

What do you do when you are depleted as an artist? (I say "as an artist;" I mean "as a person." To me they are the same thing.)

A squashy couch helps. Sometimes chocolate helps. A walk in the woods always helps (and usually includes some release of emotions which you will very likely want to avoid but after which you will feel much more yourself).

What do you do when you are more empty than that? When the river has been dammed and turned into a dry trickle? You keep drinking, keep splashing your face, keep washing the dishes and cooking the soup, but you can't deny you're scraping bottom and there's grit in your chicken broth.

You remember a distant season when the same river flowed at a merry pace right up to the edges of the lush green banks.

You sit with it.

That comes first.

You open your eyes and look at the state of things: here is exposed rock, here is dry cracked mud, there is the old loon's nest, box far above the waterline showing the gap.

And you return to the source.

It's no good to keep rationing out what little you have and praying. *You* are an agent of the universe; you are a crucial player in your own miracle. Start walking.

Allow yourself to fill your canteen from other wells, other lakes, other rivers. There is no disloyalty in that; water is water and you are very thirsty. Notice the deepest, oldest, shallowest path in which the trickle of water remains: here is your deepest strength. Notice also where the banks are crumbling and eroding, where the weeds have grown up, where the bridges and inlets need repair. The docks are dry; scrape the mud away.

See the resilient trees who draw from deep below; take comfort in the presence of the water table far beneath your feet.

Say hello to passersby. Pause for tea now and then, but keep walking, always walking back to your own source.

Here is the dam. It is part beaver-built, part storm-felled, part woman-made. Name the rubble: motherhood, marriage, India. See how old the relics date, are any from your childhood? Divorce, death, high school.

Then roll up your sleeves and get to work. If the water is high and cold you will find tall rubber boots on shore. Pull the wreckage out and toss it on the bank. Some pieces will be waterlogged and you will need help. You will notice strangers walking by, then, or a bird overhead who can carry your message to the town. Accept this help. Don't be ashamed of what you pull from the sucking earth, this is what happens in natural disaster. Cleaning up rivers is good for everyone.

See how the water seeks the cracks, how it finds the immediate outlet.

Don't drink it yet. All that muck and debris is stirred up and the river isn't potable yet. Borrow a canoe and paddle out to the deep water far from the shore and there dip you cup and drink.

Pitch a tent on the bank. Build a small fire. Make cedar sprig tea. Be still and watch the stars come out. You will sleep better here, and more so every night, muscles aching and itchy but happy to be put to use in the day's work. Keep working.

One day you will straighten up and wipe a muddy wrist across your brow and notice geese flying north. Notice trees putting out little green leaves. Smell mud and muck and earth and regeneration like a magic potion, and you will realize you have cleared the dam; the river is alive again.

Remember that, though you are not there yet, not quite. Keep walking the banks, keep pulling loose those jammed up logs. Explore the current in your canoe. Dive and swim like a shining fish.

And remember that the rocks make the rapids and falls, that the fallen logs create havens for fish, that not every eddy signifies a sink hole or a problem to be fixed.

Remember you are the river, and the river is alive. When you feel dry and empty, remember that deep beneath the riverbed is the aquifer, the womb of the earth, your very own source, from which you are always flowing and returning. No matter where you are, you'll get there.