Homily

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**Finding God in Wild Spaces**

A few summers ago, when I was between jobs and freed up from work, I went twice out West for 7 day backpacking trips on my own, off trail, where I might go for hours or days without encountering another hiker. Each of these trips had a pattern that, in retrospect, was remarkably similar. On day one I was nervous and exhilarated, and on day two tired and sore. Then, on day three I found myself discouraged, lonely, and full of doubt, and wondered why I had ever done something so dumb as to bring myself out on such a pointless trip. Starting around day four, however, I began to experience increasing moments of joy - - I would hike for a while, and then stop and gaze out at the endless vistas, and feel the boundaries between myself and the world around me begin to dissolve, and I was filled with awe. My days were reduced to their simplest aspects- a little pot to cook in, a lightweight tent to pitch at night, just walking along step by step, and yet I felt a kind of fullness that I have rarely experienced before or since. Now, when going through days that often feel pedestrian and disconnected, or tangled up with some passing worry, I harken back to those experiences, where the entire world seemed to vibrate and shimmer with spirit and force, and where I was able to shimmer along with it.

Ismael, the narrator of Moby Dick, is in the habit of taking off onto uncharted waters. “Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth”, he says in the opening chapter “whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet….I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can….There is nothing surprising in this. If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very near the same feelings toward the ocean with me.”

While salt water doesn’t call to me quite so much as it does to Ishmael, I do love being in the mountains, and I love sharing the experience with my children and my friends. And, like Ismael, I find myself regularly called. When the days start to blend one into another, and I can feel my soul begin to shrivel, there is nothing like a good day of hiking to reset my spirit. Coming back from a day in the White Mountains, I am reinvigorated, rededicated, and touched with joy. In the depths of Boston winter, I may go up and spend a weekend day on a radiant White Mountain ridge, and I feel as if I have grabbed hold of a high voltage wire and hung on until I begin to radiate and glow myself, and I ride a wave of well-being that carries me deep into the week.

The mountains of Wyoming, or even the presidential range in New Hampshire, amazing though they may be, would seem to be exotic and far away destinations to have to go in order to find spiritual sustenance. It’s hard to envision a God who was sequestered only in such remote locations, hiding out in the hills. If the idea of wilderness is going to have any expansive meaning for us, it has to mean more than just places that are really far away from a Starbucks, and has to be something that we can carry with us at all times.

One of my working hypotheses about life is that for every experience that we have in the world, and for every drama we play out, there is a mirrored, parallel experience going on inside of us. My internal world and my external world map onto each other, for the most part well outside of my attention. This is a deeply held belief, for example, amongst the people who strongly advocate for the psychological benefits of picking up your mess at home. Which means, I imagine, that I have a metaphorical mountain top inside of me, and that heading out the door on a hike helps me to get there as well.

On the surface, the sanctuary of First Parish Lincoln bears little resemblance to Wyoming’s Wind River mountain range. It’s a familiar, safe and protected place, comforting in its beautifully designed simplicity. Similarly, the walking trails around Lincoln, that so many of us are drawn to, are tame by any standard. And yet, there is something about those special places that, for many of us, provide the setting for some sort of spiritual experience, every bit as real as those found in deeper woods. There must be, in some way, an aspect of wilderness there as well.

So what does it mean to be a wild place, and why are such places so spiritually charged ? There are, I think, three aspects of wilderness worth considering.

For one, wilderness is a place where distractions are minimized, and your presence is demanded. All of the strategies that we employ to stave off boredom, and all of the diversions that we manufacture, are left behind, and we are stuck with just ourselves for some sustained period of time.

Second, wilderness is a setting that inspires a sense of awe. Sometimes it is grandeur, when you can’t look away from some magnificent display, and sometimes it is the small and unremarkable that become extraordinary by their simple existence. The millionth new Hampshire chunk of granite that you step on, stubbly and awkward as it may be, can inspire a grudging respect and even affection.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, there is in wilderness an element of danger. To be wild, it seems, is to be in a place where courage is required, where risk is present, and where the outcome is unknown and a bit beyond our control. It is to be in a place where we are forced to give up some of the massive, all-encompassing and deadening project of fooling ourselves that we are in control.

In the past few years the Danish concept of hygge (hug -gah), or coziness, has become well known- snuggling up with a comforting cup of tea under a warm blanket in front of a fire on a winter’s eve. Wilderness is perhaps best understood as all those things that hygge is not- the antithesis and necessary other end of that spectrum – a place that is uncomfortable, and frightening and disruptive and absolutely necessary for keeping us alive inside.

At the far end of my backyard is a path that leads into the woods- the grassy yard ends and there is a gap in the stone wall, where the trail leads into conservation land that is shaded and deep. I often head out for a run in the early morning hours, when the grass is wet with dew, and frequently discover the unforeseen and semi-spectacular on my trot around Sandy Pond. Yesterday, for example, I was hit on top of my head by an acorn falling from a great distance, and was for a moment just amazed that I had been singled out in that way. We all, I think, have such places, whether outdoors or in, where we can go to touch base with a little spark of wildness, to let go of our agendas and allow ourselves to be transformed in some way.