

Journeys in the Wilderness: Humility in the Wild or “Small in the Midst of it All”
by Nicole LeFavour for Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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I am honoredand deeply humbled by being invited to speak with you here this morning.

I will share with you today my journey in the wild, a personal journey, one which may have elements in common with your own journeys, what ever they may be.

I come from a family which has left me something of a comfortable stranger to any house of worship. In my family, around the dinner table, complex questions of physics and science were an art to be prodded and explored. My father is himself an explorer of sorts. He left college just months before graduation to canoe one of the most wild and then uncharted rivers in northern Canada. He met huge grizzly, and while portaging with canoes across the tundra became the object of at first somber, then playful hunting practice for a pack of wolves with young. One of his party died on the river in the cold water, rations grew scarce and there is much from that trip my father never speaks of, but in him and from him I gained a reverence for the wild. He seemed to always seek it and when Colorado grew too crowded and indulgent he and my mom moved us to Idaho to live in Custer County along the Main Salmon River at the edge of a great expanse of the wild.

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In college I studied science. In the summers before I came to Boise I applied to the forest service to become a fire lookout and spent seven years working summer seasons in the wilderness of central Idaho.

Three of those summers I spent on top of two peaks in the Frank Church Wilderness, in the most remote area in the lower 48 states.

There I would arrive by pack string, my food and a few clothes packed in cardboard boxes for three months living 16 miles from the nearest road and 10 miles from the nearest air strip.

I spent those summers in a 15X15 foot wooden house with four walls of 1920s divided light windows, mountains, trees, sagebrush, valleys, rocky canyons, and peaks as far as the eye could see in every direction.

From there in the daytime, not a single human feature was visible on the land all the way to every horizon.

I cut my own wood, carried my water up from the spring on the mountain side, cooked my food on a propane burner and baked potatoes in a tiny wood stove which was my only heat.

At Night the silence was immense and complex. The first nights after I arrived each year, my ears would strain and even the tiniest noise of a rodent in the metal strapping under the lookout sounded huge and sent my adrenaline racing. I would lie with my ears covered, shivering through hours in the darkness, wishing for morning.

Soon each year I'd grow used to the silence, stand on the catwalk at night listening to elk hooves knocking against logs in the lake basin below, a branch breaking somewhere off in the deep black.

No radio, no TV, no music, for weeks at a time no human conversation; only brief coded check-ins on the forest two-way radio, but nothing more.

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Time then would become so long and elaborate that it was impossible not to venture out, to see where trails led, try to reach distant mountain tops and make it home before sunset.

Out there I was followed by owls, studied by mink, chased by moose, struck by lightning.

I grew fond of leaving the little building, walking out from lookout to lookout, sleeping in a tent or under the stars.

Eventually I left the lookouts altogether and spent four summers alone with a backpack on my back as the first wilderness ranger to cover the terrain of the south half of the Frank Church on foot.

I walked alone for ten days at a time along ridge tops collecting data from almost every speck of high lake on every mountain side and along nearly every trail in those thousands of acres of roadless wild country that make up the upper Middle Fork of the Salmon River drainage.

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Out there, there is of course the beauty of it all, the chaotic perfection of things untouched by our hands.

SMELLS

pine needles roasting in the hot sun
elk and deer, sometimes cougar scent marks pungent and repulsive
morels, puffballs and suillis mushrooms growing in pine duff, in sage, in the mossy velvet shade of aspen trees

LIGHT

the brilliant slant of sun streaming down in evening through the smoke of a forest fire
the loft of towering clouds boiling above drifting over shedding patterns of dark and light
on the undulating expanse of ridges from my feet to the sky line

LIGHTNING

in bolts, like great overturned trees, like waves between great clouds rolling across the
sky,
simultaneous cracks of thunder, distant rumbles echoing between granite peaks

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Most of all though, there is nothing like living with your own thoughts for months on end. Whether I wanted it to or not, my whole life would stream before me, replaying itself for days, then weeks on end.

Of course if you are not OK with yourself, not settled with your own actions or with the events of your childhood or past I suspect that those thoughts can nag at you.

There were stories of lookouts who didn't make it. Many stories. One of the years I served as head fire watch, one of my road side lookouts started lighting fires. At first, within a mile or two of his little building, after his evening walks, we'd spot the smokes and the choppers and fire crews would descend. Later, as he was given a motorcycle, the new fires sprung up in more distant stands of tree. I hiked down 12 miles to the forest air strip and sent a note to dispatch to report my concerns, feeling hesitant to call over the radio where so many could hear my words.

Another lookout before my time called dispatch in the middle of the night when typically no plane or helicopter can fly. He was panicked that there were people there to get him. Station Rangers who hiked up the trail hours later with a flashlight found him huddled in some bushes, the windows in his lookout building smashed out from the inside.

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Up there it is as if your mind gets a will of its own.

At home I could distract myself, stay busy, the noise of life, volunteering, taking 20 credit hours or studying late into the night occupied me. I could avoid thinking about things I choose not to.

For me on those mountaintops, there was no keeping any of my thoughts at bay.

I was lucky, at worst what I had to confront were regrets. I'd sit on the catwalk dangling my legs over a thousand feet of air, or lay on my metal bed as the rain pattered, and I chewed on these regrets for long hours until they lost their flavor.

What I was bitter about I could turn over and over, replay until it grew dull and lost its ability to flush me to anger.

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Of course in any kind of solitude, where we are or where we exist inside ourselves is not solely controlled by where our bodies are or our location physically on earth or in time.

As a ranger I could walk for days replaying a moment in time or a series of events long past. They would cycle through me, as if my mind was stuck on instant replay and I would be gone, far off again reliving a conversation, trying out other phrases, other responses, living out alternate scenarios of reality for that time and place far, far away and gone.

I found a curious mix of kinds of presence out there.

I could live in books until I ran out of them. After that it was all my mind, my life and me and the wild alone.

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I'm sure it is clear that there is a danger in this, in being alone with your thoughts. As with loss or with grief or anger we can get truly stuck in a feeling our obsessive thought. I remember a time years later, after a difficult break up where repeating a feeling or thought simply wouldn't wear thin this emotion, instead it actually scratched it into a deeper painful groove. It became a place which hurt, a chasm I could try to skirt but always fell into. I found that years later that I could come to dwell in a place of pain inside myself and my avoidance of it could make it larger, thicker with gravity, so that like an addiction, my life could only be spent in conscious, all consuming avoidance or else deep in the pit of it.

To escape and find my life again it was as if I had to grow new muscles, a strength and determination to pass that door in my consciousness, to think of other places inside me which felt warm, which might draw me in as a better place to be. I thought about the wild, about all I'd seen, I knew if all else failed I could go back, again feel the quiet the solitude, the strength in myself-- and knowing this, I survived. I learned then that I could draw on that experience, that place that was now inside me as my own.

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Of course in those seven years in the wilderness I knew moments where I could feel my physical life and the limit of it only inches away from me.

--In the power of water, crossing a river, roaring ice-cold from spring run off. I couldn't turn around because I was forty remote road and trail miles from town, having been left

on a road corridor rarely traveled in spring. I remember standing hip deep in the pressing water, picturing my body dragged down under the weight of my pack, each boulder and log a place I might wedge and never rise from.

--I also felt this edge to my physical life in the power of gravity on a peak one day crossing a snow field which vanished below in jagged rocks. Alone there, my legs shook but I had to cross. I unsnapped my waist belt, swung my pack carefully off and let it slide down the mountain. I steeled myself, trusted my legs and kicked one step at a time in the snow to solid granite on the other side.

--Powerful animals, bears, cougar and wolverine tracked me in the wilderness like prey. I lived weeks knowing that lions watched but coming to feel agreement that if they had not chosen to bother me so far, they probably would not.

--I came to know that bears have less acute senses and like least to be surprised, and so I had a special deep "hey ho" I would call out in brush or creek bottoms where they might be rooting with cubs, head down, never hearing my feet clomping on the trail.

--Twice in the wilderness I met wolves. Once in the late 90s before any had been re-introduced to Idaho. My boss had reported hearing one but I had joined the many who were certain he was mistaken and that it had been elk or the play of his own mind in the woods. Day hiking with the elderly wife of a station guard, fighter jets flew low over and a sonic boom ripped the clearing where we sat eating lunch. Out of the fading sound of the jet engines we heard what seemed at first to be a voice, but then clearly was wolves, not one or two, but three, their voices rising and falling eerily, beautiful from the edge of the clearing where we sat. The sound reached into my chest, deep and brought tears to my eyes. They had traveled the forest parallel to the trail so, as we walked-- had they not howled-- we never would have never known they were there.

Years later my partner Carol and I hiked out from a remote part of the Frank Church. Our dog Pinza with a red backpack on trotted ahead on the trail. We were following the tracks of an elk and saw repeated wet spots in the trail. Then, oddly, the dog insisted on walking between us while we speculated how an elk would urinate several times in a row on such a short stretch of trail. Behind us, the sound of a helicopter's blades suddenly thudded out of the valley where ten miles away a crew was fighting a forest fire. A column of smoke had towered all day, rising into the deep blue above. Suddenly out of the apron of tiny high alpine spruce on the hillside near us, the sounds of wolves voices rose one by one. Judging by the marks they left on the trail, at least six. They howled and we stood staring toward where they hid in the trees.

--Once in my later years in the backcountry, at dusk I clambered over logs on a long abandon stretch of trail in a huge remote valley bottom. An odd sound made me turn to see a light brown form on a log up hill from where I stood. I can only guess that this was a wolverine. I had seen a flash of one once from a truck driving to a trailhead. This one was standing firm in an avalanche shoot, unafraid of me, sending warning that I was

where I was unwelcome. I did not sleep well that night, again and again picturing that I had transgressed, strayed this time where I did not belong.

-- Of course I have felt also the fragility of my own life in the power of the elements and the chill of wind blown snow on a peak in Nepal. There I felt the power of the sky to suddenly throw down a great weight of snow, like hands holding your feet, paralyzing, wind rendering flimsy the tent until you huddle in the fluttering cloth trying to heat water, feeling hypothermia picking at you until you flee wallowing straight downhill mile after mile to where the snow turns to rain ---because you are not prepared for this...

Sometimes in the wilderness there is no luxury of flight.

Waking up after a day like that, after any one of those days, finding morning so brilliant in its warmth and welcome, is as close as I know to a symbol of beginning.

That simple sense of survival in face of powers so huge has given me steadiness.

In my late 20s, at a young age I felt I'd lived a long life. I felt strength which I hold with me today, strength which puts my life and trials in perspective, strength which gives petty problems less hold on me, helps me hold my determination to see others find their strength, their health, their own sense of security, humility, self and belonging.

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Perhaps too in my mind that is part of the definition of the wild:

a place where we learn humility

where it is not possible to control all things

where we adapt rather than making all things adapt to us

a place where we can be reminded how fragile we are

that place we grow humble, set aside the great powers of ourselves in our immense multitude and recognize that like a single ant, a single mole rat, or a single bee we are, except in rare instances, not entirely capable of surviving all on our own.

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We look around today and where there were once forests, there are now cabins; and where there were fields or endless stretches of sagebrush, there are subdivisions, roads, shopping centers, RV parks and gift shops ...

It would be selfishness to want to keep these places to myself. I wonder though more genuinely if it is not also selfish to want to close the door behind me and just leave the wild for the wild -- keep it there untouched, even if I could never go back.

In the wilderness each year I could mark the increase in the number of people on the trails, the missing branches and scars on the trees, the fire pits burnt into the moss circling the high lakes, the tree wells gouged by hooves, the planes over head, the cars on the dirt tracks-- and I would feel a sense of panic

What I and many of us hold sacred is vanishing for our love of it, for our collective need for it.

I wonder are there too many of us now?
Have we created a drought of solitude?
A drought of humility?

We can pull over by the roadside, let the camera pan out and we have the beauty still, but what about the solitude?
Too often we take so much of home with us. Now in some places, every hundred yards, every few minutes there is another walker a mountain bike or pack string.

What happens when that solitude it is gone?
What happens when we have no place like this for confronting our lives, our pasts, our beliefs?

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Some of this at least in part we can create for ourselves, setting aside time and place in our lives to hear our own voices or hear the past or nothing but the wind or our heart beats and our breath for awhile.

But how do we save a place where we may be forced to recognize that we are vulnerable, a place to feel our dependence upon others and the fragility of our lives?

---There is great power in the microscopic world and in the betrayal of our own bodies through cancer. We learn humility there.

---The ocean is still vast and humbling but few have the skill to go there alone.

For how long will we still have places where we may feel humbled and shrunken by beauty and by fear?

If none are left, what happens to humanity then?

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My years in the Frank Church rest in me like a place I can retreat to. A sort of well I draw from. I can stand in a street in the snow-blanketed early morning darkness on my way to the Statehouse and feel the power of a huge over turned bowl of stars spinning invisibly above me. I can run in the foothills as the sun rises and feel that same wind from the knife edged ridge-top in the Salmon River Range, where the sun shines, illuminating the white shape of an old she mountain goat. The wind ruffles her fur and the universe freezes as her big black eyes stare into mine, curious but trusting.

What ever goes wrong in my life, I consider myself one of the fortunate to have found a place, a source from which to draw humility, a world full of stillness and silence I carry with me where my own inner voice is humble but clear and strong.
