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Interbeing:
An Interview with Terry Tempest Williams

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As a Fulbright Scholar, I had the opportunity to meet with Terry Tempest Williams at the Department of English, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, in February 2009. Before the formal interview began, Terry and I walked a shared labyrinth. For me the walk itself was a treasured one and I view it as a metaphor for the sacred spaces within oneself that Williams passionately talks about in her writings. In the interview, we discussed several issues ranging from the personal to the political and the sacred. Terry's openness toward life and other cultures, her warmth, enthusiasm, and refreshing idealism, are a few things that I brought back home with me.

VS: Although you are known as an "environmental writer," you are clearly connected in powerful ways to other people. Could you tell me something about the people—family, writers—who have particularly influenced your writing?

TTW: Of all the people who have influenced me, the first would certainly be my grandmother Mimi. I think she really brought me into a larger sphere of what nature is, even human nature, and at a time when there were not that many global citizens in Utah. Now we have a global bond. That was not the case growing up. I grew up in a very staunch, strict, Mormon background. Salt Lake City in the 1950s and 1960s was very insular. The Mormon community became too small for my grandmother. She really sought her solace outside. She was a student of J. Krishnamurti and she went to a hiding to study his works. When she came back, she brought back oak leaves from the tree under which they sat. Krishnamurti, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, and Alan Watts—I thought they were all Mormons. My grandmother brought that kind of scope to our family. We would spend the night with her and lingered in bed to collect our thoughts. She would ask us what kind of dreams we had had. She was an enormous influence. She gave me my first Peterson field guide to birds, when I was five. It had three lines that said "I love you" inscribed inside and that was our little secret. My love of nature was really tied to the love of my grandmother, and certainly my parents. My father was into pipeline construction and our livelihood came from the land. So in reality, there was no separation between our relationship to

the land, relationship to family, and our relationship to spiritual life. It was all interconnected. My mother was another great influence, especially her grace. I think she really embodied a sense of peace which I carry through with me.

Ted Major was a significant influence. He was the director of the Teton science school. Coming from a Republican Mormon household, he was the first Democrat I ever met. I went to the Teton school and I met him through Flo Shepard in the year 1974. These people were instrumental in giving me a larger point of view. An ecological view, perhaps. All the things that I had loved instinctively and intuitively suddenly assumed a scientific grounding, a biological grounding and an ecological awareness. I went to school with Flo as my advisor to get my masters degree in educational and cultural foundations. I ended up staying in a science school with Ted Major, where my husband Brooke and I went to, after our first year of marriage. So these people loom large.

Wangari Maathai was another powerful influence. In 1985, I was at the United Nations Decade for Women, conference that was held at Nairobi. When I left the conference, I ended up following her to the villages to see what this Green Belt Movement was all about. It was again tied to women. That was when I realized that women in Kenya were carrying an environmental crisis on their back. I saw women traveling eight to ten hours a day in search of water and firewood and I tried to learn what that meant in terms of deforestation. I was so inspired by Wangari, that I came home and started the Green Belt Movement of Utah. This I did, not only to raise money for Wangari's movement, but also to talk about deforestation here in Salt Lake, and to justify what it means to live in a place of aridity. Wallace Stegner was again an important mentor who talked about the unity of drought and issues about living in a place, a place that Mary Austin would rightly call "A land of little Rain." Certainly Edward Abbey was a deep influence and I would call him the Sacred Rage. His *Desert Solitaire* with its Colorado Plateau. Barry Lopez was an early influence. He was with Ed Abbey in nineteen seventy nine at the University of Utah, where he said "I exhort you to write as a young woman who lives on the edge of the Great Salt Lake," and that's been an important friendship. My husband Brooke has been a powerful influence. We've been together for the last thirty five years, and have both in many ways been refugees in exile. The sense of community which is embedded in us is very important to us. Brooke's great, great grandfather was Brigham Young who created Utah, and I still feel the pioneering spirit in us, because of our roots. Now, our son Louis Gakumba from Rwanda. How would you ever imagine that a prayer or a plea to give me one wild word, would ultimately lead us to our son? One can never know the paths of fate. The magic of the two of us meeting. So, these would be some of the influences along the way.

VS: I notice that each of your books is distinct from the next one both thematically and structurally. Is that a conscious effort on your part?

TTW: I appreciate that. I think especially in academics, people like to put you in a box. It has not been conscious. I think the path of my books reflects the evolutionary path that I have been on as a human being. Each of my books begins with the question which is burning in me that keeps me up at night- that which will not allow me to sleep. Beginning with *Pieces of White Shell.* We all tell stories that evoke a sense of place. I never forget reading a book by Marie Louise Von Franz called *Creation Myths*. She is a Jungian psychologist and she talks about the creation myth—Adam and Eve in the same context as the changing woman giving birth to a child, monster slayer, myths of Kali and helps us realize that we are story beings and nobody has a lock on the truth. Sharing stories were a part of my conditioning. You know for me, it was being present in the Navajo reservation and asking them, "What is a story?" And having the elders, having the children and the women saying, that story is an umbilical cord that connects us to the past, the present, and the future and it keeps things alive. They believe that it becomes the conscience of the community. That was so important to me.

In *Refuge,* I talk about the two things that I have always held as a constant. My mother (my family) and the bird river refuge. Suddenly in nineteen eighty three, it all turned to quicksand. My mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The Great Salt Lake was rising. The question that was burning in me was how do we find refuge in change? And that's how deeply ingrained the two parallel paths were. I'll tell you a story that is perhaps indicative about the struggle. My mother had died, my grandmother had died. There was a family reunion which is a tradition in Mormon culture with the Rommeleys—my maternal clan. I went to the family reunion, to my aunt's place. We call her aunt B. She is a six foot eight inches tall woman who greets me at the door and she says "Ah Terry how are you?" and looks directly at my stomach to see if I am pregnant yet. I said, "I am doing great aunt B," and she said, "What are you doing with your life?" In other words, why aren't you a mother? And I say that I am writing. And she says "What are you writing?" and I told her about the rise of the Salt Lake and the death of mother and she looked at me and she walked away. For a moment, I wondered if I had gone mad. Is there no connection here? And finally, when I came home I remember thinking maybe there is no connection. I immediately went in and got my easel that I had used as a child and two magic markers. I put mother on one side and circled it. I put Great Salt Lake on the other and circled it. I put down things that were associated with

mother in this book. Family, cancer, Latter Day Saints, Mormon Church and all things associated with the Great Salt Lake—Bird River migratory, flooding, bird refuge and circled it again, and thought there was no connection. Then I put my name down at the bottom, "TTW," and circled it. I then drew two lines joining the two circles to my name and I realized when I stepped back that I had drawn a map of the female reproductive system. Then I thought I can do this. There is a connection. It was my mother, in a way also my grandmother. There is a price that we pay when we forego our own creativity I realized that, that was the secret of the book and I had the courage to go forward. The book was released after Mother died. The book was not really about Mormonism, it was about humanity. It was about each of us. How we breathe our lives and how we breathe our deaths. It was in that moment that I kept thinking, "What do I believe in? What do I trust?" Because at that moment, whatever I had trusted most was gone. Just as my mother had brought me into this world, she had gone into the next. *Leap* was a seven-year meditation. It was once again a question of what do I believe in? Why was the body, the body of the triptych, my body denied from me? How do I look at the body of the triptych? Why was I raised beneath the panels of heaven and hell? I think I really wrote myself out of the church in that book and ended up in the desert. And after that in *The Open Space of Democracy*, George Bush takes off after 9/11, and the question really was how do you *Find Beauty in a Broken World?* How do you pick up the pieces and create something whole? So you know these books reflect my own spiritual path. And at this point I must say that writing is a spiritual path for me. It's about being fully present despite the anxieties of life. To be present in a life that is interrelated and interconnected. Not just as a species, but as living beings.

VS: In addition to your strong connections to other people, I find a lot of introspection, purification, harmony, and a dancing celebration or affirmation of all beings in your writing. What I mean is a sense of oneness. What were the influences that bring about this oneness?

TTW: I think it is in us as human beings. Don't you? Maybe it's what we've forgotten in these times of modernity—and what is in us to remember. If you look at Native cultures—and especially their rituals—Hopi, Crow Mother, Kokopelli, carrying the sorrow of the world or asking for health. These rituals are something that have existed for thousands of years. You know even in Mormon culture in the temple there are rituals. I can only imagine all the rituals in Hindu culture. I think these rituals and ceremonies strengthen all our lives and remind us in a sense to what we are connected to, if they remain fresh and not become commodified. But for me, my spiritual life has always been connected to the

land and from an earliest age I remember that there has always been a deep sense of both regard and obligation. There has always been a deep sense of care. Living in a landscape like this one cannot hide from the overarching sky, the sun, heat, snow and drought. It is a very powerful and dynamic physical place. I grew up with prairie dogs and their lives are not very different from mine. I was used to rattle snakes at the backdoor and caribou peering through my window. It was a very animated life. You know as a child I remember seeing a white bird and it looked like a robin, but a robin has a red breast and I thought what is this? There was always this variation. I then called my grandmother and said "Mimi, I think I just saw a white robin in the backyard, but nobody believes me." She said "Trust your instincts. You know your birds." I went to college and read Emerson and Thoreau and thought "I am not a Mormon, I am a Transcendentalist." There has always been this deep, deeply connected sense to the Other.

VS: What about Deep Ecology. Were you inspired by Deep Ecologists?

TTW: I certainly knew about Arne Naess and Sessions. I read their books on Deep Ecology. I don't know if it was a big influence. It seemed very intellectual to me. I remember being schooled by Paul Shepard. He was a deep ecologist. Gregory Bateson who spoke about the pattern that connects was certainly an influence. Is that what is deep ecology then? What is it? What do you think?

VS: For me, deep ecology basically acknowledges the affirmation of all beings…

TTW: In that case, I guess I am a deep ecologist. I do not identify with the intellectual discourse of the genre. My affinity is more with the land itself. The animals and an ecological state of mind like the native peoples. Even among religions the early tenets of religion say that the world was created in spirit before it was actualized and all beings have a spirit and a spiritual presence on earth. You know how it was. That was the kind of thinking I was raised upon. Maybe Mormons were deep ecologists. When we think about deep ecology, I remember one conversation in particular in Ted Major's house in Jackson, Wyoming. I think what deep ecology meant to me was the human—spiritual element tied to the biological element and that was a new connection in terms of Western thinking. That's how my grandmother lived her life and that's what she taught us. In the room where we slept there was this huge gold painting of the Buddha. It was enormous. It was painted in gold and had little human beings and all the species around him. He had half open eyes. Eyes that denote both the interior and the exterior. She raised us on that. So there was this very

strange, wonderful connected world that my grandmother gave us and that too in the midst of a very staunch Mormon culture.

VS: The concept of wholeness or the tension between wholeness and brokenness—is an oft-repeated theme in your work, perhaps most explicitly in your new book *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*. Could you tell me how you became aware of this paradigm of wholeness and brokenness and why you find this to be such a rich and evocative theme in your own experience and perhaps more widely in human societies?

TTW: I think certainly in my life time as a resident of the interior West in the United States, I watched the land completely fractured and filled up. I just took a young man from China as a part of a class activity to the Great Salt Lake and he fell asleep. He had witnessed too much space. He didn't know how to accommodate it. He said that there was nothing in his language that could talk about this kind of emptiness except in spiritual terms. I think for me that was my norm. I get anxious if there are too many people. I need open spaces to reflect upon and to reflect back on. I witnessed that brokenness within myself. You know with the loss of my mother, not being unique at all, but by being human. Maybe to be human is to engage in that paradox between brokenness and wholeness. I realize that if *Refuge* and *Leap* had gotten married, they would have given birth to *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, because I think this is a synthesis of those two books and in a way I created my own triptych after contemplating Bosch's triptych and I didn't realize that until the book was done.

VS: Scholars seem to divide your writing into three dimensions: Poetics, Politics and Erotics. I find a fourth dimension that I would label Sacrality. How would you link it to the other three?

TTW: I think it is the basis that all three emerge from. I think that is the sacred element.

VS: Another thing I've noticed in your work is a strong focus on the "present moment." I associate this with something you said in an interview with reference to *Refuge*, where you stated "Nakedness was my shield." Could you say a bit about ideas like "nakedness" and "presentness"? Do you even see these as related ideas?

TTW: To be present is the only thing I know and I can really count on. And I think that it is perhaps of the fact that I grew up knowing that my mother was so sick, and that she could die at any moment. So all that we had was the

present. Because, to look ahead and to project ahead was too painful. I think I learnt that at an early age. My grandmother again took me at a very young age up to the mountains in Utah and taught me about J. Krishnamurti's choicest awareness of the moment and what it means to be present and I remember that clearly. Though, as a child I couldn't grasp what that really meant. But, I watched the way in which my grandmother responded to the world and thought, that that must be the choicest awareness of the moment. That you are completely present in the moment and that if you are present then the bell rings. You know, when we were today at the labyrinth, I don't think the ringing of the bell was an accident. I think it's this awareness of synchronicity. When the outer world and the inner world emerge. I think for me, that moment is sacrality. You know *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* is about presence. It's about following the path of inquiry. But by being present in it, by bearing witness to it, I used to think that bearing witness was a passive act. I don't think that anymore. I think when you bear witness some fundamental shift takes place and your consciousness is expanded, and in an expanded consciousness your actions become different. "Nakedness is my shield" means that if you are in the present, then there is no fear in terms of what the past is, or what the future may bear. So all that you have is your own vulnerability in the moment. To me it is through your own vulnerability that you forge a connection to humanity or to any being, and I think even with the prairie dogs. I was always present with them and that's why they could be present with me. Because, I think there was a call that was transferred. It is like being with another human being, it's not being anthropomorphic. When you are spending time in wild places, when you are fully present, that's when the magic occurs again and again. I believe that the nature of the sacred is in *Being Present*.

VS: When you talk about these subjects there seem to be Buddhist echoes in your writings. Are you conscious of any influences from Eastern philosophers other than J. Krishnamurti that you just mentioned?

TTW: I'm not a Buddhist and I know very little about it. I was raised under the picture of The Buddha. I was terrified at times because I knew The Buddha was always watching. That was really a part of my family. I cared enough to go to the Kalachakra ceremony conducted by the Dalai Lama, even though I knew nothing about it and there was a part of me saying, "How dare you do this?" I think coming out of such a strong, orthodox tradition, I don't ever imagine that I would go back into any other tradition. To me it's again, taking up which is broken, fragmented and creating a whole and I think each of us has our own spirituality. You know maybe the truest form of spirituality again is the

present—that, which is. This is what the Buddhists believe in and also perhaps an attraction about the religion. I don't have a formal meditation practice. But whether I'm walking a labyrinth, whether I'm riding, or whether I'm walking in nature, it is a walking meditation. It is a case of slowing down and being attentive. It's about being present and it's about not letting the mind being cluttered so that you can really be with someone else or something else, and also be aware of what's happening. I think in that heightened state of awareness you begin to see the pattern of things. To me that's what I love, and that's why I love life.

VS: In spite of a sense of rootedness to place, especially Utah, that permeates your work, I find in your writing a certain universality that transcends geophysical spaces, particular landscapes or communities. When you write about Africa in *An Unspoken Hunger* or Spain in *Leap* or Italy and Rwanda in *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, I feel as if you're somehow reaching beyond the specificities of your specific background. I wonder if you could say something about how you see your work reaching out to explore big ("universal") questions and to reach readers who may live in distant parts of the world, perhaps even India, and have very different lives than your own.

TTW: I think as you said right in the beginning we are human beings first, and perhaps every book that has been written, every piece of literature is regional. It is personal in one sense. I believe that which is most personal is most general. If we can really only be honest with who we are as human beings, then every other human being can recognize that humanity in themselves. I do believe in the power of specificities of nature, of Great Salt Lake, Abissis, Long billed curlew, Sage and Rabbit Brush. By creating that kind of specificity, the ideas that may be universal are not abstracted, but are grounded in what is real in time and space. So when you read about a landscape in *Refuge*, there is some correlation in India in terms of what you know in Madras.

VS: Like the Tsunami perhaps.

TTW: Yes. Exactly. Very good association. The flood is a universal symbol and whether it is the tsunami or the rise of the Great Salt Lake, loss is a part of that changing dynamic landscape. I think these are universal themes that are brought into personal focus through specificity, that are understood in the heart of every human being.

VS: A lot of your writing talks about healing the earth, healing the body, and healing the heart. Has your writing helped you heal?

TTW: I think it has. In many ways writing for me is my spiritual practice. Whenever I sit down to write, I light a candle. It says to me that now we are in sacred space outside of normal time. I also usually have a bowl of water, when the candle tips over, I can dowse it with water (she laughs) in case there is a fire! I was just kidding. But what it really means to me is that there are days that go by, weeks that go by and nothing comes. You know there is nothing on the paper and I would have torn it away. But the water has lowered and evaporation has occurred. If evaporation is occurring, then something else is occurring surely as well.

VS: Have you been able to forgive people? The Terry in *Refuge* is different from the Terry in *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*. As an objective reader, a student or a scholar perhaps, I can see the growth in the individual. What do you think?

TTW: Well, I have certainly grown and changed**.** Even in *Refuge,* I look at what happened when I saw the owls were gone. They had been killed. The only gesture available to me was this (points her middle finger up). Then I realized that it was a pretty weak gesture. But for me, at that time it was such a radical statement. But by the end of the book, once again . . . one can't plan all this. It's just the way one evolves. What was my quest actually? The answer is civil disobedience. You know where I cross that line with other women and the Shoshone people. It was an act of civil disobedience and has a larger political context that was filled with more compassion and consciousness, and I think *Refuge* was important to my own healing. I also saw that it helped me with the death of my mother and grandmother. Also *Refuge* taught me that death belonged to a larger context like nuclear testing, and nobody could have been more surprised than I. I realized that it was a part of the story. When I wrote the piece, on the clan of one breasted women, it was not connected to *Refuge*. I did not see the connection. A group of friends who were doing a magazine came up with a theme. The theme was crossing the line. That is when I wrote the piece. A friend of mine met me after my mother's death and Mimi's death and said, "How are you?" And I said, "I belong to the clan of one breasted women." That was the first time, I heard that. And then I started learning about the dream that I had often had. A flash of lightining over an illuminated desert, over and over again. One day I had dinner with dad and he said, "How are you?" and I said, "Dad I can't sleep" and told him about the dream. He said, "You saw it." And I said, "Saw what?" He said, "Remember the day. It was September seventh. You were on Diane's lap and she was pregnant with your brother Steve. We were driving from California and we pulled over and we saw the mushroom cloud on the

desert floor." That was a revelation to me. "Trouble growing up in the American South West, drinking contaminated milk from contaminated cows." These are lines from the clan of one breasted women. The essay came together as a series of mosaics and desperation to understand, to make others understand. The fact that I belonged to the clan of one breasted women and that nine women in my family have had mastectomy, several of them were dead. How do I make people understand? Maybe they will understand the court cases. Irene Allen vs.The United States government. If they don't understand that, then perhaps they will understand fiction. You know with the fictional aspect crossing into Mercury . . . me . . . crossing that line.

So it wasn't until I gave that reading at a fundraiser for radio of Utah, a community radio station, did things make sense to me. I thought nobody in the world I know will be there and nobody would care and nobody in my family would know and I stand up, and then my father walks in. I was terrified. I had two choices—to sit down or to continue, and I continued. My father came up and said he wanted to take me to dinner. We actually had dinner in a sleazy, smoke filled bar. My father looked at me and said, "Terry, you are angry." I was so shocked by that. I don't think I ever perceived myself like that. He said, "You're angry and you have reason to be." And we both sobbed. I think it was in that tender moment that my father gave me permission to go ahead to tell the truth, especially even in a culture that did not honor the voice of women. And it was in that moment I realized that, that was the epilogue of *Refuge*—my political invasion. So there has been tremendous growth, and I could never imagine that my voice would be a voice rooted in politics of place, and ethics of place. But as you said, what drives me is the spiritual component. The rest has been almost by accident. In pursuit of the sacredness of all things.

VS: How does writing integrate with the other facets of your life? Your life as a woman and as an activist?

TTW: I feel it's all the same. To me writing lies in a life engaged, in family, in marriage. I view myself as a mother. But by the same token, Obama is elected President and meanwhile in a midnight manoeuvre the media reports that Bush and Cheney have put Utah's wilderness up for sale for oil and gas leases. In the midst of my recent book tour and having no time, I made time to write an op-ed piece for the *L.A. Times*.

That was crucial to me and again it is just seamless. You know in the midst of juggling these things, I am struggling to work this with the editor and I didn't think they would ever let me publish this op-ed.

George W.Bush and Dick Cheney are riding bear back and backwards and holding on to their dictums. These op-ed pieces, these long meditations were central questions. Teaching, family—it's all a very rich blessed life which is all mixed with paradox, complications, and humanness.

VS: I think your activism is a kind of reflective activism. Can you comment on that?

TTW: Maybe, sometimes. We just gathered on Saturday and the gathering was called peaceful uprising. The only thing I could think about peaceful uprising was the ascension of swans at the Great Salt Lake on that great day. We raised money for thirty-two young people to be able to go to DC to participate on March second at one of the largest pro-demonstration on behalf of the planet on climate change. We were trying to commit civil disobedience in our best clothes and in great peace. This is just a first step and hopefully thousands of people from around the world will be there next time. But for the next generation it will allow them to engage in a way—a novel way, it's going to be something virtual, online. Something happens when you stand shoulder to shoulder with people. Reflective activism can be a sacred rage for people like Ed Abbey. But for me, I am mindful of the effect that these things have on people and that is a part of my world. I was desperate to recover my lost poetry. I am not sure if a book can ever be a tool of activism or a path of discovery. On the other hand, I look at a small book like the *Open Space of Democracy* and that absolutely had a point of view. Liberty, democracy, and hope are what it talks about with the Arctic as its centerpiece.

VS: You seem to believe in civil disobedience. Are there any particular sources for your interest in non-violent social activism?

TTW: Gandhi. I don't know if I have a romanticized view of who he was, but I know who he has been. For me from reading his autobiography, I simply love his understanding of gesture. Spinning cotton that was not British, the Salt march, how he engaged. Gandhi was an inspiration and so were Thoreau and Martin Luther King. People who have put their presence on the mind and in the name of social change, with no knowledge of what that outcome would be. That kind of compassionate leadership, the fierceness of their character and yet the largeness of their heart has touched me in many ways—of all of them.

VS: Do you think literature (your writing, in particular) helps in the process of cultivating an ecological consciousness?

TTW: I don't know. As I said, I have never seen anyone reading my book [laughs], and I live in the American West where I have many, many enemies

[laughs again] who would love me to just disappear. Inspite of a painful discourse that is going on in this country. I hope I have been able to see this sense of compassion, a compassionate depth, and you know, for me, it's about creating a space for listening. For me, that's the most I can do.

That in between two covers of a book, that between the craft and the questioning, there is stillness in the text that creates a sense of listening so that the reader can contemplate, so these books become an extended meditation. Because I think it is through the deep listening to our own hearts, to the hearts of others, and to the mind itself that will create an ecological understanding beyond ourselves.