

“On the Marsh’s Edge”  
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with Worship Associate Anneliese Smith  
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes  
July 14, 2019

***Opening Words: “Prayer for the Great Family” by Gary Snyder***

Gratitude to Mother Earth, sailing through night and day—  
and to her soil: rich, rare and sweet  
in our minds so be it.

Gratitude to Plants, the sun-facing, light-changing leaf  
and fine root-hairs; standing still through wind  
and rain; their dance is in the flowering spiral grain  
in our minds so be it.

Gratitude to Air, bearing the soaring Swift and silent  
Owl at dawn. Breath of our song  
clear spirit breeze  
in our minds so be it.

Gratitude to Wild Beings, our brothers, teaching secrets,  
freedoms, and ways; who share with us their milk;  
self-complete, brave and aware  
in our minds so be it.

Gratitude to Water: clouds, lakes, rivers, glaciers;  
holding or releasing; streaming through all  
our bodies salty seas  
in our minds so be it.

Gratitude to the Sun: blinding pulsing light through  
trunks of trees, through mists, warming caves where  
bears and snakes sleep— he who wakes us—  
in our minds so be it.

Gratitude to the Great Sky  
who holds billions of stars— and goes yet beyond that—  
beyond all powers, and thoughts  
and yet is within us—  
Grandfather Space.  
The Mind is his Wife.  
so be it.

**Reading**

“The Peace of Wild Things”  
by 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.

**Sermon***At the Marsh’s Edge*

We live by the dance of earth, sun and moon. Their rhythms and circling and tilting color the passage of time. Sometimes it seems to pass quickly, each December day markedly shorter and darker than the one before. This time of year, just after the solstice, the days stretch long and full, bright into the evening, as if time itself has slowed down.

So it is with the tides. When the tide is coming in, the current flows swift and strong. I love the moment when it’s all the way in and the movement stops. Like a spacious summer day, the water pulsates and pools, the basin filled to the rim. Mesmerizing. Full. Waiting.

These past weeks have been a time of fullness and waiting, as our friend Harvey began saying his goodbyes and then gently slipped into a deep sleep. You may have noticed a similar fullness at other times in your life when you’ve sat with someone who is dying. It can be a time of intimacy, tears, stories. Sometimes struggle. Rich with mystery and love. A felt sense of the cup overflowing.

As time slowed last week – like that peaceful turning at the top of the tide – UUFES kept vigil, both at Harvey’s bedside and as we went about our lives, continuously aware of him. Precious moments. What was that like for *you*, waiting for the word we knew would come and knowing that he was still with us? [People’s observations: peaceful...we carried him with us “like a placenta”...grateful...] How extraordinary, how beautiful, for fifty, sixty people to come through a time like this together, perched on the edge of mystery, piercingly aware of life’s ebb and flow. Time big and slow. Waiting. Together.

I grew up spending summers on the edge of a marsh in Maine where my parents had built a house. Peaceful and luminous, that marsh has been a silent witness to the events of our lives. For

years, the marsh was in the background: it was what we crossed to get somewhere else—to pick mussels or play on the sandbar; or, at high tide, to jump into the cold deep water. On our wedding day, setting the ceremony in motion, John and our minister crossed the marsh from the water's edge to the circle of loved ones gathered on the lawn. Just few years ago, my siblings and I buried our parents' ashes where the lawn meets the marsh.

Today, the marsh is in sharp focus. In the summer wind, waves of marsh grass roll viridian, sap, terre verte. It teems with life cackling, honking, splashing, hatching, slithering. Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, who loved the wetlands, called them “the wildest and richest gardens that we have....”<sup>1</sup> They enchanted him, “painted...like a rug...the...colours running gradually into each other.”<sup>2</sup> For Thoreau, wetlands were hallowed ground: “I enter a swamp,” he said, “as a sacred place, a sanctum sanctorum.”<sup>3</sup> Holy of holies.

Come fall, the marsh will make you cry. Greens fading to brown. Dried out husks. Blades of ochre, sienna, umber, vermilion—vibrant, beautiful...and dying. The sun, low in the sky, sets all that life and all that death afire. Life blazing before winter's onset.

Winter, hard and long, takes its toll on the marsh. God couldn't do a better job of weaving together a shroud of matted grass, seaweed and twigs. The sodden, black weight of it speaks of hard times and burdens long carried. It takes all spring and most of the summer for tender, new blades of grass to break through that matted crust. It looks like hard work, but the resilience is good to see. Inspiring, even.

Truth be told, it's more than the seasons of the marsh that tug at the heart. More than the light. More than the pallet. More than its fragility as humans carve away at it. What rings true is the resonance of beauty and death together in one frame. Like the forces wrestling in Harvey's room last week. Life achingly and beautifully sad. Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron writes that it's *the mix* that expands the heart: “The sadder it is,” she says, “and the vaster it is, the more our heart opens.”

We encounter a sense of the liminal, an in-between-ness, at the marsh's edge, the very edge that separates land and water. It is of both earth and water: the spongy peat holds us, but we watch our step – it's porous and wet and watery, full of crevasses, holes and puddles of wiggly life. Nursery and cemetery, the lush marsh rustles with movement and sound, while massive chunks of peat crumble and fall into the water.

Today we rent that home in Maine so we can pay the taxes and continue to enjoy it. A few days opened up this past week between renters. After visiting Harvey Wednesday afternoon at Mountain View, the guest book again full of familiar names, I found myself drawn to the peace of the marsh “where the wood drake/rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds...” – that world a tableau of all there is: beginnings and endings, beauty and decay, the sense of forever peaceful. Freeing.

<sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, IV, p. 281.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Robert D. Richardson, Jr, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, p. 360.

<sup>3</sup> Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. Carl Bode, New York: Penguin, 1982, p. 611.

Here [ wrote Mary Oliver in her poem “Crossing the Swamp”] is the endless  
 wet thick  
   cosmos, the center  
   of everything...  
 ... Here  
 is swamp, here  
   is struggle,  
   closure—  
   pathless, seamless,  
 peerless mud. [She writes of] trying  
   for foothold, fingerhold,  
 mindhold over  
   [the] slick crossings...[She feels] glittered  
 with the fat grassy  
   mires, the rich  
   and succulent marrows  
   of earth. [She says she’s like a]...  
 dry stick given  
   one more chance by the whims  
   of swamp water— a bough  
   that still, after all these years,  
 could take root,  
   sprout, branch out, bud—  
   make of its life a breathing  
   palace of leaves.

The natural course of things breaks our heart and it releases us. Sitting at a friend’s bedside or at the marsh’s edge reminds us of our oneness with all that is.

We are always perched on the liminal edge, even here in this good company. The edge of our next chapter. Of tomorrow. Of the unknown. The good news is that we can live in a way to cherish the edge. Ours is a faith of intention. Of living life on purpose. So let us go out and be present to others in these complex times, part of something greater. And let us pause to feel the wrenching beauty of the natural world.

May we reverence the time we have.

So may it be.

***Benediction***

Gratitude to Mother Earth – Gratitude to Plants –  
 Gratitude to Air – and Wild Beings – and Water –  
 Gratitude to the Sun – and the Great Sky – to Grandfather Space....

May we “rest in the grace of the world, and [be] free.”