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What I did on my Summer Vacation!

When I was a kid, going back to school after Labor Day was a much-dreaded event. One of the few good things about going back was that during the first day or two of class, we got to tell what we did during our summer vacation. And each of us would have something to share. I grew up in the New York area – and then we had three baseball teams, Yankees, Dodgers, and Giants. So a particular highlight for me was the summer I got to go to Cooperstown in upstate New York to visit the baseball Hall of Fame. Other years, my family visited Niagara Falls, the Maine woods, the city of Quebec, and so on. As we re-gather here this morning, it's a time to reflect on what we did this past summer, each one of us. And perhaps to think about what we learned, what insights we gained, what new ways we discovered for looking at the world.

Karen and I took a long road trip in June and July, up to the Olympic Peninsula in Northwestern Washington State, camping, hiking, and backpacking along the way. One day in particular made a deep impression on me. We had arrived on the Western side of the Peninsula, where rain-laden weather sweeps in off the ocean and then stacks up against the mountains of the Olympic range. It's one of the rainiest spots in North America. I doubt that I would like it in winter, but in summer, it can be very moderate, with some rain, but many days of sun. Because of these weather patterns, the western slopes of the Olympic peninsula consist largely of rain forests, and many of these are protected old-growth forests. We had spent this particular day hiking through the Hoh (H-O-H) rain forest, and learning about how different old-growth forests are. When a giant tree falls – whether it be a Sitka Spruce, Northern Hemlock, Douglas Fir, or red alder -- it remains on the forest floor where it fell. And then baby trees begin to take root in the fallen trunk. The strongest ones win out, and they continue to grow and to put down roots. As they get bigger, they put out roots on either side, and these roots eventually reach the ground around the fallen trunk. After many years, as the new tree grows, and the fallen trunk rots away, incredible shapes emerge, as the roots now form the foundation of the tree. And huge gaps are left, where the fallen tree has disappeared. Various mosses and ferns adorn the trunks and branches of the living trees, so the light is filtered, and a special silence prevails. Walking through an old-growth forest is like being in a cathedral. The silence draws us into introspection, and the soaring trunks draw our eyes upward.

Well, after hiking through this special forest for several hours, we found a trail that led out to the Hoh River, which runs nearby. Flushed with the melting snows from the mountains, the river was raging. It was an icy blue color, with eddies and whirlpools, with standing waves, with trunks and branches careening by us. And yet, as we sat on a giant tree trunk stranded on the riverbank, there was a sense of calm and peace next to the roar of the river. We looked upstream, and in the "V" formed by the forests on either side of the river, a peak of the Olympic range loomed, still covered with snow! We sat there quietly, taking in all this magnificence around and above us. And sitting there, I had one of those moments that we all experience – I believe -- at certain special times. A deep sense of peace came over me, but it was more than that. There was a

sense of being connected to the universe, of being part of the universe, however small. I experienced a sense of the interdependence of all things – Karen, me, the river, the mountains, the trees, the creatures that inhabit the forest and the river. You could call it a “luminous” experience, in the sense that it was filled with light. You could call it a “numinous” experience, in the sense that it somehow suggested a spiritual presence. My dictionary illustrates its definition of “numinous” with these words from William G. Pollard: “the strange numinous sense of presentness . . . like a spell.” For a few fleeting moments, I felt the presence of the spirit, whatever that might mean. There I was sitting by the river, in the midst of a rain forest, next to the woman I love, surrounded by beauty. And in a few minutes, we would set out back to the trailhead, head for our campsite, and resume our travels.

Now I bring up this experience not because I think it was something out of the ordinary, some significant epiphany. On the contrary, what struck me about it was how ordinary it all felt. The only thing that was unusual was that I was especially aware of the moment; I was particularly open to the experience. And I believe that we have all had moments like that – especially when we are in a setting, a context, in which we have a heightened sense of awareness; in moments when we are particularly able to be present. And I further believe that it is moments like these – throughout human existence – that have caused people to create narratives to try to explain what they have experienced – this sense of closeness, this sense of connectedness, this sense of the presence of the spirit. And out of this impulse to make meaning out of the experience, people have created stories – stories about Gods, stories about heroes and messiahs, and prophets – and sometimes, they written these stories down, and they have called these narratives “holy” books.

There’s a reason that the ancient Hebrews preferred to refer to their God as “the unnamable,” or “the unknowable.” There’s a reason why they refused to say the name of Jahweh aloud, and why they forbade making pictures of their God. Because they recognized that there is no definitive label for this experience of numinosity. There was no way for them to know what it was that they had experienced, just as it was impossible for me to know, sitting on that riverbank in the midst of rain forest. Just as it is impossible for any of us to know what it is that we have experienced in these fleeting moments of being “present” to the wonder and beauty of the universe. And if we look at it this way, we can see that the stories that people create, about Gods, and heaven, and holy books, and prophets, are not really meant to be taken literally. They are stories created to try to reduce an ineffable experience to something that humans can comprehend. But just as they shouldn’t be taken literally, these narratives cannot be said to be “wrong.” Instead, we should see them as metaphors, as admittedly human attempts to explain what can’t be explained. When we see them in that way, they make a kind of sense, as faltering attempts to grapple with the immensity of an interconnected, interdependent universe.

From what I’ve said so far, you may get the impression that I am limiting such experiences to those that occur in nature. And indeed, for many UUs, the primary context in which we feel any connection with the spirit comes through our experiences of nature. We are drawn to live in this area, because it gives us an opportunity to be connected with nature every day. We treasure living in the foothills, among the oak woodlands, with their abundant wildlife, with the ease of making our gardens grow in

this temperate climate. And we feel drawn here because we feel that it somehow lifts our spirits, that we are more in tune with the universe when we are not having to cope with the hustle and bustle of urban life.

And our knowledge of science and evolution serves to highlight this sense of numinosity for many of us. Far from rendering existence mundane, our knowledge of how life has evolved over millions of years from tiny one-celled animals to the complexity of the present, we might feel a sense of awe at the wonder and mystery of this process. Here too, we can experience the presence of the sacred, if we are open to it. Just as the ancient Hebrews expressed their sense of wonder and called it “God,” we might experience our sense of wonder and call it “the balance of nature,” or “natural selection,” or “evolutionary biology.”

But I’m not at all suggesting that we experience a sense of connectedness only through nature. Far from it, we can experience being part of this vast universe in just about any aspect of our existence. As the Buddhists say, “when I eat, I eat; when I sleep, I sleep.” Just so, we can find the miracles of existence in the ordinariness of everyday life. Anyone who has ever been a parent, knows the sense of wonder and mystery that we experience through parenting. The miracle of the birth of a creature, who is tiny and helpless, yet fully formed. The way that infants and children have of drawing us away from adult concerns, and into being “present” in their world. The sense of love we experience as we connect with children. There’s a reason that Jesus of Nazareth rebuked the disciples for trying to keep the children away from him. And that he said that we have to become like a child to enter the Kingdom of his God. There’s a reason that Suzuki Roshi spoke of needing to have “beginners’ mind” to become a meditator. There is magic in children; there is magic in being a parent, or a teacher; there is magic in becoming like a child, again.

Many of us find what is spiritual in humanity itself. Humans have struggled toward a sense of self-awareness, toward the use of reason in their dealings with each other. In the Humanistic view, we might experience the transcendent, the numinous, through the workings of the human brain and the human psyche. In the words of David Bumbaugh, a professor at Meadville-Lombard Seminary in Chicago, and a committed humanist:

Humanism . . . gave us a doctrine of incarnation that suggests not that the holy became human in one place at one time to convey a special message to a single chosen people, but that the universe itself is continually incarnating itself in microbes and maples, in hummingbirds and human beings, constantly inviting us to tease out the revelation contained in stars and atoms and every living thing.

What some might choose to call “God,” a humanist might prefer to see as human potential, as the beauty of the workings of the human mind.

Back in July, Richard Close gave us a wonderful presentation on the teachings of Carl Jung, the eminent psychologist. One of Jung’s core concepts was that, in addition to a personal psyche, humans also have what Jung called a “collective unconscious.” he marveled at the way certain concepts have seemed to arise as human culture has developed throughout the world. And these concepts appeared seemingly without these diverse cultures having had any direct contact. Jung called these common myths and symbols “archetypes,” and he believed that are common to all humans, although they

exist at an unconscious level. Richard gave us some examples of these archetypes, such as the divine child, the hero, and the shadow. And if we study human culture, we find that these archetypes appear in peoples all around the world, in only slightly differing forms. It is as if there is a reservoir of Inherited, rather than acquired wisdom that is accessible to us. Just as some people believe in a God that is accessible through prayer, worship, and so forth, Jung's collective unconscious suggests perhaps another way of expressing the same types of experiences – that of a universal, unconscious reservoir of myth and symbol that is accessible to us in moments of numinousness. That we might experience a sense of transcendence by tapping into this wellspring of inherited wisdom, a source that is universal to humanity, and that connects us in ways we can only guess at.

And this leads us to yet another way that many of us experience a sense of interconnectedness. Just as there is a side to humans that is selfish and violent, there is a side of us that is drawn toward compassion to people in need, those less fortunate than ourselves. Through teaching, through health care, through volunteerism, through all the various ways that we reach out to others out of caring, there is the potential for experiencing a sense of the transcendent. When we are able to be truly present with another human being who is suffering or in pain, or when we simply reach out to another person out of love, and when we open our hearts to that experience, we open up the possibility that we might feel a deeper sort of connection. For example, a few years ago I served as a student chaplain at San Francisco General Hospital. When I was able to put aside my own ego and just to be present for someone who was suffering and in pain, I could feel myself opening to a much wider and deeper sense of interconnectedness. I could experience a sense of the vastness of the cosmos and to see myself as a tiny blossom on the tree of life. And this connectedness isn't limited to human suffering. Each week, when I care for injured and sick seals and sea lions at the Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito, I also have the opportunity to open my heart to the mystery by bearing witness to suffering and pain.

So what this brings us around to, as a way of feeling our connectedness, is the experience of love – love of neighbor, love of the other, love, of my enemy. In moments of clarity and egolessness, we can see that we are all brothers and sisters. And we can see beyond that to realize that we are connected as well with the animals, the plants, the trees, the rocks, the mountains. It only happens for most of us in fleeting moments of insight, but when we allow ourselves to open to it, we are able to experience the vastness, the wonder, the mystery of the universe. We are able to experience the invisible strands that connect us – to family, to larger community, to the earth, to the universe. And that, I believe, along with Carl Jung, is a universal human aspiration, an instinct, that leads humans to be in relationship with an ineffable something that transcends our human limitations.

And through compassion and love, we come together here in community. We come from many different faith traditions, and we bring with us many different beliefs. What binds us together in community is our human impulse to seek to connect with the transcendent. We don't have to think alike or believe alike. What we share is a commitment to strive for meaningful connection, and to do that together as a community of seekers.

May it be so! Blessed be! And Amen!

