

Boundary Crossings: Return to the Land of Your Soulⁱ

Welcome to the first day of the week-long festival of *Sukkot*, also known as the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles. *Sukkot* is both a harvest festival and a commemoration of the forty year sojourn the Israelites spent in the wilderness after they were freed from slavery in Egypt. In preparation for *Sukkot*, Jewish families construct *sukkahs* which are temporary structures for use during the week-long festival. Topped with branches and often well decorated with autumnal, harvest or Judaic themes, it is a symbolic wilderness shelter. *Sukkot* is a holiday time of great celebration.

After all the work that has gone into repairing and resurrecting our church, it seems appropriate to be talking about such shelters and celebration.

Four years ago, I joined Wilderness Torah at their *Sukkot* weekend in Marin. It was a joy-filled event of singing, dancing, and reading of the Torah all of which took place under a huge *sukkah* created with woven branches and grasses by a group of energetic young adults. Caught by the energy of Jewish songs and dances, and the solemnity of the Torah's words, I wished - not for the first time - that I could read and speak Hebrew. Nevertheless, I was welcomed with open arms as we sang, danced, and ate sumptuous meals together where persons ranging from young children to elders shared stories. An honored time of gathering, families from all over California made their participation an annual pilgrimage just as Jews in ancient Israel did during *Sukkot* when they were required to make a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem. And at the end of each day, we returned to our tents spread across the fields.

Tents may also serve as *Sukkot* shelters, just as they have allowed many of us here to take our own pilgrimages to ocean beaches, mountains, deserts, lakes, and rivers. And, as some of you know, I was fortunate exactly a month ago to pack up my tent and return to the wilderness country of the Minnesota's Boundary Waters where a canoe takes me away from email, traffic jams, the cacophony of news, and a list of must-dos. To this sacred space, I have returned many times.

So it was that once again, on a mid-September afternoon, my paddling partner and I set forth on our pilgrimage.

There is nothing like that initial stroke when once again the paddle dips, the canoe glides and our hearts lift as we set out across pristine waters towards the first portage taking us into the protected Boundary Waters Canoe Area. And we know the boundaries we are about to cross are more than geographical ones. They are also boundaries between our clocked life and a more timeless one where time rests in the rhythm of natural places. And this softens the boundaries between our public visible self and our more hidden soulful one, so that we hear it calling return to me, return to me, return to the land of your soul.

The land of my soul – our souls. What map leads us to this place? When and how do we hear its call? Far up ahead I hear the cry of a lonely young eagle and the wail of a single loon. I am back home.

We check the map, look for a break in the trees where our portage may be, keep an eye open for rocks as the waters become shallower closer to shore. Hazards, both physical and emotional, are there ready to greet the unwary who return to this landscape.

Reaching the portage, we clamber over boulders, lift the canoe over my paddling partner's shoulders, the 40 lb. pack over mine, and off we go to another lake with a faithful pup scampering ahead. Delightfully, this portage is short and wide. By portage standards it's "a walk in the park" compared to memories of others leading through bogs, knee-deep mud holes, hidden treacherous roots, and mosquitoes. Why do this, I've been asked? Why voluntarily paddle in all weather conditions, sleep on the ground, put up/take down tents, far away from a hot shower and soft mattress? And in response, I hear Dawna Markova to whom I referred at Eleanor Weigand's memorial. Her voice of 20 years ago still resonates, saying, "I will not die an un-lived life."ⁱⁱ And it's retreats like this that invite us to cross boundaries from our outer self to our inner self, each time making this boundary more permeable.

So we walk this portage and at the far end, looking out carefully for more boulders, we lower the canoe, the paddles, the packs, the life jackets, and launch into another lake with the dog standing, as a faithful sentinel on a pack. Far ahead lies our destination, a solitary island that first welcomed me to these waters twenty-three years ago.

We arrive, unload all our gear and begin to set up camp, just as those celebrating *Sukkot* this week have been building their *sukkah*. And believe it or not, this is fun, for every site is different. Finding a flat area for the tent without a sharp root or rock in the middle is very serious business requiring a lot of patience and humor. And then seeing grey skies at the end of the lake, we turn our attention to finding some dry birch bark for our fire and setting up a tarp to shelter it. As rain drops begin to tap their gentle music on its roof, we know this is what we came for: warm comfort, firelight in the midst of darkness, companionship surrounded by island sounds, and the plaintive call of that juvenile bald eagle.

The fire draws us in, revealing that under every surface is another surface. Small twigs and branches gently fall into ash while birch trees around the edge of our site are gracefully dropping their first golden leaves. In their letting go, I ask of what am I letting go as I rest in this cool, shaded mystery and return to the land of my soul? This is a question I have heard many of us here today ask. How can I let go? How can I clear my clutter? How can I be more present to my life? What map might show me the way?

Topo Maps

To get to this island, we used a topographical map. It's a great guide to the terrain of where we paddle and camp, but only a guide. A symbol but not the story itself, for what can a map truly tell of our quest and our questions? Eventually, we have to find our own way even with a map in hand.

I have used many topo maps – British ordinance survey maps with one inch to the mile where one can find Iron Age hill forts and ancient pathways - but who were the people of those times and what were their stories? Arctic maps have revealed to me hut circles on plateaus in the midst of far reaching tundra but what does the pile of chert chips tell us about the Inuit

who carved a spear head and the caribou essential to her survival? And now I use detailed maps of the Boundary Waters. Each one looks like another until I have written notes reminding me of cliffs with pictographs, an ideal lunch spot, an east facing camp site on the Laurentian Shield perfect for sunrise skinny dipping. There are recorded memories of a terrifying thunderstorm and the day when white caps were leaping like angry wolves. There are times that I have been brought to my knees in fear, humility, and –yes - a sense of being totally alive. On my knees, the universe is suddenly profoundly personal when the storm, the rock, the crashing of waves just below the rock are all very, very real.

Maps give us the landscape but not the stories or experience embedded in the landscape. It's the experience and story that matter. Isn't this why we enjoy the Sacred Story time in our service, coffee hours, Kathy's Tuesday Group, or Write for Your Life for those who come? It is often in listening to others' stories or having them listen to ours that we may find ourselves opening to something deeper. Stories feel real and may be the doors to opening us to our deepest, most real loving self that some call soul.

Sukkot comes right after Yom Kippur, a time for those who are Jewish to "take upon themselves the work of *tshuvah*, *tefilla* and *tzedaka*" - repentance, prayer and charity. It's a time for Jews to return to "their spiritual center, asking for help, offering gratitude along the way, and committing themselves to justice." It's a time of asking once again, "Who am I? What am I doing with my life? What does this all mean? How do I live a life of authenticity?"ⁱⁱⁱ

Islands

An island is ideal for making space for such questions and for taking time out away from *chronos* chronological time and stepping into *kairos* – timeless time when past, present, and future are all one. It's time when *not doing* may be the most important thing one can do, when our real self becomes fully present and the not real self floats away. But more often than not we still bring that list and that calendar with us, especially now with our iPhones, so that we continue being plagued by voices we haven't quite left behind. Douglas Wood, author of *Old Turtle* and fellow paddler, shared his experience of such a badgering, relentless voice that asked,

"What exactly are you doing out here? What are you accomplishing? What are you getting out of it? And what, oh especially what, are you going to do with your life?"

Wood observes, "The voice usually stops me. ... But this time I tell the voice to shut up. It's a stupid question.... Setting out to do something with your life is like sitting down to eat a moose. Nobody ever did anything successfully with their life. Instead they did something with their day. Each day. ... Let the moose run. Eat some blueberries."^{iv}

The blueberries the moose so love were past their prime in September but I still heard the loon whom I imagine, as it's getting ready to migrate, is wise enough not to be asking what I am getting out of this experience or doing with my life. (What a prime example of projection!)

I once took a course with an investment planner on Women, Money and Debt believing that it would tell me everything I needed to know about investing and how to avoid debt. It did,

but not as I expected. In describing debt, the investment consultant didn't talk about money at all but about the time, energy, and resources we spend on regret for what we have done and not done in the past or on planning for the future. All this takes away from the energy we have to invest in the present which really is all we have.

Yes, each day – this day – is what matters. There are some among us who treat each day as if it might be their last and in so doing live it to their fullest. Helen Keller was one of these and she said,

“Each day comes to me with both hands full of possibilities, and in its brief course I discern all the verities and realities of my existence; the bliss of growth, the glory of action, the spirit of beauty.”^v

Authentically Present

So I ask, when are we truly present? On that island, without my computer or iPhone, I could come into “the peace of wild things” and be present in the cathedral of cedars, pines, birches, and maples beginning to turn. I expect many here have felt the same among the Redwoods. And I have been present when looking with wonder at a spider web on a branch glistening with morning dew drops.^{vi}

And what of our webs? Do we spin these, wrapping ourselves with must-dos and seemingly important ventures whose planning may be swept away in a moment by heart attack, earthquake or fire? Then what would reveal itself as real, worthwhile, and perhaps even glistening?

Connection

In watching one web, one tree, one rock with water lapping at its edge, one lonely eagle, still water in the morning and sunset in the evening, we can be connected. In resting beside evening embers, we can be connected. In letting go, we can be connected. And connection is prayer inviting us to be with all that has come before, is now, and ever will be. All One. All part of a Holy Oneness.

Our minds, our thoughts, our words can get in the way of such intimacy but perhaps our feet in walking, our ears in listening, our voices in singing, our hearts in loving bring us closer.

Ironing Out the Wrinkles of Our Souls

We venture on these pilgrimages of personal boundary crossings be they in these Boundary Waters, the Sierra, ocean beaches, the woods of the East Bay, or perhaps right here in our Sacred Hoop Garden to work on ourselves and “iron out the wrinkles of our soul”^{vii} so that we may be deeply connected with all things, realigned with Self and the Sacred.

To say that such a journey of discovery is a solitary one may be true but only partially true for underneath a starlit sky, in the midst of dark nights or fog filled mornings, rain or sunlight, we are not alone. In carrying our history and memories of loved ones, we are not alone. And in asking questions and holding dreams that others also ask and hold, we travel with them and they with us.

Such retreats may appear to separate us from those we love but it was going into the total seclusion and silence of a Trappist monastery that Thomas Merton felt most connected with his fellow human beings.

Healing and renewing ourselves where our inner and outer selves are One is where and when we are most real and present to others. Personal redemption holds the hope of communal redemption. So let us “return again, return again, return to the land of [our] soul.”

ⁱ This wording refers to the Hebrew song “Return again, return again, return to the land of your soul” which is often sung at Yom Kippur when those who are Jewish welcome in the New Year after the Days of Awe, which is a time for serious introspection and repentance.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Markova’s book, *I Will Not Die an Unlived Life: Reclaiming Purpose and Passion* (Red Wheel/Weiser, 2000).

ⁱⁱⁱ Jhos Singer, “It’s Time to Bring Our Hearts Back Home,” *Chochmat HaLev*, Sept. 19, 2019, online.

^{iv} Douglas Wood, *Paddle Whispers*, (Duluth, MN: Pfeifer-Hamilton, 1993), 49.

^v See Wood, 50.

^{vi} See Wendell Berry’s poem “The Peace of Wild Things” that fills me with the same feelings.

^{vii} Wood, 113.

SCRIPTURE READINGS FOR OCTOBER 13, 2019

Lord, how beautiful you are – Psalm 84 (Adapted from Hebrew by Stephen Mitchell)

Lord, how beautiful you are;
 how radiant the places you dwell in.
My soul yearns for your presence;
 my whole body long for your light.
Even the wren finds a house
 and the sparrow a nest for herself.
Take me home, Lord; guide me
 to the place of perfect repose.
Let me feel you always within me;
 open my eyes to your love.

The Peace of Wild Things by Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting for their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.