The Practice of the Wild

A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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Delivered on April 8, 2018

I wonder if you can recall a time when a poem has transformed your ideas, your way of living or even your theology. Try to bring that poem from the back of your mind your mind hold it up right now. Mary Oliver, whose poetry I adore, wrote a poem called *Beans*. She writes, “*They’re not like peaches or squash. Plumpness isn’t for them. They like being lean, as if for the narrow path. The beans themselves sit quietly inside their green pods. Instinctively one picks with care, never tearing down the fine vine, never not noticing their crisp bodies, or feeling their willingness for the pot, for the fire. I have thought sometimes that something –I can’t name it —watches as I walk the rows, accepting the gift of their lives to assist mine. I know what you think: this is foolishness. They’re only vegetables. Even the blossoms with which they begin are small and pale, hardly significant. Our hands, or minds, our feet hold more intelligence. With this I have no quarrel. But, what about virtue?”*

This poem transformed me. It changed my thinking about nature and plant life-even the lives of animals. I know that might sound funny, but this poem makes me very aware of the sacrifice of nature for my living. The last line, *“But, what about virtue?”* is meaningful to me and creates a relationship with nature, one that teaches me lessons. You see, there is an etiquette of freedom in the lessons the wild teaches us. One of the lessons or practices of the wild is to remember we can enjoy our humanity with its flashy brains, its social cravings and stubborn tantrums, and take ourselves as no more and no less than another being in the wild. I recently read a book titled *The Practice of the Wild* by author Gary Snyder. He writes, “We can accept each other all as barefoot equals sleeping on the same ground. We can give up hoping to be eternal and quit fighting dirt. We can chase off mosquitoes and fence out varmints without hating them. No expectations, alert and sufficient, grateful and careful, generous and direct.”

While in the wild we are in continual togetherness with uncountable plants and animals. To practice good etiquette, the practice of the wild, we need to learn the songs, proverbs, stories, sayings, myths that come with this experiencing of the non human members of the community. Therefore, I relate to the poetry of Mary Oliver so well. She enters the wild with a notebook and observes. She observes so deeply that she understands the practice of the wild and through her writing teaches me. Author Gary Snyder writes, “Practice in the field, “open country” is foremost. Walking is the great adventure, the first meditation, a practice of heartiness and soul primary to human kind.” It seems that a short way back in the history of western ideas there was a fork in the road. The line of thought by the names of Rene Descartes, Isaac Newton, and Thomas Hobbs saying that life in a primary society is nasty, brutish, and short. All these city dwellers offering a profound rejection of the organic world. Most of humanity, foragers, peasants, and artisans has always taken the other fork. They have understood the play of the real world, with all its suffering, through the celebration of the gift exchange quality of our give and take. Gary Snyder tells us, “What a big potlatch we are all members of! To acknowledge that each if us at the table will eventually be part of the meal is not just being realistic. It is allowing the sacred to enter and accepting the sacramental aspect of our shaky temporary personal being.”

Let me give you an example of allowing the sacred to enter. The animal icons of the Inupiaq (Eskiomos) people of the Bering Sea have a tiny human face sewn into the fur, or under the feathers, or carved into the back or breast peeping out. This is the *inua,* which is often called the “spirit” but could just as well be termed “essential nature” of the creature. It remains the same face regardless of the playful temporary changes. Just as Buddhism has chosen to represent our condition by presenting an image of a steady, solid, gentle, meditating human figure seated in the midst of the world of wonders, the Inupiaq would present different creatures, each with a little hidden face. It is a way of saying that each creature is a spirit with an intelligence as brilliant as our own. Beans, for example, having virtue.

For those who would seek directly, by entering the primary temple, the wilderness can be a ferocious teacher, rapidly stripping down the inexperienced or the careless. It is easy to make the mistakes that will bring one to an extremity. Practically speaking, a life that is vowed to simplicity, appropriate boldness, good humor, gratitude, unstinting work and play, and lots of walking brings us close to the actually existing world and its wholeness. The etiquette of the wild world requires not only generosity but a good-humored toughness that cheerfully tolerates discomfort, an appreciation of everyone’s fragility, and a certain modesty. Gary Snyder writes, “Good quick blueberry picking, the knack of tracking, getting to where the fishing’s good, reading the surface of the sea or sky — these are achievements not to be gained by mere effort. Mountaineering has the same quality. These moves take practice, which calls for a certain amount of self-abnegation, and intuition, which takes emptying of yourself.”

An ethical life is one that is mindful, mannerly, and has grace. Of all moral failings and flaws of character, the worst is stinginess of thought, which includes meanness in all its forms. Rudeness in thought or deed toward others, toward nature, reduces the chances of conviviality and interspecies communication, which are essential to physical and spiritual survival. Richard Nelson, a student of Indian ways, has said that an Athapaskan mother might tell her little girl, “Don’t point at the mountain! It’s rude!” One must not waste, or be careless with, the bodies or the parts of any creature one has hunted or gathered. One must not boast, or show much pride in accomplishment, and one must not take one’s skill for granted. Wastefulness and carelessness are caused by stinginess of spirit, an ungracious unwillingness to complete the gift-exchange transaction.

Great insights have come to some people only after they reached the point where they had nothing left. Once a Spanish explorer became mysteriously deepened after losing his way and spending several winter nights sleeping naked in a pit in the Texas desert under a north wind. He truly had reached the point where he had nothing. After that he found himself able to heal sick native people he met on his way westward. His fame spread ahead of him. Once he had made his way back to Mexico and was again a civilized Spaniard he found he had lost his power of healing — not just the ability to heal, but the will to heal, which is the will to be whole: for as he said, there were “real doctors” in the city, and he began to doubt his powers. To resolve the dichotomy of the civilized and the wild, we must first resolve to be whole.

What is the practice of the wild? It is living that ethical life with mindfulness, generosity, and grace. It is the search for meaning and the journey to restore wholeness. There is a scientific theory called the Gaia theory. Gaia is the name of the Goddess of the Earth in Greek mythology. It says that everything on the earth, from the rocks to the birds to the people to the insects to the things that we have not even discovered yet in the deep ocean are all part of one living being – Gaia – the earth. Let us practice oneness. Let us practice being wild and enter the “big country” where ego, titles, social status, and rank mean nothing in a world where we are interdependent. Let us engage the practice of the wild which is synonymous with practicing Unitarian Universalism.

May it be so.