are, to claim that that part of us doesn't exist. I immediately think of Rolfe in *The Sound of Music* facing off with Captain von Trapp in the cemetery. Von Trapp—whose soul's resonance shook tears from his eyes as he sang "Edelweiss" to his traitorous countrymen just a scene before—tries to remind Rolfe that he is an Austrian first and a Nazi second, if at all. And we see how the captain's words move the youth, his gun-hand wavering, his face contorting, though in the end Rolfe shrinks from embracing his spirit's stirring and betrays both self and country.

This idea of honesty brings up the second thing: as we move through the continuum, our ability to simulate the corresponding tremble diminishes. I can fake a shiver even on a warm day, and

remembering past pain or disappointment usually succeeds in conjuring at least a shadow of the original tremble. But moments of spiritual truth, however strong, are disarmingly ephemeral, losing their potency with each second, refusing to retain any of their shimmer in the pages of our journals. Could that be why the same Peter that said, "Thou art the Christ," ended up later that night denying he knew Jesus not once but three times?

In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a Hindu poem describing a conversation between the warrior Arjuna and the god Krishna, Arjuna remarks that his body trembles at the sight of his kinsmen gathered for battle. The translator of the copy here on my desk, Barbara Stoler Miller, points out the significance of this detail, saying that in that culture such a response arises "from inner feeling and cannot be simulated." And Arjuna isn't only impressed by the sight of impending destruction; he is also moved by the spiritual ramifications of what is about to happen. His questions to Krishna reveal that he is indeed trembling from deep down, that the very center of his self is undergoing an earthquake.

I like that—the idea that trembling is pure. Paul told the Philippians to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." The Buddha said that those who fear death fall a-trembling at the thought of it but those who know the truth do not. It's as if both men are prescribing a spiritual lie-detector test. Their methods may differ, one using trembling as an indication of proper living and the other using it as an indication of its absence, but the idea is the same: the surface manifesting the depths. How often do we pause to consider the state of our soul, to listen for the telltale tremor that confirms to us the validity of the words we have spoken or the deeds we have done? Or rather, how often should we? It may seem strange to need to consult one's reactions to determine if one is telling the truth, but scanning through my memory right just now between these two sentences, I recognize that it is a valuable tool in a world of doublespeak, obscured ethics and pop psychology. Of course we know full well when we are truthful about facts and events, but oftentimes our feelings are as much a mystery to us as to anybody else until we force them into words and see if they resonate. Trembling may just be our species' own natural truth detector.

I recall the elderly butler Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. As he travels across England to visit Miss Kenton, the

housekeeper who left Darlington Hall years ago, he quietly takes stock of his life in service. At first his dedication to his craft seems first-rate and honorable; he was everything one would imagine an English butler to be in the early twentieth century. But as the full impact of his relentless adherence to what he sees as excellence in service is revealed—dodging Miss Kenton’s flirtations in the name of professionalism, loyally endorsing his employer’s racism and possible treason—we grow to pity him. My heart breaks as at each crucial moment in his life he uses his career as an excuse not to face the reality of living: in his determination to be rock steady as a butler he denies himself the opportunity to be a human being. He cannot escape his humanity, though. When Stevens is informed that his father has suffered a stroke upstairs while he waits on his employer’s guests, the surging wave of emotion cannot be hidden. Asks Lord Darlington, “Stevens, are you all right?”

“Yes, sir. Perfectly.”

“You look as though you’re crying.”

His father dies minutes later as Stevens continues to carry out his service.

At the end of his trip he has a long conversation with Miss Kenton—now Mrs. Benn and soon to be a grandmother—where it becomes apparent that he has missed his biggest opportunity in life by not marrying her himself. He cannot deny now—at the end of all things—that he truly loved her years ago when they worked together, but at that time he would not let himself feel his own heart beat. He has been dishonest with himself in the deepest way.

This honesty takes me back to Gigi, because it is what I sought the day she died, me eight and she nearly eighty. Whether as tears, as a solemn thought, or as a deep tremble, I wanted to feel something significant at her passing. I thought I had all the necessary ingredients—it was my first experience with death, I knew it was a significant thing, and I thought I loved her. But nothing came. Was I somehow dishonest with myself? I tried not to be. Since then I’ve often thought that maybe I didn’t really love her, but I know that’s not true either because she’s stayed deeply imbedded in my heart. I’ve likewise wondered if I was somehow incapable of true feeling, but I know that’s not true either because I’ve had these feelings elsewhere in my life. I’ve fluttered, jittered, teetered, tottered, vibrated, wobbled, quivered, quavered,

quaked, shuddered, stuttered, palpitated, convulsed, throbbled, and pulsed. I’ve been shaken, rocked, rattled, stirred, jingled, and jarred. I’ve indeed trembled on countless occasions, mostly for reasons far less worthy than Gigi’s death.

Perhaps Gigi’s tremble has occurred at some point and I missed it. I cannot say. I like to hope that her tremble is still in there somewhere, waiting for the moment when honesty and feeling intersect. I won’t shy away from it if it is—I’ll let the vibration flow out from my heart to my mind, from my mind to my skin, and from my skin to the room to the air to wherever she is: Dollar Time.