

## *Love of Place April 23, 2017 Sermon ©*

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On July 11<sup>th</sup> 1991 there was going to be a total solar eclipse in New England. I really wanted to see it in nature, not just in the parking lot of the industrial park I worked in. In college, my roommate had described an eclipse seen from the top of a mountain in Maine, and I too wanted to have that experience.

I convinced my friends Steve and Candace to join me. We all took the day off from work, and planned a trip to the White Mountains in New Hampshire on the special day. The plan was to get up early, drive to the trail head, and hike to the top of the mountain in time to see the eclipse.

I brought my dog Spud along. Spud was a big white dog, a rescue dog from a shelter. I imagine he got his name because as a puppy he might have looked like a big white fluffy Idaho potato. Spud was a dog who never barked. One of his former owners could not hear so Spud responded to hand signals. And when the doorbell rang, Spud would

walk over to me, then walk to the door. If I did not follow him, he would come back and repeat till I understood.

So Candace, Steve, Spud and I set out on a Summer's day with hiking boots, water bottles, snacks to sustain us, and maps to see a solar eclipse from a mountain top. We arrived at the trail head. There was a sign that described a clearing on the mountain. There was a circle in that clearing where, on the Summer Solstice, the sun would rise over a particular rock formation. I was excited. We were in a place where solar events were marked and celebrated.

We hiked and we chatted and hiked some more. It was taking longer than we expected to get to the top of the mountain. I started getting nervous about reaching the top in time to see the eclipse. What if we had come all this way to see the eclipse, and we missed it because of tree cover?

We started to look for any clearing where we would be able to see the sky. Spud was up ahead of us.

I called to him, but of course he did not bark to let us know where he was. Suddenly we humans came into a clearing and there was Spud lying down in the middle of a flat area. He had found our spot!! We settled in and looked around. We realized my dog had plopped down in the middle of the solstice circle. It was eerie...a coincidence?? The eclipse was beginning. We had our special viewers with us and could look at the sun without hurting our eyes. There were no clouds in the sky.

The eclipse was spectacular. The sun was eventually totally covered by the moon. It got noticeably darker, like after sunset. The wind died down. The birds stopped singing. The whole Earth was silent. We were silent too.

Then, eventually the sun began to return as the moon moved on. The breezes started up again and the birds began to sing. I had experienced something in nature that was totally awe inspiring. The lining up of sun, moon and Earth was a celestial event to be noted and honored. I was grateful to be on a mountain in nature to experience it.

I promised myself to take the time to experience more solar eclipses in nature, but I never have.

That experience is very special to me. It happened in a time in my life when I was no longer attending church, having left my childhood Congregational church years before. I had not yet found Unitarian Universalism. I was what is called a “none”, someone not affiliated with any religious institution. And yet... I sought out what can only be called a spiritual, a religious experience and I found it in nature. There, in community with two other humans and a canine, I experienced the holy, the divine, the sense that I was experiencing something bigger than myself, bigger than the earth itself, something that connected us to the Solar System and beyond.

Our Transcendentalist roots explore and hold up the connection between nature and the divine. According to Lawrence Buell, Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay, *Nature*, published in 1836 made “the far-reaching philosophical claim that physical nature is a mystic counterpart of

human nature that offers both a mirror of humankind's untapped potential and the means for individual and social redemption.”<sup>1</sup>

In *Nature* Emerson himself writes:

The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are always inaccessible;  
but all natural objects make a kindred impression,  
when the mind is open to their influence.  
Nature never wears a mean appearance.  
Neither does the wisest man extort all her secret,  
and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection.  
Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit.  
The flowers, the animals, the mountains  
reflected all the wisdom of his best hour,  
as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood.<sup>2</sup>

I love that recognition that the flowers and the mountains can affect us in our adult hood even as they delighted us in childhood. The affect may be different at different stages of our lives, but the ability to move us is always there.

I don't need to climb a mountain, however, every time I want to experience nature.

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings* (The Modern Library, Boston: 2006), p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 34-35.

I have a garden in my backyard. I plant bulbs in the Fall and they come up in the Spring. I have a vegetable garden. One of my favorite things to do is to go out in the last weeks of March, with snow patches still on the ground and plant peas, through the snow. I poke a hole with my finger and drop a pea into the hole and cover it up. That is all. It is the promise of the changing of the season. Then every few days in April, between Nor' Easters and showers, I check to see if the peas are poking up out of the ground. They popped up last weekend when it was warm. Planting bulbs in the Fall before the winter snow, and planting pea seeds before the snow has totally melted are acts of Faith for me: Faith in my connection with the Earth, with the turning of the seasons. I don't need to go to the top of a mountain to experience a Solar Eclipse to feel that connection.

A few years ago, my downstairs neighbors left a plastic blow up kiddie pool filled with water in the back yard over night during a heat wave. I woke in the middle of the night to hear splashing. I saw black shapes in the pool, three smaller ones and one larger one on the sidelines. It

was Mama raccoon with three raccoon babies playing in the pool. They splashed and wrestled with each other for half an hour before I heard a familiar sound pshhhhhew. They had poked a hole in the pool and it deflated.

One feature of my yard is a little, tiny pond that was created to catch the rain water from the roof of the house. We direct the rain spout into the little pond. One spring day I heard a peeper in my back yard. As I told the children, a peeper is a small chorus frog known for its chirping in the spring. But peepers live in marshes and my back yard is not a marsh. Somehow mama frog had hopped the quarter mile from the Alewife creek area to my back yard.

My little pond fed by rain water off my roof was hospitable to a tadpole growing into a little frog. I felt such gratitude that my little peeper was serenading me from my back yard. I felt like I was a partner with nature in creating a place where peepers are welcome. I have seen peepers, bunnies, skunks, raccoons, possums, and groundhogs in my tiny backyard. I am not always glad to see them. Trying to see if Mr. Skunk

has left the environs of my car in the driveway, when I am trying to get to work in the morning, slows down my morning routine. Is that so bad, to be slowed down, to pay attention to nature? I was really angry with Mama Groundhog and her offspring as they mowed down my peas, and lettuce and everything else in my veggie garden a few summers ago. But my energetic downstairs neighbors built a fence and now we share: Mama Groundhog eats anything that grows over the fence and leaves everything inside for humans and birds.

How do you connect with nature? Do you pay attention to it as you leave your house for the day? Do you feel the sun or the breeze on your cheek? Do you hear the returning song birds? Do you notice the daffodils in bloom? Paying attention to nature is our first step in loving it, tending to it, caring for it. The Earth needs our help but first it needs our awareness.

Some of us are going for an Earth Day hike later today. On that hike I will invite people to do a brief meditation to connect all our senses to Nature around us. But here and now I would like to invite you all to

connect to the Earth. Please rise as you are able. If you wish to remain seated I invite you to join in the meditation where you feel your connection to your seat with your feet on the ground.

I invite you into a time of meditation.

*If you are comfortable and balanced, close your eyes or lower your gaze.*

*Breathe deeply a couple of breaths.*

*Feel gravity connecting you to the Earth through your feet on the floor or through the seat beneath you.*

*You are connected to the Earth.*

*Feel the solidity of that connection.*

*Feel roots growing from your feet down into the Earth connecting you to the Earth's rock and core.*

*You are grounded in the Earth.*

*You receive sustenance from the Earth.*

*You grow out of the Earth and are connected to it.*

*Breathe into that connection, that support, that grounding.*

*It is always there for you.*

[PAUSE]

Now slowly bring your awareness back to this sanctuary, this gathering,  
this moment.

Open your eyes, and if you are standing, be seated.

I think back to Thoreau's time in the woods. In his book *Walden*, he  
says:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, ... to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be ...sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Grammardog Guide to Walden*, by [Henry David Thoreau](#), Grammardog LLC, [ISBN 1-60857-084-3](#), pg 25

My friend John's experiences at Walden Pond are not as rustic as those of Thoreau, though even Thoreau wasn't totally disconnected from Concord. He could hear the cows mooing in the fields and the church bells ringing. But John can swim in the quiet summer dawn or take a walk to hear the deafening sound of the peepers and the bull frogs and connect with the divine in nature.

We can do it too. We can take a walk in nature. We can listen for the birds when we open our door in the morning. We can look for the buds and the unfurling of leaves. My friend Steve once told me he loves how soft maple leaves are the first day they unfurl. He is right. But to experience that softness, I need to watch each day, pay attention, until the moment comes.

If we are going to save the Earth, we need to love it, feel our connection with it. Through our love we will be moved to watch, pay attention and tend to our Mother Earth.

May it be so.

Blessed Be and Amen.