

**“Noticing the Beautiful”**  
**© 2011 The Rev. Wendy L. Bell**  
**Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church**  
**Harvard, Massachusetts**  
**October 16, 2011**

As of today, we are just about half way through the Jewish festival of Sukkot, which began at sunset on [the 12<sup>th</sup>], five short days after Yom Kippur, the most solemn holy day of the Jewish year. In contrast, Sukkot is not solemn at all, but a time of rejoicing and celebration, a time of giving thanks for the abundance of the harvest. At its roots, it is an agricultural festival, but it is also celebrated to commemorate the 40 years that the Jewish people wandered in the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt, their time of freedom and exile following their long enslavement by the Pharaoh.

During this festival time, practicing Jews build sukkahs, or temporary dwellings, as symbols of the shelters that their ancestors made for themselves as they travelled through the desert those many years. And they are commanded to dwell in them, or to eat their meals in them, or – if the weather is truly foul or they are not in good health – to spend as much time as they reasonably can in them during the 7 day festival.

As you might imagine, sukkot has long been one of my favorite religious holidays, probably because of how much I like to spend time camping out of doors. In fact, usually around this time of year, I am beginning to experience a touch of nature deprivation, after having spent so many weeks of my summer under the trees and the stars, in good weather and in bad. Right around now, I am longing to get outside again.

This sukkot, I can't help but think of the mostly young people occupying Boston and New York City, and many other cities around the country and the world. For they, too, are living in tents or other temporary shelters in their own downtown wildernesses – urban jungles – braving the elements – the rain, the wind, the cold. We might say that they represent those who have been exiled from the houses of power in our land, and who now find themselves wandering without a clear sense of direction, through a vast economic and political wilderness not of their making. They, too, are on a journey – albeit, an uncertain and meandering one – to a better place; a promised land bounded by fairness and compassion, generosity and hope.

So far, their spirits seem good. The Jews wandering in the wilderness seem to have spent a lot more time kvetching and complaining than have the occupiers of our land. Back then, they complained to Moses, seemingly endlessly, about the food and how long it was taking to the promised land. The occupations today are, in contrast, filled with the spirit of cooperation and songs of gladness and drumming circles and mirth and laughter and joy and hope. All protests should be this much fun!

But it's not always that way. If we think back to our own personal times of exile and lost-ness, our own times of rebellion against something that oppressed our lives or our spirits, our own personal periods of hardship and meandering in the wildernesses of our lives, it is probably fair to say that at times, perhaps more often than not, we have behaved like the wandering Jews of old...lamenting, grieving, worrying, cursing, damning, even despairing. "When will things get better? When will they change? Why me? Why now? Why still?"

Some of us, sometimes, when things go wrong, or when hardship lasts altogether too long for us, *may* be able to rise above the level of complaint – we may become quite stoic about our challenges – but how many of us can rise above our stoicism to actually experience the joy of the present desert moment? That is the spiritual quality I'd like to have us consider for a time this morning. That ability to notice and appreciate the beauty, the sublimity, the grace of any given moment in the wilderness of our own lives.

For a long time, I have been interested in the literature of wilderness. Twenty years or so ago I began to become fascinated with stories of polar exploration and mountaineering, as well as stories of storms at sea. This past spring, I read with great interest Laurence Gonzales' book *Deep Survival*, which is subtitled "Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why." Gonzales looks at all kinds of accidents and survival situations in order to try to piece together a list of qualities which survivors tend to hold in common with one another.

As it turns out, it's often not the strongest, the best trained, or the best equipped who survive tragic circumstances in the wild. Instead, it is those who are able to draw on and rely on a well-spring of sometimes previously undiscovered inner resources. As he has written, "Everyone who dies out there dies of confusion." He means that people tend often to die of an internal (rather than an external) disorientation. Survival, it seems, is really very much a matter of the spirit even more so than of the body.

I've come to think of Gonzales' list of qualities as a list of "spiritual survival skills" that are useful, not only in the actual wilderness, but also in the metaphorical wildernesses of our own lives. Life can be dangerous. All sorts of things befall us during a lifetime: illness, loss, change of any kind, divorce, abuse, alcoholism, job loss, you name it. And over the course of the year, I plan to talk more about the sorts of "spiritual survival skills" that can be of help to each and every one of us at some point or another in our own lives.

Aside from an ample measure of pure dumb luck, survival is largely a matter of how we relate to our environment when our environment turns dangerous, for whatever reason or combination of reasons.

Juliane Koepcke remembers thinking that the jungle trees below her looked like cauliflowers as she fell through the air, strapped to her airplane seat, after the plane itself had fallen apart mid-air.

Miraculously, she survived the fall – survival always entails some measure of good luck – and woke up on the jungle floor, still strapped into her seat. She realized she had to get out of the jungle – no one would be able to see her there for all the trees. So she set off, following the water

ways, trying to get to civilization. “She had no survival equipment, no tools, no compass or map,” but eventually, after 11 days of walking, she made it to a hut along a river bank where she was discovered by some hunters, still alive.

Lauren Elder, who survived a plane crash in the mountains of California, kept stopping during her 36-hour hike out to appreciate the beauty around her.

“Bill Garleb, an American GI who survived the Bataan Death March in the Philippines, found his sense increasingly sharp as he experienced a deep wonder at the birds and colors and smells of the jungle.” (172)

Debbie Kiley, one of 5 crew members on a 58-foot ketch that sunk on its way from Bar Harbor to Fort Lauderdale, managed to survive a hurricane, many days on a life-raft without food or fresh water, and a shark-infested sea. Others of the crew members were either gravely injured or otherwise incapacitated, but she managed to avoid hypothermia by covering herself with sea weed.

“When she found that the seaweed with which they’d covered themselves sustained a vast number of tiny creatures, [she said she] ‘...was dazzled by the life it supported...an entire world, self-sufficient and complete.’

As Gonzales has written of these sorts of experiences, “To be open to the world in which you find yourself, to be able to experience wonder at its magnificence, is to begin to admit its reality and adapt to it. Be here now. It is to place yourself in relation to it, to say: Before I came here, the world was as it is now; after I am gone, it will be that way still. To experience wonder is to know this truth: The world won’t adapt to me. I must adapt to it.” (205-6)

After one crewmate had fallen overboard and been eaten by sharks, and as another lay dying in the raft, on the first clear night of the ordeal, Kiley noticed the stars above. “Noticing the stars, the beauty of the sky, was a significant sign of strength,” writes Gonzales. “A crucial moment for all survivors comes when they become convinced that they will survive. Often it occurs after a spiritual experience of the beauty of the world.”

“Focus on the sky,” [Kiley] told herself, “on the beauty there.” And survive she did.

Noticing the beauty present amid tragedy or challenge is a spiritual experience. Perhaps there is even something metaphysical about it, something about a supernatural God revealing Godself to the beholder. We don’t know. But we do know that the capacity to notice beauty has a significant physiological component to it.

As Gonzales explains it, “The appreciation of beauty, the feeling of awe, opens the senses. When you see something beautiful, your pupils actually dilate. This appreciation not only relieves stress and creates strong motivation, but it allows you to take in new information more effectively.” (289)

You can relate more honestly to your environment, and therefore adapt to it more effectively, if you know what is actually in it. And yet, we tend to live in our heads – so often closed off from our environment, our senses underutilized. We tend to make ourselves at home amid our own thoughts, our points of view, our opinions, our conclusions. But as it turns out, in survival situations, the people who make decisions based only on their own thinking, their own reasoning, often die. Why is that? It is because our reasoning is usually based on what has happened before, on precedent – we make deductions based on past experience – ours or someone else's.

But what worked before may not, in fact, work now. And so, in order to have the best chance of survival, we must learn to make decisions and take action based not on what we presume to be true, but on what actually is true. And that means using our senses to understand our environment so that we can relate to it properly. Therefore, anything that opens our senses seems to have survival value. Taking the time to stop and smell the roses is not merely a pleasantry, but it is beneficial in other ways, as well. It might actually help keep us alive longer.

Those of you who are more familiar with the Jewish festival of Sukkot and with the temporary shelters known as sukkah, may remember some of the requirements regarding the construction of these dwellings. Every sukkah must have at least 2.5 walls covered with material strong enough that it will not be blown away by the wind. It can be any size, as long as it's big enough for at least one person to eat meals, or otherwise dwell in it.

The roof of the sukkah must be covered in something that grew from the ground and was cut off such as tree branches, bamboo reeds, or corn stalks. Even 2x4's will do if they are made from wood. Whatever the material, it must not be tied down or tied together, but left loose. It must provide shade from the sun, but it must be spaced sparsely enough that the rain can get in and that the stars can be seen at night.

Why? Perhaps as a reminder that we are at the mercy of the elements and that life is inherently fragile. And perhaps so that the Jewish people, in the midst of their desert time of hardship and trial, might be better able to notice the beauty of the skies above them. And feel awe. And wonder. And humility. As the author of the Psalms has written,

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
The moon and the stars that you have established;  
What are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
Mortals that you care for them? (8:3-4)*

If in times of challenge and trouble, we focus only on our pain, our dilemma, our fear, our anger, and our hurt, we will, in effect, cut ourselves off from the changed and changing environment around us. If we are not honest about that which surrounds us, we cannot adapt to it in any meaningful way, and if we cannot adapt, we are less likely to thrive or even perhaps survive.

And yet, if we can open ourselves to the wonder that is beyond us – to that which is bigger than our suffering – and yes, sometimes even beautiful – if we can open our eyes to the sights, our ears to the sounds, our noses to the smells, our hearts to the joy and hope of what is possible, we will in all likelihood fair better and emerge stronger in the dawn of the next day's light.

So may it be for us...

Now, at this time, as we prepare to spend some time in prayer and silence, I invite you to pause with me first for a moment to reflect on what is going on in your own lives.

Perhaps you yourself woke up in a wilderness of your own this morning. A desert land. Perhaps your own spirit lags or thirsts. Perhaps you are wandering or adrift.

Or perhaps it is not you, but someone you know who is struggling right now to find his or her way out of some unknown and scary circumstance.

Take a moment to sit in those places of lostness and longing, and from those places, let us join in the spirit of prayer and prayerful reflection...