

LIFE: WATER, EARTH, SKY
What are Humans Capable Of?
A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

We go to the beach to be reminded of the scale of creation.
We are drawn to the ocean because it is our birth place.

We go to the mountains to be overwhelmed by something on a grand scale.
We go to the mountains because we have relatives there.

Tonight is the best night to view the persiods...the cosmic dust that rains down every year at this time. Go outdoors tonight, find a dark place, lay down and look at the sky.

We go to nature to learn about our own animal nature and also to experience and be reminded that we too are creatures of the cosmos.

We are as grand as the ocean, the mountains and the stars...and we sense, at moments, we sense, what it is we are truly capable of.

Most of the time, we don't want to know. We don't want to be tested. We don't want to be called out. We don't want to acknowledge the tide pull of what it would mean to be fully human, fully ourselves...capable on a grand scale.

Truth be told, our world, our lives, are full of ideas and events- fears and loves of a cosmic scale. We just pretend otherwise.

We tell our children that they were born in the embrace of the cosmos, in the embrace of love on the scale of galaxies and glaciers...but as we grow and age, we forget our cosmic connection.

We allow our children, our youth, our young adults, ourselves to fall asleep. We use television, cell phones, computers, cars and jobs, housekeeping; to keep us sleepy, to keep us from remembering our cellular connections to water, earth, sky, mammal.

We are guilty of the sin of minimizing...minimizing our worth, our beauty, our genius, our talent, our place in the order of things. We are guilty of minimizing even our loving.

Professor of Philosophy, Jacob Needleman asks the question in his gem of a book, "A sense of the Cosmos: Scientific Knowledge and Spiritual Truth. He asks: Why do we settle for love on so small a scale?

I would challenge Needleman's assumption that we settle...I don't think we are at all settled- I think we are most unsettled! I am not settling for love on a small scale- I search, question, argue, am dissatisfied daily by the small kinds of love...by your presence this morning, I see that you also are not ready to settle....

What I see every day are people searching and struggling for something deeper, something more meaningful, more satisfying, more wholistic,I see people everyday who are trying to get home to the cosmic love that Needleman is pointing to.

Through all kinds of human despair and tragedy...people struggle toward a larger kind of love...as toward an island of safety amid the city's dangers, or toward a peaceful meadow at the edge of the dark wood. Or as the happiness they once knew or dreamed of...and dream of still.

Perhaps we appear to settle for less than is possible in this life, because we have forgotten the scale, the huge cosmic potential, of what it means to be human.

Thus it is essential that we go to the beach or to the mountains, or hold a baby, or lay down and look at the sky, or lovingly touch the wrist of another person...or sit and listen to someone with complete attention. For all of these things require that we be fully awake...all of these things remind us of what we once knew...that we are capable of relationships of unconditional love-we can run free on the beach, build castles in the sand, or ride the waves.

We must begin by forgiving ourselves for going to sleep. The world is a tough, harsh place. There is so much pain and suffering...of course we want to turn our heads to the wall. Everything in our culture of diversion and distraction insists that we do just that.

Part of what it means to recognize our very human capabilities is to realize that we can look death in the eye, we can sit beside human suffering, we can hold the hand of a prison guard, or dive underwater to find bodies washed down the Mississippi River – facing the whole of life is part of what cosmic love makes possible.

How can we justify going to the beach, going on vacation, buying expensive iced coffee, when we know how many are dying and hungry, when we know how many live in fear of being raped or shot. When we know how many suffer mental illness, nonexistent health care, schools without books, homelessness and drug addiction. How can we take time out to experience grand awesome things, when we know that the pain and suffering that goes on every day relentlessly, everywhere in the world.

The horrors of war and poverty and oppression, the wail of those who mourn dead sons and daughters, it surround us on a wavelength we can't quite hear, but whose vibrations we can feel, if we come awake enough. No wonder we are afraid to come fully awake. No wonder we seek escapist activities.

Going to nature is not necessarily an escape. Sometimes it is an intentional act of reconnection, of losing our smaller selves, of trying to awaken our larger spirit. We return to the ocean, to hear on an elementary level, the sound of life...we return to the mountains to hone our senses to the call of the wild, we turn to the stars, to feel again- primal awe.

Every now and then, we stop business as usual. We call it a vacation, but often it is so much more. It is the time we reconnect to the cosmos. The time we come awake and remember our origins and think again about big ideas ...and watch our kids repeat the discoveries of childhood...and follow their lead for a week in the surf and sand.

We call it vacation, but it can be a turning point in our relentless quest for self-transformation.

Last week I took two days and went alone to the mountains of West Virginia...I was able to read for 8 hours, uninterrupted...my “almost heaven”.

Each morning, I took a walk up into the mountains...it was very dry. I was surprised and saddened to find that the stream that runs through the park was completely dry...I should have known. I had only a thin hope that I might encounter some wildlife. Whenever I stopped walking to listen, I was swarmed by the those bugs called, “no see ums” – there was little wind to blow them away. I have gotten good at spotting deer, that is one of the hidden benefits of ministry at the Rockville church...learning about the habits of deer.

I saw a buck with an impressive rack of horns...he stood eating and then sat down in the shade and stared back at me.

The sound of woodpeckers echoed off the mountainside, I couldn't see them...a chipmunk ran by probably searching for some water to drink. Everything was parched. The stillness wasn't a pregnant stillness promising liveliness to come; it was a barren kind of stillness, an emptiness.

Where had all the life and color gone?

Something moved in my peripheral vision...there it was, a quickly darting butterfly...black with some blue near the base of the wings...wait, theres' another one...beautiful yellow with black outlining within the wings...and another yellow one and another...

I climbed higher, I paused to consider my place on the landscape...How small and noisy an animal I was in the quiet wood. Yet how much a part of the natural world.

What does it mean to be a human being in the high mountains under the vast hot blue sky? What does it mean to be part of the grand creation of this part of the world?

Last week I was finishing another book about Alaska. A novel called “Ordinary Wolves” written by Seth Kantner. The story follows some of the authors' own growing up years in the Alaskan wilderness. He lived with his father, his brother and his sister in an igloo. They survived off the land and the children had significant responsibilities of hunting and fishing and curing caribou and coyote, of making their own clothes and shoes and snowshoes, of keeping the fire going and home-schooling themselves.

One of the significant lessons of his childhood was that to survive, he had to take a share of life...and to insure the survival of others, he had to share what life he had.

Mostly this had to do with food. Taking his share of life off the land...and sharing his food with others. To take only what he needed.

To realize our connection to the cosmic whole of life, leads naturally, I think to a desire to share. To share in the life of scale of which we are a part, and to share what helps us to survive with others. To take only what we need... is a great goal, a grand action in the consumerist world in which we must make choices of this or that every day...again and again.

The philosopher, Jacob Neeleman, suggests that when we know the scale of life of which we are a part...we can come to know our human potential on a greater scale as well...we can cease to settle for a small kind of love...a small kind of compassion. We can cease to settle for small actions. We can discover what we are truly capable of.

Needelman tells the story of a time when he was homeless and hungry and circumstances forced him to stop people in the street and ask for money. No one gave him anything, and he got more and more hungry...finally he started going door to door. At one house a woman answered his knock on the door and when he asked her for money or food, he could see the conflicting impulses playing over her face, part of her wanted to slam the door in his face, and part of her wanted to be compassionate. She stood there for long minutes, struggling with herself.

Needelman said that he felt amazing connection, a love for this woman as she struggled with the human dilemma. In the end, she didn't give him anything, but it didn't matter he said, because he had seen her true humanity In the struggle itself.

Life continually presents us with opportunities to discover our potential and to make choices to share life with others. If we stay awake, we can recognize those opportunities.

On Friday, I was alone at the church working on my sermon. A woman came into building four and introduced herself as Miss Burrow...or something like that, she was clearly a homeless person- a rugged homeless person. She was well-tanned and strong from carrying the numerous bags and packs she had slung across her body.

She spoke with a British accent, and she looked me straight in the eye. She spoke the language of a college educated person, and she asked for five dollars to help with bus fare.

It was very hot on Friday, I invited her to sit and cool off in room 44. The only cash I had on hand was a ten dollar bill. I offered it to her without reservation, I thought a nice meal in a cool restaurant would be a good thing for her.

We had quite an interesting conversation. She didn't like churches or religion, she was an atheist, she said.

She was concerned about a lot of things in the world. Health care, sexism, the war in Iraq, the meanness of America toward those in need...

She was too anxious to really rest. And so she left.

I went back to my writing.

A few minutes later I heard a knocking on the door.

She had returned saying she couldn't take the money.

It wouldn't be right she said, since she didn't even like churches.

It was too much anyway, not what she needed.

We sat and had another friendly talk. She started to share some of her fears, her anxieties, some of what happens to her at night out in the dark.

She still wouldn't take the money.

She said maybe all she really wanted was someone to talk to.

I felt really bad, I wanted her to have the money, I didn't need it...she clearly did.

But she held to her position, she wanted to keep on talking, after a while I extricated myself and she shouldered all her bags and walked on across the courtyard.

I felt deflated, helpless, ineffective, confused, unhappy with the outcome.

Perhaps she felt the same. But, I suspect, in some strange way, she was satisfied with the choice she made. She walked away free and clear.

In some strange way, I was glad she had come. I was glad to sit with her... to listen and to share. I really wanted to share the money...to provide something of substance...but she wouldn't let me...she called the shots.

I don't know what it all means. I'm just glad this church is here. That someone told her to come to the Unitarian church...that I was in my office, that I was not afraid to invite her in...that she was willing to talk,

I don't know what it means...but it felt like an opportunity...it called forth something of value in me...it left me with some big questions...

The world on a grand scale is always there just outside the door. You can seek it out or you can wait...

It will come to you, but you must be awake enough to realize it.

We are all homeless...yet we belong to each other. It is all about relationship and how we share.

We all come from the sea, from the stars, from the earth.

We all are related.

We all are afraid.

We all are full of potential on a grand scale. Don't settle, don't minimize!

Wake up! Don't miss your chance.

So May It Be/Amen