

“From Whence Comes Our Help?”
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So, I’ve been wondering...have you ever heard corn sing? Have you ever heard a tree breathe? Have you ever heard a rock sigh? Have you ever sat still that long or listened that hard?

The story that I shared this morning with the children is, as I said, one of my favorites. I love the idea of walking through the woods or hiking up a mountain or ambling through a meadow listening – just listening – to all the fauna and flora that make their homes in those places – places we often refer to as “uninhabited,” but which are, in actuality, filled with life, teeming with creatures, strewn with rocks and pebbles and other bits of Holy Mother Earth.

When I was a child, I remember going through a phase of really paying very close attention to the trees. I never heard them sing, but I would sit and stare at a tree until my consciousness expanded enough to recognize its aliveness – until I could **feel** that life and know that I wasn’t, in fact, looking at an inanimate thing, but at a being, which was more intimate with and knew more about that particular spot where it was planted than I could ever know.

The story reminds me of one of the stories in the Bible about Moses...

Moses was out in the wilderness taking care of his father-in-law’s sheep one day when he noticed a bush that was burning, but not being consumed. And he was curious, so he went near to it and paid close attention. And the bush spoke to him. He heard a voice coming out of the bush.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in reference to that scene, once wrote,

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes –
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

Earth’s **crammed** with heaven and **every** common bush afire with God...but most of us don’t notice, at least not most of the time. It takes quite a commitment to see that way – to hear that way. It takes a commitment of time, and a willingness to open our eyes and ears. And most of us don’t have that kind of time anymore. I certainly don’t.

I can’t remember the last time I took the time to stop and stare at a tree until I felt its vitality. And I almost can’t imagine doing it again anytime soon. Life is as full and as busy as it ever has been; full to overflowing; full of other commitments – family, friends, house, work, volunteer efforts – to name the big ones. And life is full of concerns. Common concerns: the lack of time,

the lack of money, the uncertainty about the future, and the regular old indecision – what to do about this or that.

In each of our lives there is a lot to juggle. Sometimes it feels more manageable, but there are other times when we may need help. Where do we turn?

“I lift up my eyes to the hills,” wrote the Psalmist. “From whence does my help come?”

Any of you who are familiar with the question, very likely remember the answer, too:

“My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.”

He will not let your foot be moved,
he who keeps you will not slumber.
Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade
on your right hand.
The sun shall not smite you by day,
nor the moon by night.

The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and for evermore.

Sometimes it sounds like a wonderful idea to me – to have a helper like that, one who watches over me and protects me, guides me and keeps me. But it’s not exactly my theology. And even though the title I chose for this week’s sermon makes reference to this Psalm, this was not the answer I intended.

From where **does** our help come?

Sometimes it comes from our communities – from our families and our friends, from our churches and our neighbors – and community **has** been the topic for January. But admittedly that’s not the answer that I intended either. There is so much value in community and I sing its praises often. Community is strongly lauded by most Unitarian Universalists and it is the #1 reason that most Unitarian Universalist give when asked why they go to church. But sometimes the best help comes from somewhere else – somewhere more elusive.

I’m reminded again of the biblical stories – and of stories from other religious traditions – stories of people in need, people in search of help, people seeking direction or struggling to discover meaning and purpose – who turn away from community to find their answers. Stories of people

filled with longings and hungers that are not fulfilled in community even though they know they could not live without their communities for long and would not choose to try.

I think again of Moses who is leading his community away from bondage in Egypt. And he brings them to the foot of Mt. Sinai, but he climbs to the top of the mountain alone. “What do I do now?” is basically his question in that time of need. And on the top of the mountain he sits alone and waits. And again he hears the voice, which gives him a sense of what his next steps ought to be.

I think of Jesus who often went off by himself. After a long, hard day of preaching and healing, he went away from the crowds “into a lonely place.” After cleansing a leper and casting out demons, he “withdrew to the wilderness to pray.” Before making big decisions, too, such as picking his closest students, his disciples, he “went out to the mountain to pray,” and stayed there all night long, waiting to hear the voice that would guide him.

The Buddha, troubled by the suffering he saw in the world and trying to find answers to his questions, first sought out other people – teachers and leaders. But ultimately he didn’t find what he needed there. Instead he found it after sitting for a long time, alone and in silence, under a Bodhi tree in the wilderness.

Time and time again in ancient stories from many traditions, when people have needed help, they have stepped outside of their communities for a time and gone alone. They’ve gone into the wilderness, they’ve gone into the desert, they’ve climbed mountains, they’ve sat on rocks and under trees. They’ve gone to the places where God speaks. They’ve gone to the places where they could be apart from the noise and chatter of daily life long enough to hear that “still, small voice” echoing from within their own hearts.

Some of us call that voice our conscience. In the flowery language of our Unitarian Universalist sources, the experience of hearing the voice is referred to as the “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.”

I’ve always liked that. But by whatever name you call it – whatever words you might use to describe it – and “conscience” is a perfectly fine word – it is a source that I’m afraid we all too often forget to access. We learn about other religions. We read books. We talk to experts. We remember the words of prophetic men and women. In other words, we rely on community-community that stretches across the bounds of time and space. We seek our answers there. And sometimes we find our answers there.

But sometimes the answers are elusive. Sometimes the direction we seek evades us. Sometimes the vision we seek appears but dimly. How often do we turn away from all that chatter to hear fresh words? How often do we take the time to step away – literally or figuratively – and to simply listen for that still, small voice within – and rely on it?

Not many of us are going to go out into the wilderness to listen for that voice these days. But we don’t have to. A regular practice of some kind of meditation or prayerful listening can fill that

need. With the complexities of my life these days, I honestly can't face sitting still on my meditation cushion at home. I just can't. There's too much there that needs to get done and I don't seem to have the discipline at the moment to just sit.

Walking is what's doing it for me right now. Even just a couple of times a week. To be out there alone for 30 or 40 minutes. No voices. No tapes playing in my head with lists of things to-do. None of that "noise." Instead I just walk and listen for whatever percolates up from my innermost soul. And bubble up it does, when I'm listening well.

It's particularly helpful, I find, when I need to figure something out, find an answer to a question, or decide what to do next in some aspect of my life or work. Sometimes when I need help I ask for advice. Sometimes I try to reason – to think through the problem on my own. But listening is different. "Thinking," after all, is really talking, not listening. And the more I try to "think" of a solution, the less spaciousness there is for other voices and visions to arise. And if they do, I'm less likely to take notice. The key is to try to be receptive.

It's like that story of the person who dies and goes to heaven and says to God, "Hey, God, while I was alive I prayed and prayed for an answer to my problems every day and every night, but you never answered me." To which God responds, "Hey, you were so busy asking for my help, I could never get a word in edgewise to offer it."

So, what does this have to do with community, which, as I mentioned, has been the theme for January? Pulling ourselves out from community – stepping away for a time – seems so...so...selfish when we have so many responsibilities. I know there are days when I feel a little guilty for taking those walks in the morning.

And on the other hand, removing ourselves from community and its obligations can feel like an attempt to escape or avoid our responsibilities. And I'm not counseling that, by any means.

Instead, I'd like to suggest a different way of thinking about this kind of stepping away.

When Moses needed help, he stepped away from his community. He climbed the mountain and listened for that voice. But he didn't stay at the top of the mountain. After he heard the voice he returned. He returned with a fresh vision and a new sense of direction that ultimately helped to guide his people to a new land.

When Jesus needed help, he stepped away from his community. He went into "a lonely place," to pray. But he didn't stay there. Instead, he returned to his community with new answers to the old questions that had been plaguing them.

When Buddha needed help, he stepped away from his community and from the voices of the experts and the teachers who had tried to tell him "how it was done." And he listened long and hard for the inner voice that would set him free. But he didn't stay planted under that tree. He returned to his community to tell them what he'd learned and to encourage them to seek for answers to their questions themselves.

In every case they returned to their communities, to share, to teach, to lead – and in every case their communities were made stronger by their fresh words and their fresh visions.

From reading the ancient stories, one could argue that one of the responsibilities of being part of a community – one of its obligations – is sometimes to go alone for a time, and to listen for that voice that speaks within the silence of our own hearts - and then to return with a piece of truth that the community does not yet have; to return with a piece of the vision that will help widen the community's collective horizon and set it free of its old ways of doing things; to return with a sense of direction that will help lead the community to a new place.

From where does our help come? It comes from within us and around us. It comes from in the midst of what seems common, but which is, instead, afire with holiness in every instant. If only we would step aside to see it. It comes from the still, small voices within each and every one of us, if only we would settle down long enough to hear them. And this day and every day, they are voices that we need to hear...

This morning I'd like to invite you to join in a time of stillness and silence, as we do each week; but instead of beginning with a spoken prayer, I'd like for us to sing ourselves into the silence. And so I invite you to join in singing one of the very meditative songs, which is in our hymnal - #391, Voice Still and Small. And I'd like to have us sing it twice, quietly, to invite the silence. And then as we sit quietly together, I encourage you to listen for that voice within...