

Nature as a Conduit to Spirituality April 2011 Kris

To see a world in a grain of sand
and a heaven in a wild flower
To hold infinity in the palm of your
hand and eternity in an hour.

-William Blake

Chalice lighting
Morning has broken
Sing out the children

Meditation: I don't have a grain of sand, but I'd like you to hold a dinosaur gizzard stone as you listen to the meditation music.

John Denver: I feel apart of everything

Introduction:

Being the Unitarian Universalist as I am, I need to start by reassuring you that I believe that there are many conduits to spirituality: Art, music, poetry, physical activity, meditation, and serving or being with others are all conduits for many of us to the spiritual. For me, the natural world nurtures my spirit the most.

In preparing for this talk, I realized that there are so many directions to go, that there would be no way to give this topic justice. First, narrowing the topic was a challenge. I could address Native people's spirituality, references to nature in the world's major religions, the many facets of Unitarian Universalism relating to our principal of respect for the interdependent web of all existence. Secondly, when doing some research, I soon found that there more than I ever imagined about nature and spirituality. As a result, I decided to put further research aside, and go within—to reflect analytically upon how nature nourishes my soul; and then return to those whose writings have long resonated with me: among them are Rachel Carson whose book Silent Spring helped spark the environmental movement, Albert Schweitzer (a Unitarian, by the way) who articulated the ethic, Reverence for Life, the Tao Te Ching which was written over 2500 years ago by Lao Tzu or his disciples and offers much wisdom on how to live with integrity today.

The basic format for this talk will be in three parts. Part 1—operational definitions—god, spirituality, soul. Part 2—How nature is a conduit to spirituality; Part 3—taking action to find greater spiritual wholeness.

Part 1—Operational Definitions: God, spirituality, soul

God: for me, god is—the all that is, the beingness, the presence, the universal consciousness, the Great Mystery. I just use the word God—and am reclaiming this word thanks to Amy.

Spirituality has to do with pertaining to the spirit or soul. Often included in this are the experiences of connectedness, inspiration and transcendence" I resonate with Rabbi Abraham Heschel who says "To be spiritual is to be amazed."

I like how Albert Schweitzer addresses the word soul: "No one can give a definition of the soul. But we know what it feels like. The soul is the sense of something higher than ourselves, something that stirs in us thoughts, hopes, and aspirations which go out to the world of goodness, truth and beauty. The soul is a burning desire to breathe in this world of light and never to lose it--to remain children of light."

Part 2—Ways nature is a conduit to the spiritual, or the experience of the divine:

In reflecting upon my own experiences of spirituality and nature, I came up with the following: I feel most connected to life and spirit when I am in nature. Here are the words that describe my feelings: Connected, In touch with transcendence, Rejuvenated, Inspired, Grateful, Reverent, Prayerful, Balanced, In touch with myself, Feelings of Renewal, rebirth, being centered, and renewed hope. Well, that's a lot to fit into a talk. So Then I narrowed these down further into: connection, transcendence, Inspiration, Reverence, Awareness, and Harmony. 5 categories down from 9. Fortunately for all of you, I attended a talk entitled "Children of the Landscape" just last Thursday by Gary Furgeson, a naturalist and prolific author. His talk helped me boil the themes down to 3: Beauty, Community and Mystery. In reading hundreds of stories about nature from many different cultures, he recognized they taught three fundamental qualities of that are needed by us to live well in the world: Beauty, Community, and Mystery. My big list was easily adapted to this list of 3, and again I am reminded, that I am part of the whole of humanity, and my experiences are not unique to me alone. So the organizing principle: Beauty, Community, and Mystery. I'll start with Community.

Community (includes sense of connection, and harmony): There is no way we can separate ourselves from the Earth, or for the universe, for that matter—we are all part of a divine community. The whole earth—the whole universe is part of our body. We are stardust—as the Woodstock song goes—The elements within us and all creation as we know it were forged in the centers of the stars. The oxygen we inhale has been created by the plants and algae. Our cells are constantly replaced –from the air, water and food we take in. Our bodies will return to the earth. We are part of a complete interdependence of matter and energy (and possibly spirit). For me, these items have a spiritual dimension:

Antler Shell Rock Bone

Knowing I'm part of nature and not separate from it gives me a grand sense of connection with all that is. Everything in nature has a purpose. There are cycles in nature, and there are cycles within me. Participating in natural cycles makes my life more harmonious.

Harmonious action is an extremely important theme of Taoism. Tao Te Ching written by Lao Tzu—over 25 centuries ago teaches to live wisely, seek personal balance and integration with the cycles of nature as a path to inner and outer peace Tao is said to be the force that flows throughout all life and the one existing thing that connects the many things. The Tao underpins all things and sustains them. It is the source of the One within all as all existence derives its being from Tao. Verse 37 of the Tao Te Ching quotes how “People would be content with their simple, everyday lives, in harmony, and free of desire. When there is no desire, all things are at peace.”

Beauty (includes Inspiration and Reverence):

When we are open to the natural world of which we are apart, all of our senses are involved—sounds of birds, smells of earth, the light playing upon the water, the breeze touching our face. A deep sense of awe and humility is inspired. When my senses are in tune with the beauty—even of a weed growing in the crack of a sidewalk, my heart leaps, I feel a deep sense of gratitude, and prayer comes forth: As Ralph Waldo Emerson says: “prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view; it is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul”

We gain inspiration for our lives through these experiences. We realize metaphors for living—such as regeneration and rebirth as we view the new growth of spring; the strength that gentle water has to erode rocks over time; being like a sapling and bending without breaking. “Be still like a mountain and flow like a great river.” (Lao Tzu) And we can learn from Nature. The strength and flexibility of trees can teach us lessons in endurance. The mobility of rocky streams can teach us lessons in freedom and adaptability. The condensation and dissolving of clouds can teach us to let go of our pains

Albert Schweitzer was struggling with developing an ethic for living when he was inspired on a trip down an African river: “ Late on the third day, at the very moment when, at sunset, we were making our way through a herd of hippopotamuses, there flashed upon my mind, unforeseen and unsought, the phrase, "Reverence for Life." The iron door had yielded: the fundamental fact of human awareness is this: “I am life that wills to live in the midst of life that wills to live.” A thinking man feels compelled to approach all life with the same reverence he has for his own. Thus, all life becomes part of his own experience.” (*World Book Yearbook, 1964*). *In another writing he explains that this ethic can be the basis for a world philosophy because it forms and builds our spiritual relationship to the world, and shows us how we are linked with all living beings.* . As the wave in the ocean surges forward together with all waves, so must we feel in our life the life that is around us, with its privations and anguish. Then we will have an ethical code that is meaningful and can sustain a world philosophy. I have ventured to express the thought that the basic concept on which goodness rests is reverence for all life – the great mystery in which we find ourselves together with all living things. “

Rachel Carson was able to withstand the vicious backlash of the pesticide industry as well the internal turmoil of dealing with cancer by finding strength through the beauty of nature: "Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature -- the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter."

Henry David Thoreau proclaimed, "My profession is always to be alert, to find God in nature, to know God's lurking places, to attend to all the oratorios and the operas in nature."

For the beauty of the earth—music???

Mystery –(transcendence, awareness of the miraculous)

Science helps us to understand more of the workings of our universe, but the bottom line is that there will always be a mystery—that which is not known. Just as we need the tonic of wilderness, we need the sense of mystery. Looking at the Milky Way, or the frosted colored fuzz on a leaf, we realize that we are not the center of life on the planet. Science can help explain the hows, but not the whys of the universe. Reveling in our sense of awe and wonder at the miraculous, our consciousness expands. Our ego is transcended. We can live with the idea that the universe is perfect as it is. Eckart Tolle: “Awareness is conscious connection with universal Intelligence. Another word for it is Presence: consciousness without thought.” I find this Presence when I’m alone and in touch with the wilderness.

“Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy. “Abraham Joshua Heschel

Opening ourselves up to the mystery, power and beauty of the universe is a mantra for true mindfulness of everything we do. We can find solace that Nature always goes on, regardless.

Song: p. 175 “We Celebrate the Web of Life”

Part 3

I believe we can restore our spirits as we restore our planet by finding greater spiritual wholeness through our connections with nature. Above all we need to nurture our wonder and reverence for Nature knowing that we are part of nature and not separate from it.

Four possible ways: Rejoice, Learn, Reflect, and Serve:

1. Enjoy nature where you find it—in a small garden, a favorite houseplant, your pet. Rejoice in its splendor. Look with fresh eyes at our surroundings. We can play in the dirt:there's a natural serotonin booster in created by microscopic organisms in soil (An interesting, scientific reason for this can be explained by a recent discovery by UK scientists that bacteria in the soil have been found to have an antidepressant effect by increasing the release of serotonin in our brain.)

"Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement.get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed." Heschel

2. Learn and develop our awareness of the connections. Observe. Get to know our place. (On the back is a Bioregional Quiz that can be a fun starting place.) Rachel Carson says "It is not half so important to know as to feel." In being amazed, we can also become more in touch with ourselves.

Carson reminds us that one way to open your eyes is to ask yourself, what if I have never seen this before? What if I knew that I would never see it again?

3. Reflect on our intimate connections with our environment. As we breathe, take time to reflect that some the oxygen we breathe in came from the plant on the windowsill, and the carbon dioxide we breathe out becomes part of the plant. Or reflect upon the water we drink, and the endless cycles it has passed through—the animals and the ancients of which it was once a part. Reflect upon the paper we use and remember that it was once a living organism—a tree that provided nesting places for many animals. Reflect on the food scraps that we compost to cycle back into the soil to nourish life. The awareness of our unity with nature and the universe means that the community is not just our family or place of worship: it's all life on earth. Keeping alive our awareness of these intimate connections helps in developing our mindfulness of every thing we do, and will help us live more lightly upon the earth while rejoicing in the miraculous.

Through our reflections on these connections, we will be able to slow down, look within, balance our lives, make wise choices; choose simplicity; live with rather than against the cycles of nature.

4. Serve—help restore our earth. Unitarians are mystics with hands, right? So action is always a part of the answer. We can promote environmental literacy in our children, neighbors, and policy makers. Environmental literacy, defined by environmental educator David Orr, is “to see things in their wholeness.”

Work toward sustainable practices. “Conservation at its core is a spiritual act; it looks far beyond our own generation’s needs. This spiritual argument, made on behalf of future children, is the most emotionally powerful weapon we can deploy in defense of the earth and our own species.” Richard Louve author of Last Child in the Woods.

In serving, we must continue to nurture wonder and reverence for Nature.

" A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength."

— Rachel Carson (The Sense of Wonder)

In closing, I'd like to quote Albert Schweitzer again:

"Man can no longer live for himself alone. We must realize that all life is valuable and that we are united to all life. From this knowledge comes our spiritual relationship with the universe."

"It is a wholesome and necessary thing for us to turn again to the earth and in the contemplation of her beauties to know the sense of wonder and humility. "

— Rachel Carson (The Sense of Wonder)

Schweitzer's general philosophy could be stated as never to destroy life, unless it is unavoidable. "And by going out of our way to help any living creature in distress we are helping to discharge a debt – a debt of honor – which we owe to the rest of creation for its vicarious sacrifice to our needs. It is after all the only sane and reasonable course we can adopt."