



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“On Sacred Ground”

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Centering Thoughts

*I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown,
for going out, I found, was really going in.* John Muir journal

*Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where
nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike.* John Muir, THE YOSEMITE

*No synonym for God is so perfect as Beauty. Whether as seen carving the lines
of the mountains with glaciers, or gathering matter into stars, or planning
the movements of water, or gardening – still all is Beauty!* John Muir journal

Shared Reflections and Readings

Rev. Alison:

John Muir’s writing should be essential reading for anyone who identifies as a religious naturalist. His poetic and spiritual descriptions of his experiences out among the trees, the rocks, and the waterfalls almost make me want to give up city life to go out into the pristine forests and lakes to reconnect to our kin, or cousins, the tree- and rock-people. In *My First Summer in the Sierra*, Muir wrote:

Worship Assistant:

“The very stones seem talkative, sympathetic, brotherly. No wonder when we consider that we all have the same Father and Mother.”

Rev. Alison:

Here’s more, from an 1896 speech to the Sierra Club which he co-founded:

Worship Assistant:

“Few are altogether deaf to the preaching of pine trees. Their sermons on the mountains go to our hearts; and if people in general could be got into the woods, even for once, to hear the trees speak for themselves, all difficulties in the way of forest preservation would vanish.”

[“The National Parks and Forest Reservations” a speech by John Muir from the Proceedings of the Meeting of the Sierra Club Held November 23, 1895, and published in *Sierra Club Bulletin*, (1896), v. 1, no. 7, January 1896, pp 271-284, at 282-83.]

Morgan:

Back in the 90s, I began to have my first of what I consider mystical experiences in nature. During a trip out west with friends, I decided to take a solitary walk into the woods of the Sequoia National Park in California, when a perfect perch between two enormous redwood trees seemed to call out and invite me to sit and rest, which I did. While sitting in awe of these gigantic living beings, I notice a shift in the very energy around me, a sort of vibration I had never felt before. I sensed our shared respiration, as I breathed in oxygen exhaled by the trees and exhaled carbon dioxide inhaled by the trees. I believed then and still do today that I could hear the trees “speaking for themselves”, as Muir said, not with words but with a language I somehow understood in my heart.

Alison:

Muir called the wilderness ‘Godful’, an experience more awe-inspiring than anything he found in the dour, sin-filled worship of his father. Here are Muir’s own words from his book, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, written in 1911:

Worship Assistant:

“How often I have gazed ... from the tops of hills and ridges, and through openings in the forests on my many short excursions, devoutly wondering, admiring, longing! This I may say is the first time I have been at church in California, led here at last, every door graciously opened for the poor lonely worshiper.

“In our best times everything turns into religion, all the world seems a church and the mountains altars. And lo, here at last in front of the Cathedral is blessed [flowering] cassiope, ringing her thousands of sweet-toned bells, the sweetest church music I ever enjoyed.”

[*My First Summer in the Sierra*, Chapter 10.]

Alison:

To Muir, wild lands were holy ground. Nature was a divine book that spoke of God’s goodness and love. Nature, Muir believed, was a necessary place where people could find comfort, healing, and hope. The trees spoke of patience and how to live through the storms and droughts of life. Healing occurred when witnessing the blossoming of spring, the birth of animals, and the meandering paths of rivers and streams. Solace and connection awaited in the wild. Muir wrote in another book, *The Yosemite*: [p. 256]

Worship Assistant:

“Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike.”

Alison:

And, in an unpublished journal Muir wrote:

Worship Assistant:

“Come to the woods, for here is rest. There is no repose like that of the green deep woods. Here grow the wallflower and the violet. The squirrel will come and sit upon your knee, the logcock will wake you in the morning. Sleep in forgetfulness of all ill. Of all the upness accessible to mortals, there is no upness comparable to the mountains.”

[John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir, (1938), page 235]

Morgan:

Again, I recall the Sequoia National Forest. On another trip there, I slept tent-less in my sleeping bag under the giant trees. From my deep slumber in the early morning hours, I became aware of a slight fluttering, buzzing sound and little puffs of air upon my face like a child's breath. I opened my eyes to see a hummingbird hovering less than a foot above my face, it turning its head from side to side eyeing me as we stared at each other. My logical mind told me the bird was attracted to the red liner of my sleeping bag, but my soul sensed we had known each other~ that hummingbird and I~ for a thousand years! I knew then I would not be the same person anymore. I had experienced the "upness".

Alison:

Muir loved wandering alone in deep contemplation, but he also would dance on rocks, ride an avalanche of snow down a mountain, rock ecstatically with the quaking earth, climb high up a tree to feel the wind toss him about. He became one with Mother Nature and realized his connection to nature in ways few ever have. Listen to Muir again, from *My First Summer in the Sierra*:

When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. One fancies a heart like our own must be beating in every crystal and cell, and we feel like stopping to speak to the plants and animals as friendly fellow mountaineers. Nature as a poet, an enthusiastic workingman, becomes more and more visible the farther and higher we go; for the mountains are fountains – beginning places, however related to sources beyond mortal ken.

Morgan:

Recently, I sat reclined in my lounge chair in the backyard rather late on a clear, star-filled night, thoughts of recent events, relationships, and the goings on of my life chattering about in my head. Not attempting to meditate, I felt pleasantly surprised when the cluttered thoughts subsided, and a quietness of mind settled in as I stargazed. Then, just as clear as if someone was speaking to me, this thought came to mind: "You are blessed for the presence of each and every one of them in your life." I understood that each of the stars represented all the connections and interactions between people and other living things that had affected my life in some way. All were equally important, regardless of how mundane the passing may have seemed.

Alison:

Muir rejected the prevailing religious and cultural belief that natural resources were here for humans to consume at will and without consequence. He protested indiscriminate tree-cutting, mining, and other ways industry damaged ecosystems and habitat. His growing scientific understanding of the environment and his religious feelings prompted him to lobby for protecting what became Yosemite National Forest and other wilderness areas. Muir's scientific and spiritual truths led him to speak for Mother Nature and preserve her wild lands. May we be so bold.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Share a time you felt 'at one' or 'at home' with nature. What helped you feel connected?
2. Are you drawn to the wilderness for solitude, healing, prayer, or giving thanks? Or, is the wilderness meaningful in some other, less spiritual, way?
3. Do wild places feel like special or holy ground to you? Should they be preserved? Share.