

Spell of the Sensuous
Sermon Delivered by Tracy Springberry
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North Idaho Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

Reading 1

From the Spell of the Sensuous by David Abram

Late one evening I stepped out of my little hut in the rice paddies of eastern Bali and found myself falling through space. Over my head the black sky was rippling with stars, densely clustered in some regions, almost blocking out the darkness between them, and more loosely scattered in other areas, pulsing and beckoning to each other. Behind them all the streamed the great river of light with its several tributaries. Yet the Milky Way churned beneath me as well, for my hut was set in the middle of a large patchwork of rice paddies, separated from each other by narrow two-foot-high dikes, and these paddies were all filled with water. The surface of these pools, by day, reflected the perfectly blue sky, a reflection broken only by the thin, bright green tips of new rice. But by night the stars themselves glimmered from the surface of the paddies and the river of light whirled through the darkness underfoot as well as above; there seemed no ground in front of my feet, only the abyss of the star-studded space falling away forever.

I was no longer simply beneath the night sky, but also above it—the immediate impression was of weightlessness. I might have been able to reorient myself, to regain some sense of ground and gravity, were it not for a fact that confounded my senses entirely: between the constellation below and the constellations above drifted countless fireflies, their lights flickering like the stars, some drifting up to join the clusters of stars overhead, others, like graceful meteors, slipping down from above to join the constellations underfoot, and all these paths of light upward and downward were mirrored, as well, in the still surface of the paddies. I felt myself at times falling through space, at other moments floating and drifting. I simply could not dispel the profound vertigo and giddiness; the paths of the fireflies, and their reflections in the water's surface, held me in a sustained trance. Even after I crawled back to my hut and shut the door on this whirling world, I felt that now the little room in which I lay was itself floating free of the earth.

Reading 2 *From Rainer Maria Rilke*

Ah, not to be cut off,
Not through the slightest partition
Shut out from the law of the stars.
The inner – what is it?
If not the intensified sky,
Hurled through the birds and deep
With winds of homecoming.

Sermon:

In order to celebrate my recent marriage I was lucky this summer to spend a week on the island of Kauai. While there, I spent lots of time outside enjoying the wonders of nature.

I also took responsibility for making sure my family enjoyed the wonders of nature. Particularly, when we were on Kauai I worked very hard figuring out everything we just *had* to see and making a plan to see it.

No one else seemed to share my concern. Ella, the four year old, wanted to swim in the condo pool every waking minute, and, the way she saw it, every activity that did not include the pool was a conspiracy against her basic needs. When at the condo, the three boys could barely look up from their phones or computers to engage in conversation. If I was lucky enough to break through their mesmerized state, they didn't notice me, instead, they would suddenly remember that they were hungry, needed a shower, must change the music, or had to work out at the gym and off they would go. Lisa was sure I had all sightseeing under control – just tell her where to be and when. She didn't need to be concerned about the details.

So I pushed against the family inertia. I harassed, hounded and cajoled, until I got the whole family in the car. Our guidebook had many “not to be missed” items, and I did not want to miss them– the Grand Canyon of the Pacific, the green cliffs of the Napali Coast, dozens of divine beaches, and snorkeling. My mind clicked to super busy making sure we did such things. As I sat on the porch, I read the guidebook and the pile of flyers I'd picked up at the airport. In the car, I peered at my phone, following maps and choosing restaurants, making sure we didn't miss any crucial side trips. I had never been to Hawaii, and who knew when I could come again. I would make sure we had the perfect Hawaii vacation.

When I managed to look up from the planning, the things we saw were wonderful – remarkably lush flowers in reds, pinks, yellows, and whites, the rusty red craters of the Waimea Canyon, spectacular views of the aqua blue ocean from high in the seaside mountains, and the golden sandy beaches curved like smiles between the sharp green cliffs.

Was the vacation perfect? Well, if you look at the list, we did most of the important things people say you should do in Kauai. We drank in beauty. We lay on the beaches. We swam. We didn't kill each other and laughed a lot. We felt renewed. So, yes, it was perfect...

Except...

While on vacation, I spent my relaxed hours reading the *Spell of the Sensuous* by David Abram who shook up my ideas about how to be in the natural world.

He pricked my perceptions and tilted and twisted them, until my lists of things to see, my expectations of perfect experience, my goal of “enjoying nature” seemed like rather shallow and meaningless ways of engaging with a place.

My experience felt like Abram's in the first reading where he steps outside his hut into the night and cannot tell the sky from the land and feels dizzy. Where am I? What is up and down? Who is right?

I typically think of nature as a place to do things, to have experiences and to bask in beauty. My challenge, I've always felt, is to put down the stupid guidebook and notice what is happening. I believe that I am in right relationship with the natural world when I notice its wonder and I feel awed and thankful for all that is given to me. This is how I engaged with the places we went to in Hawaii. I made a list of experiences I wanted to have. I soaked them in. I felt amazed and grateful. Checked off what I had done. I came home renewed.

Which seemed like exactly what I should be doing.

But Abram's book gave me pause.

I realized I consume nature.

I don't mean consume in a use-it-up way like I use paper towels, even though, as an American I do that too. I mean I use nature to meet my needs. I appreciate it. I enjoy it. I am awed by it. I am restored by it.

I am not in relationship with it. Or, more accurately, the relationship is a dreadful one. It is like a Master with a Servant. It is all about me.

Abram argues that somewhere on western civilization's route to the present, we fell out of equal, respectful relationship with the wild world. We shrank back from it, into ourselves and our own cacophony of concerns and issues.

Once upon a time, and even now in indigenous cultures, people perceived the non-human as conscious, capable of speaking and sharing knowledge. It was alive. The wild world and people were brothers and sisters. They spoke and communicated. All had spirit. All had wisdom.

We were one, together, part of the amazing earth.

The stories and attitudes of indigenous people and the stories and attitudes of older western cultures are full of this understanding.

Consider the way an Omaha elder speaks to a rock:

Unmoved

From time without

End

You rest

There in the midst of the paths

In the midst of the winds

You rest

Covered with the dropping of birds

Grass growing from your feet

Your head decked with down of birds

You rest

In the midst of the winds

You wait

Aged one.

This elder is describing a rock, very accurately, but does not speak *of* the rock, as if it was a mere object but speaks to it, as if there is wisdom and meaning in the rock, as if the rock is to be respected.

Consider, also, all the old, old stories from cultures across the world that claim people and animals once spoke the same language in the time before time.

In other stories people become animals or animals become humans such as the old Scottish tale of a seal hunter who sells seal skins for profit but is captured by the seal people, becomes a seal himself, and learns the pain he has caused.

There are also from all cultures stories like the old Russian folktale we heard this morning where people learned the language of animals and become wise.

Consider also the Greek myths, particularly the work of Homer, where all of nature has the ability to act and has emotion and feeling and power. The sun is Helios, who is the actual sun, but also a being with desires and will. Zeus is the power in storms. Even Dawn, “has spreading fingertips of rose.”

In the Odyssey, Odysseus prays to a river to save him after Poseidon, the sea god, goes into a rage and almost kills him in storm. The river, conscious and animate, is able to change the course of the water and bring him to safety.

We are taught to think of the old stories as childish myths of primitive people who did not understand the scientific reasons for the way the world works.

However, what people in those cultures received from their way of perceiving and understanding the world was a *relationship* with natural world that was far deeper and richer than our own. They spoke to Zeus, the storm God, to Demeter, the Earth, and to the spirits of trees and rivers. Their world was alive, with its own agenda, and able to respond to what happens. In their view nature was to be respected and its point of view needed to be considered.

For modern westerners, the world is not alive in the same way as it was for ancient and indigenous people.

There are lots of reasons for the change: the move from being hunter/gatherers to agriculture, religious views that demonized the material world, literacy that allowed us to enter more deeply into our own psyche, Descartes famous decree that “I think; therefore I am”, the rise of industrial methods of production, and now the digital age.

Through all this we are pulled further away from the greater world into our own human selves, mesmerized by human specialness and concerns. Our participatory, respectful, equal, relationship with all who share the earth with us ended. We no longer hear the wild world.

Parts of the world are, of course, still alive to us— plants, animals, and bacteria. We know them to be alive. But we don't feel them to have consciousness, wisdom, a way of being that matters to themselves, to each other, and to us. We don't feel that we have an *obligation* to understand.

They do not have, we believe as we go about our ordinary lives, the characteristics that make humans unique and thus the most important species. So instead of focusing on *relationship* with the non-human, we focus on private human concerns -- things to get done, how we are feeling, the right experiences, and our relationships to each other.

This western perspective has allowed our societies to use the Earth for our own good with little thought of the pain to trees we cut down, the ground we cover with asphalt, and the rivers we suck dry or any of the creatures who live in the trees, on the ground, or in the rivers.

The destruction of the other living creatures and entities that share our earth is, of course, of the most important issue of our time.

We know our part of the interconnected web of life. We have learned through science and, unfortunately, experience, that when you rip one part of the web, things happen you couldn't quite imagine. Enjoy the convenience of cars, carbon increases in the atmosphere, the temperature heats up, and suddenly the snow is melting early in the Rocky Mountains, flowers bloom too early, die in the frost, and when the butterflies show up to feed, they go hungry and die. When Henry Ford started mass-producing automobiles who knew he was killing butterflies? That is the way the web works; it is so woven together humans can't, as brilliant as we are, untangle it to understand the implications of every action.

This reality terrifies and grieves me. I am terrified of suffering that Earth's destruction is causing all living things. I am grieved by all the beauty and all miracles of life and non-life that are vanishing.

How do we find our way from here?

We must return to our senses, argues Abram.

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As a metaphor, "return to your senses" means, wake up to what is right before you. Abram means that but he also means, literally, returning to our sensing, perceiving bodies in the natural world.

We've closed ourselves to the natural world by hiding away in our homes and cities built for our comfort. We limit what we see, hear, feel, taste and smell to what

is pleasurable and comfortable. In fact, we believe that to be comfortable, to feel good, to be happy are the highest goals we can achieve.

Instead, Abram says, we must fall under the spell of the sensuous world. To fall under its spell we must use all our senses fully.

We must feel the breeze on our skin, see the way it moves the leaves on the bushes, and listen to them sing. We must smell what the breeze brings in and taste it with our tongues.

The breeze is the air's voice; the atmosphere's voice. It speaks to us and we should listen. It might say something like "rain's coming." And know it to be true without TV, radio, or our smart phones. Maybe the air will tell us other things we've never thought to know.

We must listen to the birds; know the call of the ones who live outside our homes and in our neighborhoods. See them as they come seeking food and shelter, building a life that flourishes for themselves, their children and their community of bird. We can learn, as Ivan did in this morning's story, to know when the birds sense storms and other situations and respond to their distress – that which affects us and that which does not.

It was this idea, the listening to the wild world *for what it had to say, because I was in relationship* with it and not to hear what I wanted to hear, that send me topsy-turvy on my vacation. Where am I? What is up and down? Who is right?

I watch the waves rhythmically break on the sand and the fish swim among the rocks. Who are you? I ask. What do you have to tell me?

The surf almost dashed me into a turtle while I was snorkeling. It floated in the sea, near the bottom, stretching its neck to nibble something too small for me to discern. What do you eat? I wonder. Why are you here? Do all these people staring at you bother you? I do not know. I mostly can talk to my dog, but I do not know how to talk to a turtle. My only hope for understanding is not floating in the sea staring the turtle in the eye, but to find a web page that might tell me something of its life; but I could never know this turtle or its life.

I wished suddenly not for a perfect vacation, or lists of activities diligently checked off in a guidebook, or "enjoyment", but connection, deep connection with the turtle and the bright blue fish that dart beneath me, and the surf rushing in and off the beach. I want to know this place. More importantly I want to know the place I actually live, in the pine forests of the western North American continent.

I realize with deep sadness, I do not know how to be in real connection, equal relationship with non-human nature. I can admire. I can be awed. But to hear what a hummingbird or pine tree has to tell me about anything? I don't know how to do

that. They are languages I don't know or even know how to learn. I find myself envying those people from cultures and times who have been able to discern such things. How much richer was their world as they walked through their places? How much more did they see and hear and appreciate about the places they lived than I ever might?

As I swim with the turtle, my young daughter contemplates the Kauai waves. "Why does the water move?" she asks me later.

"Why does the water move?"

Her question sends me reeling with the intense vertigo of Abram's night in rice patties with the fireflies and I want to retreat back to my hut to what is familiar. Where is up? Where is down? What is Truth?

There is the scientific answer. The one I was taught. The wind makes the waves. The water flows up and back because of the moon. The ocean is mechanical responding to gravity and other physical laws. This is the right thing to tell her. It is the Truth. The Truth that powers the world I know, understand, and makes the life I know possible.

But I want her to feel the ocean as itself, as alive, as having its own purpose and needs and desire to flourish. I want her to understand the ocean not only as awesome and remarkable and powerful, which she can see and feel with her own body, but as animate, capable of its own actions in response to stimulus. I want her to respect this mighty being, so that she can have a relationship with it, one that inspires her to behave respectfully, with kindness, and with care.

I want her to believe as people once did that you should treat the ocean with respect or that the God Poseidon might get mad and send a storm. This is Truth too. It is not a silly naïve belief. Humans have not respected the ocean. We have not respected its purposes and needs, and well, it is fighting back. The fish we've depended on for food are disappearing. The ocean surges more easily in storms that hurt all life terribly. If we'd only been respectful. If we'd only seen the ocean as an equal partner in existence on earth.

I want my daughter to approach the ocean with her full being – with all her senses. I want her to listen to it, feel it, taste, and smell it. I want her to consider what the ocean might want. I want her to feel sick when she learns this fellow earth being is filled with garbage and poison and the life within it is slowly dying. Like when she hears a friend has cancer... I want her to fight with all her might...

How can the Truth contradict this? Science and mythology. Reason and Stories?

Of course, it doesn't have to.

When my daughter ask, "why does the water move," I mumble something, about how the ocean wants to move and about the moon and wind, but what I wish I had said was this...

The ocean loves to move. It dances with the moon who pulls it up to the shore and pulls it back. It dances with the wind, rolling up and down in waves. Listen to the waves, ride them, float in them, feel them, taste that ocean water, smell deeply. Notice the ocean and what it does. Learn about the ocean from the poets, storytellers, scientists, and people who live nearby. What does the ocean tell you about why it moves? What do you know to be true?

Our Unitarian Universalist faith seeks truth from many sources: our experience, world religions, and science. We seek truth, and we seek to respect the web of all existence.

For this reason, I believe, it is one of our primary tasks to weave together the understandings of science, the stories and sensibilities of wise human cultures, and the experiences of our own senses, to find a Truth capable of deepening our relationship with all that exists. We must find a truth that deepens our relationship with all that exists.

Only then can all life truly flourish on our fragile and magnificent planet.

May it be so.