

A SENSE OF PLACE
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
January 19, 2003

Contemplation

If we will make our seasons welcome here,
asking not too much of earth or heaven,
Then a long time after we are dead
the lives our lives prepare will live here
Their houses strongly placed
upon the valley sides. (Wendell Berry, from *The Wisdom To Survive*)

Reading

Sometimes you look at an empty valley like this,
and suddenly the air is filled with snow.
That is the way the whole world happened—
there was nothing, and then....

But maybe sometime you will look out and even
the mountains are gone, the world become nothing
again. What can a person do to help
bring back the world?

We have to watch it and then look at each other.
Together we hold it close and carefully
save it, like a bubble that can disappear
if we don't watch out.

Please think about this as you go on. Breathe on the world.
Hold out your hands to it. When mornings and evenings
roll along, watch how they open and close, how they
invite you to the long party that your life is.
(“A Valley Like This,” William Stafford)

Sermon

When I was six years old, in the second half of my first grade year, my family moved to a tiny rural community called Pentz. It was in Northern California, fifty or so miles north of Sacramento, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains. I lived there for eight and a half years, until the end of my freshman year in high school. We had 100 acres and called it “the ranch,” although it wasn’t even a farm, properly speaking. (My mother and stepfather had day jobs in town.) Probably five acres or so were devoted to the garden, the barn (four or five cows), the pig pen (three or four pigs), the pasture and

the goose enclosure. The other ninety-five was pure Inland Northern California: dry hills, cut by small ravines, dotted with the upthrust rock outcroppings that were so friendly in summer to rattlesnakes. Hardy vegetation: Digger Pines, not noble and symmetrical, but bifurcated and scraggly; California live oaks, not grand and expansively-leafed, but small and wiry, with brownish, extremely stickery leaves; gnarled manzanita, with its shiny leaves and burgundy-red, peeling bark; lots of brush of various kinds, making it a continual necessity to check the dogs for ticks. There were tarweed and sticker weeds, creating resinous gluey stuff and sharp pokey things for small bare feet. I loved the smell of rain on the dust and the tarweed.

Through the barnyard a little stream wandered, glamourously dubbed “the ditch,” because its source was the large P G and E ditch way up the hill. My two-years-younger sister Kate and I roamed through the pastures and barnyard and garden, playing games of imagination. (Once, we lay down in the pasture, to see if the buzzards that were always up in the sky would think we were dead and come closer.) We wandered the back forty, fascinated with an old wagon moldering by the rutted and grassy little road that ran to the end of the property. When we were older, we rode our bikes down the paved road, to have picnics in the valley down by our one-room schoolhouse, hauling our bikes under a bridge to play in a creek in our own private little hideaway. (Once, we took our clothes off for awhile, deliciously scandalized at our daring.) It was hot country in the summer, and Mom took us and cousins to swimming holes in the Feather River. (Undammed.)

There is a part of me that will always be a Pentz girl. There is a part of me that will always feel like Butte County in the ‘fifties, a part that thinks groups of live oaks on a hillside are families and have things to tell me, a part that finds a swimming hole just about as thrilling as anything can get.

The rest of my life, at least until I came to Boise, was lived like the majority of Americans live. Pre-Pentz, I lived in Hawaii, Oakland (CA), Brooklyn, Long Beach, Lomita, and Almaden (CA). Post-Pentz, I lived in Santa Cruz, Seaside, Santa Cruz again, and Redwood City (CA), then seven different houses in Seattle, then Berkeley. Then Boise.

“Placedness”—a deep, abiding sense of home, a commitment to the place we live—is not a dominant American characteristic. Our country was started by people who chose to leave home, that they might find freedom. We have our Thoreaus and our Faulkners, but better known are our Davey Crocketts and our Billy the Kids. When an American historical stereotype is conjured up, we are more likely to think of brave individuals conquering new territory than we are of settlements where generations stay in one place. For every “My Blue Heaven” there is a “Tumbling Tumbleweed” or a “Don’t Fence Me In.”

Wendell Berry is a poet of place—in his case, a farming part of Kentucky. In our *Contemplation*, he says that if we “make our seasons welcome here”—if we know where we are and live in our place with care—“then a long time after we are dead” things will still be well with “the lives our lives prepare.” The lives our lives prepare...

I would add that when we do not know where we are—or at least if we do not value where we are—our sense of community and belonging will be diminished. If we take the individual-entitlement, just-passing-through attitude so often found in our country, we may unwittingly contribute to the world’s store of ills.

In the recent movie *Bowling For Columbine*, documentary film-maker Michael Moore notes that Canada is a country with a lot of guns, just as we are, but Canada has far, far fewer violent, gun-related crimes than we do. In the movie, he never really comes up with a satisfactory reason for why this puzzling fact exists. I wonder if it has something to do with the respective founding history and ethos of the two countries. We were born in revolution against our mother country, and our early development was full of individuals moving out, taming the land and its indigenous people. Canada's founding families moved from the same country, but maintained their allegiance. Their country—huge and sprawling, full of strange-to-them indigenous people and awesome flora and fauna, just like ours—was settled first by the Canadian Royal Mounted Police. When law had been established, families moved westward to settle, not to move through on their way to more untrammelled wilderness.

We would be a better people and a better country if we could value our places. If we could look upon the regions in which we live as places we are always preparing for the lives that will come after ours. If we could, somehow, in William Stafford's words, "watch [the world] and then look at each other." For a sense of place and the creation of community are intertwined.

We are not going to change the fact that we are a pretty mobile people, both by nature and of necessity. It is not likely that we will ever get to a point where the majority of Americans live in the communities settled by their foremothers and fathers.

But we can adapt. We can develop a sense of place appropriate to the realities of the twenty-first century. We can look at every place we ever live as a cradle for future generations. Instead of sense of place requiring communities of the same people staying in the same place for generations, perhaps our "placedness" will focus more on the lives our lives prepare—more on making our places safe and whole and beautiful, however much time we spend in them.

For me, the Treasure Valley and this religious community are good examples of how that can happen. In June, 1988, as the plane descended into the Boise Airport, I got my first view of our scrubby hills and the town with the river running through it. I was home. Again. I walk a lot, and I ride my bicycle places, and I note the seasons in my favorite trees, in the church gardens. I have lived here for fourteen and a half years, in the same house for the past eleven and a half. I am blessed.

But even without the advantage of Pentz-likeness I could have found a sense of place in this valley and this Fellowship. I could have learned about and honored my new place. I could have committed to preparing for future lives, however long or short was my stay to be.

I love the sense of community moving through time. I love seeing it here.

There is a certain senior in high school who will never hear the end of the story about the time when he was five and was my Secret Buddy, and wouldn't eat Secret Buddy brunch with me. Babies I met when I came here in 1988 are high school kids. One baby born within days of this congregation's decision to ordain and call me as its minister, is an obstreperous Coming of Age kid, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. Couples I married when I was a fledgling minister come to church with their school-age children.

I am filled with a profound reverence for how the previous generations have created for us what we are creating for those to come. It has changed my very being, in

the past few years, to conduct memorial service after memorial service after memorial service for our forefathers and mothers, those stalwarts who welcomed their babies and buried their dead and mourned their tragedies and exulted in their triumphs—in people’s living rooms, and “Y” basements, and other church’s facilities, and school gymnasiums. Whose sense of place was a movable feast, the community of liberal religion.

The sense of place inherent in this congregation became very real when we finally moved from our well-loved but shabby and no-longer-appropriate building on Pierce Park Lane. Those who went before us had made great leaps of faith. (Although they might not choose to use that word!) They accepted the hugely-daunting challenge of buying a building, our first literal place, against significant initial opposition. They navigated the even-more-daunting waters of deciding to call their first minister. In spite of nay-sayers. Our leap of faith said that we could and should find a new home, better suited to who we are. This leap was made, just as were the earlier ones, after years in which the doubters and gloom-predictors prevailed.

But we did it. And we did it with vision, buying four-plus acres, creating a plan that would result over time in a lovely, functional “campus” serving hundreds of people. For years. For decades. Even centuries.

January, 2003—right now—marks our fifth year, officially, in this building.

For those of you who were not here, our Pierce Park home was an old, brown, low-ceilinged building. It had served well—but it had become down-at-heels and too small, strangely-configured as a result of remodels.

Now, imagine Christmas Eve, 1997, our first service in this room. The room is at least half again as large as our old one, high ceilinged and full of light. It is packed with people and with delight. A lump rises in the individual and communal throat as we begin, belting out a “Joy To the World” that raises the rafters. Joy to the world, indeed!

That night, we looked at each other’s luminous faces, and community shone anew. We had come, hosanna and hallelujah, to our place.

We have spent a few years learning to be here, in this place. Many—maybe hundreds—of us have planted and weeded and conducted worship and taught our children, and have done the everyday maintenance work of committees, have taken on forward-looking internal projects.

Now, we are on the move again, ready for the next step in our creation of place. (I am hoping—dare I say assuming?—that each and every one of you will be going to one of the informational meetings mentioned in your order of service, and will join in an enthusiastic vote on Feb. 2, approving of a capital campaign this spring.) If we can raise what is needed to build a two-story religious education building and renovate this space to make it larger and more beautiful, we will be able to offer our embracing faith to more and more people.

People sometimes say they fear “growth for growth’s sake.” That phrase has meant less and less to me as I have lived and loved in this space we Boise UUs call home. Our faith tradition, requiring that we open our hearts and minds and spirits to all, is unique and precious. The generations before us knew that. I want nothing less than to honor them by creating a hallowed space where lots and lots of us may be nurtured, a sacred and everyday place that also reaches beyond its walls. A place where hundreds of children will learn about compassion and justice and interdependence, and will pass it on.

I was a small child (maybe catching tadpoles in the ditch on the ranch) when some of our living foremothers and fathers began creating our space—for a long time, of necessity, movable. (Like the Ark of the Covenant!) Many of you were not born. But look at what has been built, from their persistence and dedication and tears and laughter. In decades to come, we will not be here. The rejoicing and grieving and arguing and raising money and worshipping and educating and rallying in the larger community will be being done by someone besides us.

But someone will be. Many “someones” will be, because we have cared for our place and committed to our community, this faith tradition that cherishes uniting in our differences.

It will happen here. It can happen anywhere we go, however long our sojourn. It can happen, if we look carefully at the world, then look at each other, then work together to make and keep it whole. It can happen if we live so that, a long time after we are dead, the lives our lives prepare will live here, strong and whole and joyous, committed to the lives their lives are preparing.