

# THE HEALING POWER OF NATURE

## I. WE NEED TO HEED THE TONIC OF WILDNESS

The universe, in its entirety, displays what 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian forebrother Henry David Thoreau called “the tonic of wildness”—freedom being an inherent quality of both nature and humanity. In fact, Thoreau believed only in sufficient restraints to negotiate our social contract. Anything that smacked of physical bondage or emotional servitude was morally offensive to him. Animals cannot be trapped and caged; neither can women and men; and that goes for the deities as well.

As we roam the wilds of the ecosphere, Thoreau reminds us to pay simultaneous homage to the unfettered, even uncivilized, territories inside our souls. He would have us cultivate, without taming, our inner beasts and unkempt terrain.

Unquestionably, Thoreau’s social activism stems from his mystical naturalism; so should ours. The reason he spent a night in jail—having committed civil disobedience by refusing to pay war taxes—is philosophically interwoven with his commitment to spending 26 months’ worth of nights at Walden Pond. In both cases he was paying heed to the tonic of wildness, the claims of unshackled freedom. Thoreau concurred with the viewpoint of his peer Daniel Ricketson: “I am an abolitionist because I am a lover of nature.”

As small children, we heard the call of the wild. Not unlike wolf pups in the den, we ran when we felt like it, sniffed and tasted things to see what they were, howled when the mood struck us, and boogied at the drop of a hat. We’d dig in the earth, heave rocks into ponds, roll and tumble about, even run naked whenever we could. We simply knew who we were: children of the mud.

But as time passed, we were encouraged to act our age and quit being and doing such wild things. Nonetheless, deep-seated wildness remains embedded within our DNA and within nature. It can be stifled but never erased.

For “life consists in wildness, the most alive is the wildest...” writes Thoreau. The kind of wildness, I would propose, as shown in our ferocity, vehemence, intensity, radicality, and passion...rather than the kind of wildness unleashed in our being reckless or wantonly violent, as becomes the human tendency when our natural fierceness is suppressed.

So, my fellow animals: let’s cease warring with wildness, let’s re-embrace its expansive, healing gifts both within and without our beings. Wild fruits, wild weeds, wild winds, wild animals, wild dreams.

## **II. BEHOLDING**

When the Christian scriptures report Jesus as saying, “Behold the lilies of the field,” the Nazarene isn’t saying “Hey, look at those lilies over there!” in some detached, smug, analytic fashion. Rather the word “behold” means showing profound regard, perceiving with a deep caring and gentleness which suggests that things possess their own wondrous authenticity and dignity apart from human beings, apart even from our viewing them. Apples, volcanoes, yucca, rattlesnakes—earth’s infinite panorama of flesh and bones. “Behold the lilies of the field.”

So, as a wondering tribe of spiritual wanderers, perhaps our primary vocation is to become beholders and lookers, observing with an active gaze and level glance all that moves, or doesn’t move.

As naturalist Greta Ehrlich puts it:

*To see is to stop. To open oneself to what is there. To open one’s eyes, nostrils, ears, or as John Muir suggested, stand on one’s head to see the world anew. The beauty of the natural world is given to us. We abuse the gift by not looking, by using it for profit, by not recognizing its intrinsic value. Real wealth is biological*

*diversity: sun, grass, water, birds, antelope, elk, bear, moose, and the joys that we find living among them.*

Naturalist Louis Agassiz was once asked how he planned to spend his upcoming summer. “Why, crawling across the backyard on my stomach and observing insect life, blades of grass, the pebbles, and the earth,” he replied.

“Then, what will you do with the rest of the time?” his questioner continued.

“Why, it’s going to take me the whole summer to get halfway across the yard,” Agassiz exclaimed.

While not being as disciplined, if not compulsive, as brother Louis, it remains our joyous duty, performed daily, to behold the mules, the ocotillo, the scorpions...the lilies of the field, the moon, the sunset as well. And the rocks, yes the rocks, for a brook without rocks has no song. And the tornado and the earthquake, for we dare not wrench beauty, however terrifying, from the whole. As we meander this sprawling maze of a universe, we will surely behold wonders both awe-inspiring and fierce.

May you and I internalize the ancient Celtic imagination that welcomed nature, divinity, and human existence as equal partners in one unified cosmos...every bit of it rampant with soul. Consequently, animals are our brothers and sisters. Wells are sacred sites. Rivers and streams are the outpouring of earth’s emotionality. Is it any wonder that Unitarian Universalists finally came to our senses, resonated with our ancestors, and celebrated earth-based spirituality as one of our sacred sources?

And so, standing tall before the advancing dawn, while facing the sun, I bow in prayer each morning of my existence, and humbly utter:

Great Spirit,  
Thank you for another day—

A blessing I did not earn.

May I become an unfettered beholder throughout my waking and sleeping.

Open my eyes that I might see,  
Open my ears that I might hear,  
Open my nostrils that I might smell,  
Open my mouth that I might taste,  
Open my throat that I might croon,  
Open my hands that I might touch,  
Open my soul that I might entertain...  
marvels exceeding comprehension  
and mysteries eluding capture.

Shalom, salaam, amen, namaste, and blessed be.

### **III. SAUNTERERS**

The saunterer is one who strolls in measured manner, with one eye on nature, the other on soul—treating the terrain, and all therein, as sacred. As the French say, there goes a *Saint-Terrier*, a saunterer—literally a holy-lander.

The saunterer is sent on a hallowed quest—not recreation so much as re-creation. It's not the length but the depth of walk that makes it blessed. For sauntering remains a mystical adventure.

Saunterers are known to awake, as is the Hindu custom, to caress the earth each morn, stroke it lightly, then apologize for treading upon it in the hours ahead. Hence, true saunterers stride in reverent, appreciative gait, touching the dirt with deft hands and with tender feet (you'll recall there was nothing between Thoreau's soles and the soil except the skin of an animal).

Direction isn't paramount either, although for Thoreau the East signified the ancient treasures of European culture, whereas the West symbolized wilderness, that which remains untamed, primitive, innocent, a fairer world aching for discovery. Hence, Thoreau wrote:

“Westward, I go free” and “the West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in the Wildness is the preservation of the World.”

Sauntering was not extraneous but indispensable to Thoreau’s daily fare. He would stroll in the woods up to four hours every day, defying those who considered sauntering worthless:

*If we walk in the woods for love of them half of each day, we are in danger of being regard as a loafer; but if we spend the whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, we are esteemed industrious and enterprising citizens. As if a town had no interest in its forests but to cut them down.*

I close this piece on sauntering with one of my favorite chants, most appropriately intoned in carefree fashion:

*I am moving on a journey to nowhere,  
Taking it easy, taking it slow,  
No more hurry, no more worry,  
Nothing to carry, let it all go.*

#### **IV. MYSTERY**

While the rationalist strain in our Unitarian Universalist heritage is well-established, our mystical inclinations lie concealed. We’ve been lampooned as a demystified religion suffering from an “ecstasy deficit.” Even while applauding the prodigious contributions of Unitarian transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller, we often fail to acknowledge their pervasive mystical bent. Yet the truth remains, as expressed by President Louis Cornish of the American Unitarian Association, back in 1937: “We belong among the mystics;” ours is the company of those pilgrims who experience the cosmos numinously.

As bona fide mystics, the substance of our faith points to an ineffable yet undeniable connection with sacrality. Unitarian Universalist mystics would proclaim two linked convictions: our lives are embraced by a mystery that is baffling yet trustworthy, and our human fulfillment lies in surrendering to it.

Our liberal religion pushes our minds as far as they can go and then invites us to bow before the ambiguities of existence...of evil and joy, sexuality and death, love and creation. All these mysteries are uncanny, inexplicable, and elicit feelings best rendered by the English word “awe” and its derivations “awesome” and “awful.”

Organized religions have customarily been preoccupied with mastery over mystery—reducing Life, Spirit, God itself to credal phrases and shrewd doctrines. Not so Unitarian Universalists; we unabashedly remain freethinking *mystics* with hands...all our days and nights.

The Greek root *mys* in the word mystery means shutting the eyes or mouth, because mystery has the power to overcome and because its essence is omnipresent. Therefore, in engaging mystery we’re often driven to silence, muteness, dumbness. We’re forced to shut-up, at least for the moment—no easy or comfortable feat for loquacious, logical sorts like Unitarian Universalists.

Consequently, upon the death of a parishioner, during the Sunday worship service, we often extinguish our flaming chalice, then re-light a fresh candle in her or his memory, closing with words such as: “In mystery we are born, in mystery we live, and in mystery we die.”

Simple words, accompanied by an elemental ritual, then silence.

## **V. WITH HANDS**

Our hands, at their worst, are known to spank, slap, assault: to deliver pain rather than pleasure. Our hands, at their noblest, are lifted in praise, shaken in friendship, held in loving embrace, aroused to clapping, employed in playfulness, raised in resistance, folded in prayer, unfurled to welcome the alien and enfold the needy, wrung in frustration and anguish, used to cultivate the soil.

In the Garden of Eden we were given the mandate “to till and keep it.” Plainly, one of the meanings of the Eden myth is that we humans have received our life conditionally, and we must remain obedient to basic laws. We were kicked out of the garden, and we’ve been destroying it ever since. Why? Because we’ve refused to accept life as something deeded to us under the requirement that we’ll be responsive to and responsible for it—that we will handle the cosmos with exceeding carefulness.

And tilling, my friends, means far more than having a green thumb. Some of us don’t own green thumbs, and we’re not off the hook. We’re still mandated to become robust stewards of the earth. Why, I used to plant gardens in Iowa, a land with as much lush, fertile, chocolate ground as exists anywhere. And, alas, I learned always to keep the empty seed packages, because they were usually just the right size for storing my crop.

Each individual act of respect for the natural world, each personal measure of conservation, each decision against dirtying the air, land or water, these are gifts of the green spirit. We humans can bequeath no greater legacy to those who follow us than to handle our daily greetings with earth...gently yet firmly.

Possessors of green thumbs or not, we must all harbor green spirits.

## **VI. THE PEACE OF WILD THINGS (Wendell Berry)**

*When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
In fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

I began with musings upon wildness; I return to what poet-ecologist, Wendell Berry, calls “the peace of wild things”—the peace discernible in recognizing what lies in our hands and what lies beyond our grasp, the peace discoverable in letting go and letting be.

For hard-driving, high-control Unitarian Universalist folks, the toughest spiritual discipline imaginable is learning, then practicing, the art of surrender. It entails finding allies with whom we can lightheartedly labor to co-create an ever-evolving universe. Healthy surrender demands relinquishing our rabid urge to dominate other people as well as control nature for our own purposes. Surrendering ourselves to neighbor, to nature, to God is never about submission but always trust...abundant trust. It requires giving ourselves over without giving ourselves away.

For at the close of our earthly trek, we’ll release our beings back to the ultimate mystery from whence we arrived, dust unto dust, entering the loving grasp of the Infinite Spirit that birthed us into being, has nurtured us ever since, and won’t let us go. “Rest assured, rest assured,” as our Universalist forebears put it.

It happens through our hands, doesn’t it? We come into existence with our fists clenched as babies, but when we arrive at death’s door our hands are open. During the intervening days and nights, we’re summoned to progressively unclench our fists and open our hands in reverence toward every object and living entity that crosses our path.

May we live unclenched and open...the rest of our earthly journey.

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