

Poplar Ridge Friends Meeting
February 4, 2018 Message
Claire Howard

MORNING POEM

Every morning
the world
is created.
Under the orange

sticks of the sun
the heaped ashes of the night
turn into leaves again

and fasten themselves to the high branches—
and the ponds appear
like black cloth
on which are painted islands

of summer lilies.
If it is your nature
to be happy
you will swim away along the soft trails

for hours, your imagination
alighting everywhere.
And if your spirit
carries within it

the thorn
that is heavier than lead—
if it's all you can do
to keep on trudging—

there is still
somewhere deep within you

a beast shouting that the earth
is exactly what it wanted—

each pond with its blazing lilies
is a prayer heard and answered
lavishly,
every morning,

whether or not
you have ever dared to be happy,
whether or not
you have ever dared to pray.

Mary Oliver

First hymn: Morning Has Broken
Green 32

Reading: from Henry David Thoreau's book entitled "Walking"

"When we walk, we naturally go to the fields and woods: what would become of us, if we walked only in a garden or a mall? Of course it is of no use to direct our steps to the woods, if they do not carry us thither. I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile in the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit. In my afternoon walk I would fain forget all my morning occupations and my obligations to society. But it sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village. The thought of some work will run in my head, and I am not where my body is—I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods? I suspect myself, and cannot help a shudder, when I find myself so implicated even in what are called good words,—for this may sometimes happen."

Reading: from Madison Taylor's blog entitled "Daily OM"

"Walking in a forest can be a meditation, the interweaving lives of all living creatures and the planet on which we all take root and reach for the sky."

Second hymn: "When Jesus Walked Upon the Earth"
Green 107

Joys and Concerns

Music interlude

Prayer

Third hymn: At Worship
Blue 69

Message

I want to talk about walking today, and specifically walking in the woods. For it is the surest way I know to shed my worries and my cares, to settle my soul and to ground myself. You have heard me speak before of my favorite woods, the forest preserve at the south end of Skaneateles Lake called Bear Swamp. A creek runs through it that the beavers have dammed, forming a lovely pond where one can sometimes spot a Heron, Kingfisher, or pairs of Canada Geese. The land is hilly, rocky, and was once farmed in the late 19th century by hardworking farmers and their horses. The stone foundations of their houses hide in myrtle and ferns. It is a beautiful place to walk in every season, though we do sadly avoid going there during hunting season. It takes just a few minutes of following the familiar paths through hardwood or pine forests for me to feel that familiar sigh and wash of letting go through my body. My vision clears, my body settles to the rhythmic motion of my footsteps on the earth. My nose takes in the sharp odor of fallen leaves, pine needles. The silence is astounding. My heart opens, and I am at home.

I have been reading books this winter by two Scottish authors who write about walking. I would like to read some descriptive passages from their writings.

Nan Shepherd was born in 1893 and died in 1981. Her book, "The Living Mountain" testifies to her love of the Scottish Highlands and her knowledge of them in all their moods. Here is her description of birch trees she encountered on the Cairngorms mountain range:

“ Birch, a tree that grows on the lower mountain slopes, needs rain to release its odour. It is a scent with body to it, fruity like old brandy and on a wet warm day, one can be as good as drunk with it. Acting through the sensory nerves, it confuses the higher centres; one is excited, with no cause that the wit can define. Birch trees are least beautiful when fully clothed. Exquisite when the opening leaves just fleck them with points of green flame, or the thinning leaves turn them to a golden lace, they are loveliest of all when naked. In a low sun, the spun silk floss of their twigs seems to be created out of light. Without transfiguration, they are seen to be purple—when the sap is rising, a purple so glowing that I have caught sight of a birchwood on a hillside and for one incredulous moment thought the heather was in bloom.”

Robert MacFarlane, the other Scottish author whose books have graced my nightstand this winter, has hiked England and Scotland for most of his life. He loves their wild places. Here he is on a winter trek in the Black Wood to the east of Rannoch Moor:

“I woke in my Black Wood den early the next morning, after a long and broken night. The snow had stopped falling, and lay everywhere in voluminous drifts. It was so soft and light that nothing could move trackless upon it. It kept all marks. Even loose leaves that had dropped on to the snow had settled down into depressions of themselves. As I walked, it flattened and creaked beneath my feet. The wood’s few sounds were muffled, as though their edges had been rounded off. Where streams of meltwater ran in gulleys, little hills of snow had formed on the stones and branches and islands in the streams, around which the water ran in intricate deltas. The forestry tracks, which I came upon here and there, had been smoothed into white avenues.”

Now for a more personal tale of woods magic.

There is a birch forest near where my mother lives on Skaneateles Lake. One may follow a deer track into its interior. The trees are young and grow quite close together, and once you have entered their space you can see nothing but their beautiful white and black trunks wherever you look. Gazing upward toward the sky, you see their crowns forming a delicate interweaving, bending and swaying toward one another as if in conversation. It is a magical place.

Just before Christmas a friend called me asking for help with his 18 year old daughter who had gotten herself into some serious trouble at college. I agreed to interview her. As she answered my questions in monosyllables, I could practically taste the anger and fear that enveloped this young woman. The word that came to mind was “ungrounded.” How could I teach her in a very real way about grounding? The birch forest flashed through my mind. I asked her if she would like to try some Ecotherapy, something I had heard mentioned by another of my young clients recently. Give it an important sounding name and it might work...so she agreed to go for a walk with me the following Saturday. We headed to the birch forest on that cold, windy, snowy morning; she of course refusing hat and mittens. I explained that we would not be talking much, just taking in our surroundings, noticing things along the way. We walked quietly to the birch forest, and as we entered I asked her to find a tree, lean up against it, and just be with it and the forest. I did the same, choosing a young sapling further on. I had not done this befriending of a specific tree in this place before. The quiet was the deep silence of a frozen forest, and I settled my back gratefully along the sapling’s trunk. The breathing began imperceptibly. Minute, rhythmic breaths from the tree began entering my body after several minutes, through my back. I could not distinguish my own breaths from those of the tree. It was a friendly, loving, sharing of conscious life. The presence was definite and palpable. I looked upward and saw the birch crowns swaying gently in the moving air. I took my chilly companion home, hoping that she had been able to ground herself with the help of our birch sapling friends. Her smile told me that something good had happened, and I did not press her for details. When she left to return to college last week I gave her a photograph of the birch forest. She rewarded me with a smile.

I would like to close with another quote from Nan Shepherd’s “The Living Mountain.”

“I believe that I now understand in some small measure why the Buddhist goes on pilgrimage to a mountain. The journey is itself part of the technique by which the god is sought. It is a journey into Being; for as I penetrate more deeply into the mountain’s life, I penetrate also into my own. For an hour I am beyond desire. It is not ecstasy, that leap out of the self that makes man like a god. I am not out of myself, but in myself. I am. To know Being, this is the final grace accorded from the mountain.”

Silence

Fourth hymn: The Trees of the Field
Green 335

Final Prayer

Be still my soul, for these tall trees are prayers.
Bless the trees and their place on the earth.
Bless their growth and their search for the sun.
And bless us, too, for we, like the trees, are journeying towards the Light.

After thoughts
Introductions
Announcements

Postlude