



February 28, 2024

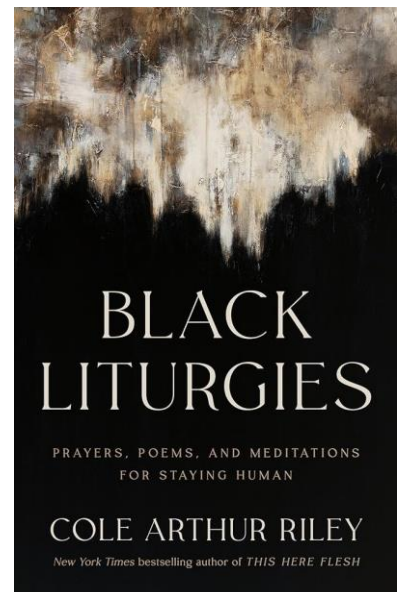
A Note from Pastor April & Cole Arthur Riley

Dearly Beloved,

On a week when there might have been (just for a February moment) some space to take in the beauty around us outside, I invite you to consider how your Lenten practices might bring you not only in connection with God and yourself, but also with that life-giving power of wonder and awe.

As we finish up Black History Month, I leave you with this beautiful letter and commend Cole Arthur Riley's new book to you with all its rich gifts and beautiful meditations on what it means to stay human.

Source: Cole Arthur Riley, *Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human* (Convergent Books, 2024). <https://colearthurriley.com/>



Letter IV: To Those at Rest on Park Benches

I drove to the lake to write this letter. Perhaps I thought it would move me, looking out into the distance. But my eyes are bothering me today, so I can't stare at the lake. It's too bright toward the sun.

But to my left, there's an old man trying to fly a kite with a child. I've decided it's his grandson. I pivot my body just so to watch them twist and tug at the string. The purple nylon octopus stares up at me with mouth agape, as it thrashes and flaps against the grass. And the little old man is saying, *Take it and run, take it and run*. And the boy does, only there always seems to be a pause between the passing of the string and that first step. So the kite drifts up for a moment, then crashes back to the ground. And maybe on another day, this would be a tragedy, but the man and child are laughing hard enough for all of us. The man begins grabbing the octopus by the mouth and shooting it like a dart toward the sky. *Now run, go!* And the boy just rocks back on his heels and laughs.

You might wonder if they ever got it in the air, if the octopus took flight and soared above as we marveled and clapped. That is not this story, and it never met the sky. Not this day. But now, they're sitting on the bench next to mine sharing orange slices. Have you ever been doing something and suddenly you realize you're smiling? Like your whole face is playing a trick on you? Well, I'm grinning now as I watch sideways from my bench. They're squirting juice from the oranges at each other. The boy licks it up off his hand and puts it out for a handshake. The man nods and solemnly obliges. A small head tucks into his sticky arms.

There are days when the sun is too bright, when the majestic feels like the kind of beautiful you cannot approach. Look to your left. **The beauty you seek can be found in the mundane.** A man holding a boy, holding a worn nylon octopus, and maybe you're grinning too.

In a time when we have more access than ever before to the traumas of this world, how will you resist the tide of despair? Let beauty be your anchor. If you find the lake view too bright, bring your gaze closer, perhaps all the way to your own flesh and blood. Life is monstrous on the threshold of apocalypse. **The practice of beholding, the fidelity to beauty and all things, I've come to believe, is no small form of salvation.**

In awe,

Cole Arthur Riley
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