

Spirituality of Place a sermon by Rev. Doug McCusker

“Where are you from?”

I don't know about you, but when someone asks me that, I always hesitate. Do they want to know where I was born, where I live now, or where I feel at home? For some of you the answer to all three of those questions would be the same place. But for those who have moved around, it could be three different places.

I was born and raised in Richmond, Virginia, but I haven't lived there in 35 years. Even when we lived in Springfield, we would travel down I-95 at least once a month to visit family and spend the weekend. I estimate that we've driven roundtrip between Northern Virginia and Richmond at least 500 times. I could do it in my sleep. And sometimes when the traffic was creeping, that's what I did.

I used to live on the Northside of Richmond, right where Route 1 and I-95 enter the city. So whenever I go down there, I pass through my old stomping ground. My daughter, Bree now lives two miles from where I grew up and my parents last residence was in a retirement village a couple of blocks from where she lives. On some level, Richmond is still my home. I'm proud to say that I am from Richmond. Richmond is one of those places on this planet where I feel a deep sense of connection.

Parker Palmer, the well know Quaker writer defined spirituality as “the external human longing to be connected to something beyond oneself.” I would add “connected to someplace beyond oneself” as well. Native American spirituality and other earth centered religions explicitly locate the spirit in the earth. They acknowledge the spirituality of place.

Chief Luther Standing Bear of the Teton Sioux describes it this way: “For the Lakota, one of the three branches of the Sioux nation, mountains, lakes, rivers, springs, valleys, and woods were all finished beauty. Winds, rain, snow, sunshine, day, night and change of seasons were endlessly fascinating. Birds, insects, and animals filled the world with knowledge that defied the comprehension of man.

The Lakota was a true naturalist – a lover of Nature. He loved the earth and all things of the earth, and the attachment grew with age. The old people came literally to love the soil and they sat or reclined on the ground with a feeling of being close to a mothering power.

It was good for the skin to touch the earth, and the old people liked to remove their moccasins and walk with bare feet on the sacred earth. Their tipis were built upon the earth and their altars were made of earth. The birds that flew in the air came to rest upon the earth, and it was the final abiding place of all things that lived and grew. The soil was soothing, strengthening, cleansing, and healing.

... For them to sit or lie upon the ground was to be able to think more deeply and to feel more keenly; they could see more clearly into the mysteries of life and come closer in kinship to other lives about them.”

The European-American immigrants did not have the same connection to this land. The God of their forbearers was extra-natural and considered greater than the

earth. For them the land was primarily a resource to own and exploit. This clash of cultural and religious perspectives resulted in extremely tragic circumstances for Native Americans as the white settlers spread out across the continent.

When I was little, I read a book about Mt. Rushmore, and I thought it was an amazing feat to carve statues into the side of a mountain. It seemed larger than life to me. I vowed to go see the monument one day. I still haven't been and I'm not sure I want to anymore. Now I look at those 60 foot heads of the 4 president's and I think to myself "Why?"

I know the answer, it was conceived by historian Doane Robinson to boost tourism and make money. But come on, wasn't the natural, elegant, complex beauty of the Black Hills enough? To the Lakota, the mountain named Six Grandfathers is considered sacred ground. And even after signing a treaty granting the Black Hills to the Lakota in perpetuity, our nation, the nation of those 4 presidents, seized the land and dynamited our legacy onto it.

The history of humanity is a story of migration. Even the ancient forbearers of the Lakota travelled great distances across ice shelves from Asia to reach these lands. It took thousands of years and hundreds of generations before they populated the Western hemisphere from the Arctic Circle to the tip of the Tierra del Fuego.

I want to pause for a moment and recognize that not all migrations are freely chosen. The vilest and most tragic example, perhaps in the history of mankind, is the forced migration of millions of Africans who were shipped here and elsewhere during the roughly 300 years of the slave trade. Once they arrived, they were treated as resources to own and exploit, just like the land.

Civilizations have come and gone, clashed and merged leaving behind traces of their connections with the land. Over those millennia as people settled down, their attachment grew until their very existence became symbiotic with their surroundings. Even the European settlers and eventually the freed slaves developed roots in the places where they landed. And with those roots came spiritual connection to the land and the nature that supported it.

Migration continues unabated as an economic reality and yet we are always called to be in relationship with our environment. The sense of place never goes away. My mother emigrated to this country from Colombia in 1953. She was born on a farm nestled in the coffee growing foothills of the Andes Mountains. She came here with my father after they got married in Bogota. The United States became her home for the rest of her life, but every time she visited Colombia she felt as though she was returning to her real home, her spiritual home.

I remember the first time that I visited Colombia when I was 13 years old. It was an amazing place that opened my teenage mind to a whole different reality. Everything about it was different, the climate, the geography, the food, the culture and the people. I was a tourist even though I was embraced by my extended family. But for my mother it was different. She moved around with a gracious air and a lightness of spirit. Not only was she surrounded by her people, she was also surrounded by the mountains, the

foliage and the birdsongs of her youth. I could not share this with her, but I could see how it affected her. A little while after we returned home to the states, I saw her crying while she was folding clothes. She was homesick, spiritually displaced.

Six years ago, after my mother passed away, I took my family to the farm where my mother grew up. My mother's cousin owned the property, and he invited to spend the day there. We walked all around, hung out under the same trees, sat on the same piece of earth that my mother sat on once upon a time. It felt like ancestral land, a place where I belonged. It's hard to describe, but I truly felt like I belonged to something, someplace beyond myself."

We all have places that make us feel grounded and connected. For some it is bobbing on a river or laying on the beach. For me it's the mountains and forest. When I lived in Northern Virginia, there was a stretch along my commute home from Reston when I would cross a bridge above Route 50 and catch a glimpse of the Bull Run Mountains. That's all it took to switch something inside me no matter what I was going through on the outside. I remember hoping that I'd hit a red light so that I could sit there for a few minutes and take it all in.

Maybe someday I'll live in the mountains, but for now I get my fix by heading west any chance I can get. Last week, I had the immense pleasure to spend some time in both the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina and the Sandias of New Mexico. In the beginning of the week, I attended a minister's gathering at The Mountain in Highlands, North Carolina. This is a rustic Unitarian Universalist retreat center situated on a mountain top with gorgeous vistas. Our group was the only one there that week. All around us was a quiet stillness, and a crisp air as the trees hung on to winter for one final week. My cabin overlooked the valley to the east, so I was treated to breathtaking sunrises every morning. It was a perfect place to unwind, meditate and recharge my batteries.

Then later in the week, I travelled to the desert highlands around Albuquerque, New Mexico to attend the Ordination of one of my former classmates from seminary. While I was there, we went on a hike at a place called Tent Rocks National Monument. The immense sky in all directions and the unusual rock formations dwarfed us humans. At one point I realized that whenever we spoke we barely raised our voices above a whisper. It was like we were in a great cathedral surrounded by the divine spirit. Simply being in the presence of such beauty and vastness humbled me.

The fifth century Christian hermits, known as the desert mothers and fathers must have experienced the same thing. They escaped the hustle and bustle of the cities along the Mediterranean Sea for the austere Egyptian wilderness where they could be left alone to commune with God. They didn't despise culture, instead they were fleeing from that compulsion to be ego-centered and constantly tending to their self-image.

Ironically, their detachment from approval is what attracted others to them. Word got out, and before long, people flocked out to see these spiritual superstars so they could learn the secrets of enlightenment. The bishops back in the cities were busy

building the power of the institutional church with theology and dogma, while the desert monks looked inward and found an alternative path to God.

Those who made the arduous trek to the desert caves learned along the journey that the key was not what they added to their spiritual kitbag, but what they discarded. The medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart, observed that the spiritual path has more to do with subtraction than with addition.

The spirituality of a place often depends on where we are internally when we encounter it. If we are filled with ego-centered static noise, we will miss the intrinsic beauty of any place. If we are restless and out of synch with our surroundings then any place will feel stifling to our soul. We can bring the solace of the spirit to wherever we are as long as we are open to connection. The desert monks realized that escape was not possible. We are at our most spiritual when we are part of a greater consciousness no matter where we are. As the great sage Buckaroo Banzai once said, “no matter where you go, there you are.

The important thing is to be at home where we are. This is something that only you can do for yourself. The enslaved Africans who were wrenched from their ancestral homes and carried in chains to a life of servitude somehow, remarkably, created a home for their spirit wherever they were. The Jews who were forced into Nazi concentration camps carried their light within them even in the most horrible of places. Even in the midst of our brokenness, we are somewhere, never adrift.

Sometimes, it may be extremely hard to reach out and claim our presence, but until we do we will not be able to answer the question of “where we are from” or “where we are going”. We belong here, in this spiritual place of connection, part of nature like the mountains and rivers. Deep within each of us is a divine place that sanctifies the world. We can travel the world looking for holy ground, but it is already with us wherever we are. May you be the spiritual place that you seek, and may you be humbled by the beauty that you find there.