

## WISDOM CIRCLES

October 2013

### How Do I Experience Myself As Part Of Creation?

Rev. Christine Robinson, senior minister of the First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque writes:

Nature, whether oceans, deserts, mountains, rosebuds, 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 reverences, 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 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 partied of God.

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 word humility is the same as the roots of words like humus, meaning fertile topsoil or earth, and human. Humility has connotations of groundedness and 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 became an object of fascination as we eat 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 practical 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.

### **Spiritual Exercise**

This month your spiritual exercise is to notice and write down all the details about the creation that surround you that you experience. Get yourself out of the house or apartment at daybreak, or sunset, or both, and experience what is happening to the earth. Notice the days getting shorter. In there a marine layer in the morning? Is it hotter or cooler than the day before? More or less humid? What direction is the wind coming from? Notice the bits of nature right inside our just around your home—plants, pets, flowers. Choose one experience in nature that you are willing to talk about in your Wisdom Circle.

### **Questions For Reflection**

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?

### **Words of Wisdom**

“It seems as if the day was not wholly profane, in which we have given heed to some natural object.”

~ Henry David Thoreau

“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.”

~ Terry Tempest Williams

“Fierce landscapes remind us that what we long for and what we fear most are both already within is.”

~ Belden Lane

“Tell me the landscape in which you live, and I will tell you who you are.”

~ José Ortega y Gasset

“All are but parts of one stupendous whole,  
Whose body Nature is, and God the soul.”

~ Alexander Pope

“If I spend 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.”

~ Meister Eckhart

“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.”

~ Nancy Wood

“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.”

~ Psalm 106, adapt Morley