

“Seeking the Sacred in Nature”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Since my earliest contacts with UUFB members back in 2016 it has been clear that spending time in nature is important to many of you. The Gallatin Valley, the state of Montana and Yellowstone National Park offer incredible and diverse opportunities to enjoy nature and what it has to offer in each season of the year. Many of you have shared with me the kinds of activities you enjoy in the out-of-doors. The activities you have mentioned to me include hiking, skiing, camping, boating, fishing, watching wildlife—large, small and in-between—as well as gardening to name just a few. You have shared with me how being in nature is stimulating, energizing, calming, healing and inspiring. As you have shared your activities and experiences in nature with me, I have frequently been reminded of some of my own. Like many of you, being out in nature is important to me. Being out in nature is where I prefer to get exercise, where I am most likely to experience awe and where my spirit is uplifted. I agree with Alan Gussow when he asserts that humans require support for our spirits, “and this is what certain kinds of places provide.” Since my twenties or possibly even earlier, I have known that nature is where I tend to turn whenever I feel moved to seek that which is sacred.

I recognize that some of you may have some discomfort with the word sacred. I can understand that. For anyone who is an atheist or an agnostic, the definition of sacred that refers to something connected with God or gods can be problematic. But there are other definitions of sacred, definitions that are broader and much more open, definitions that I believe almost anyone can feel comfortable with and embrace. Here are two such broad and open definitions. The first is “entitled to reverence and respect.” The second is “highly valued and important.” These two definitions allow us to consider all manner of things to be sacred. Life, justice, beauty, truth or even a specific place or experience can be considered sacred using these two definitions.

As I stated a moment ago, nature is where I typically turn whenever I feel moved to seek the sacred. From my studies of numerous religious traditions, I know I am not alone here. In the Christian tradition there are numerous scriptural passages where people sought and experienced the sacred in nature. Some of the passages speak of Moses and Jesus seeking the sacred in nature. In Chapter 3, Verse 5 of the Book of Exodus, the second book of the Hebrew Bible, it is written that Moses encountered God while on a mountain. In this passage God tells Moses, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” And in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John we find that as the day of Jesus’ death was approaching, he went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. In the Buddhist tradition it is taught that before becoming the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama spent time living in remote jungle thickets as he studied with a spiritual teacher. His eventual spiritual awakening came about while sitting at the base of what is often referred to as the Bodhi tree. It is taught that as he took a seat under the tree, he made the vow not to arise from the spot until he attained enlightenment. The founder of the Muslim faith tradition, Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, received his first revelation from God in a mountain cave he would frequently visit to pray. This revelation, along with others he would subsequently experience, form the verses of the Quran, the most sacred text of the Muslim tradition. And on this continent the Vision Quest has been a common rite of passage and spiritual practice of Native tribes of the Plains for longer than we can know. Doing a vision quest often involves going to a place in nature that is considered sacred. Places such as the Black Hills for the Sioux and the Crazy Mountains for the Crow are such sacred places. A Vision Quest involves spending one to four days in some sacred place while fasting and praying. The fourth chapter of the book *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* is about the Vision Quest. In our own faith tradition Henry David Thoreau may be the best-known person to seek the sacred in nature. In his book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau wrote: “Nature is a greater and more perfect art, the art of God.”

It isn't just people who identify with a particular religious tradition or teaching who seek the sacred in nature. Albert Einstein, possibly the greatest physicist of the 20th century, identified himself as an agnostic. Yet he found in nature the inspiration and the revelation that propelled many of his theories, including the theory of relativity. Three quotes may provide clues about how Einstein thought and felt about nature. "Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better." The second is: "Joy in looking and comprehending is nature's most beautiful gift." And third "There are two ways to live: you can live as if nothing is a miracle; you can live as if everything is a miracle."

I don't know about you, but I find that life feels richer and fuller when I hold the latter perspective. When I am open to the experience of awe and wonder when perceiving even the most simple or everyday things like a flower, a rainbow, a snowflake, or a sunrise, I feel more connected, more centered, more vibrant, and significantly more grateful than when I am unable or unwilling to recognize the miracles that exist in every moment. And when I immerse myself in nature it seems much easier to perceive the miracles that are at my feet, above my head, surrounding me in every direction and coursing through every cell in my body.

Through the course of my life there have been a number of specific places, places I would return to again and again, where I would seek the sacred. Finding such places has been important as I moved from one part of the country to another. Each time I would move from one location or state to another I would begin visiting and exploring natural settings close to where I was living. Frequently my intent was to find a place where I felt connected to that which is greater than I can comprehend. Sometimes the place in nature was expansive, like sitting atop a mountain along the continental divide where I could see mountains and valleys 60 or more miles away, or on the beach of Lake Michigan where the distant shore was beyond the horizon line. Other times the place in nature was confined, such as in a garden of flowers or at the base of a particular tree in the woods. The size of the place was less important than the fact that I found the spot to be special. I imagine some of you have or have had similar places.

In a paper titled "Experiencing the Sacred in Nature," John L. Swanson, Ph.D. shares his thoughts and perspectives on the topic of this sermon and his paper. Very early on Swanson writes that the purpose of his paper is to help us answer the question: "How can we know through our own experience, the sacred in nature?" He then goes on to state: "This article: looks into the ways we experience the sacred in nature; identifies the common characteristics of these experiences; and explores ways to cultivate them."

Swanson cites noted psychologist Abraham Maslow's work related to what are referred to as "peak experiences" to identify some of the common characteristics of sacred experiences. And he notes that "Maslow and subsequent researchers have found nature to be the most common setting in which peak experiences occur." And a bit later he shares a passage written by the Swiss Psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology, Carl Jung. Jung had experiences in which he felt that he would merge with nature. He wrote: "At times I feel like I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and in the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons." It seems to me that an experience such as this could assist any and all of us to feel and know both the truth and the importance of our Seventh Principle: "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Such an experience, it seems to me, can be considered mystical as well as sacred depending on one's perspective.

If experiences such as Jung's are beyond your comfort zone or belief system, the perspective presented by William R. Murry in the book *Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century* may be more to your liking. In the book Murry states that he is a religious humanist and a non-theist. By this he means that while he is religious, he doesn't believe in a God. He also states that he is a religious naturalist. He writes that he finds religious meaning and values in nature. Murry avoids the word sacred, using it just twice, and then only because it is in a book title he refers to. Instead of the word sacred, he uses the word spiritual as he cites experiences similar to those that Swanson connects with the word sacred. In the middle of the book Murry, like Swanson, mentions Maslow and peak experiences. While Murry agrees that peak experiences are one type of spiritual experience, they are not the only type. He includes such things as love of the universe as another type of spiritual experience. Notice the similarity here to the Einstein quotes I mentioned previously.

If you feel a kinship with humanism then you might find some of the ideas in this book interesting, inspiring, or even enlightening.

I want to return now to Swanson's paper and particularly to the section that identifies what he refers to as "gateways" to the sacred. He mentions four such gateways. The first is "the geographical gateway: entering into the sacred. The second is "the temporal gateway: passing through from chronos (clock time) to kairos (sacred time)." The third is "the auditory gateway: silence." And the fourth is "the verbal gateway: invocation." The first of these, the geographical gateway, is the one that most closely corresponds to the focus of my sermon this morning. In the geographical gateway section Swanson writes that:

A sacred place is not arbitrarily chosen, but is sought after and reveals itself to us. The experience of place is something you sense. You **feel drawn** to a sacred place. It has **allure**. It **calls you**... When drawn to special places, people frequently have strong and meaningful experiences, and go away transformed and renewed.

As I first read this portion of the paper I was immediately reminded of what Gussow wrote in our reading this morning. "The catalyst that converts any physical location -- any environment if you will -- into a place, is the process of experiencing deeply. A place is a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings." I would invite you now to recall places in nature that are special to you, places that have been claimed by feelings, places that call you, places where you have had meaningful experiences, and gone away transformed and renewed. It is my hope that each of you has at least one such place in nature. That place may be spacious in size, such as the ocean or on top of a mountain, or it may be small and confined, such as at the base of a particular tree. The size isn't the important thing. What is important is that you have been called by the place or the spot and you have accepted the call. What matters is that the place opens you in ways you could not have predicted and ways you may not be able to describe in words.

Swanson ends the geographical gateway section with this paragraph.

Repeated visits to special places help develop your sense of connection to nature. A special place, for you, might be in your backyard, your garden, a nearby park, a special tree, stream, hill or mountaintop. Ideally, you will find a place you can return to frequently so you will be able to experience it at various times of day and night, and throughout the seasons. You will develop a sense of familiarity and deep understanding that is earned through prolonged contact just like you experience with long-standing friendships. And special places can be as precious to you, in their own way, as longtime friends. Going to your own personal sacred place is a returning to your spiritual Home.

It is my hope that all of us may discover places in nature where we may seek and at least sometimes find that which is sacred. And may we carry such places with us both in our minds and also in our hearts. Let us carry them with us for they are at least as special as our closest friends. And they are where we feel ourselves to be truly and fully at home.

So may it be.