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Terry Tempest Williams discusses 'Erosion: Essays of Undoing'

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[music]

[00:00:46] Wow. Thanks so much. Well, I just stood here. Wow. Good evening, everybody. I'm Stesha Brandon. I'm the literature and humanities program manager here at the Seattle Public Library. And as we begin this evening, I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered together on the ancestral land of the Coast Salish people, and we honor their elders past and present and we thank them for their stewardship of this land. Welcome to Central Library. And thank you all for joining us for tonight's program with Terry Tempest Williams, presented in partnership with Elliott Bay Book Company, we're grateful to the Konnie and Gary Clunies Foundation, to Seattle City of Literature, and The Seattle Times for their generous support of library programs. Finally, we'd like to acknowledge the Seattle Public Library Foundation for their support of library programs and events. Private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors helped the library provide free programs and services that touched the lives of everyone in our community. Thank you to any Library Foundation donors here with us tonight. So now I am delighted to welcome Rick Simonson, who's going to introduce tonight's program.

[00:01:56] Thank you, Stesha.

[00:01:57] And thank you all very much for being here tonight. It is a great pleasure and thrill to be having Terry Tempest Williams back again and thinking of all these both since her sweep of time. But as we in this in the time we're in now, moving to the end of the year, we're talking a little bit beforehand, said Terry, "This is the darkest. So you're going to be in because we're up north, further north", and I think she is anywhere else as she's traveled around for this new book. She's here with tonight a book entitled *Erosion* in the subtitle, which with Terry is sometimes as important as the title

Essays of Undoing. For those of you thinking about the longer or arcs of time. The first book that Terry came to Seattle with in 1991 was *Refuge*, and the subtitle of that was An Unnatural History of Family and Place. So there's a thread there of of that long where there was an unspoken hunger to a title of a book of of of an unnice that sort of comes with the books. What things she's addressing, they're doing and their undoing. And tonight, part of that, too. In fact, what this book does, if you recall what happens in refuge where Salt Lake is, is being flooded.

[00:03:22] It's it's over. A bird refuge itself has been flooded in this book. Salt Lake is disappearing. So what what's going on in the world with the with the climate and everything is brought to bear. And our part in it is brought to bear with beauty and intelligence and and a very open eye, which is through this. What's going on with this government in the southwest and elsewhere has also taken on in great power and eloquence as this happened all through her books. There's passion, compassion. And there's also kind of a calling out of what what's going on. So Terry has been here all these many times over the years. And it's just we don't we've sort of grown our store, but this feels like a lot like being even in that very first time she came here in 1991 to the store and read and recall 1995 when the Mariners were in a playoff game. And and the whole place got excited in a sort of strange way about how the game went. But then it went back to Terry and it was a crowd I wouldn't have expected about the baseball, but.

[00:04:35] But she's been to and through and has spent great time here. Her husband, Brooke, is here. She'll probably make some acknowledgement of him. And and her father didn't make this trip, but he's often been parts of these visits. And we think of him and he's still at it, too. So I've been told I've got some getting in touch to do. If you ever met John Tempest, you won't forget it. He's quite he's quite a you realize. Terry does not fall far from the tree of an I--and you also sense because her mother's in this book in various ways, Diane, that she also was. Part of why Terry is who she is, so Terry will read from *Erosion* and will take questions and then she'll be a staple to sign copies of the books, which we have many of the *Erosion* as well as many of the earlier books. And I know many of you here know here and you'll get to pass on your reading. So I will get out of the way and say thank you again. And actually, now please join in welcoming back our dear friend, the necessary, vital and eloquent writer, Terry Tempest Williams.

[00:05:55] Good evening. Thank you so much for being here. I just want to take you in. And thank you, Rick. I love you. You know, that book is not a book can tell. It's been touched, held read by Rick Simonson.

[00:06:13] And I really mean that and I've said this before, but I will say it again. If I have a voice in the world, it's because of Rick, who early on with a book called *Refuge* handed it. I think every person that walked in the story of Elliott Bay and I have never taken that for granted. I also I'm going to repeat this because it's ritualistic. But my father loves Rick so much that when he was here for surgery. Um, and, you know, it's a very tender thing for a daughter to go through that. It was a serious cancer surgery. And when the doctors said, "you know, who would you like to sign? Your living will", I said, "well, I—". And he said, "Not my daughter. Rick Simonsen."

[00:07:03] And literally, we got Rick. I said, "Dad, there's one problem. You know, he's not here. It's like 6:30 in the morning." And we had to wake up, Rick. Rick came sign that. And the good news is, and I can tell you this because I feel like my father is here. My father's getting married on Monday. He's 87. And when to Jan Sloan, who we love. Who's a great book person, who's one of the owners of the King's English with Betsy Burton. And when he knew that we were coming, you know, he said, "you know, I'm sorry, I just can't come because we've got wedding details." And he said, "do you think Rick could marry us?" But he didn't want to impose. The saga goes on.

[00:07:54] But Rick and I were talking it's it's been 30 years of friendship. And this is what independent booksellers and writers create together is this sense of deep community. I value Rick. More than anyone in this literary community, and he has guided me, advised me, been honest with me for three decades, and he just never talking, spoke about 43 years in this business and to Rick, we honor you with all of our hearts.

[00:08:33] And Karen, I want to thank you. Thank you so much for your commitment, loyalty, wisdom, presence and longevity as well.

[00:08:50] And Stesha and Veronica. We thank you so much for this beautiful library where we can convene and gather. I don't take any of this for granted.

[00:09:05] And here we are, so many friends, too many to name. I just want to thank you for being here and for what we share and the history that is ours. Here we are today, the day that articles of impeachment have been given. To our current president, introduced to the U.S. Congress today, erosion and for the next hour or so, 40 minutes. It's really where the heart of this book is rooted, erosion. And I think the first piece of this book where I knew that there was something happening was the day after this November 8th, 2016. I do not assume that we all share the same politics coming from Utah. I'm certain we don't. But what I do assume is that we care about similar things. The land, each other.

[00:10:11] Democracy. Decency. And I think that we have seen an erosion in these last few years, and it's not Donald Trump, it's it's I think where we are in the world and who he represents. And, yes, the actions that are taken, even an erosion of the rule of law.

[00:10:33] But I think this notion of an erosion of democracy, an erosion of decency, an erosion of trust in one another, an erosion of science.

[00:10:48] An erosion of our capacity to.

[00:10:51] Bear the differences with one another. Even around our own dinner tables. You know how, how do we meet one another in full presence with the capacity to listen? So that's the idea of this book. What is erosion? And, erosion, we know, is a natural process. It is a natural law, and I come from a landscape of erosion in the Red Rock desert of southern Utah in a little place called Castle Valley, a hamlet of maybe 250 people. Erosion, what is whittled, worn and weathered away is as

beautiful as what remains every day, but can I see that? What I love about erosion is it's associated with movement. If it's weathering, it's it's a whittling in place. But erosion always constitutes motion, be it with wind or water or time. And I find that stirring. When Brook and I got married and I was all of 19. Brook was talking about the Grand Canyon, he had just come off of a river trip of the Colorado River.

[00:12:13] He asked me what I thought of the Grand Canyon, and I had to tell him that I had never seen it, that in our family that spent so much time outdoors. My father felt that it all looked the same. And why travel all that distance? And Brooke said "that's not acceptable". And we immediately took a road trip down to the Grand Canyon, the north rim, whereby Brook blindfolded me. I'm sure some of the tourists thought that was very strange. And he led me to the edge of the rim. And there I took off the blindfold and looked out over this immense chasm. And I was absolutely stunned. And I said to him, why didn't someone tell me about this? And he said, "you know, Terry, I think people talk about the Grand Canyon." Well, what I meant was why didn't someone tell me about this? And it wasn't what remained that moved me so deeply. It was what had been.

[00:13:18] Whittled, worn and carried away. By wind water and the mighty Colorado River.

[00:13:27] I met a geologist named Joann Holloway, who works for the USGS, the United States Geological Survey, and I was asking her about her definition of erosion. And it surprised me. The inevitable process by which rock seeks the ocean. Don't you love that again, motion, the inevitable process by which rock seeks the ocean.

[00:13:57] We are eroding and evolving together. We are eroding and evolving together. On one side, everything that is breaking our hearts. On the other side, a consciousness that we were coming to that has taken centuries. An awareness that the world is so beautiful, that the world is alive, that we are not the only species that lives and breathes and loves and grieves on this planet.

[00:14:38] Not long ago, a friend of ours called from New York City and said, "I have fallen in love. I'm so excited. I want you to meet her. Can we come to Castle Valley?" And both Brook and I just said, "We're thrilled. Our doors are wide open. Please." They came. We had a wonderful dinner. We toasted to this new relationship. We had in the afternoon, gone on a circle walk that we love. That Sarah and Larry, who are here tonight, have been with with us on that walk and we just felt energized.

[00:15:18] We were thrilled. We thought everything had gone so well. We retreated to our bedroom their guestroom and we thought, what a beautiful night. Star struck under the Milky Way. And what I thought was the middle of the night, I heard some ruckus, some rustling and we leave our doors open and I thought maybe it's another coyote running through. Chasing a rabbit. I put on my robe, went in, the light was on.

[00:15:47] And our guest, she was dressed. Her bag was packed and she was standing in front of the door. And I said, are you OK? And she said, No. This is. Too quiet, too dark, too remote, Too

everything; I have to get out of here. And our friend came out rather disheveled, dragging his bag, stuffing everything in. And Don was just starting to break. Brook came in and we very hurriedly walked out the door with them and they got in their car, turned on the engine. She rolled down her window and she said, Terry, aren't you afraid you'll be forgotten?

[00:16:34] I wanted to say I hope so. We will be forgotten.

[00:16:40] But I didn't. And they drove away. As I thought about it, I thought, no, I'm not afraid of being forgotten, but I am afraid of forgetting. That the world is alive, that the world is so beautiful, as Leslie Selco says, as delicate and strong as spider silk. All souls come here to rub the sharp edges off each other. This isn't suffering. It is erosion. Chuck Palahniuk.

[00:17:17] So if we were to sit on our porch, this is what we would see are for directions, erosion on the south is the Lassalle Mountains covered in snow. Right now, the Aspen's leaves have dropped. There's a beautiful peak called [unitelligible] the last light of day. Fourteen thousand feet above sea level, to the north is the Colorado River running red, carrying the sediments of the Red Rock wilderness downriver. To the west, you see the setting sun. Porcupine Rim. To the east, the rising sun.

[00:18:07] Where there is an extraordinary landform called Castleton Tower, a freestanding 400 foot pinnacle. Out of Wingate Sandstone. One of the few on the planet. And next to it, a formation called The Priests and Nuns. That's where we live. I want to share with you a scientific paper.

[00:18:39] Remember the 400 foot sandstone tower I just told you about? This, from Science News and the Bulletin of the Seismological Society of America. Quote. "At about the same rate that your heart beats, a Utah rock formation called Castleton Tower gently vibrates, keeping time and keeping watch over the sandstone desert. Swaying like a skyscraper, the Red Rock Tower taps into the deep vibrations of the earth. Wind, waves and far off earthquakes can all be heard. New research from University of Utah geologist details the natural vibration of the tower." I just think that such beautiful language then, quote, "We often view such grand and prominent landforms as permanent features of our landscape when in reality they are constantly moving and evolving," says Riley Finnegan, a graduate student and co-author on the paper. And then Jeff Moore, the geologist who was the lead on the study, said, quote, "Most people are in awe of its static stability in its dramatic free-standing. Nature perched at the edge of a ridge overlooking Castle Valley," says Jeff Moore. It has a kind of stoic power in its appearance. This, in the Seismological Society's Bulletin. Then they go on more and his colleagues go on to say that they're interested in the process of erosion. What is the lifespan of delicate art in arches or landscape art?

[00:20:26] What is the lifespan or the eroding possibilities? Rate of a place like Valley of the gods or needles in Canyon Lands. So what they have discovered is if they put a seismometer on those forms, they will get a reading. But they were most interested in this freestanding tower. So they enlisted two climbers and they put one seismometer at the base of Castleton Tower, which itself is a real hike to

get up to that point. This is one of the great climbs in the world for climbers. And then they scaled the 400 feet and put another seismometer on top. And then came down and put on their headphones.

[00:21:21] What they discovered was that Castleton Tower has a pulse. Has a heartbeat. As we do. Let's listen. To the pulse of Castleton Tower.

[00:23:48] Castleton Tower has a pulse. We have a pulse. The earth has a pulse. That pulse is in our hands.

[00:24:03] We have all intuited living in Castle Valley. Science has confirmed, and what our native friends have always known.

[00:24:15] The earth is alive. "There are no beautiful surfaces without a terrible depth." Nietzsche.

[00:24:28] So much of what is in this book is about faith and heartbreak and healing.

[00:24:39] And as Anna Brady knows, who's a great inspiration to me. And who has been working with tribal leaders and Utah Dennard Becae in Utah. And thank you, for your work and the work that continues now with native people here in Seattle.

[00:25:07] I asked if she had plans to run for governor or senator.

[00:25:14] She didn't answer me, but we have plans. As many of you know, Bears Ears's National Monument was established by President Obama in 2016, December 28th to be exact, exact. And President Obama heard the pleas, the cries, the wisdom. Of the Hopi, the Zuni, the Dene, the Navajo.

[00:25:43] The Ute, Mountain Ute and Ouray Ute, saying that these are sacred lands. These are the lands of their ancestors where the bones of the ancient ones are buried. Where on any given day you can hear the voices of the ancient ones through the canyons where their ceremonies are held, where their medicines are found.

[00:26:10] And a medicine person like Jonah Element would. Say and continues to say these lands are not just for them, but for all of us. 1.3 million acres protected. It was a handshake across history. A new trust being developed between Indigenous people and the United States government. A management plan that incorporated both traditional knowledge with agencies, the BLM, the Forest Service, the Park Service revolutionary, really.

[00:26:58] Less than a year later on December 4th, 2017, Donald J. Trump, by a stroke of a pen, gutted Bears Ears's National Monument. Divided it in half, changed the name alongside Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

[00:27:22] I remember visiting Willie Grayeyes, who is a great tribal leader and community organizer. And I said, "Willie, what do we do with our anger? What do you do with your anger?" And he said, "Terry, it can no longer be about anger. It has to be about healing."

[00:27:43] I keep thinking about that and with a name like Tempest. I don't have a lot of hope. Um, but when that anger rises, and I have to say at times, it is often I think about that. "It can no longer be about anger. It has to be about healing." And in a conversation with of Angie Gray. And again, Jonah, they talked about how what they are hearing. And what they are sharing with us is we have to go deeper.

[00:28:16] What does that mean to go deeper? And I will ask each of us tonight to think about that. Each in our own way, with the gifts that are ours in the communities we call home. How do we find this strength to not look away from all that is breaking our hearts?

[00:28:39] For me, I can tell you that in those moments when I feel like I can hardly get up in the morning. I'm aware of the limits of my own imagination. Imaginations shared create collaboration. And in collaboration, we find community and community. David and I were talking today. I believe anything is possible. You are part of my community and I want to share something with you that I had not planned, but I just feel that I want you to know where I've been because I owe so much to you as readers and as members of my community and friends. About a year and a half ago, my brother Dan Dixon Tempest hung himself.

[00:29:35] We had had a conversation, and I hope you don't mind me sharing this. But to me, this answers part of the question it can no longer be about anger. It has to be about healing. How we have to go deeper. And where do we go? To find the strength, to not look away from all that is breaking our hearts. So I want to share this story with you. About three months before Dan's death by suicide. He called me and said, "I have the rope."

[00:30:05] And I.

[00:30:07] If there are those who have experienced this, and I think we all have on some level near or far. I understand if you need to leave.

[00:30:15] But he told me that.

[00:30:20] In his language, he said, I'm fucked. We're all fucked and you're in denial.

[00:30:29] It's over. And he talked about the earth. He talked about himself.

[00:30:36] And I remember saying, Dan, I will never give up on you, nor will I ever give up on the earth. And then I remember him saying, "do you think I can get better?" He had suffered for decades from depression and addiction. And he said, "Terry, I'm an addict, but I'm not a bad person."

[00:30:58] It was probably one of the most meaningful conversations I've ever had with Dan.

[00:31:05] And then he said. "Knock if need be." I never did. I never did.

[00:31:15] I was there for all of the big moments.

[00:31:18] I was not there for the small ones. And I can tell you as a conservationist all my life, the hubris. When I thought "Well, I could help save a species or a piece of land when I couldn't even help my brother." Erosion.

[00:31:43] Community.

[00:31:46] Suicide has teeth. And it doesn't let you go. My remaining brother, Hank, the youngest of us. In my mind, he's [unitelligible]. He's wiser than all of us.

[00:32:04] I met him at the mortuary. And this is the part that I want to share with you. And for me. It's why community matters. Even a community of two. Three.

[00:32:27] The bouquet of sunflowers fell off the mantel onto the floor. I awoke to sunflower petals strewn across the carpet. I picked them up one by one and placed them in a pouch with two grouse feathers from brook and an owl feather that fell from the sky snatched before it touched the ground. A gift from Louis, our son. I took the red tailed hawk feather resting on our bookshelf given to me by Dan.. I arrived in Salt Lake City from Jackson, Wyoming, in a daze. Hank would meet me at the mortuary at 8:30 AM. On my way, I called my father. He was not doing well.

[00:33:09] Hank greets me at Sunset Lawn. We hold each other tight and then walk into the funeral home that we know all too well. We sit in the lobby and say little the funeral director welcomes us and tells us the cremation will begin at 9:00 and will take roughly six hours to completion. You're welcome to leave and come back when we call you to pick up the cremains.

[00:33:35] We will stay. Hank says, I look at him. We had not talked about this. He is resolute.

[00:33:44] We asked to see Dan's body. We tell the funeral director we would like to spend some private time with our brother. He tells us that would be difficult as he is covered in plastic. We asked to have the plastic removed. There is a long pause. We say we want to touch his body before he enters the crematorium. The funeral director says he will see what he can do.

[00:34:10] He returns and says it will take some time to remove the plastic. We say we have plenty of time. The funeral director disappears.

[00:34:21] After 20 minutes, we are taken into the back of the mortuary where cremations occur. It is clear to us that this area is not meant for the public or families. The doors open for us and we see Dan's body draped in a white sheet.

[00:34:37] His shoulders are bare and his hands are folded one over the other above the sheet. We stand on either side of Dan's body, his beautiful long body. We are left alone with our brother.

[00:34:52] Dan's face is beautiful. I expect to see his eyes open. His skin is translucent and a deep peace has settled over his body. There is the slightest smile on his face, not forced or fixed by morticians. His body has been washed. That is all. We see him clean and pure. I pull out my pap pouch. Hank and I each take a grouse feather and place one east and one west beneath his hands. His beautiful hands that we could finally touch and hold. Surprisingly feminine hands in spite of a lifetime of digging trenches. I hear him say, quote, "I have finally mastered dirt," unquote. Other phrases returned to me. Give me the sky. I've been buried too long.

[00:35:42] I have the rope tear. I'm done. He is done.

[00:35:47] We are undone into his resting hands. We place feathers. The owl feather in his left hand. The red tailed hawk feather in his right. The one bird of prey that yields. And I should tell you, that was Dan's work. He was a bander of migrating birds of prey. Golden eagles. Bald eagles. Peregrine Falcons. Gosse Hawks. And his favorite hawk, the red tailed hawk who said it was the one heart that yielded.

[00:36:22] Hank and I, without words, intuitively place the sunflower pegals on his heart, lay bare a pile of many pedals to draw out the darkness from his troubled heart into light, Hank places one pedtal on his throat, where a wide red line circling around his neck reveals his choice. And I placed two yellow pedals on his forehead, one vertical and one horizontal, making a sunflower cross. In that moment, would you believe me if I tell you I heard Dan's voice as clear as the day "sunflowers tear? Do you get it? Don't you get it?" I paused and then burst out laughing. Yes, I got it. I had forgotten the Sunflower clan.

[00:37:09] I had forgotten the beauty of a late summer walk we made together through a radiant field of sunflowers. The last time Dan was at our home, Brook and Dan and I were on an afternoon stroll. Dan noting how all the sunflowers were facing the light. We made vows as self-appointed members of the Sunflower clan to take care of one another and remind each other to follow the light in times of despair. Can I love myself enough to change? Dan asked. As we walked waist-high in the yellow pedaled field, can I see this? I saw Dan's choice as an act of self-love, a quick change of form from body to spirit. Could his suicide have been an act of courage carried out by his own hands? His beautiful hands? His desire, finally, for a quick transformation of his burdened soul after decades of suffering. Maybe that's why the first thought out of my mouth upon hearing he was dead was one of support.

[00:38:16] I returned to his body cold. There is no romance here. Only the brutality of truth. My brothers are before me. Count them. Hank is alive. Dan is dead. Steve is dead. I am the eldest. Why was it not me?

[00:38:34] Hank and I stood on either side of Dan's body, now placed inside the blue cardboard box he would be burned in. We said our prayers to each other on Dan's behalf. And then if I am honest, I felt Dan's impatience, his eagerness.

[00:38:49] Let's go. A man in a black suit from the mortuary entered and asked if we wanted more time. We said we were ready. The man that we meant we were ready to go. Hank told him no, that we would be staying through the entire process. Are you sure? He asked. Hank said yes. By his side, reluctantly, I was following Hank's lead. And so the man in the black suit pulled the two doors open that revealed the cremation chamber. The chamber was computerized. He said the dials to heat the furnace. Hank and I watched the neon numbers rise from 400 degrees Fahrenheit to eleven hundred degrees. It was hot enough. He then pushed a button and the chamber door opened. Inside we witnessed the flames, fueled by natural gas and sounding like rocket boosters. The man nodded. That now is the time Hank and I lifted the box, holding our brother's body into the flames.

[00:39:57] The chamber door came down.

[00:40:01] The man in the black suit closed the two white doors and left the roar of the furnace audible. Hank and I sat on the love seat against the wall. It was covered in red fabric with gold, dragonflies. Nothing else in the room was comforting. It was a room of discard and storage filing cabinets faces plastic flowers, cardboard boxes, urns decorated with flags or doves or sunsets. A small desk with a computer on it. A few stray chairs with overhead lights. Clearly, this was not a space intended for the contemplation of loved ones. I got up and turned the lights off. It suddenly became very dark. Hank, forever the wry one said "nice atmosphere, Ter" Another man in a black suit, an acquaintance from high school came to check on us and asked if we might not be more comfortable sitting in the lobby. Hank and I said we were fine. That we would wait. It may take up to six hours, he said. "We're cool," Hank said. I smiled. Is there anything you need? Maybe. Light a candle? I asked. His mouth moved sideways. Let me check. And then he left. Hank and I looked around the room. We spotted two candles on the shelves and remarked how uninspiring the art was, including a print of a misshapen girl in a pinafore holding a disgruntled cat. Then there was the one with the garish sunrise, whose bright orange rays appeared to be spiking through a forest of lime green trees. Our favorite, we concluded, was the tipped over milk can in a garden of gladiolas. My friend from high school returned with his practice solemn demeanor and said, "I'm sorry, Terry, no candles can be lit as it is against the fire code." Of course, I said. And then we all burst out laughing. Time passed two hours, then three. Lindale, about a dear friend close to Dan, came to see us and the three of us shared stories as we sat on the floor together. An astrologer. She read Dan's death chart for us.

[00:42:14] He was born on a lunar eclipse and he went out on a lunar eclipse, one for the records. She said. On the night Hank and I went to the medical examiner's office to identify Dan's body, I recalled once again how we held each other's hands as the blood moon rose above the Wasatch Mountains with caged dogs howling behind us. He was a warrior, she said. I flashback to seeing Dan's body for the first time after his death and thinking to myself how noble he looked. That was the word that came to me, Hank and I could not believe this was our brother.

[00:42:52] Dan was dead. This was true. The disbelief began to evaporate as I stroked his forehead. In life, he looked like our father. In death, he resembled our mother. Hank and I sat down in the brocade couch in silence. Dan's peace helped us gather our composure, and we believed seeing Dan's body would help soothe our father's heart. We left the room, closed the door behind us, and found our father in one of the mortuary rooms, having finished signing the last documents, including Dan's death certificate. We told him we thought it would be good for him to see Dan's body, that he looked peaceful and it would make it real. He hesitantly agreed. We descended the steep steps with Hank and me on either side of him. And then we entered the dimly lit room with our father between us. We put our arms around him as he faced Dan's still body. I can't see him, he said. Shattered. He mourned his son. Another son he had now outlived. And then his eyes were finally able to focus through the tears. He looks like a noble warrior who could have belonged to any time.

[00:44:08] Dan's hair was combed back. Long curls touched his shoulder. His beard was brown with gray streaks. He was then too thin. His high cheekbones accentuated his chiseled face. "He looks like Diane," our father said. Everyone always said he looked like me.

[00:44:25] We sat on the couch across from Dan for some time and then dad stood up abruptly as we left. He put his hand on Dan's shoulder. Thank you, Dan..

[00:44:38] The door opened. I jumped, startled the man in the black suit entered again. You may want to leave now. I'm about to shift the bones. "We are staying". Hank said "I made a vow to our brother."

[00:44:53] The man in the black suit then introduced himself. His name was Brian Rabei. We shook hands. He pulled the white doors open, the heat from the retort seared our faces. Mr. Rabei took off his jacket and folded it neatly and placed it on the back of a chair. He then put on a pair of long gray welding gloves, the same gloves my brothers had worn laying pipe. We stood behind him as the chamber door to the crematorium was drawn up. Dan's body was burning, our brother's rib cage had become white paper, prayer flags flapping inside the flames. His arms looked like wings. And in that moment, Dan was Icarus kin to the eagles he loved and released in Utah's wilderness. We watched Mr. Rabei rake dance bones with the grace of a Zen master and meditative motion like a dance with the dead. His body was being disassembled, spread across the floor of the gray brick chamber. Hank and I were mesmerized, witnessing the beauty Dan was becoming how the process was vaporizing a human body from flesh to spirit.

[00:46:08] And then after the final rearrangement of bones, Mr. Rabei, a step back with his rake, assessed the situation, and pushed the button once again as the door to the chamber closed. Mr. Rabei took off his gloves and placed his rake to the side. We walked back into the low lit room as he shut the white doors. We thanked him. He nodded his head as we resumed our place on a love seat of dragonflies.

[00:46:40] Our friend who stood with us, said she felt blessed to have witnessed what we had as she had not been present at her father's cremation, unaware it was an option. She used the word healing,

although I'm not sure what I heard as the moment had transcended transcended anything I could rationally comprehend. Hank and I sat in silence for another stretch of time. Another hour or two passed and Mr. Rabei returned, this time inviting us to watch him gather the bones. Before he ground them into ash.

[00:47:18] The doors opened, the chamber door rose, and Dan was gone.

[00:47:25] The chamber was empty.

[00:47:27] I was shocked by the void that only hours before had held his physical body. Mr. Rabei put the welding gloves back on and began raking Dan's remains rhythmically into stainless steel trays. Hank and I watched as our brother's bones were swept into view, now recognizable as parts of the human anatomy. The ball of a broken femur, finger bones on the radius, rib fragments, a shard here and there, a glimpse of his skull, his jaw, his beautiful jaw and many vertebrae, all being lovingly raked into the trays, through the deliberateness and artistry of Mr. Rabei's care, with the larger fragments now gathered into trays. He took out a fine brush and swept the dust and smaller particles of Dan into another smaller tray with such tenderness. We stood in awe of the reverence and respect he was showing our brother.

[00:48:29] This was a holy act, a ritual performed by a stranger with great dignity, usually unseen and unacknowledged by anyone. We followed Mr. Rabei into a stark room where he would separate the bones further before they would be ground into ash. He excused himself and left Hank and me alone with our brother's remains.

[00:48:57] Hank and I stood before trays of white bone fragments. "What are you thinking?" I asked. "Probably the same thing you're thinking." Hank replied. "Are they coyote, rabbit or raven?" He said, smiling. How many times have we come across similar piles of sun bleached bones in the desert? I asked as siblings growing up in the desert.

[00:49:22] We wanted to touch them, but instead placed our hands just close enough to feel the heat emanating from them. The remaining energy of our brother's life was being transferred into the palms of our hands.

[00:49:37] The pulse.

[00:49:40] There is no hierarchy in death, no hierarchy of lives. It is this hierarchy that allows them to be inferiorized, stigmatized and brutalized while other lives are privileged. We are prisoners of an ideology that prevents us from seeing the world as it is. We are captives of a view of things that give them a false appearance of self evidence.

[00:50:06] Our task is to change the world. No. Our task is to change our view of the world. There is no hierarchy in death. There are only bones. Mr. Rabei returned. We did not speak.

[00:50:26] We simply watched him meticulously separate the bones with long, narrow tweezers. He looked for metal and found some in Dan's teeth with special pliers. He pulled out fillings and placed them in a box with other fillings from the dead to be recycled, with proceeds going to the local children's hospital. Bone fragments were then separated into what looked like pieces of coral. Smaller pieces resembled shells, white shells. Then Mr. Rabei took an even finer paintbrush and swept the last particles of Dan into what looked like a small ripple of sand found on the periphery of Pacific Coast beaches.

[00:51:07] He brushed the bone dust into a metal container, followed by the sordid bone fragments. He turned to us and quietly asked if we were comfortable watching him grind the bones. It would take roughly 50 seconds. We said yes.

[00:51:23] He turned on the switch like a morning blender and we listened to the bass notes of our brother become the melody of ash.

[00:51:32] And then. It was silent.

[00:51:37] Would you like to feel the last heat from your brother's life? Mr Rabei asked. Hank and I held them in our hands for the final time.

[00:51:49] Dan's ashes would be placed into a simple black container that Hank could put in his backpack and carry into Utah's West Desert, where Dan abandoned and released Golden Eagles to their vast terrain of sky. Mr. Rabei took the container, opened it and poured the warm ashes inside. We inhaled our brother. The box was closed. Mr. Rabei handed Dan's cremains to Hank. We thanked Mr. Rabei for the grace of his work and for taking care of our brother. We experienced it as a sacred right.

[00:52:24] A healing.

[00:52:26] "It is my privilege and my calling," he said." I know that I am the last person to touch the body of an individual who was loved.

[00:52:35] I take that very seriously." He paused. "Thank you. For witnessing what I do."

[00:52:45] Mr. Rabei walked, taking me out of the foyer of the mortuary. Everyone had gone home. We shook hands again. One more thing he said. "It's been my experience that when you scatter Dan's ashes, there is usually a sign that lets you know when you have found the right place.

[00:53:03] The shape of a cloud, the color of a bird, some sign in nature." Hank told him that he planned on taking Dan's ashes into the Cedar Mountains west of Salt Lake City, a beautiful, rugged place. Hank said. Mr. Rabei smiled. "My family name is German. When translated into English, Rabei means Ravan. I want you both to know I felt your brother's essence. I had a strong feeling we would have liked each other."

[00:53:38] We carry Dan's remains to our father's house. We walked inside and found John, as Hank calls him, sitting at his desk waiting for us.

[00:53:48] We sat down and told him this story.

[00:53:55] Dan's ashes weighed eight pounds, seven ounces, the same weight as when he was born. It is also the weight of a gallon of water. One carries in the desert.

[00:54:13] Two days later, Hank put Dan's ashes into his backpack and headed toward the Cedar Mountain Wilderness Area. Several mountain ranges west of Salt Lake City in Utah's Great Basin.

[00:54:25] South of Great Salt Lake.

[00:54:28] Hank hiked for four hours straight up a particular peak that both he and our father knew and that Dan inhabited during the winter months when his work entailed taking deer carcasses out to the west desert to lure golden eagles down to the foothills for a yearly population counts. Hank did, in fact, recognize a sign, a stone pinnacle in the shape of an eagle head very near the summit. He knelt down on the pale, steep ground where a flat spot emerged next to a bare bone tree sculpted by the wind into the shape of a cross. Hank released the white ashes of Dan's body to the earth and sky acknowledged by a circling hawk.

[00:55:11] Above that he could hear but not see one body yielding to another. It can no longer be about anger. It has to be about healing. We have to go deeper.

[00:55:35] We are eroding and evolving at once.

[00:55:41] In community. There is beauty.

[00:55:47] Stone has a pulse. We have a pulse. The Earth. Has a pulse. Wild mercy is in our hands.

[00:56:05] Thank you for holding this space together.

[00:56:38] So we have time for a few questions. And I would ask Teri, actually, if you wouldn't mind repeating the question for the folks using our assistive technology.

[00:56:50] Who has a question for Terry? I see one up there. Dan Christian's.

[00:57:04] Hi, Terry. Thank you.

[00:57:06] I'm wondering about what's the.

[00:57:11] Latest status in the Bears Ears.

[00:57:14] Has there been any movement at all? I know.

[00:57:18] There is litigation happening. But what's what's the latest from down there?

[00:57:26] We are so lucky to have Anna with us. And I'm going to invite you up to give a report from a legal standpoint, what I can tell you on the ground is that the tribal members are in ceremony.

[00:57:41] Community members are organizing. There's a native foods program that is spectacular. And I think there's so much power coming from the tribes themselves in terms of creating community and going deeper.

[00:57:58] And then there is the legal issue. And I'll let Anna tell us.

[00:58:04] Yeah. Thank you for that opportunity, Terry, and thank you for the question and your interest. It's always good to know that the Pacific Northwest has its sharp eyes on the important parts of the rest of the country as well. And to address your question, Bears Ears National Monument, which, as Terry mentioned, was designated at 1.3 million acres and was purportedly reduced by the sitting president by 85 percent, is currently in litigation in the District of District Court in D.C. And the status of that is fairly typical in a sense. It's proceeding very, very slowly, but in a positive direction. The judge, who's a federally life appointed judge, was appointed by Obama, denied the government's motion to transfer to the district of Utah, which presumably it saw them as a friendlier venue. And then in October, also denied the initial motion to dismiss which the federal government had filed, saying that the tribes claiming that the tribes don't have standing legal basis on which to bring a claim, which is deeply ironic, given the depth of connection and standing that those who've inhabited these landscapes since time immemorial have as to their protection. So that was a positive move that that initial motion. Those two initial motions were denied. But there hasn't been any deep substantive momentum in a particular direction. I would speculate. And this is pure speculation, that the judge would rather see the administration shift and not have to make the call about whether Trump had the authority, whether the Antiquities Act imbues this this power. But the bulk of legal scholarship on the matter definitely weighs on the side that that a president cannot undo a national monument. And there are some some pretty digestible legal articles out there on the matter. So it's continuing. But. Both the the judiciary, I think, and possibly the the public hope that it's resolved in a sense politically rather than judicially.

[01:00:39] Thank you. Other questions. One up top, can you reach there, Veronica? Mm hmm.

[01:00:51] Among the erosions, I believe it's been said about your book that you write about the erosion of compassion. Could you speak to a little bit of that?

[01:01:01] "The erosion of compassion?" "Yes." "um, how about two words. The border?"

[01:01:19] Thank you for such extraordinary evening. I really appreciated that sound of the pinnacle.

[01:01:31] And I've read two articles in The New York Times reached recently. One is was about a heat, an artist who recorded plants growing. And there was a she had an exhibit at a museum in Brooklyn. And there was another scientist who recorded the Antarctic Ice Shelf splitting.

[01:01:59] And it also had a pulse. And so I just thought it was interesting that we are still starting to listen deeply. And that we actually have the technology to start to listen deeply. Thank you very much.

[01:02:12] Thank you for your comment. And I think all around us we're seeing whether it's art or literature or science or ceremony or our own experiences that we are living in an animated world. And what does that mean as we watch so much of it destroyed? Talking to David Williams, writing about Puget Sound. You know, I was so inspired by the way you were saying, David, that we're at a turning point. And what do we choose? And I think we're at we're at that place where the stakes are so high now. And to really begin to see the choices before us, not just as political issues or even ecological issues, but spiritual ones.

[01:02:57] And how do we want to live? And what are the choices before us and how do we strengthen the spiritual resiliency that we each have? Both alone, as well as in community and hearing does soundscapes, I think are so extraordinary. Whether the plant growing, we have a friend, Mickey Hoolihan, who spent years trying to find the first breath of life. He had very generous women friends and he couldn't.

[01:03:30] He said it was so ineffable. But when you think about breath, pulse, vitality, vegetality, again to not forget. The world is so beautiful. We need not lose hope. We just need to know where it dwells. And I think tonight I'm just going to close with a short passage.

[01:04:03] Brook and I are now living in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

[01:04:08] For reasons too long to go into. I was fired from my job at the University of Utah. And it it really broke my heart. But perhaps my soul had other plans. It was political. We bought oil and gas leases, not thinking that the major donors of the University of Utah are the fossil fuel industry. Nevertheless, I had never been more than

[01:04:35] Four months away from home and I'm 64 years old.

[01:04:40] So it was a jolt to be back east. And this is just a very brief letter to my father.

[01:04:51] And I just want to thank you so much for holding the space tonight and for sharing this beautiful evening together as friends. And I just want you to know my debts are large. I love this place.

[01:05:07] And you dwell. In my heart.

[01:05:13] Here it is. October 8th, 2017. Dearest father, here is the truth.

[01:05:21] I miss the American West terribly, so much so that the other day as I sat down to make a grocery list, it somehow morphed into an accounting of all the things I longed for at home in the desert. Here is my list. One sage, two meadowlark, three collared lizard, four sandstone. Five a night sky of stars. Six wind. Seven rain. Eight heat waves. Lightning clouds. Coyote Water, Moon. Jackrabbit Antelope. Squirrel, mule, deer, turkey vulture arrowhead. Handprints on slick rock walls ring tales. Great Horned Owl, Raven, Cottontail, Globe Marlowe Mountain Lions Sand Bone Stones Juniper Opinion Rainbows Turquoise Bluebirds 34. Black Widow Spiders 35. The Smell of Rain in the Desert 36 The Colorado River Running Red 37.

[01:06:21] Milk. Thank you.

[01:06:40] Thank you, everybody. Thank you so much, Terry. That was wonderful.

[01:06:51] [music] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.