

A Spiritual Revolution

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Psalm 104

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Do you remember when you first had these awakenings? Sometimes it felt like a bright aha revelation and sometimes it felt more painful, like the scraping of the brain. And later you wonder, why then? Why did that awakening happen in me at that time? Or maybe you've not yet awakened in these ways...

Like, do you remember the first time you were challenged to think that maybe humans are not the center of the universe? That maybe the creation story we know so well, though beautiful and true, also has a problem with it. a serious one.

And do you remember the first time it occurred to you how absurd those "for sale" signs on "plots of land" in the beautiful forest or the prairie?

Do you remember awakening to the slow, miraculous Spring resurrection on your daily walk by the river or around the lake?

Awakening is good!! Woke is good! If you aren't, it doesn't mean—shame on you. But it does mean, wake up! Always, for the rest of your life, keep learning, growing, and changing your life.

I have this memory of being in seminary, at United, was it 35 years ago? hearing a professor who had just returned from the World Council of Churches assert a harsh critique, not just a different interpretation, but a disagreement with the first creation story in Genesis. It wasn't about how the words "dominion over," --that humans have dominion over the earth-- should be translated as "stewards of". It was more than that. He questioned whether humans *are* the center or the pinnacle of creation. He questioned the anthropocentrism inherent in our creation story. It challenged me. Honestly, it still does.

Memory two. I remember going North to Cloquet to get the covid vaccine. A pharmacy there in a strip mall had openings. In our eagerness we arrived quite early, so we drove around a little to kill some time, drove a wee bit out of town to a foresty area, it was also a “new development”. We took a walk. It was a beautiful land, filled with spruce. I remember looking at the for-sale signs hammered into the ground and being struck by the absurdity! This land for sale?! How is this possible? Who owns it?! How did they get it!?

Memory three. I remember Spring of 2020. One month earlier the world had locked down. Our younger daughter flew home. We took walks as a family. The other daughter and her family would come over later in the afternoon, and we walked the same three-mile route every day, through the neighborhood and to the river road, keeping our distance from everyone. We were a gang walking in the middle of the street and on the boulevard by the river. We’d wave at the same families every day playing in their yards or entertaining in the garage. And somehow, during those weeks, our eyes opened to spring as never before! We could truly see! Every little bud, every new plant, the slow greening from light to darker, the blossoming. Every new bird song, everything, amazing, we were in such awe every day, even in, in spite of, because of? that terrifying time in life.

Awakening happened to us during the pandemic... Life was cleared away, so we saw some things more clearly.

Oh, this green space we are gifted with in the Twin Cities—the lakes, the river and creeks, the parks!! Oh, thank you twin cities ancestors who had the wisdom to keep it public, developers hands off. Oh, thank you public servants who preserve it and even expand it so every neighborhood has access to this amazing green, in the middle of the city! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you, bodies that takes us, to the riverside every day. Thank you, dogs that turn their heads to sounds and their noses to prodding around, reminding us that there is so much more going on than we can sense... And thank you grandchildren who invite you into childlike seeing through silly but wondrous conversations... like... “the trees are hugging us, Nonna”... And these young children who love to sing the same song over and over again, so it becomes a mantra in your head too, in your heart.... “If you love the water, Mississippi, then have the courage to fight line 3.” Thank you, song writers. Thank you, owls, with your haunting hoots and eagles soaring above....

And some of us, it should be all of us, have been further privileged to leave the city every year for a week or two or a month and camp in state or national parks or, in MN often, to go North to the cabin. These long immersions in nature every year.... and we leave our planners back in the city, and our computers. The phones may or may not come with us, but they are mostly turned off and left in a drawer, not in our pocket.

I was thusly privileged as a child. We never owned a home, it was always a parsonage, I'm a pk, but we had a little family cabin in the woods, by the lake, filled with books by Wendell Berry and Henry David Thoreau. 24-7 were the sounds of nature and we had the time and bandwidth to stop and listen, as well as seeing all the different sights, like the play of light and shadow on the forest and the lake from morning to night. And the spider and the amazing spider webs in the outhouse that was surrounded by lady slippers. Bats were sometimes in the cabin and we'd shoo them out. The cabin was, shall we say, permeable. And loons singing during our happy hour on the porch.

My spirit as a human being, and I know the same is true for many of you, was shaped both by Sunday school and by the Northwoods.

So why, with this upbringing, was I so surprised and amazed when our long time acquaintance from the nearby village of Onigum, a member of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe..., who was the best tree cutter around... when we hired him to cut down a dying tree near the cabin after the summer season was over and when we went back in the fall the rotten tree was gone and in its place a little pine, the same kind, was planted. Why surprised by this act on *our* land? No, it's national forest land. No, it's Anishinaabe land. Not it's the creators' land... Surprised by this ritual act and gift in place of what we thought was just a friendly, functional, market exchange. For him it was only natural, perhaps a practice of his religion. For us a delightful surprise.

So back to the question: why was I surprised? (Do theologians think too much? You bet we do!)

Though influenced profoundly by nature-- one month a year and one hour every day-- still my worldview is fundamentally shaped by the modern, so called civilized, so-called enlightened understanding that the earth belongs to us, to humans. Not unlike racism, this mechanistic worldview, was the cloud of distorted thought that many of us were born into. We didn't choose it, but it chose us, and it clings tightly, and we must work hard to shed it or peel it away.

The last 500 years most all of us, with the exception of indigenous peoples and some poets and artists whose heads are in a different cloud, have been shaped by this colonial, mechanistic worldview that I'm about to try to explain. It's the chicken or the egg question... whether the exploitive economy forced the belief system to take shape or whether the belief system gave birth to the exploitive economy.

But before this radically new way of envisioning the earth, this modern utilitarian worldview, people had a more integrated, reciprocal, relational feeling with the land and the plants and the animals. "The land was a theophany, a revelation of the divine, not a mere backdrop to human affairs." The human was in nature *and* of it, not above it or separate from it. We belong to the earth. To be modern though, enlightened, civilized was to believe that the earth belongs to us... "to believe that the earth is inert and machine like, and that no aspect of it

can elude human understanding.” Amitav Ghosh thinks that “This new belief system was necessary for the emergence of a new economy based on extracting resources from a desacralized, inanimate earth”. (Quotes in this paragraph come from both Ghosh and Armstrong.)

Furthermore, Any remnant of this vitalist earth worldview had to be pushed to the side, removed, or better yet expunged. Because belief systems are powerful. And so, the removal of native American tribes from their sacred land. And so boarding schools to try to civilize their young, and exorcise everything primitive. And so! even in this country where freedom of religion was a foundational creed, the powers that be felt so threatened by indigenous spirituality, just wanting it to disappear,—this sacred view of nature—that the practice of native religions was banned in 1883. It wasn’t until 1978 that native beliefs were legalized!! As if you can ever outlaw beliefs...

When the Dine people were finally allowed to return to a part of their homeland, one of the chiefs literally longed to speak to the land. “We felt like talking to the ground, he said, we loved it so.” (Ghosh)

Mayflower, we were reminded last weekend, that we as a church are wholistic in our green justice work... We engage in the political, the economic, the architectural and mechanical, the personal, in our work at the capital, at line 3, at state and national church gatherings, in our own building and grounds and our homes and lifestyles...

And we were reminded that all of our earth justice work has grown out of our spirituality. Our worship. Our song. We started celebrating earth day as a high holy day over 30 years ago and that is the soil out of which all of this other work grows. It’s not economics that shapes how we live, how we view the world and behave in it. It’s our religion. Our spirituality.

And so, I ask this morning whether our creation story, the one we know best, can be saved? All peoples have a creation story that shapes how they live. Ours speaks of the goodness of creation... “and God saw that it was good” ... but it also speaks of humans as the apex of creation. It is anthropocentric, which feeds into egotism, which is always a problem for the human soul.

But then there’s also Psalm 104. I confess I just discovered it on sabbatical. It is also a creation story. In this telling, the human is a creature among all other creatures. Not the apex. So, I propose that we always include our reading of Psalm 104 whenever we share our more well-known creation story. so, these two creation stories can engage and expand and correct each other. And feed our faith.

And, then there’s this! For those who have ears to hear, listen. It is not only the indigenous peoples of the earth who have shared this sacred bond with nature. It’s also our ancestors, those of us who are of immigrant lineage!! Before the so-called age of

enlightenment, and especially among those who lived close to the land, “the great majority of people in the world also believed the universe to be a living organism, not a machine”. (Ghosh and Armstrong) Yes, before modern western civilization, many of our ancestors would have experienced nature as animate and the inner-connectedness with *all our* relations, but over time we’ve been brainwashed to believe in the mechanical, utilitarian understanding.

We need a seismic shift in consciousness. We need a spiritual revolution. We need to reclaim the worldview of our ancestors.

Here at Mayflower, we’ve begun the earth spiritual revolution. In fact, we’re deep in on that path....

...As we experience our sacraments, like baptism, we see the water not as a tool, but as life...not as an “it” but as a “thou”

And as we do our death work too and use the sacred water from the river or the lake, for blessing the beloved body after death and as we learn more about natural earth burials, placing the beloved body back into the earth.

Yes, we are on the path of the earth spiritual revolution as we are asking profound religious questions about mining, about changing the earth dramatically, gutting it, God’s earth... Come to the chapel next Sunday as we wonder together...

And as we compose new songs and sing the mantras that shape our souls, our minds, our actions, our world, our reason for living...

Let us pray,

Oh God ground of being,

Help us wake up to reverence you.

May we become more and more awake to your glory every day, and every year of our life.

May we never cease from praising you—all creation!!

Amen

Sources

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