

Heaven Underfoot
Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer
Sunday, April 22, 2018

First Unitarian Universalist Church
Rochester, Minnesota

READINGS

from Chief Noah Sealath

An excerpt from A Poem of Hope by Wendell Berry:

SERMON

It seemed to go tiny strip by tiny strip – centimeters at a time;
like trying to get every speck of an eggshell
off a hard-boiled egg that isn't peeling well.

The wall we were trying to clean and prep for painting
must have had at least 4 or 5 layers of wallpaper –
probably evenly spread over decades
dating back to 1927 when the house was built.

Some of you surely have done this –
scraping off years - old wallpaper,
with a putty knife or one of those circular scrapers, or frustrated fingernails – these
walls covered in not-so-earth-friendly toxic glue
that you just hope isn't too poisonous.

The walls have been covered, infused over years with dust and dirt,
and who knows what stories, lives, moments lived in those walls.

But it felt like,
beyond the surface of the dated wall covering,
we were clearing off the sticky dirt in search for some more authentic, something
more true and lasting –
the covered up identity of the old house –
to find the shining beauty of something
that had been covered and glued over – again and again.

I grew up amidst the prairie – surrounded by farm fields, open sky.
Not too far in any direction from my home in Mankato
was it possible to move beyond the city lights,
to enter onto those lonely country highways.

Those were the roads we took to relative's homes
all over the southern Minnesota prairie –
or on long bus rides with sports teams to Rochester
when it was still 2-lane the whole way – those were rough days.

There is a deep connection for many with the landscape,
the climate, the terrain, the biome, the water, the trees, the fields, the dirt,
the smell, the buildings, the streets, the lights –
whether it's out in a prairie field or in the middle of the big city –
there's something in our bones that remember that this is home.

Land is so much about layers of memory.
It is in how we tell and retell the story of our people, our heritage;
the same old jokes at the holiday table, the expected punch line,
the tender or hard story of loss or grief or loneliness.

We keep time by the stories we tell, the narratives we live out,
the memory that comes to vibrant life
where we remind ourselves of the strands that connect us back,
generation to generation, to names remembered and lost,
to histories both spoken and forgotten,
woven through time and space to form the fabric of who we are –
a fabric of loss, of love, of change, of memory –
back to the dust of the earth
and the bright blaze of the big bang that gave us life.

Many people speak of places – homes or land – as having a core identity,
something about the character of the place, the personality of it,
that can't quite be put into words.

Like layers of paper on a wall,
or layers of soil beneath our feet,
sometimes there are layers of things getting in the way,
covering it up,
sticking to it so strongly that it is hard to see beyond the surface.

Do you ever feel like that?
Feel covered in layers –
not the good, natural layers of a life changing and growing
over days, years, a lifetime.

But covered in layers
like paper and glue –
trying to cover up something about the world
or the messiness of our lives -
of expectations we have of ourselves, for one another –
expectations being placed upon us by the narratives
of commercialism and capitalism –
trying to be a good
sibling, spouse, parent, child,
or trying to be
productive, useful, helpful
in the wider world,
and failing to be present
where it matters most – at home.

The layers can be put on thick, old, cracking layers put on thick
that you try to peel away, over and over,
and seems to only leave more of a mess.

And when we can't even find ourselves
under all these layers that obscure our radiant shining soul,
how easy will it be to notice the bright blaze of divinity in someone else.

Theologian Richard Rohr speaks of the massive mistake
made across religious traditions in early histories –
the clear separation between the sacred and the profane –
places that were holy, and places that clearly were not.
This idea become embodied, literally, in greek and western culture
as a separation between the soul and the flesh –
the soul, that hidden part deep within us that was any good,
was covered, by layer and layers and layers of sin-soaked evil flesh.

But there are counter-traditions to that,
and the ancients believed something quite different.

Peeling back the layers, diving deeper beyond the surface
of traditions which treated creation as a commodity,
there is something more authentic, just a little deeper down.

This is about creativity – found in some of the oldest creation stories.
In the Jewish tradition, the sacred aspect of humanity, the soul,
comes from the word *nefesh* which means breath, air, life.
God breathed into humanity, into the dirt and dust of the earth;
through breath, created life. So, the soul, our very breath and bone and blood, then,
is the very essence, made out of the air of God.

In gnostic traditions, and carried in new ways in the Quaker tradition,
the indwelling of the holy in humans is spoken as the spark of the divine –
the *inner light* – that *of God*, in every person.

As mystic Hildegard wrote of the divine essence of the natural world:

*"I am that supreme and fiery force
that sends forth all the sparks of life.
I am that living and fiery essence
of that divine substance that flows in the beauty of the fields.
I shine in the water,
I burn in the sun and the moon and the stars.
Mine is the mysterious force of the invisible wind...I am life."*

Another creation story, from a modern poet,
as part of her *Coming of Age* credo,
which is a Unitarian Universalist rite of passage, she said,

*I exist
On this little blue island of a planet
In the middle of a solar system
Spinning in a galaxy
Moving through a universe
That is forever expanding.
Does that make you want to sing too?
The pulse of the universe
And the beat of my heart
Courses through my being
And your being
And we are being in this
Moment,
Just for a second,
Together.*

Does that make you want to sing, too? she writes.

Our Earth, our natural world,
has been, over centuries and millenia,
sometimes unintentionally, sometimes with clear lack of attention,
has been covered,
layered over –
the shining beauty
of clear water, green leaves,
bright blue skies –
has been layered over
with greed, with production,
with a separation
of what is sacred, and what is not –
and the most sacred of all things –
the dust and dirt of earth,
has been systematically used,
by religion, by commerce, by indifference,
not as holy ground,
but as a pile of dirt.

We have a pretty bad track record at that the last several hundred years,
don't we?

Long ago, a misunderstood biblical passage from the creation story of Genesis
falsely framed this relationship – one of domination and misuse.

What many early Jewish theologians understood, however,
was that this was a calling of relationship –
that humanity was made out of the sacred silt and dust of earth –
to be careful stewards of the land and resources,
to understand that we ourselves are sacred dust from the earth and we are called to
care and tend for the well-being of the earth.

In the name of progress and civilization,
driven by greed, and the blaze of the industrial revolution
which brought us wonderful machines at a high cost to the natural world,
but then was blown out of imaginable possibility
with capitalistic corporate profit.

It becomes easy to level the earth as a means to a comfortable life.

Too often,
in our wanting to discern between right and wrong,
in our attempts at categorizing and understanding and crafting the world,
we place layers of separation between us and the natural world –
physical and mental barriers and layers
that separate us from the land, from one another –
even when its right in front of us.

Yes, there can be something beautiful and playful and engaging
on a screen –
but too often it obscures our senses
so we neglect to notice the sacred something
right in the moment right here, right now.

The problem is not modern technology –
the problem is as old as humanity –
of placing something – a screen, a profit –
something about greed or self-centeredness or indifference or apathy
between us and the rest of this world –
and over time, often without really noticing,
we are layered
and it takes someone else, or a moment of realization –
to put down our devices, put down our defenses,
blink our eyes and notice
what is right there.

Like the separation between the *sacred and the profane*,
there is an assumed separation between *nature and city* –
we often think we have to go *somewhere else, get away*
to find the wild and free beauty of nature.

There is an assumption about where one can connect with something peaceful –
that nature walks outside the city are intrinsically spiritual,
and time spent within a concrete jungle is somehow worse.

To go a rest in the peace of wild things
writes Wendell Berry.

And there is truth to that –
there is something about being in a place
that feels so wild, so untamed, so untrampled,
that feels like we are peeling back the layers,
finding something more authentic, more true –
I fully agree we need green space,
places untouched and protected –
lest we regularly and always pave paradise and put up a parking lot.

And at the same time –
human Is not synonymous with bad,
creating, and making, and inventing is not synonymous with evil –
there are places, and moments
that can feel wild right in the middle of the city.

For example –
just yesterday afternoon,
walking along 16th street,
stumbling out of our home as if we had been in a cave for 8 months -
with this unfamiliar feeling we didn't remember – *what is that – oh year, warmth.*

There, on the corner of Mayowood and 16th St. was a wild turkey.
It was just strutting around like the cars at the traffic light
were stop just to observe its beauty. And they kind of were. And so were we.

And as we got closer it slowly, stylishly, moved around the sign on the corner,
and then came back around.

A half hour later, as we came back,
it was still there,
enjoying the line of adoring vehicles.

It was something wild –
it was catching everyone's attention –
it was something that felt untampered,
wild, free, unbound, unfenced –

like it had broken out of the layers all around it
of concrete and metal and traffic –still wild, still beautiful,
right in the middle of everything.

Found your hope, then, on the ground under your feet,
writes Wendell Berry,
Your hope of Heaven,
let it rest on the ground underfoot.

As much as there is beauty in fleeing to protected, natural, wild habitats –
there can be something beautiful, heavenly,
and filled with a wild beauty
on whatever ground right under your feet.

It's like playing with a young child – and classic game of hide and seek.
And there is a time in child development,
where the lines between permeance and impermanence are thin,
but also when the point of games is much less concerned with logic and rules –
sometimes to the dismay of the adults playing.

But maybe you have experienced this –
a child says, “let's play hide and seek”
And you say okay, and close your eyes or go to another space,
and you count...until you say “ready or not, here I come”

And you open your eyes
and look around –
and it only takes a few moments until you realize –
there is a giant human shaped object
in the middle of the room
under a blanket.

“Hmm...let's see...” you say,
trying to get past your adult logic and into, perhaps,
a more true and authentic point of playing games –
“I wonder where she is...” you say,
walking right next to this 3-foot upright shape in the middle of the room,
now softly giggling –
and out of nowhere she says,
“I'm right here!”

And for a brief moment you may think
“you clearly don't understand the point of this game”
and then you think
“no, this is the point of the game.”

The point of play –
of being in relationship –
is to laugh at the notion
that something so simple could separate us –
that something so simple could obscure our senses
and cause us to not notice
our beloved
right there –
to not notice something of meaning, and beauty
hiding in plain sight in the middle of the living room – that is just silly.

Sometimes it is as simple as one layer of a woven thread
over the head of a toddler.

Sometimes it is as complex, as crusted over, as rigid and solidified
as layers of wallpaper over decades filled with dust and dirt.

Sometimes, it just takes a moment,
for something beautiful and wild to spring up
and shout – I'm right here!
and you uncover beauty and laughter and joy
right in the middle of everything.
To love the earth begins with simply being in relationship,
simply noticing
what is already around us, everywhere we are.

So when the traffic light turns,
and you are forced to slow down –
maybe think of it as a spiritual reminder
to center the soul, take a breath,
and look out the window –
because you just might see a wild Turkey, in all its beauty,
right in the middle of a Saturday afternoon, strutting along the sidewalk.