

“Nature: Why Our Relationship With it Matters”
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Last weekend, I went out to Martha’s Vineyard to visit my parents. Getting there always includes the adventure of the ferry ride – the “big ferry,” as we call it. On Saturday morning, as I stood on the upper deck, I looked around me at the wide open sky that was so blue it almost looked surreal; the expanse of dark water, sparkling almost magically in the sun, and the sun, which, I don’t know how, but it seemed to glow a little bit brighter there...I heard the cry of a gull and saw it swoop by, hoping for a snack, I smelled the sharp smell of the ocean, felt the wind in my face...all these things made my heart sing. And I know that sounds corny, but it’s true. Actually, what I really wanted to do was to jump up and down, but I didn’t really want to attract that much attention to myself.

Once I arrive, there’s always the drive across the island to the “little ferry,” as the Islanders refer to it. It’s also called the “on time” ferry. It goes back and forth across the Edgartown channel all day and evening (with a break from 7:30 to 9 o’clock), taking cars and passengers to and from the smaller island of Chappaquiddick. The “on time” ferry has no schedule, hence it is by its nature always “on time.”

Just as the ferries have their own rhythms, which people are wise to be mindful of, so, out there on the Vineyard, everyone lives just a little closer to the rhythms of nature: the tides, the winds, storms, wave heights, the return of native shore birds each spring and the erosion on the beaches in some areas, and the buildup of land in others.

Chappaquiddick means only one thing to people not familiar with the island, but once you have visited there, you soon move on from that association with a certain Massachusetts senator. The locals call it “Chappy,” and Chappy is where my parents have made their home. There are only about a hundred year-round residents and one grocery store which is so small that in this case, three is literally a crowd.

Most of the island is covered in pine and scrub oak woods and open meadows. On Sunday afternoon, my parents and I took a short walk along a trail that begins near the back of their property. Like the ground in Rachel Carson’s description, this area is also covered in that light-green reindeer moss, which crunched under foot

because it was dry. As we made a turn in the path and entered the woods, I had a strange sense of being out of time. I was aware of a kind of “filtering through” of a memory, or a memory of a feeling, really, a feeling I recalled from childhood. It was the feeling of pure wonder. Of being outdoors and being completely filled up with that feeling. I suddenly had an intense longing to be that child again, and for a moment my heart ached with the intensity of my desire. I felt a pang of sadness as I accepted the reality that of course, I can’t go back in time.

All this occurred in the space of about 5 seconds. I came back to the present and all that other stuff was replaced by a feeling of gratitude for all the natural beauty that was there right before my eyes. And I experienced wonder. It was an adult wonder, the wonder of someone who has seen so much more of the world than that small child I once was, but still, it was wonder.

I credit my father and mother with imbuing in me a love for and appreciation of the natural world. And I realize how fortunate I am. Children are born with a sense of wonder about the world around them, but if they are isolated from nature, they learn about a very different kind of world. I read about a study that revealed that a high percentage of kids in East LA know the names of more guns than they do names of birds.

In her book, The Sense of Wonder, Rachel Carson writes,

“What is the value of preserving and strengthening this sense of awe and wonder [in children], this recognition of something beyond the boundaries of human existence? Is the exploration of the natural world just a pleasant way to pass the golden hours of childhood or is there something deeper?”

I am sure there is something much deeper, something lasting and significant. Those who dwell...among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life. Whatever the vexations or concerns of their personal lives, their thoughts can find paths that lead to inner contentment and to renewed excitement in living. Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.”

She continues, “There is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds, the ebb and flow of the tides, the folded bud ready for the spring. There is

something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature –the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter.”

Whether we have an opportunity to stimulate a child’s inborn connection to the natural world or we want to strengthen our own, the principle is the same: there is an innate connection between us and the earth and all that comes forth from it. “[Humanity] is an aspect of nature,” says naturalist and writer Peter Matthiessen “and...nature is the ‘Great Mysterious,’ the ‘religion before religion,’ the profound intuitive apprehension of the true nature of existence attained by sages of all epochs, everywhere on Earth; the whole universe is sacred, [humanity] is the whole universe...”

Matthiessen gets at the heart of why our relationship to nature matters so much. In a hierarchical system of religious belief, God is not equated with “all that is,” or “the universe;” rather, God created all that is, God created the universe and is the lord over it all. Humans were created in God’s image, and so humans are meant to exert their control and domination over all of creation. It doesn’t take too much imagination to see how this idea has been taken to extremes and has led to horrors without number, from the taking of land of indigenous peoples all over the world, often accompanied by the genocide of those indigenous peoples, to the poisoning and destruction of the environment.

An earth-centered understanding of spirituality is a very different paradigm from a hierarchical, top-down worldview. “The Earth is the foundation of Indigenous Peoples; it is the seat of spirituality,” says Hayden Burgess, a native Hawaiian. He adds, “We do not dominate [the Earth]; we must harmonize with her.”

Spirituality is our relationship to something larger than ourselves. Clearly, the way in which we see our relationship to that “something” matters. I believe that, at some level and in some way, each of us begins life with an awareness of the oneness of everything. The sense of separateness from nature is something that our hierarchically-based society teaches us. But, fortunately, as with most matters of spiritual health, there is a remedy. Rachel Carson, in describing how to explore nature with children, explains, “[It] is largely a matter of becoming receptive to what lies all around you. It is learning again to use your eyes, ears, nostrils and finger tips, opening up the disused channels of sensory impression.”

She continues, “For most of us, knowledge of our world comes largely through sight, yet we look about with such unseeing eyes that we are partially blind. One

way to open your eyes to unnoticed beauty is to ask yourself, ‘What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?’”

In theological terms, this is about an understanding of nature and the earth as inherently sacred, and that we are an intrinsic part of the picture, not above it or below it, but in harmony with it. When I use the word, “sacred,” I mean that which is considered worthy of our deepest, most profound respect or devotion, that which inspires a sense of awe or reverence. Those of us, and I include myself here, who believe that the sacred interpenetrates all of nature, are, theologically speaking, panentheists, from the Greek “pan” (all), “en” (in) and theos (God), all-in-God. “Panentheism.”

A strong sense of spiritual connection with nature and with the earth can evoke in us a sense of meaning, as we feel ourselves to be part of a much larger whole. It can make the existentialist’s ennui almost incomprehensible. Existentialism being that sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world (Robert C. Solomon, *Existentialism* (McGraw-Hill, 1974, pp. 1–2).

While I was visiting my parents on the beautiful island of Chappaquiddick, I found a book in their bookcase that I had never seen before. With today’s sermon topic in mind, I asked my mother if I could borrow it. I recognized the author’s name, but I had never heard the particular title before. The book is called, The Sense of Wonder, by Rachel Carson.

A bit of serendipity, perhaps. The book is an affirmation of Rachel Carson’s belief that those who live with the mysteries of the earth, sea and sky are never alone or weary of life. Rachel Carson’s dream was that every child would be endowed with “a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life.” She said that for a child to keep alive his or her inborn sense of wonder, that child needed at least one adult who could share the joy and excitement of the world with him or her. She hoped that her book would inspire and encourage us to both engage in that sharing with children and to rediscover our own excitement and joy about nature, in all its mystery and its glory.

I learned that The Sense of Wonder was Rachel Carson’s last book. She had intended to expand upon what she had written, but she died of breast cancer before she was able to complete the book. She was only 56. This final project is both a gentle instruction book as well as a testament to her own secular yet deeply spiritual relationship with nature. For me, this book was also inspirational. If I

can't be that little child again, I want to find a child and go for a walk in the woods. I want to see what we might discover. I want to go to East LA, I want to borrow someone's child – I want to borrow a little boy who knows the names of so many guns, and I want to show him birds.