**Connecting Deeply With Nature**

**Rev. DC Fortune**

**UUCSV Sermon, June 11, 2023**

Today’s sermon is brought to you as the choice of Claire Lawrence, who won a sermon on the topic of her choice at this year’s service auction.

I will tell you three stories this morning to illustrate the chosen topic of how deep connection with our natural world can be a healing and renewing spiritual practice.

**Story one: Thoreau**

Today’s reading is among Thoreau’s most well-loved passages. Its appeal in our modern lives is easy to recognize: to retreat to the woods, to sit by a pond and watch nature do her thing; well, it is attractive to those of us who tire of 24/7 connection with an electronic world of information and data and emails and global crises. Watching the news and breathing the results of climate change this past week, who wouldn’t want to get away?

And, as beautiful as Thoreau’s words are, I need to offer some perspective on his essay.

Each week, Thoreau would walk to town to visit friends and pick up his laundry which his mother had prepared for him. He would attend church and enjoy Sunday dinner with the Alcotts, who would then pack him back to his simple retreat with a week’s worth of provisions, including pie.

Thoreau went to the woods to live simply, which he did.

But that commitment to simplicity and spartan life was supported by a network of resources invisible in his essays. The casual reader imagines him sitting peacefully in his cabin at the edge of the pond, eating nuts and berries or the occasional fish cooked over a crude campfire.

It is much easier to wax on about transcendental ideologies when one does not have to engage in the menial everyday survival tasks that keep our corporeal bodies alive.

That said, Thoreau understood, in his 19th century way, that the natural world of planet earth is every bit as complex and beautiful as the cosmos that spreads out before us in the nighttime sky. Nature is amazing and weird, and connected on so many levels, only some of which we can measure with manufactured instruments.

Trees in a forest communicate with others of their species where their roots meet underground. They share information about rain and sun and changes in the soil, their roots intertwine so as to support each other, anchored in the ground in a dense mat of organic matter that prevents one tree from blowing over, because the network of roots is so tightly woven that a lone tree, even the weakest among the grove, can be plucked alone from the web.

**Story Two: The ocean**

During my recent time away from the congregation, I took a healing retreat to Maine, where I was able to walk along some favorite trails in the woods, look out at the ocean and smell the salt air, and watch familiar rivers flow through channels carved thousands of years ago by retreating glaciers.

Like a lone violin in a room full of others, I found myself beginning to resonate to the music the world was playing. I found my body rhythms adjusting to match old, familiar surroundings and smells.

Looking out at the light chop on Penobscot Bay was a balm to my soul. Seeing the movement of the tides in Casco Bay and in the Back Cove of Portland felt like seeing an old friend.

The human body is a part of nature, just as the trees and flowers and animals around us. We share much of our DNA with other living things, and there is a good reason why connecting to the natural world is good for us.

When I was a young child, my aunt used to take me to the Parker River Wildlife Refuge on Plumb Island at the mouth of the Merrimack River near Newburyport, Massachusetts. Plumb Island is a barrier island that protects the coastline from Ipswich up to Salisbury, and is backed up by extensive salt marshes that are home to countless waterfowl and other wildlife.

There used to be long, low buildings that were closed up and unused in a couple places on the Island. They had an air of mystery and darkness around them which I could not understand. My aunt told me they used to be a sanitarium, or a hospital retreat for patients with polio years before. Patients would come to the sea to a special facility where they were able to get the medical care they needed, but at the edge of the ocean, with its fresh air, sunshine, and ocean to provide comfort and a diversion from institutional hospitals.

As a small child, I envisioned black and white movie images of long rooms with hospital beds staffed by nurses in crisp white uniforms, and patients wrapped in blankets and propped up in wheelchairs along a long, shaded porch facing the sea.

“They used to think that being near the ocean would heal people,” my aunt told me, as though such ideas were ancient and primitive, and clearly out of date.

This would have been in the late 1960s or early 1970s, and giant wards of people stricken with polio were a thing of the past by then, but the buildings remained, until they were eventually demolished for parking space for visitors seeking to lay in the sun at the water’s edge.

During the time of our seaside adventures, the goal of beachgoers was to get a gloriously bronze tan, as opposed to emotional or spiritual healing from the ocean’s edge, but I remember the feeling of relaxation once we got our towels and cooler set up, the beach chairs arranged, and I was granted permission to play in the frigid waves. Irish as we are, I never managed to get more than a revolving series of sunburns that blistered and peeled. I remained doggedly pink through the summer.

There was joy there, beyond the rose-tinted nostalgia of innocent childhood years, but something about being near that body of salt water has always done that for me.

**Story 3: the wood thrush**

**One summer during seminary, I had an outdoor job, repairing a dock in an environmentally sensitive marsh and pond. Often, I saw no other humans all day. I stayed busy when I worked, puttering and measuring and pounding. Sometimes I used gas-powered trimmers and other noisy equipment. I wore ear protection to muffle the sound of a two-stroke engine held at my hip, but it was nothing close to a quiet endeavor.**

**When I took a lunch or water break, I would turn off the engine, take off the ear protection, and sit in the shade of the path through the trees.**

**At first, all I could hear was quiet. The silence roared in my ears. As my heart slowed down to a resting pace and my body cooled off, I would begin to notice the sounds around me. Cicadas shrill in the trees. Frogs called to one another in the shallow, murky water at the edge of the pond. Jays screeched at one another, and occasionally a squirrel chattered at an intruder.**

**The longer I sat quietly, the more distinct the noises became. I could hear the sound of trucks on the far-off beltway of Route 128. I heard planes overhead. I heard flies and mosquitoes hovering in the thick air around me. I could begin to pick out the different, delicate sounds of birds I could not see. Red-winged blackbirds have a distinct song that is beautiful and hauntingly lonesome.**

**Occasionally, I would hear a pair of wood thrushes singing in the thick leaves of the edge of the pond. The wood thrush has perhaps the most perfect, beautiful, complex, free-style song of any of nature’s creations. It is so beautiful that it inspired Thoreau to write about it “Whenever a man hears it, he is young, and Nature is in her spring; wherever he hears it, it is a new world and a free country, and the gates of Heaven are not shut against him.”**

**Finding the stillness of that space, and letting it settle around me, and ground me, did as much to refresh me as any prayer or meditation practice I have ever experienced. Stillness need not be silence. It needs only to be intentional attention.**

**Bringing it together**

**In Greek, there are two words for the concept of time: Kairos and Chronos. Chronos, roughly translated means “the time of humans” and kairos is “the time of God.”**

**Connecting to the natural world around us fits into the latter of those two concepts.**

The power of nature to restore us to a grounded, healthier space, is a thing that frustrates science’s ability to precisely measure.

But let me offer you this example that works for me:

We know how the strings of a violin sitting alone on its stand will begin to vibrate and resonate when other instruments around it begin to play. The laws of physics make that happen. It helps me to understand it like water seeking its own level – the instruments align to sing as a whole, even if one has no bow touching the strings.

So what might happen when a living, human-shaped, group of hydrocarbons spends time immersed in an environment of living, breathing, natural species like a forest, or among the great plains? Would not our bodies begin to resonate and align with the rhythms of that natural world? Are we so arrogant as a species that we think ourselves immune from such natural power?

Our tears have the same salinity level as the ocean. What might happen, then, when we take our small human bodies and place them alongside the enormous ocean? Might that proximity cause our bodies to adjust and align with the natural world? Any teacher, Emergency Room nurse, or bartender will tell you that a full moon affects humans. How much more significant might it be to spend a stretch of time next to the ocean also ruled by the moon?

Our bodies contain complex chemical systems. The farther removed we are from the natural world, the more challenging it can be for our bodies to maintain a grounded, healthy state. In this way, spending time in nature can be a truly restorative exercise, connecting in a way that brings our bodies back into closer alignment with what works for us.

This is not to say that nature retreats can or should replace chemical therapies for physical or mental illness, merely that those treatments may be assisted by spending some intentional time, some *kairos*, immersed in the healthy chemical balance of the natural world.

Connection to the natural world is a vital spiritual practice for many people. Intentional time spent with nature can nurture and even heal deep ruptures in our spiritual beings.

As we head into the summer months, I encourage you to spend some intentional time engaged with the natural world around you. You don’t need to hike to the top of the nearest bluff or overlook – although you certainly can if that’s your thing – but take a few minutes to notice the smell of the woods, to listen to the sound of the water as the river moves past the shore. Put your feet on the ground, if you are able. Let the earth touch your skin. Put your toes in the water, lay your hand against the trunk of a living tree and feel the presence of life there – the branches and leaves overhead, the expansive network of roots beneath the earth. Listen to the birds you might hear. Notice the chittering of squirrels and chipmunks, observe the marching ants carrying food back to their colony in preparation for a long winter ahead.

Notice.

Connect.

Heal.

May we engage in this practice of mindful and intentional healing today and every day.

Amen.