

**“Into the Wild”**  
**12 March 2006**  
**Unity Church–Unitarian**

**Worship Leader: Katie Lawson**

**READING: “River History” – Gretel Ehrlich, from *Montana Spaces*,  
edited by William Kittredge**

“To rise above treeline is to go above thought, and after, the descent back into birdsong, bog orchids, willows, and firs is to sink into the preliterate parts of ourselves. It is to forget discontent, undisciplined needs. Here the world is only space, raw loneliness, green valleys hung vertically. Losing myself to it – if I can – I do not fall...or, if I do, I’m only another cataract of water.

Wildness has no conditions, no sure routes, no peaks or goals, no source that is not instantly becoming something more than itself, then letting go of that, always becoming. It cannot be stripped to its complexity by cat scan or telescope. Rather, it is a many-pointed truth, almost a bluntness, a sudden essence like the wild strawberries strung along the ground on scarlet runners under by feet. Wildness is source and fruition at once, as if every river circled round, the mouth eating the tail – and the tail, the source.

Now I am camped among trees again. Four yearling moose, their chestnut coats shiny from a summer’s diet of willow shoots, tramp past my bedroll and drink from a spring that issues sulphurous water. The ooze, the white chute, the narrow stream – now almost a river – joins this small spring and slows into skinny oxbows and deep pools before breaking again on rock, a stepladder of sequined riffles.

To trace the history of a river, or a raindrop, as John Muir would have done, is also to trace the history of the soul, the history of the mind descending and arising in the body. In both, we constantly seek and stumble on divinity, which, like the cornice feeding the lake and the spring becoming the waterfall, feeds, spills, falls, and feeds itself over and over again.”

**Sermon: “Into the Wild”**

A few years ago, I was lost – very lost. This happens to all of us from time to time. Whether on purpose, through happenstance, or inattentiveness we find ourselves beyond what we know and suddenly we are “out there.”

In this particular case, I stood on a hill looking back and forth between the map in my hands and the landscape around me, and finding no connection between them. I was somewhere in the midst of The Barrenlands above Canada, but I had no idea where. The Barrenlands it seems, were aptly named.

The Barrenlands is the name used to describe the huge expanse of wilderness that stretches between the Canadian provinces and the Arctic Circle. It is a wilderness not because anybody has set this land aside, but because it is so remote and so difficult to live in. Like all wilderness, this is a place that exists mostly beyond human intervention. The Inuit have survived there for thousands of years despite harsh winters and the fact that there are only six inches of soil that is ever unfrozen, but their presence does not seem to mitigate the vastness surrounding their small villages of government housing which float in a sea of mostly treeless tundra and lakes and rivers all of which are covered with snow for eight out of twelve months - snow that is wind-packed as hard as cement.

The Barrenlands are beautiful, but not in the way that the Grand Canyon is beautiful. The Grand Canyon says, "Look at me. I'm gorgeous!" But the Barrenlands sit quietly by, waiting for you to notice them. The flowers are small and unobtrusive, unable to take root any deeper or grow any taller. They are best looked at not more than a couple of inches away from the end of your nose while lying on your stomach. The tundra is a carpet of small plants that change color in the fall. It smells good. If you lay your newly washed underwear out in the sun on it, it comes away smelling like eucalyptus. Like so many wilderness places, it makes you feel big and very small at the same time.

On that hill I was talking about – the one that didn't appear to be on my map – I felt small, very small. It was day 17 of a 45-day canoe trip. I was the designated leader for a group of five 17-year-old young women who were presently waiting below me in the canoes looking like little monopoly pieces. This was our third day lost, and they held onto an abiding – and sorely misplaced – confidence that I would keep them safe. I do not know if they knew, as I stood up there, that I had run out of ideas, that I was crying, that I was a mostly grown-up woman muttering over and over "I want my mom."

I think they fully expected me to come down from that hill having figured it all out. I don't claim to know how Moses must have felt coming down the mountain with the word of God carved in stone, his circumstances being slightly different than mine. However, I do read that story through a lens of profound anxiety. At many points in wilderness travel, skills and preparation cease to matter much. The ability not to panic helps.

I waved broadly at the dots below me to buy a few more minutes. Understand no cell phone, no radio. Only the dreaded eperb. The eperb is a florescent orange metal box with a long folding antenna and one switch on it. When you flick its switch, it sends out a sonar signal that reaches the Canadian Mounties looking like the signal from a downed plane. Then the Mounties, based on a long-standing agreement, call the American Air Force who then dispatch the Thunder Cat, a huge aircraft with hover capabilities that would come looking for a downed plane.

What they would see instead of course, in this case, would be six women in brightly colored rain jackets waving canoe paddles furiously in the air. We would probably not die unless it was of embarrassment, but we would create quite a stir. The worst possibility, that the Eperb wouldn't work, lurked in the back of my mind.

Unless circumstances changed we had run out of options. No planes flying overhead. No North Star. No trees to hug, ack. We hadn't seen anyone besides each other in 17 days. If you've been lost, even for an hour, you know this feeling. This desperate, humbled feeling. It's a feeling of uncertainty, of feeling that your fate has been mostly taken out of your hands. It's a common feeling people have in the wilderness, and not just the physical wilderness, but the other kind: the wilderness of grief, of

aging, of any transition. Both kinds involve a recognition that most of the trusted footholds are gone and that you've relinquished a certain amount of control and can't be positive about how it will all turn out. Both will squeeze heart-felt prayers out of the most agnostic of us...just in case.

On that hill, I wasn't being so philosophical. Part of me really wanted to go back to the place where we knew where we were, but I knew that could cost us time that we didn't really have. At the same time I didn't want to just keep getting more lost by moving forward in desperate grasps at found-ness. It's true what Kerri said [in the children's story]: they always taught us that if we were lost we should just sit still and wait or yell. That, it turns out, is so counter-intuitive. Something moves you forward even when you are acutely aware of how badly it could all turn out. It is the hardest thing in the world to believe that the thing that could put you back on the map, may not be your ingenuity, your work ethic, your intelligence, or even your stubbornness.

Why do people do this *voluntarily* when life makes it available to us all the time? Why do people pay thousands of dollars and go to so much effort to put themselves in harm's way - to be wet and cold and blistered and frightened and bug-bitten and lost? It's not just REI shoppers. It's the Native Americans who for thousands of years have walked out into the wilderness to vision quest. It's Jesus. It's John Muir who walked all over everywhere and ended up in the Sierra Mountains riding the top of pine trees in windstorms. It's Henry David Thoreau. It's Thomas Starr King who before he went west to serve as a Unitarian minister was a renowned mountaineer. Something compels us to be in the wilderness despite its hazards. I believe it has something to do with what's available to us when we are in a situation that exists outside the bounds of human control. The wilderness of the Bible is a place that tests us, frustrates us, and scares us. It is also the place, not coincidentally, where God speaks to people.

As it happens, we are in the season of Lent. During these 40 days Christians recognize the time that Jesus spent in the wilderness alternately being tempted and being served by the angels and ultimately being "filled by the power of the spirit" (Luke 4:14 NRSV). During this time people try to bring themselves to that frame of mind by denying themselves a creature comfort or two. They try to remind themselves of the ways in which this one life matters very much. They return to the essential questions. The questions that tend to come up in the wilderness. "How did I get here?" "How will I survive?" "What can I put my ultimate trust in?" "What is this crazy beautiful place about anyway?" The wilderness experience reminds us of what really matters and can offer glimpses of life that are worth the whole trip, if we can stay with it, stay present to it even as it is confusing us, scaring us or exhausting us.

On the night before I stood on that lost hill, Lynn and Arika, two of our group members took out across the tundra on a post-dinner hike to make a sketch of the surrounding area in order to see if it matched up with what appeared on our map. This was our New Strategy. I also looked around for clues but instead found enormous Grizzly Bear prints in the sand not far from our camp. For an hour and a half I imagined telling Lynn and Arika's parents that I had not only gotten them lost but eaten as well. When they finally emerged out of the rolling orange sunset that is the Arctic night at that time of year, they were chatting happily and tried to drag me off to a small pond nearby filled with unidentified birds.

This was typical of those days we spent lost. We found things. Our awareness of the shape of the land was heightened. We spent time gathered around the map as if around a flame and in an effort to

brainstorm together found a deeper sense of connection. Don't mistake me: we had moments of intense crankiness, but overall those differences were muted in the presence of our mutual predicament. We noticed the subtlest changes in current or elevation. Our search for clues in the environment drew us out of ourselves into an encounter with the wild and essential world around us. We had fallen off the map and into real wilderness – a place with its own eternal rules, a place of tremendous power, of beauty, and mystery.

That mixture of beauty and awake-ness makes me feel *expanded* or like my boundaries are now more permeable with the environment. The wilderness does not tread lightly around us. It exists in as much ferocity as serenity. And it can bring out the same in us – our essentials. Sometimes, though I know better, I swear the wilderness is trying to beat down my doors with wind, unrelenting heat, endless ice. And I think a lot of times it succeeds, it all comes around and the tree-snapping storm passes, and I finally find I am just there swelling up with sunshine or warm soup and I am gentle and focused on things as they are - like a Buddhist monk in a temple having completed prostrations and attending entirely to the meal in front of him - and I feel totally in It and of it. "I am thine! I rest in thee! Great spirit come and rest in me."

This is what we go out there for – to have an encounter. An encounter with Emerson's Nature with a capital "N," with the Divine, the Life-beat of existence, the very boundary of our humble and holy beings, the "geography of hope" as Wallace Stegner calls it. I hold these experiences close to my heart when I am in emotional wildernesses. I try to hope for holy, to know that even though the environment seems hostile and I can barely focus on the terrain just ahead, that soon enough I may find my way out or trip upon some unexpected piece of beauty. When it's really bad, I try to remember to sit still and call for help. Next time I'll hug a tree. My dog will be glad to be off the hook.

Speaking of which, did you see the article in the St. Paul Pioneer Press about our wolves? Wolves need miles and miles of wandering room in order to survive. Their habitat *is* vastness and they should remind us that there is something else that thrives in that vastness – "the breathing space of the nation", Richard Nixon called it – something that matters even if we never visit those particular places, because we are connected to those places, and our lives exist as they do because those places exist. "In wildness," said Henry David Thoreau, "Is the preservation of the world."

At some point I stopped crying, only because it wasn't working, and soon after I could hear my group calling to me. I turned to look at them and saw what they saw: two red canoes speeding across the other side of the lake. Whoever they were, they seemed to know where they were going. I barreled down the hill and we all frantically loaded ourselves into the canoes. We made chase for a good hour and a half screaming at the top of our lungs the whole way. For a while, I thought they might actually be running from us.

We didn't catch them until they stopped for lunch. There they were, sitting serenely on a beach eating pasta salad, looking reassuringly cool. We paddled up and tried to make a mellow approach as is the unspoken protocol in the wilderness. After some pleasantries, I admitted our situation: we'd been lost for three days. So then I asked them, "Do you know where you are?"

They explained that this year had seen the heaviest rains on record and that as a result the lakes and rivers had swelled out of their banks and assumed new shapes. Streams that were supposed to run into the lakes were forced in the other direction as the lakes spilled out into them. We had

mistakenly turned up one of these streams, thinking it was the entrance to our next river. We thanked them for this clarification with our last half pound of French Roast and made our way in our new direction. It only took a day to un-lose ourselves and soon we returned to our couches, our root beer, our fresh fruits, our running hot water and a world of other comforts that we call "home."

The comforts of home are important, but the illusion of the ultimacy of human affairs is dangerous. It is no wonder that we continue to carve away at wildernesses because we live so much in the illusion that human creation matters most. Howard Zahniser who wrote the Wilderness act of 1963 said:

*We deeply need the humility to know ourselves as the dependent members of a great community of life... Without the gadgets, the inventions, the contrivances whereby people [sic] have seemed to establish among themselves an independence of nature... to know the wilderness is to know a profound humility, to recognize one's littleness, to sense dependence and interdependence, indebtedness, and responsibility.*

This is what is so hard for us in this culture where we have been made so powerful, so almighty. We know deep down that we are not and that we depend always on each other and on the world that feeds us and offers us up beauty upon beauty. But still we sometimes do not show respect for life's wildernesses not only by chipping away at the rainforests, deserts, and waterways but also by surrounding ourselves with environments that don't challenge us, by resisting change, by rushing on or turning back. When we do this though, we also deny ourselves encounters with beauty, revelation, and unity and we risk the life of the whole.

I am aware this morning that you may never make it to the Barrenlands or any other woody wilderness and I don't think you need to. I've told you before there's so much beauty to be had from the porch. But there's a reason the wilderness holds fast as a meaningful metaphor. We needn't drag ourselves to the arctic to know its power. For some, there is enough revelation and encounter available *in our interactions* with humanity. Or in our grief. Or in our times of transition when we have left something and its cozy familiarity but have not stepped fully into the next place. In these times we can find unexpected beauty, having been shaken more fully awake. We are humbled by our fear. We surprise ourselves with our ability to keep moving or wait for grace in the face of really poor odds. Ultimately we can fight against the wilderness, try to subdue it or worse use it up, or we can cooperate with the mystery, observe it, and join it.