

This Land, and the Tonic of Wilderness

Cantor Shoshana Brown

My adult daughter, Mira, lives in San Francisco. The downside of this is that it is *far*, and I don't get to see her often. The *upside* is that when I travel to visit her, I am able to use the occasion to take her on a trip to enjoy some of California's splendors. Like many millennials, Mira does not drive, and so when I visit, I rent a car and take her on "field trips," that she might have her eyes opened to the fantastic natural beauty that her chosen state contains – even if for the most part she is content to enjoy the more "cultured" life of San Francisco. Three years ago, we tented under redwoods in Napa Valley, and visited natural hot springs. This year we stayed at a hostel for 2 nights in the Point Reyes National Seashore Park, and conducted excursions from this central point.

I am finding that the older I get, the more clamorous grows the "call of the wild." And I wonder why this is: Is it because I now recognize the wisdom of the Psalmist who adjured us, "teach us to number our days" (Ps. 90:12) – that is, not to take for granted that I can always do that thing, take that trip, or speak to that person another year, another day? Or is it because of my concerns about the health of the planet, what with climate "instability," rising temperatures and seas, melting glaciers, disappearing species – that I want to see what I can before it is too late? Or perhaps, when I take Mira (or her younger brother back here in Fall River) on one of these "field trips," or when I write my monthly "Take a Hike" articles for the *Herald News*, my aim is a kind of "evangelizing," attempting to open the eyes of others to the "good news" that despite all the of the environmental doom and gloom, our world is still indescribably beautiful, wondrous to behold? Yes, we need to fight for its health, but at the same time we ought to enjoy, to celebrate this awesome creation which God declared "very good."

2017 is a year of significant anniversaries: 400 years since Martin Luther posted his 95 theses; 100 years since the U.S. entered WWI; 100 years since the birth of JFK; 50 years since San Francisco's "Summer of Love" (and the release of the Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band"). But there are two anniversaries that occupy a special place in my heart: This July 12th will mark the 200th anniversary of the birth of Massachusetts native son, Henry David Thoreau, author of *Walden* and the world-changing essay "Civil Disobedience." And 125 years ago, on May 28th, 1892, John Muir, perhaps our planet's most beloved wanderer and environmental champion, founded the Sierra Club. I was acutely aware of Muir's legacy on my trip last week. Muir lived much of his life in northern California, and I felt blessed by his spirit as I strolled the rolling hills and beaches of the Point Reyes Park. On our way back to San Francisco, Mira and I stopped by the Muir Woods, a magnificent preserve of coastal redwoods that brings its visitors to awe and wonder, no matter how many times they have visited. And even when we returned to the city, I encountered wildness at the urban park known as "Land's End," where I went one morning to chant my morning prayers. Looking out at the wide expanse of the Pacific from this park, what did I see but *whales* – yes, a pod of whales was feeding right

off of this urban coastline, with mothers and calves distinguished by their large and small spouts side by side as they came to the surface to exhale and inhale again! I made sure on that morning to chant Psalm 148, which exhorts all of creation to “praise the Lord” – even the great sea-monsters!

John Muir surely appreciated the “gospel” of Thoreau, penned approximately 47 years before the founding of the Sierra Club:

“We need the tonic of wilderness – to wade sometimes in its marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk...to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground... [W]e require that...land and sea be infinitely wild... We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder-cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander.”(*Walden*, Chapter 17)

A direct spiritual descendant of Thoreau, Muir wrote kindred words about nature’s spell on the West Coast, especially about the national park that he was most responsible for founding, Yosemite:

"I have run wild... As long as I live, I'll hear waterfalls and birds and winds sing. I'll interpret the rocks, learn the language of flood, storm, and the avalanche. I'll acquaint myself with the glaciers and wild gardens, and get as near the heart of the world as I can." (Muir Journals, undated fragment, 1871)

Alas, I could not put my ear under the ocean to hear the whales sing! Despite my concern for the health of our planet, God’s precious creation, I also experience overwhelming feelings of awe, gratitude, and jubilation for the beauty, vitality and abundance that nevertheless persist. As the Psalmist exhorts us, we must praise God for the beauty of Creation. And while we are at it, let us give thanks as well for these “better angels” of the American spirit, H. D. Thoreau and John Muir – and also for one who died 50 years ago this year, who sang of the redwood forests and the Gulf Stream waters. Most people have never heard the final verse to “This Land is Your Land” (recorded by Moses Asch in 1944 but not released, and certainly not taught to school children!), and so, in the spirit of these great wanderers and eco-mentors, I will close with the words of Woody Guthrie:

*There was a big high wall there – that tried to stop me.
The sign was painted – said 'Private Property.'
But on the backside – it didn't say nothin'.
This land was made for you and me.*

Cantor Shoshana Brown is co-spiritual leader and music director at Temple Beth El of Fall River.