

Wake Now My Vision

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme by Deborah Willoughby

I come from a family that spent a lot of time in nature, but it wasn't perceived as care for the soul. We didn't go on hikes, or canoeing. No long walks on the beach. Our camping trips mostly coincided with deer or duck season, and we'd return home with food for the winter.

I think a love of beauty and nature is part of the human experience. But how we encounter it is affected by a lot of factors. Maybe you've seen a depiction of culture as an iceberg, with some aspects obvious, while most of it is underwater, unseen. I'm thinking that our relationship with nature is one of those aspects of unseen culture.

My grandmother, Bythia Reeves, embraced the beauty of nature, planting dozens of rose bushes, filling her home with dogwood branches, and nurturing in me a love for trees and gardens and the joy of finding trillium blooming in the spring. She was born in Arkansas, and was just a baby when her father died in the Spanish flu epidemic. Her mother died a few years later. My grandmother was still young when she and her older sister moved to California to work in the fields. To her, I think that hard labor meant getting enough to eat. California seemed like a great big garden. My grandmother was sweet and gentle. The worst thing I ever heard her say was a comment about my mother's lack of interest in houseplants. "Ginger just kills her plants," she said.

Mom didn't grow up in the redwood forests like I did. She spent her childhood in California's San Joaquin Valley, and she knew about hard work. Once, many years later, Mom and I drove past a cotton field, which was something I had never seen. "Look at the cotton," I said. "That's so cool!" Mom muttered that there was nothing cool about cotton fields.

I had it easier, and I had the luxury of experiencing the outdoors as a place of wonder, not as a source of food and place for backbreaking work. I never had to pick cotton or peaches to help support my family, and I never worked in a cannery. I was a soft-hearted child, and I was mostly excused from participating in hunting and fishing. I stayed really close to camp during deer season. I remember sitting in the warm sand next to a beautiful creek, reading a library book and sipping a soda, which was a treat reserved for camping trips, and thinking I could not be happier.

Mom never really enjoyed gardening or houseplants, but she eventually developed a fascination with wild mushrooms. She loved photography, and she liked wandering around the woods taking mushroom photos.

Most of the men I knew growing up spoke of the outdoors as a place for hunting and fishing, for gathering firewood, for providing for their families. I wonder if they were also drawn by quiet time in nature but felt that talking about beauty and peace didn't fit with their definition of masculinity. After my dad died, I found some schoolwork from when he was in ninth grade. One assignment was to describe his vision of an ideal life. He wrote: "My ambition is to live in a small town near a lake and the mountains where fish and game are abundant."

I like to think that everyone in my family experienced the wonders of nature and found peace in our own individual ways.

Wake Now My Vision© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Last week I spent time explaining why our bodies need to be in a ventral vagal safe and social state in order to be able to cast a vision at all. Vision is our theme this month. If you weren't here or are unfamiliar with the reference to a ventral vagal state, just know that my point is that visioning doesn't come automatically or easily. We need to work on regulating our emotions in order to even see beyond the immediate. Fortunately, focusing on the immediate can help. If we're worried, anxious or depressed, we can't be visionary. But if we focus on the immediate – our breath, this moment, the colors surrounding us, we can calm the system and possibly get to the place where vision can happen. "If there is meaning in the past and in the imagined future, it is captured in the moment" writes Robin Wall Kimmerer. Noticing the Natural World around us can help us center– even in an urban area, there are plants and sky and clouds and bugs. But of course, many of us choose to live in the Pacific Northwest because we enjoy getting out into the woods or mountains or down by the water or to the coast, to surround ourselves with the beauty of the earth.

I am loving Kimmerer's book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. The book is a series of essays, and I've been reading it over time, a chapter at a time, not quickly or straight through the way I read novels. The essays weave scientific knowledge – botany, Indigenous knowledge and story, and personal narrative. These are personal reflections, much like what our Worship Associates share each week, and they focus on the connection between living things and efforts to create a more sustainable world. About half way through it, I was longing for someone to write an equivalent book for the Pacific Northwest because she grounded the early essays in the East: Kentucky and New York. The author is an enrolled member of the Potawatomi nation, a land I know from where I first served a congregation in Michigan. So, I recognized the Maples she tapped for syrup with her children, but it wasn't until some later essays when she started writing about the West and Doug Firs, Cedars, and fungus that the terrain really resonated for me.

I've lived more years of my life outside of the Pacific Northwest, but the fact that I was born in Seattle, that my grandparents and family lived in Kirkland, Everett and Marysville, Concrete and Sedro-Woolley, Pullman and Spokane, made the Pacific Northwest the land of my heart. When we didn't live here, we would return annually. When we lived in Chicago and I would get homesick, I'd go to the Shedd Aquarium because it had this Northwest theme – I would go in there and the smells would just remind me of home. Those smells of home, be they the sea or mountain air, or cooking smells, can comfort. They can also trigger if home wasn't a place of safety. Fortunately for me, they are smells of comfort. Snapping and cooking green beans always takes me back to my great-grandparents home in Concrete, every time, and it's a memory I cherish and a feeling of safety and joy. Only recently did my sister tell me that they were cooked for hours in bacon grease, which is probably why the scent is so evocative.

Last week I talked about how exercise and church can be ways to regulate our emotional state so that we can get to the place where visioning happens. Noticing the natural world around us is another entry into

that safe and social emotional state where visioning takes place. It doesn't have to connect to memory. "If there is meaning in the past and in the imagined future, it is captured in the moment."

Paying attention to the moment, this moment, can provide for us all we need to plan a future with wisdom and imagination. These essays are about paying attention to the moment and the natural world around us. A theme that arises is how everything is related. In one chapter she writes about the dissertation of a student of hers who explored the reasons for declining sweetgrass population. The student had wanted to write about something meaningful, and the Indigenous basket-weavers wanted to know why there was a decline in sweetgrass which they use to make their baskets. The surprising results concluded that "The sweetgrass that had not been picked or disturbed in any way was choked with dead stems while the harvested plots were thriving." It was the decline of basket-weaving that threatened the sweetgrass, not the harvesting of sweetgrass. Harvesting it actually stimulated growth. There are many examples of important relationships in this book, and she particularly explores the positive relationships between humans and plants to dispel a common European worldview that humans compete with rather than cooperate with Nature. "Everything is steeped in meaning, colored by relationships, one thing with another," she writes.

This fact of our interdependence, in my view, demands a vision of healthy relationships. That's how focusing on the moment helps us create a future. In this moment we notice our interdependency and that makes us want to build healthy relationships. I know, healthy relationships doesn't sound very visionary. It sounds kind of basic. But call it Beloved Community: a community in which everyone is cared for, absent of poverty, hunger, and hate, it becomes a vision and demands action and a lot of work.

Though Kimmerer's book focuses on plants, she makes meaning that resonates for human life. From her indigenous worldview, she doesn't separate plant life from animal life the way I just did in this sentence and the one before it. And in that way, this work feels religious and visionary.

It reminds me of our Transcendentalist ancestors. We just introduced some newcomers and old timers to Unitarian Universalist history and theology yesterday morning, and when we talked about the Unitarian Transcendentalists – you know, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller and their contemporaries, I was extolling the beauty of the Emerson quote about going into the woods. "*Standing on the bare ground,*" he wrote, "*bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.*" So let me read you from *Braiding Sweetgrass*, a passage that reminds me of our Unitarian ancestors. She writes,

"However alluring the thought of warmth, there is no substitute for standing in the rain to waken every sense- senses that are muted within four walls, where my attention would be on me instead of all that is more than me. Inside looking out, I could not bear the loneliness of being dry in a wet world. Here in the rainforest, I don't want to just be a bystander to rain, passive and protected; I want to be part of the downpour, to be soaked, along with the dark humus that squishes underfoot. I wish that I could stand like a shaggy cedar with rain seeping into my bark, that water could dissolve the barrier between us. I want to feel what the cedars feel and know what they know." End quote.

That quote sounds so Transcendentalist to me. And Penny Slingerland, who teaches this class with me, made the point that our Unitarian Transcendentalist ancestors were not just romantics who went into

the woods, like Emerson, to have a spiritual experience, but that these experiences then informed their politics and action. Henry David Thoreau who famously went into the woods by Walden Pond for two years and two months was arrested once for not paying his poll taxes as a protest against the Mexican-American war and the system of slavery in the United States. His book *Walden* and *Essay on Civil Disobedience* are, I hope, still required reading for students in this country. The transcendentalists criticized government, organized religion, laws, social institutions and industrialization. They took progressive stands on women's rights, abolition, reform, and education.

But I don't wish to romanticize our Unitarian ancestors or suggest that they had Kimmerer's insight from her Indigenous and scientific worldview. Emerson and Thoreau were complicit in the cultural belief in an extreme individualism which is on display in Emerson's essay on *Self-Reliance* and Thoreau's talk of self-sufficiency at Walden Pond, despite the fact he was living on Emerson's land and eating at the Emerson home not infrequently. They aided a myth of individualism that took root in this country but does not reflect the natural world in its interdependent reality. You could say they had a vision, but that the vision has, of late, failed us in many ways.

There are positive aspects to that vision, of course. The fact of interdependence means that we are constantly toggling between authenticity and belonging, or self-differentiation and staying connected. My guess is that the Transcendentalists were balancing a polarity that had privileged 'going along to get along' (the belonging aspect) over self-differentiation and asserting one's authentic self. This is probably what led to their progressive stand on women's rights, for example, because the women among them (like Margaret Fuller and Louisa May Alcott) no longer accepted this common cultural understanding of the roles of women as they self-differentiated and asserted their authentic selves. This leads to the celebration of the individual apart from the group. And I think we can trace a direct line from that assertion of the authentic experience of women in that age, to a current growing understanding that even the categories of man and woman don't describe the authentic experience of many people in our society anymore.

What we know now and what Nature teaches us is that the values of belonging and authenticity don't exist on opposite ends of a polarity, but both matter. We need to belong **and** we need to be authentic, we need to stay connected **and** we need to self-differentiate. That's the definition of interdependence and how nature works. "One thing I've learned in the woods," writes Kimmerer, "is that there is no such thing as random. Everything is steeped in meaning, colored by relationships, one thing with another."

Nature is steeped in meaning, colored by relationships, one thing with another. Deborah's family of origin didn't perceive nature as care for the soul, but as the source of survival. The Transcendentalists - who as we talked about in yesterday's class were Unitarian and of an educated class - saw Nature as care for the soul and Thoreau writes about a return to nature for subsistence as a cultural oddity.

However, I think Kimmerer's writing speaks also to those of the working class - to folks like Deborah's mother who spent her childhood working in the San Joaquin Valley, or her father who saw the outdoors as a place for hunting and fishing and providing for their family.

Like the Transcendentalists, Kimmerer draws upon Nature for teachings that matter to humans. I know I've already spoken about - I think in my first sermon back from sabbatical - I spoke about her chapter on the Gift of Strawberries where she describes the difference between a gift economy - her indigenous worldview - and a private property economy - the capitalist society we inhabit that provides untold

wealth for some and soul-breaking poverty for many. All this wisdom she finds by noticing her relationship to strawberries. (and to not throw Thoreau entirely under the train, he is also criticizing the capitalist society in *Walden*, but from his particular social location) In the chapter that I like so much because its setting is the Pacific Northwest rainforest, Kimmerer talks about how “There are different kinds of drops, depending on the relationship between the water and the plant. If tannin-rich alder water increases the size of the drops, might not water seeping through a long curtain of moss also pick up tannins, making the big strong drops ...?!” One thing I’ve learned in the woods is that there is no such thing as random. Everything is steeped in meaning, colored by relationships, one thing with another.”

This fact of our interdependence, in my view, demands a vision of healthy relationships. Call it Beloved Community: a community in which everyone is cared for, absent of poverty, hunger, and hate, it becomes a vision and demands action and a lot of work.

One of the challenges of a vision of social justice is that we want changes now, and it can take a long time to effect change. Well, a long time in our measure of time. “Two hundred years is young for the trees whose tops this morning are hung with mist” observes Kimmerer. Again, I think that by paying attention to the natural world, we can calm our spirits and remember how relative time is. And that change happens in seasons. There are the seasons where change is imperceptible, like in winter, when the leaves have fallen and growth has gone underground, invisible to the eye, but vital. Growth is happening, change is taking place. It’s just not like the change of spring when trees can bloom in the course of a single day, shocking us with vibrant color. That eruption of color doesn’t happen without the groundwork of the other seasons. In the same way, we build beloved community, where everyone is cared for, and we’ve rid ourselves of poverty, hunger, and hate.

“Be a tree,” writes Maria Gianferrari. *“And now, look around you— you are not alone. You are one of many trees. Our roots twine with fungi, joining all trees in the forest together. We talk, share food, store water, divide resources, alert each other to danger.”* Is that not a vision of social justice, where we share our food and divide our resources fairly?

I think a vision, whatever vision, whether it be for your life’s path, or your community, your church, the world, any vision, needs to be grounded like a tree. Deborah’s father had a vision to live in a small town near a lake and the mountains where fish and game are abundant. Her mother, a life where her daughter wouldn’t know the hard work of a cotton field. These visions were grounded in the realities of their lives. Our visions need to be rooted in the soil, connected with others, and stretched high above the canopy.

I think I’m focused on that grounding these days, because it seems that is what we have lost. We = Many of us = Society. Instead of being rooted and solid and strong, I see people blowing this way and that, uprooted and fragile, disconnected and alone. The vision we cast from this fragile position is transitory and thin. It can hardly be called a vision at all.

By observing the trees, or the squirrels, or gnats or rain, we can come home again to our Nature and ground ourselves in the world from which we were born and into which we will die. We plant our roots, connect with other life, and reach beyond what we could otherwise imagine.

“However alluring the thought of warmth,” writes Kimmerer, “there is no substitute for standing in the rain to waken every sense – senses that are muted within four walls, where my attention would be on me instead of all that is more than me.”

Let our attention be on all that is more than me. Let us waken our senses and hear the Earth call. Let us work toward a planet transformed by our care.