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New York's fracking debate and the peaceful quiet of renewables

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Eco Catholic

Any day now, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo will decide about fracking in the state. You can't go anywhere without someone talking about it: where we will get our energy, how will we get our energy, and what if we have to barter the future for the present.

You'd think all of this had to be decided by this afternoon!

But many upstate landowners near the Marcellus Shale want to do just that: they need the money now, and it's hard to blame them for wanting to sell an asset. Many others are nearly hysterical about how dangerous fracking is and how it will cause cancer, explosions and the lives of grandchildren.

The one fact that keeps sticking in my mind is how shale came from mountains that long ago became oceans, which then long ago became "energy" deep underground. I want to go through the mountains and the oceans to find the energy deep underground, and I want to find it by "long looking," both forward and back.

Given how long the earth took to get to here, I wonder if we couldn't just *delay* the decision about fracking until we had put real money into renewables, like wind and sun. The corporations could fund it? and if they won't, the state could. Don't the oceans and mountains deserve at least that much respect?

Let me tell you a story. We had set sail at dusk. We were out for about four hours when our captain turned toward home. Usually, in other sails, she had turned on the engine as we approached the dock. Her boat, a sailing instructor's boat, is docked at the far end of the marina in a corner ? a bit of a tight squeeze but not impossible, with the engine going.

This night she got a twinkle in her eye as we made the turn toward home. ?Let's try it without the engine. I think the conditions are right,? she said, adding minutes later, ?We may have to turn the engine on at the last minute so be ready ? we won't know till we get close.?

In moments, we glided, soundlessly and effortlessly and enginelessly, into the berth.

There was a calm in that moment that deserves respect and attention. It was quieter than anything I have ever heard. I used to think you couldn't hear quiet, but now I know you can. It was less effort than I have experienced in a long time.

Effort is a persistent intruder in my life: even getting to this sail had required it. I didn't know if I had time, didn't know if it would be enough fun to warrant the time off and away, wondered if I had brought the right dish for my part of the potluck, blah blah blah.

Like the fracking fight, we don't think we have the time to decide what we need to decide, which is surely at least about our engines. It is also about our mountains and oceans ? and about long looking, backward and forward.

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It may also be about death, the big kind, not just the turning off of the engine. Hear the words of Pablo Neruda from his poem ?Solo la Muerte? (?Only Death?):

Death arrives among all that sound

Like a shoe with no foot in it, like a suit with no man in it,

Comes and knocks, using a ring with no stone in it, with no finger in it,

Comes and shouts with no mouth, with no tongue, with no throat.

Nevertheless its steps can be heard

And its clothing makes a hushed sound, like a tree.

I loved the quiet of that berthing that night, long ago. I look forward to the quiet of the renewable energies being tested before fracking goes anywhere further.

Otherwise, we will overdo our fear of enginelessness, no matter what we think about fracking, and waste precious energy along the way home to our berth.

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