

WINTER REFLECTIONS: NATURE AS SACRED TEXT
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, January 2006

Leaving Colorado to return to my native Pacific Northwest home seven years ago meant something very important to me: I would no longer have to shovel snow, at least if I lived west of the Cascades. I might get tired of rain, but I would rarely, if ever, have to deal with snow again.

For snow in Denver was a phenomenon to be reckoned with. We'd have a balmy winter day, the temperature hovering in the 60's in January, and if we'd been residents long enough to figure it out, we started thinking about whether we had enough coffee and milk and bread in the house, because it was very likely that within 36-48 hours, we'd be inundated with piles of fluffy, white snow. Newcomers could hardly believe it when they heard the weather forecast. But we longtimers did.

And nearly always, a warm Chinook wind would blow in over the Rockies for a day or so, lulling us into blissful gratitude that we lived in such a benign climate, there on the edge of the Great American Desert, where winter temperatures could climb into the 60's, and forgetting entirely that the Rockies formed our backyard, that our verandah might be sand and cactus and waterless plains but that our rear view was of 14,000 foot peaks and year-round snowdrifts.

Sometime during this shirtsleeve period of weather, the view to the west would change. From a few lenticular clouds in a bright blue sky, the horizon would change to a deep, sullen grey mass, the temperature would drop precipitously, and gradually, a few tiny flakes would begin to fall, slowly and stealthily, seemingly only in the air at first, then quickly whitening the lawns, slickening the streets, covering the trees and gardens with diamonds and turning the world whiter and whiter.

If we were out and about at such a time, we would make haste to go home. Nobody wanted to be out on the roads as the snow got deeper and the wind began to kick up. If we were at work, as I usually was in those days, we stood anxiously at the windows until we could legitimately leave our workplace.

As a school counselor, I was part of the team which mulled over the weather safety issues which schools must consider. One big one was how would we handle snowball fights on lunch? Another: Would it be necessary to send the kids home early and if so, how would we get the word out to the classrooms and the parents? And, biggest of all, would we have a snow day tomorrow?

The next morning, our ears glued to the radio, we'd hope: oh, please, God, let Jefferson County Schools be closed today! Of course, in Colorado, school superintendents are a hardy bunch; we often judged our superintendents on their leniency about snow days. The poor super who moved to Colorado from Minnesota was not very popular; was it his educational policies or the fact that we almost never got a snow day during his six year tenure?

And on that rare blessed occasion when the snow was so heavy and thick that all the schools along the Front Range of the Rockies closed their doors, when the wind piled drifts in every driveway, when only the snowplows could get out onto the highway, when we prayed that no laboring mother would have to go to the hospital, that no child would be sick enough to go to the doctor, that the power would stay on, snowbound, we enjoyed a day of enforced idleness.

No newspapers, no mail delivery, no way to get out of the driveway and go somewhere-----we stayed home, we played in the snow, perhaps with our kids or on our cross-country skis, our day was entirely different from any other day. No guilt about not working-----we couldn't! If we felt like shoveling ourselves out, we could, but chances were that some kind fellow down the block, just having fun with his new snowblower, would come dig us out.

And if the plow even came down our street, it would shove a mass of concrete-like grey slabs of ice right back into our driveway, so it made better sense to stay inside, have another cuppa something, and hope that tomorrow might be a second snow day! Or that the Colorado sun would return and make short work of two feet of snow!

We knew we'd have to pay for this respite in the work week---we might even have to go extra days in the spring, if we had too many days off, but it was worth it, at least until we got cabin fever.

Nature is one of those implacable forces that absolutely controls human behavior. We often think we have mastered Nature to some degree, but it only takes one earthquake or tsunami or hurricane---or blizzard---to convince us otherwise, at least temporarily.

During the terrible destruction of several natural disasters this past year, I watched the dreadful social and environmental and human consequences of Nature's power and I thought to myself,

"The earth is speaking to us.

The earth is telling us something.

We need to listen."

It seemed almost as if the hand of God had risen up in anger at the misbehavior of humankind, returning a punishment for exploitation, greed, and cruelty. Now, my theology has changed quite a bit over the years. I am pretty sure that hurricanes and other natural phenomena are not God telling us that we ought to teach intelligent design in school or persecute gay people or outlaw reproductive choice. But I am pretty sure that the earth, or Nature, can talk to us, and that we aren't listening.

In September, telling the children's story to Vashon Island kids on our Water Ceremony day, I spoke to them about my idea. I said:

"You know what I've been thinking about, especially since the big hurricane Katrina, which destroyed so many people and so much property in the South a few weeks ago. I've been thinking about how water talked to us through the hurricane. And I've been thinking about how the earth talks to us.

Does the earth talk to you? It talks to me sometimes-----I hear it when I listen to the wind or to the water on the beach. I hear the earth talk when I hear thunder or hear the howls of coyotes or see the deer alongside the path. These are all beautiful things that the earth says to us.

But what might the earth be saying if there was a great big storm? Or an earthquake? Or a flood? Do you ever wonder if the earth is warning us humans in some way? I think it might be.

I think when there's a big storm, the earth might be saying to us, "watch out! make yourself safe, because I have to fix things around here---the ground needs water, so I'm going to produce a snow storm or a big rain. and in a hurricane, watch out especially because your little houses aren't strong enough to survive and the dams you've built won't hold back the water!"

I think when there's an earthquake, the earth might be saying to us, "hey, guys, I've got to stretch, excuse me while I wiggle around a little bit and get more comfortable! hope this isn't too inconvenient for you. hope this doesn't cause you problems, but, after all, I am the boss around here and my word is law."

I think when there's a flood, the earth might be saying to us, "you know, you guys have cut down all the trees around here and the rain I need just runs down the slope and doesn't soak in, so it all goes into the rivers and overflows. sorry about that, but you might think about not cutting down all the trees next time."

I think the earth is speaking to us these days about a lot of things, and it's telling us that we need to remember that we are just human beings, we are not more important than the earth, and we need to take care of the earth, not use it up for our own selfish reasons.”

Since I spoke to the Vashon kids, I have done a lot of thinking about how Nature, or the Earth or Universe, communicates with us. We humans are always looking for credible sources for our understandings and to gain wisdom to make life-affirming decisions. Sometimes our sources are our own experiences, sometimes other respected human beings like scientists, sometimes they are the sacred texts of religious faith, all fallible and imperfect resources.

And then I realized that the natural world, Nature, Earth, Universe, might be seen as a wordless but utterly reliable sacred text itself, that virtually all our accumulated human wisdom has come from our studying and pondering the mysteries of Nature, that Nature is a primary or original, not secondary, text, and that so-called “modern” humans have lost sight of that reality over the millennia, trusting instead the interpretations of others, which may or may not be based on Nature.

I got to wondering: what are the lessons of Nature? what is the earth telling us in larger ways than words? are natural disasters the efforts of the living earth to heal itself, to achieve balance? in short, what are we missing as we seek answers to the big questions? is it possible that the answers are right in front of us, plain as the nose on our face, and we are overlooking them?

Since this is a Winter Reflection, it makes sense to look at the chapter of Nature's text entitled "Winter in Puget Sound", that period of time during the year when the weather is cooler and wetter and windier, when most plants die back, go dormant, when we seek shelter and respite from the weather, when we are limited in our activities by the season.

To examine what Nature might be saying to us through this wordless text, it is necessary to consider what our lives would be like if we stripped them of all the human-created layers that separate us from the earth's realities. Early peoples experienced winter from this point of view, with few layers between themselves and the earth. What did they learn from their experiences and how did they relate their learnings to the ways humans should best live?

What did the cold and the rain tell the earliest peoples? Weather forced them to create shelters and to use fire for warmth. The movements and patterns of the animals changed. What did that mean and how might they use that knowledge? Hunting, fishing and gathering activities were limited; how did they survive the barren times?

One of the things we know they learned was the importance of a reliable human community, where sharing food, shelter, and working together on survival tasks kept them alive. Another thing we know they learned was that Nature was all-powerful and to survive it, they needed to work with it, to watch its cycles, and to learn to predict them and cooperate with them.

Our earliest ancestors knew that they were not essential to the Universe, but as they learned about procreation, life, and death, they saw that it was not the individual who mattered most, dear as that person might be, it was the group, the species, the family, the community.

They learned that protecting the group had its benefits and also its challenges; protectiveness could easily become selfishness and cruelty directed at outsiders. They had to focus on what behaviors were most life-giving for the group. And sometimes this meant conflict with other groups.

They learned that their lives were enhanced by their efforts to develop a relationship with Nature, that Nature's elements-----the wind, the water, the earth, the animals, the vegetation-----fed them spiritually as well as physically and mentally.

With the development of technologies that allowed human beings to live farther removed from the Earth, from Nature, many of the lessons of Nature have been lost or subsumed in the complications of a technologically rich society.

In many ways, we have gotten stuck in protecting OUR GROUP's interests over the interests of other groups. OUR GROUP must live; if that means other groups must die, so be it.

Somehow we overlooked the lesson of Nature which says that all life exists in an interdependent relationship, that for us to live, we must keep others alive as well. That when we kill for food, we must express our gratitude. That we must be very wary about killing living things, human or otherwise, because we depend on other living things for our own survival.

Our much vaunted civilization has been achieved at the expense of others. There is no denying that fact. It is an outgrowth of our humanness, that we protect our group and oppress other groups, and it is because we have failed to read the writing on the canyon wall-----for us to thrive does not mean that all others must die. We must eat to live, but we must not take more than we need.

So what is the essential lesson of Nature, the one all other lessons seem to be built upon? I think it is, as Albert Schweitzer once said, “Reverence for Life”.

Nature, though “red in tooth and claw” still fosters life. For the Earth and its inhabitants to thrive in a healthy way, Nature’s laws must be obeyed. To the extent that we do this, we will experience wholeness. When we forget, when we distance ourselves from the Earth and its lessons, we increase our brokenness and our sense of separateness.

And how might we see that lesson writ large in Winter? In our gardens, we see our plants withering and returning to the soil, to enrich the ground. Animals wither and return to the soil as well, our bodies feeding the earth. Winter is a time to honor that process, to note that all things die to this life and become something different.

In Winter, the light is diminished, the air is cold and wet, and in our families and communities, we seek the fire and the light together, for warmth, for companionship, for survival. We are more vulnerable in Winter, to illness, to deprivation, to loneliness; we need each other in Winter, as animals shelter one another with their bodily warmth.

In Winter, we may experience as well a greater sense of solitude, whether we are cut off from others by power failures or flood or grief or illness. Winter is a time for inward reflection and rest, as we wait out the storm or the sorrow or the ailment, looking for meaning in the bleakness of the landscape, the dangers of our condition, the agony of our aching hearts.

And Winter demands from us compassion, that we reach out to our brothers and sisters of all species who are not warm and safe and protected. This is where the physical truth of Nature---that we are interdependent---intersects with the spiritual truth of religious faith. It is essential to human wholeness that all living things be nurtured and valued, not oppressed, not killed for selfish reasons, not ignored because they are ugly or dirty or sick.

The community of living things, from the highest form of life to the lowliest, is an interdependent system. Compassion for all life is our human reading of Nature's text. It is spelled out in the written texts of all world religions, and it forms an essential piece of our Unitarian Universalist religious faith.

We as religious people, as Unitarian Universalists, must deal with life and reality and Nature as it really is. We need the truths of Nature to build our lives upon.

We as religious people, as UUs, must look for Nature's truth and good in the midst of the chaos and storm that is modern society.

And we as religious people, as UUs, must build a loving community of persons who care and love and forgive and accept, and who nurture the earth, reading its lessons in the sky, in the water, in the animals and trees and rocks, and trusting the lessons of the earth to be more reliable than all the accumulated opinions of all those who do not see its truth.

We need Earth for its beauty, for the canyons and rivers and flowers and oceans; we need Earth for its lessons about interdependence; and we need Earth to lead us daily into a stronger connection with the Divine.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

#1064 "Blue Boat Home"

Benediction:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that we are only one part of this immense interdependent web we call Life. May we be ever mindful that our connection to Nature, to Life, is also our connection to the Divine, that spark which some call Soul, which some call God, which some call Cosmos. And may we seek to deepen and strengthen that connection in all we do in the days to come.

Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.