On the Journey

2023 Mar

Exploring themes for deepening wisdom

Community Unitarian Universalist Congregation
468 Rosedale Ave
White Plains, NY 10605
www.cucwp.org / 914-946-1660

Nature

Chalice Lighting

(unison): We light this chalice to shine on our time together. In its light we celebrate the relationships and under- standing we are creating in this place and time. May our sharing be deep.

(light chalice)

On Our Hearts

Silence

(3 minutes)

Readings 1

Henry David Thoreau: It seems as if the day was not wholly profane, in which we have given heed to some natural object.

Terry Tempest Williams: The world is holy. We are holy. All life is holy. Daily prayers are delivered on the lips of breaking waves, the whisperings of grasses, the shimmering of leaves.

Belden Lane: Fierce landscapes remind us that what we long for and what we fear most are both already within us.

José Ortega y Gasset: Tell me the landscape in which you live, and I will tell you who you are.

Share reflections on these readings.

Readings 2

Meister Eckhart: If I spent enough time with the tiniest of creatures, even a caterpillar, I would never have to prepare a sermon, so full of God is every creature.

Nancy Wood: It is our quiet time.
We do not speak, because the voices are within us.
It is our quiet time.
We do not walk, because the earth is all within us.
It is our quiet time.
We do not dance, because the music has lifted us to a place where the spirit is.

It is our quiet time.
We rest with all of nature, We wake when the seven sisters wake.
We greet them in the sky over the opening of the kiva.

Psalm 106, adapted by Christine Robinson: We stand in awe of an infinity which we cannot begin to comprehend.
We set ourselves to live in tune with the universe – that we may be glad with the gladness of people of faith.
Yes, time and time again we have gone astray.
We have despoiled this beautiful, wonderful world
And dealt unjustly with our companions on the planet.
The law of love is a hard law.
In our prayer and then in our lives, we return to the Way.

Share reflections on these readings.

The Reflection

Rev. Christine Robinson and Alicia Hawkins[1]

Nature, whether oceans, deserts, mountains, rosebushes, pets, or trout streams, offers us several avenues to experiences of spirit. This experience of transcendence in nature is the foundation of Pagan and earth-centered faiths, but it is also found in the Christian world, from Saint Francis to the newest of the creation-centered spiritualities. Nature-inspired spirituality was one hallmark of the nineteenth-century American thinkers known as the Transcendentalists. Henry David Thoreau stated in his journal, "My profession is to be always on the alert to find God in nature, to know his lurking-places, to attend all the oratorios, the operas, in nature." Even persons who do not have traditional beliefs about God and those who do not easily experience the divine in meditation, scripture, speaking in tongues, and so on often have profound experiences in nature. Whatever our theology, whatever our language of reverence, Nature has gifts for our spiritual lives.

Oneness. The first of nature's gifts to the soul is the experience of oneness. When we sit by a stream, gaze at the clouds, stroke a pet, or look out through the trees during a mountain hike, one thing that we might experience -- especially if we are expecting or hoping for it -- is a sense of unity with the universe. Even a whiff of a neighbor's flowers on a twilight walk can bring that wonderful, mystical feeling: "I am right here. I belong." People who enjoy hunting and fishing sometimes say that one of the attractions is the excuse to get out "where there's only you and the morning" (and if pressed, they might say that the distinction between themselves and the morning feels blurred). Many skiers make a similar claim about their sport. "I'm at one with the mountain," they say, and they know that this is a valuable, spiritual experience. Experiencing the sacred in nature is a practice deeply rooted in American spiritual tradition.

The Transcendentalists spoke repeatedly of their own experiences of oneness in nature. In his essay *Nature*, Ralph Waldo Emerson describes such a moment.

> "Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."

[1]Adapted from Christine Robinson and Alicia Hawkins, *Heart to Heart*, p. 64.

If you are one of the many people who most reliably experience that expansive sense of unity out in nature, then regular excursions to gardens, parks, mountains, riversides, and oceans should be a part of the way you care for your soul.

Humility. Nature reminds us that we are small and that our lives are surrounded in mystery. This deeply spiritual feeling, sometimes called humility, can be found by being in a little boat on a big sea, or looking out on grand vistas, or spending the night in a sleeping bag under the stars. Humility is a sobering and necessary corrective to the heady discovery that we are at one with the universe.

Some people dislike the word *humility*, because it has connotations of bowing and scraping before an arrogant power. But the root of the world humility is the same as the root of words like humus, meaning fertile topsoil or earth, and human. Humility has connotations of groundedness and of connection to earth and humanity. The truth of the matter is that we are specks of life and consciousness in immensity; short lived, soft shelled, vulnerable.

Our smallness and vulnerability is a countercultural truth — not one that we're likely to dwell on in our workaday lives. Our factories, hospitals, and shopping malls operate on opposite assumptions: that we know most of what we need to know and are in control of most of the things we ought to control. Experiences in nature offer a healthy corrective to this hubris.

Mindfulness. Nature also offers us a variety of opportunities to be mindful -- to practice that combination of relaxation and alertness that is the meditative state, and to be appreciative of the gifts of life.

In almost all excursions into nature, we have to pare down, take only what's necessary, enjoy – really enjoy – tepid water and real sweat and sometimes even real danger. We are inclined to slow down and appreciate. The sandwich we would have devoured without thinking in the kitchen is good to the last crumb when fished out of a backpack at the top of the trail. The ants that would have been an occasion for the bug spray if they'd been in the dining room become an object of fascination as we eat at a picnic. The moon that we barely notice in town is a crystal beauty when we stare at it from our campsite in the woods.

A special subset of mindfulness is found in the taking of risks that require a focus and intense awareness that most of us don't cultivate in our daily lives, unless we are practiced at meditating. Activities like fly fishing and mountain climbing offer us this gift. When hanging by a rope on the face of a cliff, we're really present, not worrying about our job or wondering how to fix the house. All of our attention is on the cliff, the day, and the task. Taking risks, or what some part of our brain perceives as risks (no matter that the guide has never lost a raft, that the mule has never stumbled, that the rope has been carefully inspected), fills our bodies with those "fight or flight" hormones and then actually gives us a way to use them up, giving us a natural high at the end of it all.

The gifts of time spent in nature – a sense of oneness, an appropriate humility, and opportunities for mindfulness and focus – combine to give us a realistic and holistic sense of our place in things. That experience of realness and truth is precious and deeply spiritual. Nature's beauty and grandeur are potent aides to our spiritual lives.

Exercises

Before the gathering, reflect on nature by doing one or more of the following activities.

Notice the Season. Get yourself out of the house or apartment at daybreak, sundown, or both, and experience what is happening to the earth. Notice where the sun is in the sky. How long is the day?

What signs of the season are present? Are plants resting, growing vigorously, or dropping leaves? Do you really feel the heat, the cold, the wind? Try to find a comfortable way to spend some time just sitting or walking and noticing the season.

Practice Mindfulness in Nature. If you have a meditation practice, try either meditating outdoors or using a natural object as your focus. If you don't have a meditation practice, just try sitting and gazing at the stars, a part of the garden, a tree, or even a pet or houseplant. Notice details. Appreciate.

Bring Nature Indoors. In our gardens and indoor spaces, we often cultivate bits of nature to remind us of our experiences in the natural world. Plants, pets, fountains, nature-inspired color choices, and pictures of outdoor scenes can enhance our spiritual life. Bring the outdoors into your living space to remind yourself of nature's beauty and grandeur.

Journaling Suggestions. Most people can tell a story of a time when they felt "opened" or awestruck by something in nature. Alternatively, many of us can remember when an experience in nature lulled us into a deep sense of peace. Or we have felt at one with the universe while in nature. Write about your memories of some profound experiences in nature.

Terry Tempest Williams, an author and naturalist, speaks of breaking waves and whispering grasses as nature's prayers. Where in your life do you notice the prayers of nature?

What landscape do you live in (or visit often)? How does that make you who you are?

How have you reacted when you have discovered some way in which nature has been harmed?

Bring With You to Your Group

Think about the experiences you've had in nature this week and in the past. Choose one you are willing to talk about at the gathering. Decide which of the four elements of the Pagan tradition — earth, air, fire, or water — your experience embodies. For instance, you might choose fire if you've found yourself drawn to stargazing this week, or water if you want to tell about an experience you had at the ocean. Bring an item that is symbolic of the element you have chosen to the gathering. You could bring a candle to symbolize fire, a feather or a balloon for air, a rock for earth, a shell for water, or anything else that works for you.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Nature on Your Screen?

Emma Marris, "The Nature You See in Documentaries is Beautiful and False," *Atlantic*, 2021, abridged

Nature documentaries have never been more popular. Sir David Attenborough's soothing, avuncular voice guides you through a simple story about animal life. In between, you are treated to epic, empty landscapes and intense close-ups of the rich colors and textures of the nonhuman world, which pop off like fireworks in your wide-open mind.

We are streaming sharks and penguins and lions into our homes in record numbers. According to the BBC, "Over a billion people have watched *Planet Earth II* and *Blue Planet II* in the last 3 years." Those series were produced by the BBC Natural History Unit (NHU), the undisputed leader in high-polish nature documentaries since at least 2006's *Planet Earth*.

Whether through the NHU's own films or knockoffs, the company has come to define nature for millions of people on a fast-urbanizing planet. So the stories it tells, the techniques it uses, and the world it has created are all worth examining. It is, in many respects, an altogether new world. By selecting just the most stunning shots and editing people out of the picture, the NHU creates an untouched parallel universe that's undeniably glamorous—both beautiful and inaccessible.

I watch grizzlies swim in a transparent lake ringed by green-black conifers. If the flamingos and the bears have a thematic connection, I've already forgotten it, but I feel good. It's heartening to know that these bears are out there somewhere, living their best life. And it feels deeply satisfying to see them presented so crisply, so closely, the drops of water they shake off their fur sparkling like diamonds in the far-northern sunlight.

Something about these programs is hyper-real. Partly, this stems from the fact that the films are enhanced. It is an open secret that the long zoom lenses used to capture animals up close can make recording real-time sound nearly impossible. And so the wet crunch of lions opening up a gazelle's rib cage, the hollow clack of birds' bills closing, the groan and woosh of a calving glacier—these noises are often recorded separately or even created by sound-effect artists and added to the shots later.

These sound effects, along with the orchestral music added to nearly all of the high-end wildlife documentaries, set the emotional tone for the vignettes on-screen. Are these seabirds supposed to be majestic or comical as they enact their mating dance? The music tells us. Whom are we to root for in this interaction of predator and prey? Listen for the menacing strings.

It isn't just the sounds that make these films feel more than real. They use the absolute highest-resolution cameras available. The images on any modern television are thus crisper than any available to previous generations. Special techniques such as slow motion, time lapse, and underwater filming capture details that you simply can't see any other way. Most series include at least one long-exposure shot of the night sky, a technique that makes the stars and Milky Way pop in a way they never will to your naked eye, no matter how far away you get from artificial lights.

The depth of focus in many of these films' shots is literally inhuman. On-screen, I can see individual feathers on the birds in the foreground and the distant mountain peaks—both sharply in focus. The effect is impossible to achieve in person with our soft, imperfect, biological eyes. What I am watching from beneath my blankets is in some measurable way more beautiful than real life.

Viewers reared on this high-gloss version of nature might struggle to connect to or appreciate the actual world: a place of wonder and beauty—but also mud, cold, heat, mosquito bites, and long intervals during which distant, hard-to-see animals don't really do anything. Why would I go outside and deal with all of that when I can stay tucked in bed, sipping an apricot La Croix, and get close enough to African lions to see the taste buds on their tongue?

In the case of natural-history films, we need to make more kinds of wildlife and more kinds of nature—including the nature in our cities and backyards—sexy. In the United Kingdom, the NHU's landmark series share the airwaves with NHU productions about British wildlife and working ecologists, which expands the British public's natural-history-video diet. But in the United States, we tend to stream just the landmarks. So there's an argument to include more nearby nature in them as well.

As an environmental journalist, I've had the extremely good fortune to go to some of the kinds of places where they film nature documentaries. I've been in the Amazon, days from the nearest road. I've seen humpback whales feed in groups by weaving together nets of bubbles. I've watched Tasmanian devils sunbathe, and snorkeled with sea turtles. But when I watch BBC documentaries about those places and those animals, I don't feel like I've returned to those moments. Instead, I feel like I've entered a fantasy.

It is usually a fantasyland without any humans. Chris Sandbrook and Bill Adams wrote, "The BBC has edited out the people of an entire continent…. Viewers are led to believe that Africa is not part of the modern world, and that Africans have no place there." The consequence is that tourists who go to Africa expect to see a pretty wilderness instead of a busy continent of 1.4 billion people.

I'm sympathetic to the idea that not every documentary about the nonhuman world has to be about the environmental crisis. Rather than a dour sermon about humanity's environmental sins, I just want a realistic presentation of "wild" animals as creatures embedded in a highly humanized world. Instead of showing the annual wildebeest migration through the Serengeti only via footage of the ambling ungulates, why not also show the fleets of jeeps ferrying thousands of tourists up and down the Serengeti's road network to watch the migration, or the villages and farms pressed up against the borders of the park?

By consistently presenting nature as an untouched wilderness, many nature documentaries mislead viewers into thinking that there are lots of untouched wildernesses left. I certainly thought there were, before I became an environmental journalist. This misapprehension then prompts people to build their environmental ideas around preserving untouched places and to embrace profoundly antihuman "solutions" to environmental problems, such as kicking indigenous people out of their homeland. In truth, wilderness doesn't really exist.

In his famous 1995 essay, "The Trouble With Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," the historian William Cronon demolished the concept of wilderness. Cronon argued that European settlers in North America had transformed their inherited idea of "wilderness" as worthless, scary, and unimproved land by reimagining it as a sublime, prehuman Eden. "The myth of the wilderness as 'virgin' uninhabited land had always been especially cruel when seen from the perspective of the Indians who had once called that land home," Cronon wrote. In reality, the Americas had already been thoroughly shaped by the nearly 60 million people who lived there when colonists first arrived. Agriculture and other intensive human use was widespread, covering 10 percent of the Americas' landmass; human-caused fires maintained grasslands and prairies; hunting, foraging, gathering, and replanting—sometimes in new places—regulated the populations and ranges of dozens of species.

The wilderness myth is simply factually inaccurate, in the Americas and elsewhere. It has also been a real stumbling block for conservation. With wilderness set as the gold standard for nature, any human influence has come to be seen as negative by default. The myth has thus ruled out any approaches to saving nature except walling it off and keeping humans out. Trying to "save the planet" with a wilderness mindset has been all about self-exile. It offers "little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, honorable human place in nature might actually look like," as Cronon wrote.

I find that the wilderness myth lives on, 26 years after Cronon's essay. And I worry that the BBC Natural History Unit is one reason why.

Models of a still-gorgeous-but-not-mythical approach exist, if you look beyond the landmark series. Take *Springwatch*, a live program produced by the NHU that has aired every spring since 2005 on BBC Two during a primetime slot. The show chronicles the gentle reawakening of life in the British countryside after the winter, and is filled with footage of butterflies, beavers, hedgehogs, and common urban birds. Signs of humanity are plentiful and not treated as eyesores. Baby foxes bounce on backyard trampolines. Honey bees drone in an apple orchard. The presenters, holding their cue cards in country lanes and narrating the action captured by nest-box cameras, sound a bit like sportscasters bantering their way through a slow-paced athletic event.

My response to *Springwatch* was totally different from the slack-jawed awe I felt watching *A Perfect Planet*. I found it extremely touching. I'll admit, I cried at the viewer-submitted videos of backyard birds and moths and ducks. Most of all, unlike the polished, screen-saver-esque shots of the Arctic or the Sahara in ultra-high-def, it made me want to go outside.

So as the NHU continues its work on *Planet Earth III*, I say let's keep the dancing albatross and breaching whales and snow leopards. But let's consider skipping the music in some scenes to foreground the silence or perhaps even the enthusiastic murmurs of the camera crew. Let's linger over the charm of the house sparrow and the bumblebee. Let's remind viewers that they can likely see these creatures where they live, and maybe even give them tips for doing so. And when showing the elephants or the agouti, let's pan back and show the road or the houses or the farms that surround them. Let's see the faces and listen to the voices of the people who live near these animals. I want to hear what they say.

Final Thought

from Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, 2007

"Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration."

Closing

Facilitator: We extinguish this flame, and we remember the warmth of our community, the light of our wisdom, the generosity of our sharing. We keep these in our heart until we meet again.

(extinguish chalice)

All (unison): Thank you for your loving hands, your loving heart, your loving ways. Thank you for the gifts you bring into the world each day. And if you ever doubt yourself, remember us, who love you well. We know all the gifts you bring into the world each day. So thank you for your loving hands, your loving heart, your loving ways. Thank you for the gifts you bring into the world each day.

On the Journey is produced by Community Unitarian Universalist Congregation at White Plains, NY for use in small groups. Each month (ten months a year) explores a different theological or spiritual theme.

Editor: Meredith Garmon. Email: OnTheJourneyGroup@gmail.com

Next issue, 2023 Apr: Money