

September 2016

Dear Friends in the Journey,

I just returned from a few days at my parents' camp in the woods in central New Hampshire. It's a small cabin on a 15 acre pond (Bear Pond) with no electricity or running water. Our family has been going there for about 40 years and that place has been a great teacher for me. I and some of my brothers-in-law are now making an annual trek there for a few days to spend time in this quiet wilderness. Time there puts me in touch with other rhythms. Deeper rhythms.

I want to relate three stories that are connected for me that will form the intro to this month's reflections.

Story #1: On one of the nights, we stayed up a little late and all laid out and watched the stars from the dock of the pond. We could see the Milky Way, saw numerous shooting stars and just felt a presence all around us – as if this pond and the surrounding wilderness were a living, breathing organism. I would not be exaggerating to say that all of us there felt a love for this place and felt this place loving us back somehow.

Story #2: As we were driving back from NH and entering into MA, I felt a change. As some of you who have lived in bigger cities may have experienced, the pace of life seems very speeded up in major metropolitan areas. I could feel the pace of traffic getting faster, people seeming a little more in a hurry and a general sense of tension as we got closer to Boston.

Story #3: On our way through Albany, NY, we passed through an area of the Thruway that has 3 lanes on each side with a grassy median in the middle. A small mole was crossing from the center grass towards the edge – trying to cross 3 lanes of speeding traffic. It paused in between lanes, seeming very dazed and confused. I lost sight of it in my rear view mirror, but I suspect that it did not fare well.

And lately I have been reading Todd Wynward's new book Rewilding the Way (Herald Press, 2015). I really love this book, and, at the same time, feel its call to change our ways of being in the world. (By the way, Todd will be visiting Rochester in late October and doing some community presentations as well as preaching at Spritus liturgies!). Essentially Todd is suggesting that our God and our faith experience has become so domesticated and co-opted and we must return to the roots of the tradition to "re-wild" our faith experience so that it helps us live more in harmony with our natural world. No small task indeed.

We will take up notions of place, sustainability, ecology and faith in these reflections.

Hoping this finds you well.

Blessings,

Mike Boucher

I. Fire-starter Questions

1. To what degree has your faith life been connected to the earth or place?
2. Can you think of a powerful experience that you had “in the wild”? (this may mean different things to different people) What happened? What did it teach you?
3. How well do you know the place where you live? If you know it well, how did this happen? If you do not know it well, how do you suppose that happened?

II. Scripture Passages for Reflection

Hosea 2: 14-16, 20 – 24

*“And now, here’s what I’m going to do:
I’m going to start all over again.
I’m taking her back out into the wilderness
At the same time I’ll make a peace treaty between you
and wild animals and birds and reptiles,
And get rid of all weapons of war.
Think of it! Safe from beasts and bullies!
“On the very same day, I’ll answer”—this is GOD’s Message—
“I’ll answer the sky, sky will answer earth,
Earth will answer grain and wine and olive oil,
and they’ll all answer Jezreel.
I’ll plant her in the good earth.”*

Mark 1: 4 – 8

John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey.

As he preached he said, “The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will change your life. I’m baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out.”

Romans 1: 20

But the basic reality of God is plain enough. Open your eyes and there it is! By taking a long and thoughtful look at what God has created, people have always been able to see what their eyes as such can't see.

III. Some Questions for Reflection

1. The prophet Hosea describes a time where the people of Israel had lost their way. Where are they brought? Why do you think that they are brought there?
2. What connections does Hosea make between Israel being lost and militarism? Can you see any relevance to our world today? What does this bring up in you?
3. John invites people to be baptized in the wilderness. Why do you think he chooses the wilderness? Where would that be around where you are? How well do you know that place?
4. How often would you say that you take a “long thoughtful look” at God’s creation? What happens when you do?

IV. Commentary

I know that I am fortunate to have a place like Bear Pond to connect with and for such a long time. I am aware that there are many people who do not have vacation time, access to the outdoors, transportation, etc. to be able to enjoy the “wilderness”.

Yet we all live in a place. And most of us have become severely disconnected from the places that we inhabit. We’re not familiar with the animals, the trees, the rivers and watersheds where we live. We are not tuned in to the rhythms of our surroundings. We do not know where our food, water and resources come from nor do we know where our waste goes after it leaves our dwellings.

To some this may not seem like a big deal. Yet we seem to be waking up to the reality that this disconnection means our peril (and the peril of everything around us!).

A few of my relatives have taken up birding recently. They have become quite adept at identifying specific kinds of birds, some of their bird songs and their habitats. It is really cool to see. As a result, they pay more attention to the world around them, get out a little bit more and are much more concerned about factors that affect birds in their locality.

Whether it be birding or something else, we all need to reconnect with our place. To counter the disconnection, we must reconnect. My friend and mentor Ched Myers writes, “To paraphrase the Senegalese environmentalist Baba Dioum’s comments to the 1968 general assembly of the

International Union for Conservation of Nature: ‘We won’t save a place we don’t love; we won’t love a place we don’t know; and we can’t know a place we haven’t learned.’” In the case of my relatives, birding has become one very good entry in learning and knowing a place.

I contrast that with another phenomenon that I have witnessed lately – Pokemon Go. While I love and appreciate a good game and would not consider myself “anti-technology” in any way, I do not see something like this phenomenon connecting us more deeply to the places we inhabit. Yes, it gets people out and moving, but the virtual nature of what we seek only seems to make the natural world around us the playground in which we will seek our virtual creatures – all the while the real creatures living in those places are dying off.

In the stories that I started with, the profound connections to a place are just the starting point to recovering our very souls. Todd Wynward talks about this need for rewilding because that is the place in us that holds ancient knowledge about how to live in harmony with the earth and with each other. My connection at Bear Pond over the years has given me a love of the trees, fish, plants and animals that lived there with me. But it also gave me an interest and love for the animals, fish, birds and trees elsewhere.

And it really doesn’t matter what kind of place we inhabit right now. Whether we’re in a country setting, a residential neighborhood, a high rise apartment or a mobile home, we all live in a place. The key is knowing about that place, connecting to it and becoming more and more aware of our impact on it (and its impact on us).

Even when we’re aware, there’s so much about places that we do not know. Just the other day, I started to think more about garbage – particularly my own garbage! We had been traveling near Waterloo, NY, and some friends had talked about the landfill controversy there that New York City garbage was being hauled all the way upstate and passed through Waterloo. I wondered, “Where does my garbage go?” I think it stays local, but I want to do more investigation.

My sense is that if many of us knew more about what was really happening, we’d be disgusted and outraged. The reality, however, is that we don’t have much information (a lot of it is actually KEPT from us or we have to do some incredible digging just to get the facts) and there’s so much we just don’t know. And the combination of being disconnected from a place and not having much information is deadly. Literally.

One factor in our disconnection is the speed with which we live our lives. As we zip through our days, we have little time to pay attention to what’s around us. We favor convenience to accommodate our lifestyles. We cram a lot into our days and weeks. In order to be connected, we need to be in touch with slower rhythms. We need to take time outdoors – in the places where we live – and need to work to develop our capacities for paying attention. We need to notice what is there and what’s not there as well as the relationships between and among things.

Poet David Whyte speaks a lot about paying attention in his work. In this interview with Krista Tippett from OnBeing, he says

And in Galapagos, I began to realize that, because I was in deeply attentive states, hour after hour watching animals and birds and landscapes — and that’s all I did for almost two years — I

*began to realize that my identity depended not upon any beliefs I had, inherited beliefs or manufactured beliefs, but my identity actually depended on how much attention I was paying to things that were other than myself. And that as you deepen this intentionality and this attention, you started to broaden and deepen your own sense of presence.*¹

This art of paying attention is also the art of survival. I think about the little mole who was caught in the lanes of the highway. Modern technology has rendered our little friend unable to pay attention to so many variables at the same time (probably not unlike humans). We try to take in all the necessary information, but there is just too much. And because of this survival is no longer a given.

OK, OK...you may be saying. I get it. But what does this have to do with our faith?

In the Judeo-Christian circles, the wilderness is where everything that is essential is taught (Exodus). It is where the prophets go to listen to God's call. It is where Jesus went in order to get clear on who he was. It's where we need to go to get right-sized and "re-placed."

A great teacher of the church, Thomas Aquinas, said that nature is the primary revelation of the divine. If we want to learn about God, just look around at the natural world. Fr. Jim Callan often says that when Jesus says to us, "Consider the sparrows (Matthew)" or "Look at the lilies (Luke)," he is actually commanding us and not just using a teaching tool.

Jesus was a student of his surroundings and constantly used natural images to reveal what the kingdom of God is like. No doubt, he read the book of Job (12:8-9) and heard the powerful counsel to "ask the animals what they think—let them teach you; let the birds tell you what's going on. Put your ear to the earth—learn the basics. Listen—the fish in the ocean will tell you their stories."

It is high time for us to ask the animals what they think and to let the birds tell us what is going on.

It may not happen all at once, but we need to be steadfast in our commitment to grow in this area. As with anything, we need to start where we are. If you are new to this whole idea, start small and simple. If you've been in it for a while, push yourself further. If this is old news to you, bring more and more people along with you through invitation and information.

Poet and farmer Wendell Berry says that, "there are no unsacred places. There are only sacred places and desecrated places." Our task is to find the sacred beneath our feet again, and for many of us we now live on desecrated spaces – so our task is daunting. But it is our task.

V. Action Step

One action that I will take based on these reflections is....

¹ <http://www.onbeing.org/program/david-whyte-the-conversational-nature-of-reality/transcript/8581>