

“Mountains and Rivers”
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Words of Reflection by Nicolette Toussaint

Lament for the Animas

When I was in grade school, my family went backpacking in Chicago Basin.

What lingers in my memory is a verdant green alpine bowl brimming with blue columbines and red Indian paintbrush. Bounding white mountain goats scaling cliffs that glowed golden in the evening’s alpenglow. Clear turquoise lakes fed by silvery snowfields that remained unvanquished even by midsummer.

Over it all hung a hush so profound it seemed to echo back to the time before any human being set foot among the San Juan mountains.

To get to Chicago Basin, backpackers board the narrow gauge railroad in Durango, and then get off about halfway to Silverton. I remember curling my toes hard in climbing boots, hoping to help the little train hang on to cliffs. Its rails perched precariously on old cribbing built 200 above the green waters of the Animas river.

This week, the Animas is not green. It turned toxic orange, tainted by more than 3 million gallons of sludge released from the defunct Gold King mine. The Animas is now the color of a pesticide warning label – one of those orange labels that say, “If ingested, call a poison control center immediately”.

The waters of the Animas contain arsenic, cadmium, lead and many other toxic chemicals. No one knows what all those toxins might be because the Gold King has been abandoned for nearly a century. When it was running, miners used chemicals that are no longer allowed today.

We are inheriting pollution left by generations long dead, and the damage will flow down to generations yet to be born.

Along the river, people are worrying about wildlife, livestock, wells and river-based jobs. They’re wondering, “Will the Animas become another Love Canal?”

Soon after the spill, Durango stopped pumping water from the Animas into its reservoir. When I read that, I thought immediately of friends who live in Durango —Jeni’s daughter Sarah and my friend Miles, whose wife is expecting a baby.

Below Durango is New Mexico — home to my cousin Ginny and my friend Honey.

Below that, the waters flow into Utah, Arizona, Nevada, California and Mexico — to about 30 million people.

When I saw photos of the river, I gasped. My throat went tight. My chest ached. Tears pricked at my eyes. I felt that fish-out-of-water sensation that heralds an asthma attack.

Over the following days, my shock turned to anger, and then to grief.

The anguish I feel is a microcosm of Gaia Grief. It's an echo of the loss I feel for the last lion, the last tiger, the last polar bear. For the loss of our winters, for the snow that should cap our peaks and feed our drying rivers.

Our beautiful blue earth is dying. I fear for every creature that clings to the interdependent web.

About now, the toxic orange waters are reaching the Navajo Nation.

Native Americans believed that we should make decisions with an eye to seven generations in the future. But as I look at the Animas, I wonder if the earth will be able to support future generations.

This week, a friend sent me a quote from Buddhist scholar and environmental activist Joanna Macy, who has written:

"Don't ever apologize for crying for the trees burning in the Amazon or over the waters polluted from mines in the Rockies. Don't apologize for the sorrow, grief, and rage you feel. It is a measure of your humanity and your maturity. As your heart breaks open, there will be room for the world to heal."

I light this candle of mourning for the Animas, and for a world in peril.

Sermon, "Mountains and Rivers"
Florence Caplow

Last year I gave a sermon, on the meaning of sabbath, at a small congregation in Washington State. At the end of the sermon I asked each person to reflect on where and how they find true rest, in the middle of full and distracted lives. An older man spoke up and said, "When I am in the mountains, hiking, that's when everything drops away, and I can really rest, just walking, being there." You could hear a ripple of sighs through the whole congregation. Everyone knew what he meant.

Yesterday I went hiking with Adriana and Seth Brown and their three daughters, Ruthie, Bella, and AnnaSophia. We hiked up the Avalanche Creek trail, under spruce and aspen, the roar of the creek off to our right as we walked and talked and ate thimbleberries.

Afterward we went to Penny Springs on the Crystal River and jumped in, first into the cold and then in the hot, hot, hot springs. As I emerged from the river after diving in, rubbing the water from my eyes, and saw the granite cliffs all around, the wildflowers in the river meadows, I said to Adriana and Seth, “Now I have arrived in Colorado!” And it was true. My body, which had traveled so far to get here, finally felt like it had arrived, right there in the middle of the Crystal River.

The title of this sermon, Mountains and Rivers, and the quote at the top of your order of service, “The mountains belong to those who love them,” come from a 13th c, Japanese Zen master Eihei Dogen. Dogen gave a sermon to his monks in the year 1240, and the sermon was called The Mountains and Rivers Sutra. Now a Buddhist sutra is a sacred text or philosophical work, and in this talk, Dogen does not say that his talk is a sutra, a sacred text, but that the mountains and rivers themselves are a sacred text, and are speaking sacred truths to us all the time. Think about that for a moment: mountains and rivers themselves are a sacred text.

And when Dogen talked about mountains and rivers, it was a kind of shorthand for the whole world. In ancient China, mountains and rivers was another way of saying the everything, the whole natural world. The whole world is sacred, and is teaching us.

Dogen himself chose, in mid-life, to leave the city of Kyoto, the capitol of Japan at the time, where he was respected and close to the sources of power, to found a monastery deep in the wild and snowy mountains of western Japan, in a narrow canyon by a whitewater river, just as many of you have chosen to leave places where you could perhaps be far more successful in a worldly sense, to be closer to the mountains and rivers. I saw on some website that Carbondale had been voted the best place to put off a career!

I grew up in the industrial town of Terre Haute, Indiana. Outside the town for hundreds of miles were the cornfields of the Midwest. I remember a poster that some joker had made that showed a skier in a cornfield, and the photographer had tilted the photo by 45 degrees, and it said, “Ski Indiana”, and I remember riding the high school bus and looking out the window and thinking, What would it be like to see mountains on that horizon? I longed for wilderness, and as soon as I was old enough, I hightailed it west, and landed in the Pacific Northwest, a place where every morning, if the clouds lifted, and that’s a big if! I could see mountains.

Wild rivers, wild mountains. What a word, wild. The Zen poet Gary Snyder writes, in his book, *The Practice of the Wild*: “wild is very close to the Chinese term Dao, the way of Great Nature.. In some cases we might call it sacred. The wild requires that we learn the terrain, nod to all the plants and animals and birds, ford the streams and cross the ridges, and tell a good story when we get home.”

Gary Snyder may be partly to blame for my teenage longings for wildness.. He grew up in Washington State in the 1930’s, spent his teenage years scrambling up the peaks of the Cascades, went to Japan to study Zen after college, built a house in the California Sierra,

and has spent his whole life speaking and writing of the importance of place, -- a particular and beloved place and all its plants and creatures. The mountains belong to those who love them.

I read Gary Snyder and the other Beat poets voraciously as a teen. They were my nourishment, my hope for a different, more vivid, connected, and spiritual life than I was experiencing.

I have a feeling that I first read Gary Snyder's poetry while sitting in a half abandoned, overgrown city park on the banks of the Wabash River a few blocks from where we lived, a river so polluted by the chemical industries of the town that I never so much as put my hand in it. But I loved the river and it was my refuge, the closest thing to wilderness I could find within walking distance.

And I think it was there, on the banks of that sad and sorry and beloved river that I first read Gary Snyder's poem "For the Children." Here is part of the poem:

In the next century
or the one beyond that,
they say,
are valleys, pastures,
we can meet there in peace
if we make it.

To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children:

stay together
learn the flowers
go light

I began to try learn the flowers and trees of Indiana, with a field guide in hand. And when I fled west, I knew I wanted to live as my guru, Gary Snyder, instructed: Stay together, learn the flowers, go light. And I took him so seriously that I didn't just learn the flowers, I became a field botanist! I knew that I wanted to spend my work life dedicated to what I called the green world.

I had an extraordinary life in the wild. most of my adult working life. I have worked on Prince of Wales Island in SE Alaska, dodging the biggest black bears I've ever seen and being dropped by helicopter on uninhabited islands and mountain tops.

I have worked in the Mojave Desert, catching glimpses of burros and kit foxes as we looked for endangered plants that might lie in the way of solar power development.

I have kayaked large stretches of the Columbia River as part of my work. One summer I walked across the state of Oregon, from north to south.

I have found new species, and named them, and worked to protect some of the rarest plants in the world.

In the process I have lived more like a nomad than Gary Snyder's deeply rooted bioregionally based life, but I figure this means that I just have more to love.

I can love the emerald green mossy river canyons of the north Olympics, where I lived last year, and I can love the vast sweeps of sagebrush of Idaho.

I can love the dry Mojave playas that fill up with flowers in wet years, and I can love the soft foggy gray chaparral-covered hills of coastal California.

Now – and it's so easy! – I am falling in love with the Roaring Fork River, which I can hear out my window, and Mount Sopris, gleaming there against the sky. My heart can hold them all.

Gary Snyder's Zen practice inspired me too. I needed a spiritual practice to bring me into presence, into appreciation for the wonders of being alive, of having eyes to see, lungs to breathe, feet to follow the faint trails of deer and elk across the mountain slopes, and so I became a Zen student too.

You might be wondering about that “stay together” part in the poem I read? Well, that is what has brought me to ministry, late in my life. How are we going to climb these coming crests, when so much seems to be falling apart, when the night is growing darker and the green world cries out in distress?

We have to stay together, we have to find ways together, of going light, to lighten the heavy burden we are putting on the systems that sustain us. We have to love each other, across our differences,

We have to truly know and love our communities, human and non-human,

we have to find a way to walk together, to feel with our feet the faint trails that may lead to a different way of being human, a different way of living on this earth, for the sake of everyone: those in this room, those not yet born, the insects and the plants and the pines on the highest, mistiest peaks.

This is the work of this time, what Buddhist ecophilosopher Joanna Macy calls the Great Turning. I feel like I've spent my whole life preparing to do this work, with you, a work of love. Maybe you feel this too, in your own way.

Our UU Seventh Principle speaks to this: respect for the interdependent web of all existence.

And I want you to know that now, all these years later, the egrets and bald eagles have returned to my childhood Wabash River, after years of restoration, of shutting down the chemical plants and bringing back the trees, and people and fish in the Wabash.

The mountains belong to those who love them. The rivers belong to those who love them. And we belong to them, and to this whole earth. We can rest in that, today and always, and each day, when we wake up to the beauties of the earth, recommit to this love.

Benediction

Whatever you love, whatever belongs to you, love it with all your heart and soul. The world needs you. The world needs you to stand strong on the earth, rooted in your place, spirit open to the wind and hands ready to dig in the ground. Remember: Stay together, learn the flowers, go light.