

**Sermon****Chopping Water**

Rev. Julia Older

The morning after this year's big gathering of UU's ended (General Assembly), Fanny, my sweetheart, picked me up in Salt Lake City in his 1972 International Travel -- with 370,000 miles on it -- and we headed north . . . toward no particular destination. Just north. Some days we went thirty miles and were distracted by some tiny local museum, or a happy encounter with other travelers, or just the sumptuous beauty of the countryside: miles of growing hay, wheat fields waving and still green under the limitless sky, and cows. I am partial to cows.

There is so much beauty in this world and right here in North America.

Mostly we avoided cities but delighted in small towns and, better yet, wild places. Somewhat surprisingly, we headed toward high prairie grasslands rather than mountains and woods.

There were some exceptions. We camped for a week at Jenny Lake in the Tetons. Gorgeous. The mountains rise abruptly from the valley. No foothills. Just valley and then rocky ridges with snow covered peaks, couloirs and waterfalls.

I spent some time each day walking around the lake. I was able to walk around the lake. Some of you will remember that I've had problems with my foot and leg such that even walking grocery store aisles was tiring. It is with real gratitude that I find myself able to hike again. I didn't know if the nerves would regenerate. They did.

I can now look on that period of having a funny leg as both a difficulty and a gift. It does make me more aware of able-ness and accessibility and SO glad that, for now, hiking is again possible. All of us, if we get to live long enough, are only temporarily abled. Savor each day.

I do love being able to wander about, sometimes with a companion but sometimes being alone is best because it heightens my attention and makes everything more

vivid. Walking with a friend, I can get so involved talking that I miss the flowers. (I imagine you have trouble believing that I can talk so much!) Walking to Moose Pond at twilight was deliciously spooky. Would I meet moose? Or maybe a bear?

We did see elk and pronghorn antelope and bison. One evening a small black bear wandered into our camp. Another day I had a thrilling encounter with a moose, a young moose, who was sitting beside the trail. I almost walked up to him accidentally. When I saw him, I stopped and we stared at each other quietly for several minutes. When he stood up (my goodness, he was tall) and started walking slowly toward me, I lost my nerve and backed off into the woods . . . but it was a thrill. I was delighted by prairie dogs and ground squirrels some of whom are too tame for their own good, stealing food from the camp even while I was sitting there.

Toward the end of our travels we had a couple of days at Grand Coulee, which Woody Guthrie anticipated as

“The greatest wonder is in Uncle Sam's fair land.  
It's that King Columbia River and the big Grand Coulee Dam.  
Now in Washington and Oregon you hear the factories hum,  
Making chrome and making manganese and light aluminum.  
And there roars a mighty furnace now to fight for Uncle Sam,  
Spawned upon the King Columbia by the big Grand Coulee Dam.”

I plan to return to this theme later this year: how we progressives are passionate and so certain about our causes and how our perspective changes as time passes.

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So many days, actually several times a day, I was just happy to be wherever I was. No schedule. No to-do list . . . just small daily chores like putting a two-liter bottle of water out in the sun to warm which I could then use for a bath. Time flowed gently. I had the space to take my time and linger, distracted by loveliness wherever I found it. I began to feel refreshed on the inside.

Our tradition, Unitarian Universalism, has the custom of giving long breaks to ministers every year: generous vacation time and a period out of the church for reading, study, and writing. By the end of the church year, about the time of our annual national meeting, and the meeting for ministers preceding General Assembly, I am really fried. Beyond physically tired. Physical weariness is easy to

recover from. I'm tired on the inside. Everything seems like a too big deal. There is a gloss of overwhelm over everything. I cry easily. I become more forgetful, more distracted.

Typically, I don't notice these things so much until the time for a break is near and I realize how much effort I've been making. And, I wonder why I can't keep up. I worry that you are not getting your money's worth.

Meeting with other ministers helps. By June, it is clear that we are all dragging.

Ministry is the most wonderful work. Such variety. So many interesting challenges. And, the best seat in the house for understanding the human condition. But for all of the same reasons, it is strenuous. And lonely. Surrounded by people, it is lonely. Can you imagine? That's why groups of ministers get together as often as possible. We never really step out of our roll while we are at home.

We who are drawn to this life are committed to being with our people. I mean WITH our people, through all of life's challenges and changes. It's where the juice is for us. The pleasure. And why we get worn out.

Thank you for accepting the fact that this is so and creating balance so far as a schedule can mend the abrasions and rough places. A long break every summer, one week out of the pulpit roughly every month, and a sabbatical at least every seven years. Thank you.

I know you have heard the expression, "Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water." And what then do you do after enlightenment? "Chop wood and carry water." Life never stops demanding of us all of the mundane tasks of being alive.

When I'm overtired, I don't believe I'm very good at anything. I spill the water and I've never been good at chopping wood. Every task feels futile, repetitive, and meaningless. More as if I'm "chopping water." You can imagine how fruitless such effort is . . . and how much at the end of the day there is to show for it. I don't feel the gentle flow of time. I feel the constraint of a hundred to-dos and almost always worry, whatever work I'm in at the moment, that I am neglecting something more important.

I wish that it was easier to live back at home the way I am able to during the summer. Stepping out of the to-do lists and remembering: I am alive here in this

moment. I'm not worried about yesterday's failures or tomorrow's challenges or today's to-do list, not even to yesterday's glory but I am present to THIS day for it is where life is lived.

Our hymnal includes these words attributed to Kalidasa:

Look to this day!  
 For it is life, the very life of life.  
 In its brief course lie all the verities  
 And realities of your existence:  
 The bliss of growth,  
 The glory of action,  
 The splendor of beauty,  
 For yesterday is but a dream,  
 And tomorrow is only a vision;  
 But today well lived, makes every yesterday  
 A dream of happiness  
 And every tomorrow a vision of hope,  
 Look well, therefore, to this day.

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It is a wonderful thing it is to be present to the world and all of it's beauty. That's aliveness. That's what Douglas in our opening reading finally noticed, his aliveness.

The two great shadows of that revelation unfortunately come simultaneously: we feel separate and we know we will not live forever.

Young children assume that every family is like their family. There is an *undifferentiated* sense of belonging. Somewhere along the way we all come to realize our separateness. Perhaps that too is a state of illusion from which we can escape by coming again to the oneness of everything. . . not by going back into the ignorance of childhood but into an appreciation of our interconnection.

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We crave the experience of aliveness, not merely stories about life. Not reading about life or watching other people's lives, but being awake and noticing that we are here, now.

Like the poem “Diving into the Wreck” by Adrienne Rich:

the thing I came for:  
the wreck and not the story of the wreck  
the thing itself and not the myth.

Being “awake” is to be really present in the moment and notice.

Aliveness is not busyness. It is not even peak experiences. It is the astonishing awareness of the astonishing fact that we are living now with faculties which allow us to be self-aware.

Spiritual practice is intended to help us step out of mere words and get to the real deal, that first hand experience.

(I am aware of the irony that I stand here on Sunday morning filling you with words. Practicing silence is a far more powerful way to get beneath the appearance of things and experience the things themselves.)

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After the week in the Tetons we headed north through Yellowstone and Montana into Saskatchewan. First stop: Val Marie. Population 160. Located at the edge of the Grasslands National Park. The land is flat, the grass is high; the sky seems even bigger than in Montana and lives up to the license plate: Land of Living Skies.

How do people endure with so few people, one small store, a bar that doubles as a community center, and very, very cold, windy winters?

I found that the folks who live there have mostly chosen to live there. The grassland prairies are teeming with life and subtle beauty . . . eventually my eyes adjusted to what is instead of comparing to what I’m used to. And the locals don’t feel isolated. They enjoy the quiet and they have a few good friends. We even found that though the store was small, there was a brand of Indian food, “India House,” imported from Bangalore, that surpasses the packages I usually buy from Trader Joe’s.

The world is both vast and very small.

And, it turns out, there are many lives worth living.

We stopped a number of times to take pictures of abandoned buildings that had served as houses of worship and schools and community centers. Early in the 1900's Canada gave land to pioneers willing to farm it. Many of the communities that sprang up were utopian experiments by European immigrants whose descendants are now woven into the fabric of Canada. What courage it must have taken to move west. Here in the U.S. too. Traveling without shelter for the winter in those vast treeless lands. I wondered how they could make fires for cooking and what they would rely on for heat. Turns out bison chips were the solution.

A couple of weeks into traveling and I became disoriented, losing track of what day it was. One Monday we found everything was closed and at first thought we had miscalculated and it was still Sunday, but it was a holiday. For what? No reason. Just to give people a long weekend. There is one in June and one in July so another was created in August. There is something more humane about the way workers are treated in Canada.

Of course there is more to say about the last six weeks but this is a taste. I loved the lack of schedule. I loved taking time to explore what I was interested in. I loved reading. For the first time in many years I read fiction -- plus work-related things. An open schedule can make life more mellow, more fluid, and make me more openhearted. Life is sweeter . . . which is other than being exciting. Excitement is good but cultivating that sweetness and noticing all that is beautiful is even more important and more enduring.

Coming back I want to keep some of what I savored while traveling as part of my regular life. I hope to stay more quiet inside. To be better about my spiritual practice. To sit in meditation more regularly. During seminary I sat at least an hour a day.

I know that being busy is not the same thing as being alive and having a good life is not the same as having many accomplishments . . . but staying quiet is really difficult. And I've already broken my promise to sit regularly . . . unless I redefine regularly as once a month.

One resolution I made I'm doing somewhat better about and that is to let the little spaces be.

When I'm waiting somewhere, I have promised I will not immediately start reading. I will look around. Waiting in line at the store, I'll stop scanning

magazine headlines and look at the people around me. Sitting in an office I'll let the magazines lay there and I'll breath.

It is not easy to put the traces back on though I am genuinely delighted to see everyone.

If ministers are to bring good news . .in whatever form we understand it . . . awareness of blessings, hope, the reminder that we are endlessly able to heal . . .if we are to announce joy, we should taste it and regularly savor it. While we all have hard times, and being busy is our normal state, being alive and knowing we are alive is miraculous.

We may sometimes be exhausted, even in pain, but the next moment may bring one of those moments when we feel hope again. That's miracle enough. Just that.

America the beautiful. It is, you know. Even while seeing it, the variety and magnificence is beyond comprehension. Yet back home, how easy to is to be caught up in schedules, the budget, our schools, health care, and Afghanistan.

Perhaps you have had trouble stepping back into your traces here at the edge of autumn. My hope for each of us is that we allow some time each day to simply be present to life, to savor, to let time flow, to remember what makes it *wonderful* to be here and to declare to whatever mystery brought it all into being, our gratitude.

As Rev. Harrington ended the Service of the Living Tradition at this year's General Assembly: "Every day look at the world with your wide and grateful eyes.... Every day offer and bless, stand and love, surrender and praise. Live with all your might. Love with all your heart."

Blessed be.