

“Old man, up now, get yourself home and talk to your children, spare them any suffering. In this matter I know far more than you. There are many birds flying to and fro in the heavens, lit up by the rays of the sun, and not all are omens. As for Odysseus, he has perished far away, and if you had died with him, then you would not speak so about the reading of signs.”

From Homer's *Odyssey* Book 2, line 177-192

### **Sailing on Dry Land**

Midcoast Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

Damariscotta, Maine

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The Rev. Andrea Greenwood

#### **Opening Words from E.B. White**

Sometimes I feel as though I were a diver who had ventured a little beyond the limits of safe travel under the sea and had entered the strange zone where one is said to enjoy the rapture of the deep.”

**Reading** from *The Home Place: Memoirs of a colored Man's love affair with nature* by J Drew Lanham

*This is a beautiful and riveting book, in which Lanham – a biology professor and professional birder -- tells us the story of his life, which he shared with his grandmother – a woman one generation removed from slavery, who knew all about herbs and healing and lived with one foot planted in the South Carolina clay and the other in the spirit world. In this book, trees in the forest are so entwined with family trees that it feels like he is describing the exact place where nature and human nature come together.*

I hated Sundays then. I came to hate most Sundays because they caged my mind, body and soul into four walls. I couldn't look beyond my physical discomfort to see that going to church was a kind of social glue. Black folks and church in the south are stuck fast together like cockleburs on a dogs back. Church for black folks has always been an escape from a week of toil, a place of refuge where the community's news can be shared. Sunday was one of the few days we could call our own. Back then, though, all I knew was that I hated going to church.... I was pulled from the roaming rhythm and natural worship that truly fulfilled me. A church Sunday meant that God was suddenly confined to something that seemed much less miraculous than the woods and fields where creation was so evident. Inside the church wall, the wind didn't blow and the bobwhite quail didn't call, the hawks didn't soar and creeks didn't gurgle.

Later, through studying with great people, and reading folks like Aldo Leopold, and EO Wilson – I came to see church as a place with a heart-filled plea to notice, to nurture, to care. Nature and god are the same thing. Evolution, gravity,

change and the dynamic transformation of field into forest move me. A warbler migrating over hundreds of miles of ocean and land to sing in the same tree once again is as miraculous to me as any dividing sea.

There is righteousness in conserving things, staving off extinction, and simply admiring the song of a bird. In my moments of confession in front of strangers, talking about my love of something much greater than any one of us, I become a freer me. I am reborn.

I find myself defined these days more by what I cannot see than what I can. As I wander the predawn dark of an autumn wood, I feel the presence of things beyond flesh, bone, and blood. My being expands to fit the limitlessness of the wild world. My senses flush to full and my heartbeat quickens with the knowledge that I am not alone.

### **SERMON Sailing on Dry Land**

Do things ever happen to you that seem like signs? A friend discovers she was born on the same day her most favorite writer left this earth. Your father dies, and the next morning a bird flies calmly into your house, and stays for weeks, and is perfectly tidy, and somehow keeps you tethered to both earth, and heaven; to past and future. Even if you are not sure you believe in such things, it can be hard not to notice when a path opens up before you, marked somehow by omens.... And then you have to wonder, of what? What does this strange series of events mean? Are these coincidences random, or do they point somewhere, and how can I find out?

Not quite two years ago, I took a little trip out to Amherst, Massachusetts. There was a memorial service for the man who had been my college advisor, and I felt called to attend. I wasn't entirely sure why - I had not kept in touch as life unspooled. While I was driving, I thought repeatedly that this was silly; was using up a whole day; that I did not know anyone, and no one would know the difference if I was there, or not there.

Everything I fretted about was true. It took all day. I did not know anyone. But the experience moved me, as in, caused a shift of the building bricks that hold me up without my being entirely aware of them. Light moves in me differently because of that day. And later, it occurred to me that in all my calculations about the worth and importance of my attendance, I had left out me. I knew if I was there or not. It made a difference to me.

I felt very singular as I listened to former students mention the torture David required; that if you wanted to work with him, he would delay and deflect and, faced with persistence, finally he'd suggest a breakfast meeting. If you were willing to get together at 7 am, he would take you on. Decades later this is what they recalled:

having to get up at dawn to meet the beaming Buddha-like man, who would notice if they seemed to lack energy. They were laughing, as if in recognition of his stealth wisdom.

I was dumbfounded. This bore absolutely no resemblance to what happened to me. I was assigned to David my first term, stayed with him, and never even realized others were fighting to work with him. And I was completely oblivious to the time. I worked as a lifeguard from 5 to 7 every morning, and it seemed completely natural to go see David afterward. It never crossed my mind that I was undergoing a test.

So at this memorial service, I found myself thinking a lot about how such tiny differences among us – are you an early riser, or not? -- radically changes the meaning and evolution of an encounter. A trial to one person was fun for me; a time of companionship and shared observations, and a major influence in my decision to enter seminary, which was in many ways an extension of the courses David taught in nature writing, American landscapes, the literature of travel; of observation and detail. The small school I attended was just starting out in the 1970s, and the Smith family arrived at the beginning. For at least one entire semester, the entire half-dozen of them, ranging in age from 3 to 40, climbed a ladder each night, like sailors up the rigging, because their house on campus had no second story as yet; just mattresses spread on the decking of an imagined future. It was as if a schooner was emerging amidst the fog of silver boughed apple trees. David was, in fact, a sailor, and had done a solo trip in which he followed the path of Odysseus. In my day, he named the twin maple trees that stood atop a nearby hill Castor and Pollux, bringing the heavens to earth, perhaps; surrounding the campus with a mythic air that made it possible to believe we could step through a veil and discover new worlds.

*Roots, hold me close; wings, set me free; we pray in song.* The campus was my experience of natural theology that holds out the promise of transcendence and transformation; of abiding mystery, while also being concrete, and grounded, consisting of things we can see and taste and touch– the blowing wind and the gurgling creek and the grasses that rustle and wave and scratch. Nature excels at small differences, the tiny mutations that spin out new realities, which is precisely why it can be a source of salvation – it is an escape from the sameness we sometimes feel; of strip malls and big box stores that crop up on the landscape no matter what city we are in; the tasks that never change; the mundane repetition of days that march along; the sense that today will play out essentially as yesterday did. As Drew Lanham said in the memoir we heard from earlier, the woods and fields made creation so EVIDENT; as if God was on the loose right there.

In an E.B. White story, the heroic journeying mouse Stuart Little teaches school for a short while, and he asks a question, to which one boy replies: “A shaft of sunlight at the end of a dark afternoon, a note of music, and the way the back of a baby’s neck smells if it’s mother keeps it tidy.”

“Correct,” said Stuart. “Those are the important things. You forgot one thing, though.

Mary Bendix, what did Henry Rackmeyer forget?"

"He forgot ice cream with chocolate sauce on it," said Mary quickly –

This, my friends, is where you enter the story. With the ice cream. About a month after I attended the memorial service, I was at Dorman's Dairy, on the Thomaston/Rockland line. My mother and I had just been to the transfer station with the recycling and the trash, and we stopped for one of the most important things in life, and moved into the shade to slow down the melting. There were girls in the trees, with parents dressed rather formally. My mother thought the suited man was staring at her, but I thought it was because he could tell I was sort of listening to him. I felt like I kept hearing them say "UU." So finally, I said, "Excuse me, but are you talking about Unitarian Universalism?" Well, Tim and Karen were indeed, and we had a nice time connecting and Tim was interested in the schooner on my mother's t-shirt, which was from a family reunion. This prompted her to say; oh, if you're from Damariscotta, you might know my cousin Johnny, and they did know of him... So I decided that I should go for a connection, too. I said, I can't remember the name of the small town he lived in; I just know it was near Round Top, (You see I live a life measured out by ice cream stands).. and he didn't exactly have a distinctive name, but by any chance did you know David Smith?

And it turned out Tim had been his doctor. And the sense that he had genuinely cared for this man was palpable. And it all felt so weirdly impossible and random, and also like destiny.

So, what does this mean? On a completely practical level, it's why I am here today. Karen told your minister about this encounter, and Erika called me, and I said I would come preach some day... but really, what does it mean, beyond the "oh, small world, isn't that a coincidence" kind of chit chat?

Providentially, perhaps, I had got to just about this point when I set aside my sermonizing in frustration, and picked up this week's *New Yorker*, only to find an article by a college professor teaching a seminar on the Odyssey. His 82 year old father sat in on the class, having promised not to speak; a promise he promptly and continuously broke. When the semester was over, father and son ended up going on a cruise retracing the path of Odysseus through the ancient Mediterranean. Well. How odd, and timely. I had picked the quote about omens a month earlier. Clearly the fates are intervening.

But to what end? I've been thinking about this for months now, and right now it seems that these odd coincidences and connections are a prompt to help us think about time; about how we revisit various incarnations of ourselves; about how we can grow and change, but also still be who we are. In Lanham's memoir, he remembers himself as itchy and impatient in church; boxed in when he wants to be out, one with creation, but now he feels expansive and free because of all that is contained in those church walls. They hold his childhood self and all of evolution, and his ancestors, and the future, too. It isn't the church that's changed. He has.

And yet he hasn't changed so much. We recognize him; the nature loving boy and his God of life; of growth.

Exploring the spiritual significance of landscape and cultivating that sense of being at home was certainly a legacy of my college days, but it was motivated by all the time I spent at my grandmother's. Why did I feel I belonged there, in the damp fog of the rocky coast, and nowhere else? Drew Lanham calls his book *The Home-Place*, exploring the patch of earth where he grew up. And for many years I thought of the Odyssey as a kind of meditation on home; on returning to the place that has a claim on your soul. The poor man is lost, and can't get back; he has to endure travails and outwit predators, and when he does finally arrive back in Ithaca, he is almost unrecognizable. – as if the same gods who delivered him are also testing everyone.

But I don't think that is quite it anymore. It isn't about getting home so much as it is learning to be at home in the world; in this insecure and ever-changing globe that holds us and spins us around. Last year I read Helen MacDonald's *H is for Hawk*, and there is this incredibly moving passage in which Macdonald has seen a herd of deer walk along a narrow path at the bottom of a dry valley. She says they resemble charcoal cave paintings made manifest, and is bewitched as they disappear before her, leaving behind only wind and wheat and an exhilarating sense of connection to the land and its history. The mysterious powerful beauty of it all just floods her, and she wants to share it – for this to be a collective experience.

Soon, walking home, Macdonald crosses paths with an old retired couple she has seen repeatedly over the months; they greet and she speaks of what she has seen. Yes, the older man says; they are special aren't they; and they are enjoying their shared secrets of a place. He is beaming, and then his expression changes.

"Doesn't it give you hope?" he says suddenly.

Hope? I ask

Yes, he says. Isn't it a relief that there are still things like that; a real bit of old England still left, despite all these immigrants coming in?

Macdonald writes, "I don't know what to say. I nod a goodbye, sad as hell, and trudge home through the rain."

Home can be a terrible idea, too, I saw in that exchange. The idea of belonging can mean we are pushing other people off; that we are ignoring histories other than the one that reassures us. Claiming the land can sanctify a form of selfishness; making things appear natural and timeless rather than the product of evolving choices, and of power. I think of Drew Lanham, saying that he is starting to define himself more by things he cannot see than what he can; the presence of things beyond flesh, bone and blood. The wilderness conveys a sense of limitlessness, and that is what he sees. On one level, he may be talking about the spirit – things that can't be seen. But he might also be talking about something more literal – in the world of birding and ecology, he doesn't see people like him; people of color; descendants of slaves whose

relationship to the land was not natural, or chosen. “Limitlessness” takes on a different meaning.

A month or two ago, I went to hear Christina Baker Kline talk. It was the day of publication for her novel about Christina Olsen, the woman in the famous Andy Wyeth painting, and Kline told this incredible backstory of how she had come to this project. Her parents were academics in the South, very active in the civil rights movement of Mississippi in the mid-1960s; until they were run out of town. The family ended up in Bangor, as far north as they could get without becoming Canadian, she explained. Kline said her father was determined to expose the children to every cultural icon in the state. She showed slides of them picnicking on the grounds of the Olsen house, and examining the corn with E.B. White. At every school vacation, they would pile into the car and drive, unannounced, to the home of writers and poets and artists, and just go talk to them. She said that because of this, she had been thinking about Christina Olsen since childhood, but I remained back with the slide of E.B. White, and his farm, walking down a dirt road with this girl who appeared out of nowhere; who had been driven from the place of her birth, and landed here; way down east, and up north.

Once upon a time, the mark of a civilized people was to show hospitality; to welcome the stranger and the wayfarer. This was not a naïve belief in the goodness of everyone, but a moral code; a recognition that if we treat those who wash up on our shores respectfully, perhaps we will be met similarly when life carries us to far-off places. This was a tool of survival in a world where political boundaries were in constant flux; when the territory could suddenly become unfriendly, and when word of mouth was how we learned what was happening in the great beyond. Those arriving strangers may be harmless, or they may be villains, but we are wise to treat them all the same; to recognize the necessary and precarious relationship between guest and host.

How do we appear in one another’s lives? Is it really ever out of nowhere? It’s a little bit funny, this idea of following the path of Odysseus – after all, the man was lost for years and years. Maybe what we are looking for is the creativity with which he responds to the predicaments he lands in; the attention he pays; the people he encounters; what he learns to carry.

Once I learned that we humans are oriented in one way by the east, where each new day peeks up over the horizon; but in a deeper way by the north, because of the polestar. Because of that bright star, north stands for a kind of permanent sense of home, of immortality, a reaching up towards everything that will outlast us. But no matter where we stand, the future is always behind us, because we can never see it. I love this image; the idea that we can look out over all that has happened; but that what is to come remains at our backs. It is not ahead, but behind. Maybe that day at the ice cream stand, with the girls in the trees above us, and the memory of David in the wind, we were learning how the past and the future can greet each other, and beckon us forward, into a shared new life. So may it be.

**Benediction** from Birches, by Robert Frost

I'd like to get away from earth awhile

And then come back to it and begin over. ...

I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,

And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk

*Toward* heaven, till the tree could bear no more,

But dipped its top and set me down again.

That would be good both going and coming back.

One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.