

Coming Down to Earth
with Barbara Brown Taylor



I just weighed the trash I picked up from the shoulders of my two-mile dead-end road today. It was light duty, in spite of all the glass bottles—just 11.8 pounds total, which barely filled one 30-gallon recycling bag. There were extra blue bags in my pocket, just in case, since I've filled two or three of them on previous walks. Contents vary with the seasons, as well as with the presence of new construction on my road, since workers who don't live here tend to celebrate as soon as they get in their trucks to go home.

Today's haul included many crushed cans of SweetWater 420 Extra Pale Ale and eleven glass bottles of Corona Extra, though not all of them were whole. I also collected two empty glass pints of bottom-shelf vodka and three shooters of something with no identification markers on it beyond "99 proof" and the image of a round peppermint candy. Last fall, I was surprised to find three empty bottles of pretty good California chardonnay in the drainage ditch, proving that people who don't want to get arrested for drunk driving chuck their bottles out the window regardless of their taste in drink.

My bag also held many Styrofoam cups with famous logos on them, plastic water bottles, carbon-datable cigarette filters, and three white plastic tips from the ashtray of someone who smokes cigarillos. Also, an expanse of bubble wrap, a heavy metal cylinder that apparently fell off the bottom of a car, and an empty container of breath mints. It is hard not to feel virtuous while picking these things up, though the only real difference between me and the people responsible for them is that I did not throw mine out the window of my car.

I got the idea of picking up trash from David Sedaris, an American author and humorist who has lived in West Sussex, England, since about 2013. When people noticed a strange man with a grabber picking up litter along their roads for long periods of time every day, Sedaris got his picture in the paper. When someone identified him from that photo as a famous person, he received even more attention. In July 2014, the local district council named a trash truck after him.

My litter detail is not nearly as extensive as his, nor as civic-minded. I do it for the exercise. I do it to see what's happening in my neighbors' yards. I do it because the county does not do it, at least not on my road. When they send their big machines in a couple of weeks to mow the shoulders, they'll create a mulch that includes native grasses, shredded aluminum cans, the contents of ashtrays, and miles of wildflowers.

I also go to see the flowers—so many of them today, on the second day of May, that they stop me in my tracks over and over: short yellow buttercups, blue-eyed grass, wild geranium, oxeye daisies. Once, when I was bending down to pry bits of broken beer bottle out of the mud in front of a culvert, I stood up too fast without looking where I was going and got a big wet kiss from a five-inch cluster of pink mountain laurel blossoms.

When I wiped the dew off my face with my shirttail, I looked around and saw what a small thing I was doing. There was so much more beauty around me than litter. More often than not, nature was already breaking down the bits and burying them. Where that hadn't happened yet, surprising things had come into being. I found a whole beer bottle with a natural terrarium inside, complete with a tiny mountain range of verdant moss. Up the road a ways, I turned over a large metal panel in the stormwater runnel, which turned out to be the cover of a nearby utility pedestal. It seemed a shame to haul that up where a repair crew could find it, since nature had already turned it into a stabilizer for the eroding red mud runnel.

I'm not making a universal case for anything here. This is a local story, limited to one person picking up trash on a two-mile stretch of road. Sometimes, my neighbors toot their horns at me, sticking a hand out the driver's window to wave. Other times, one will stop to roll down a window and talk. "Be famous for five miles," Gary Snyder once wrote, meaning that was enough ambition for anyone who sets out to change the world.

By the time I was trudging up the hill toward home with close to thirty gallons of meaning on my back, it was the miles themselves that had done all the work. They had nipped at the heels of my high principles, given me back my sense of proportion, and smacked me in the face with beauty. I'm confident there's something within five miles of where you live that can do the same for you, just waiting for you to pluck it from the mud.