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UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
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When we loosen our certainties, we live more fully.

What We Cannot See

The singer's act was raunchy and provocative. Black, full-bodied, about my age, she wore colorful African attire – a turban and a matching tunic in bright reds and yellows. She belted out “I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Mama,” and men in the audience shouted, “Yeah, baby!” An eye-popping scene on the quiet island of St. John last week where my husband and I had the privilege to vacation.

We had been there twice before, the first time with our young kids during Carnival. I remember waiting for the ferry when we arrived. The dock was on the parade route, and the scene before us was wild and loud. Hundreds of party-ers, mostly Black, danced by in costumes and rasta-striped hats, singing, shouting, walking on stilts. Our provincial, NH-born son, about eight at the time, freaked out. He'd never seen anything like this and was ashen with fear.

John and I went alone the second time, nine years ago, the year I started divinity school and both kids were up and out. I remember it simply as a happy, welcoming place. I don't recall paying much attention to the local culture. It was what it was, and we were there to relax in the sun.

This year felt different. It was the same place with the same people, but something had shifted – maybe the world, maybe we. Perhaps we weren't so certain. Perhaps we came this time with a bit more curiosity than before about the culture and history – and the inequality, racial and economic. In our cottage we found a timeline of the island's demographics and learned that St. John had been a plantation island. West Indian natives and African captives had been enslaved by Europeans and forced to clear the steep hillsides and build terraces to grow sugar cane.

In the 1700s, the census showed a hundred or so white people on the island and several hundred Black slaves. Every few decades, the number of white people would increase slightly while the number of enslaved Blacks mushroomed. At one point there were 167 whites and 2400 enslaved Blacks. Finally, in 1888 slavery was abolished. As happened here, freedom didn't come overnight. But we were shocked to read that the 1907 census showed *only four white people* on St. John island and some 2400 Blacks. The owners and masters had gone home.

And then it's as if the same thing happened all over again. Onto this paradise of freed people came whites again, with their power, money and will – their supremacy. They bought up land and eventually made most of it National Park, forcing the people who lived there out of their homes into the two towns and largely into service jobs, where many of them remain. Today a quarter of the population of about 5,000 is again white and well off.

Now you don't see all that if you don't look for it. You see a happy-go-lucky place. But the history of white people exploiting the land and their fellow humans not once but twice – shook us up.

How often is it that we don't see the full picture? It happens all the time. Eight generations later, Susan Ticehurst urges legislators to question their certainty, her own grammy hung as a witch.¹

Sometimes we only see the full picture in retrospect. It even happens across the street. For years, I admired the couple across from us. A little older than we and widely respected in town, she was musical, an accomplished flute-player, also a painter and potter with an eye for beauty. He, a prominent lawyer, was civic-minded, into the environment. He and his friends enjoyed hunting and fishing together. Their life looked like one we might emulate...until it ended. "I'm leaving," she told me one summer day, no reason given or ever shared publicly. Their life wasn't what it seemed after all.

Sometimes what we don't see delights us. We may only see the tree or the squirrel, but on looking more closely, a whole new world opens up. You can look at Marion's hidden orchid for a long time. You might have seen the photo about this service in the Mail Pouch.² It looks like a photo of a hillside of trees. I'd taken it from our deck on St. John because the image contained at least four good-sized iguanas, hiding in plain sight.

Now iguanas are an invasive species, hard on the local vegetation. But for me that morning, they were exciting and exotic. In that part of the world, iguanas ride trees. Ten to twenty inches long, not including their really long striped tails, they'll wrap themselves around a branch and sway in the breeze for hours at a time, barely moving. The more you look, the more of them you see.

We didn't see them until our third day there, camouflaged as they were. It had rained that night, the air fragrant. That morning, I was determined to do some writing out on the deck when suddenly an iguana appeared off to the left, looking like part of a tree. I raced to take its picture – no need, as it was there the whole week, whenever I looked.

Then I returned to start writing. But wait, there was another iguana on the same tree. How had we missed that prehistoric silhouette, the scaly ridge along the head and body? I snapped another photo. Now, back to the writing. But no. Boom, right next to the deck this time, a big one in the treetop, close enough to reach out and touch.

I never did write that morning! Between delighting in seven iguanas in the trees and trying to capture an image of a bird on the railing – who knew before I did that I was trying to do that and always flew away – the natural world took my full attention. It was at that point I finally felt on vacation!

When I later checked messages, a friend, in a stroke of serendipity, happened to have sent this Celtic prayer:

As the light of dawn awakens earth's creatures
and stirs into song the birds of the morning,
so may I be brought to life this day.

¹ Reading on p. 5.

² Which took some looking this week. When Google blocks us, you can always find the newsletters at uufes.com.

Rising to see the light,
 to hear the wind,
 to smell the fragrance of what grows from the ground,
 to taste its fruit and touch its textures,
 so may my inner senses be awakened to you
 so may my senses be awakened to you, O God.³

As people of conscience, paying attention is part of our sacred work, and the more we look, we more we do see.

St. John is one of many islands directly hit by Hurricanes Irma and Maria two years ago, Irma a Category 5 with sustained winds of 185 mph. You see the devastation everywhere. Abandoned ruins of homes, wreckage strewn down every hillside. Truck engines grind up and down the hills all day long as the island rebuilds – shocking and saddening.

Every person we met had a storm story. One man, stuck at work twenty minutes from home, waited out the storm overnight. When it subsided at 4 a.m., all communications were down. Desperate for news of his son, he walked home, the roads blocked by downed trees. It took six hours.

At the UU fellowship there, every person in the room had lost a home. And yet, everywhere, we heard something that surprised us – more than resilience, it was an extraordinary optimism. Pride. A sense of identity. A bright energy. A Native woman whose grandparents lost everything, said, “But it’s really good here!” It didn’t look that way. What do you mean, I asked. “Our recovery,” she said, “it’s fast and strong.” Another survivor summed it up, “It were bad,” they said, “but we good.”

Later that night at the restaurant, the African American singer sang another hot song about the secret of happiness for older women (a younger man). Again, she revved up the crowd, impressive and a little daunting, too. She had a powerful presence. But there was something else about her, especially when she looked toward the cheering men. I’d wondered about the look in her eye a few times that night.

On our way out, we stopped to thank a member of the band, and he offered up more of her story. As a young woman, she’d waited tables on the island. One day, a man of means said to her, “You’re way too smart to do this with your life.” He saw that she was far more than a waitress. More than a pretty face and a great voice with a red-hot act. It was seen to that she attended college and then law school. She has been advocating for justice on the island ever since. I saw her on the ferry on our way home, on the phone, clearly working. Yeah, baby....

We can go about our lives accepting what we see or what we’re told, our mind made up much of the time, our focus elsewhere. While it’s true we can’t investigate everything (nothing would get done), it’s also true that when we look more closely at a singer, a tropical island, or the view off the deck – a vastness opens up. A world of complexity, nuance and intricacy.

³ J. Philip Newell, A Celtic benediction.

There's always more to know, and as our understandings expand, I like to think we expand, too. We may look the same on the outside, but like a snake that sheds its skin, we too can outgrow our containers. As we learn and think and feel, we inhabit a larger space, the soul – that mysterious, ineffable part of ourselves – is always expanding.

Some people understand God this way. It's called process theology. That great mystery is not only vast and beyond our knowing – “greater than all and yet present in each,” as Forrest Church used to say – it is always changing. In process theology, God is not a constant but a dynamic, ever-evolving vastness.

Mary Oliver wrote, “I want to say all my life/I was a bride married to amazement.” On her death last winter, *The New Yorker* observed, “She tells us that wonder has to be earned. Marriages are hard work; they take nurturing and constant vigilance. By comparing herself to a bride, she yoked herself to being amazed; she gave herself the lifelong assignment, however difficult, of looking up.”⁴

Let us give ourselves that “lifelong assignment, however difficult, of looking up.” Looking closely. Allowing our certitude to loosen. Inviting in the vastness of all things. As we see more clearly, may we stretch and become bigger, brighter vessels. We are not at the end of our understanding. Praise be!

(See Reading on the next page.)

⁴ Rachel Syme, “Mary Oliver Helped Us Stay Amazed,” *The New Yorker*, 19 January 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mary-oliver-helped-us-stay-amazed>

5/12/19 Reading:

Our reading is excerpted from the words of NH Rep. Susan Ticehurst. Interested in certitude and the fallibility of initial judgments, she intends to make a short speech when the House considers overriding the Governor's veto of the death penalty repeal bill:

"I rise today to illustrate a parallel between my 8th great grandmother's life...well...the end of her life...and the pivotal point we find ourselves at today.

You may not think that you are interested in any granny of mine, but you ...have heard her story before. You may not remember her name, but I will remind you: Susannah North Martin, a mother, Christian and outspoken woman.

Susannah was accused of a crime. And she received a fair trial...well...what was considered fair in her time, anyway. Multiple witnesses testified against her....

Intelligent and respected men made the best decision they could, given what was understood at the time...intent upon protecting the safety of the people of their community. They believed in doing justice. They were certain of the rightness and righteousness of their decision....

Their decision was to hang Susannah as a witch in Salem on July 19, 1692.

Now we are in a new time, but some things remain the same. Intelligent and respected men and women make the best decisions they can about guilt or innocence. [They too] take their duty to protect public safety seriously. They value justice. They are certain of their rightness and righteousness.

... as in previous times, they are sometimes...wrong....[S]ome things are different now from previous times. We have scientific tools which provide evidence that intelligent, well intentioned, respected people...witnesses, juries, judges, reporters and the public...can be mistaken....

Right here...we have heard...testimony from people... accused of horrific crimes and erroneously given a death sentence, just as Susannah North Martin was.

[More than 160] innocent people [have been] exonerated...released from a death sentence with evidence of their innocence.

How long will we go on believing in our own infallibility?...

Fellow Representatives, we make a lot of rather mundane decisions here. This is not one of them....

I'll be casting my vote as a memoriam to my granny, Susannah North Martin. I ask you to join me in memory of those who have been falsely convicted and executed in the past...and with respect and compassion for those who may follow without our action today.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker."