

You Can't Tell Me There's No Mystery**©Rev. Lois E. Van Leer****Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman****June 13, 2010**

It was a day that held all the promise of a Montana Spring: sunshine in-between cloud pockets and a sky that can only be described as "big." The rains had filled the hillsides with a lush green. The last of the snow leached into the mountains. A gentle wind was present, a reminder that nature rules. Raptors rode the currents, wingspans balancing effortlessly. On the sloping field beneath Mount Ellis, wildflowers triumphed once again. The pasque flower, that early harbinger was still to be found. Prairie smoke with its red pink mauve stood to the breeze. The blue purple of larkspur grew, the harebells, closer to the ground echoed its colors. The fuchsia yellow black shooting stars were going by, yet still to be found. The yellow bell, sometimes truly yellow and sometimes the softest orange, rang in the wind. Lupine were pushing up green and formed everywhere but not yet full of color. The distinctive stems of the iris presented themselves, a hint of what was yet to come. The glacier lilies were in their abundant yellow spotted to maroon center glory. Here a patch, there a patch, everywhere a patch. In the distance the mountain ranges bore silent witness as they had for millennia.

Driving toward Sypes Canyon the foothills were a patchwork of arrowleaf balsamroot and pale flag iris. As the lengthening day drew out and evening came to meet it, the orange hues around the mountains and bits of clouds settled down for the night. Yellow light rose higher and higher on the evergreens until it was gone. It was dark over the Tobacco Roots, foretelling the weather for the next day. In the aspen, the songbirds fluttered from limb to limb, their songs so distinct. But it was the last song of the robin that put the day to bed.

You can't tell me there's no mystery.

The Triune Rivers that define this area run thick, full, and fast. Unrelenting power pushing over rocks, invisibly wearing the banks. And in the high grasses behind the Crazy's an antelope calf and its mother run, exposing the silver of the grass. The bear, both black and grizzly, solitary and with cubs, are everywhere. Herons wing unobtrusively by. The bison calves, having survived the river fording, hop skip and jump. Kits and pups and other four-legged offspring emerge from the dens though still hidden from predators.

You can't tell me there's no mystery.

Montana changes a person. Its wide-open spaces open the soul. You can breathe here. There is room for the self. Somehow the expanse of land, valley, mountain, prairie, and river makes it safe. Not that every season's elements aren't a serious challenge that demand respect. But it is not personal nor hostile. It just is. The new campaign challenging us all to get lost in Montana really should say not "get lost" but "get found" in Montana. Get found in the sense that all the geographic space creates a place for those who chose it, to travel inwardly and outwardly. To let themselves be shaped and formed and reshaped and reformed again and again by something bigger than ourselves: a sometimes harsh but constant beauty and an omnipresent Mystery. To find the things that can no longer be found anywhere else, the things that are disappearing even from here. It is not possible to walk away untouched, unmoved.

In Oregon, I kept track of the seasons by what was blooming or available for harvest. The sweet smell of Daphne meant January. And forsythia in bloom was February's gift. Peas were planted then as well. I knew when the trillium was in the forest in late April into May. And when the snow was off Mary's Peak, our one mountain of 4097', it was time to plant tomatoes. First came the strawberries in summer, then the cherries, then raspberries, blueberries and blackberries. Fall brought dahlias and gladiolas. Then melons and pumpkins. And round and round it goes there.

Here I have learned to mark the seasons by the animals and the birds. Fall inevitably means black bear in town. Animals will be everywhere foraging. Great Horned owls can be heard and seen along the river at dusk. Winter is the best time to see wolves in Yellowstone. Or coyote or fox. The snowshoe hare has turned white camouflaging itself at the airport. Spring means the return of songs to the air as the birds migrate back. The snow geese will be at Freeze Out Lake outside of Chouteau. The heron rookeries will be full of action. Summer is mammals feeding. And fish in the rivers.

You can't tell me there's no mystery.

Place matters. Here, in this place, spirituality and meaning are interlaced with the natural world. Encounters with Nature are inevitable. Nature brings out the awe and wonder in us. Forays on the river or into the mountains, hikes, bike rides, strolls- you have told me that they nourish your spirits. Fishing is meditation. As is snowshoeing. Prayer is moving in and about the Mystery of this natural world. Prayer is walking in the first heavy snow, the world lit by white, soft, quieted. Looking up into the flakes filtering down, each holding its pattern, each its own promise. If you cannot find the taproot of meaning here, I am not sure you will find it anywhere else.

You can't tell me there's no mystery.

In his poem "The Peace of Wild Things," Wendell Berry writes:

"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.”

In Montana, we fear no less than Berry or a city dweller for our lives and our children’s and grandchildren’s lives. Despair for the world does accompany us here. We have not escaped by living here. We have all the access we need to the world’s despair with us. So here, we, too, must go down to the river where the ducks and heron wander and feed. We seek to come into the presence of wild things as a balm, as a place of restoration and healing. We are not separate from Nature, and when we encounter it, we are ultimately reminded of where we come from, of what sustains us as we “rest in the grace of the world.”

Sometimes I think it is only the presence of wild things that allows us to face what is broken in all of creation. Of the ways in which we humans treat and mistreat one another and the environment. But here across the wheat fields and the in the needles of bark beetle bitten pine and spruce, lies hope. What we find when we rest in this beauty is the insistence that we must act. Injustices, wrongs, despair can be ticked off every nanosecond for as long as we exist. But what if we counted off the ways in which we can gather strength, sustenance, perseverance for the work of mending the torn veil of creation.

You can’t tell me there’s no mystery.

I go now to the land of fir and cedar. To a land of low mountains. And ocean. Fog and mist. Summer heat. Winter wet seeping cold. In search of the otter, the loon, the orca, the snapdragon, the osprey, the hawk, the eagle. To a place inhabited by rain. I bring with me an opened space in my soul. A space carved by Montana. A space carved also by all of you as we have encountered one another. I carry with me memories still too close to visit. I wrap them close around my heart. I carry with me

an unshakeable sense of Mystery. I have come into the peace of wild things. I have rested in the grace of the world and been freed.

You just can't tell me there's no mystery.

Thank you. I love you. Peace be with you.