

## “Wake, Now, My Senses”

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Reading

*You Be Glad at That Star* ~Clarke Wells

*Several years ago and shortly after twilight our 3 ½ year-old tried to gain his parents' attention to a shining star. The parents were busy with time schedules, the irritabilities of the day and other worthy pre-occupations. “Yes, yes, we see the star—now I'm busy, don't bother me.” On hearing this the young one launched through the porch door, fixed us with a fiery gaze and said, “You be glad at that star!”*

*I will not forget the incident or his perfect words. It was one of those rare moments when you get everything you need for the good of your soul—reprimand, disclosure and blessing. It was especially good for me, that surprising moment, because I am one who responds automatically and negatively to the usual exhortations to pause-and-be-more-appreciative-of-life-unquote. Fortunately, I was caught grandly off guard.*

*There is a notion, with some truth in it, that we cannot command joy, happiness, appreciation, fulfillment. We do not engineer the seasons of the soul or enjoin the quality of mood in another, and yet, I do believe there is right and wisdom in that imperative declaration—you be glad at that star!*

*If we cannot impel ourselves into a stellar gladness, we can at least clean the dust from the lens of our perception; if we cannot exact a guarantee for a more appreciative awareness of our world—for persons and stars and breathing and tastes and the incalculable gift of every day--we can at least prescribe some of the conditions through which an increased awareness is more likely to open up the skies, for us and for our children. Matters more subtle and humane should command our lives. You be glad at that star.*

You be glad at that star. You've all heard this before. Pay attention! Don't worry, be happy. But it bears repeating, because we tend to forget or we put it too low on our list of things to do. I think it is essential to our spiritual well-being, to our souls, to remember to notice and appreciate the universe around us. I think we gain that appreciation when we allow our senses to be a bit vulnerable and let them give you all the messages they possibly can. To wake up greeting the world around you. Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hahn, says it like this, “The sun is rising on the forest and so is my awareness.” Although it is difficult to articulate, most people understand what it means to stop and smell the flowers. But how often do we really do it and let them sink in and smell and see them with your heart and soul? Poet and author, Mary Oliver, describes being mindful like this:

*Every day I see or I hear something that more or less*

*Kills me with delight,*

*That leaves me like a needle in the haystack of light.*

*It is what I was born for ---to look, to listen, to lose myself inside this soft world---*

*To instruct myself over and over in joy, and acclamation.*

*Nor am I talking about the exceptional, the fearful, the dreadful, the very extravagant---*

*But of the ordinary, the common, the very drab, the daily presentations.*

*Oh, good scholar, I say to myself,*

*How can you help but grow wise with such teachings as these---*

*The untrimmable light of the world, the ocean's shine, the prayers that are made out of grass?*

Most of us, from time to time, feel killed with delight at a color or an animal or a breeze. Our senses do not always bring us just the beautiful however. Senses do not always tell us about the rational world. For instance, some people feel the hair on the back of their neck stand on end when they are frightened or start to scratch their heads when someone says the word lice! And pregnancy can really heighten senses. A pregnant woman might crave strange food combinations. Or the smell of broccoli cooking might make them sick. When I was pregnant, I smelled a rodent in the house. It was a new house and it was possible something got in during the construction and stayed. My husband looked everywhere for signs of a mouse. Nothing. Are you sure? I smell it! Eye-rolling - No you don't - I don't smell anything. The next day one of our cats went prancing proudly through the bedroom with a cute little field mouse in her jaws. Of course, I am not the sort of person to rub such things in!

Other people may say that it is also not rational to claim to have a sixth sense, but some people will undoubtedly tell you that they do and even produce proof. And there are scientists who really believe we do have more like 9 senses than 5.

I think we all at one time or another feel something that we can't explain. It might be pleasant or unpleasant, but our bodies are registering something. Some things touch the core of our being. Maybe it is elephants on an African savannah at twilight, or starving children on television. And I believe our souls whether what we experience is unbearable or wondrous, connects us to all living things- to the universe. Taking care of our souls and the universe as a whole, then, includes being glad at that star!

In "Care of the Soul" theologian, Thomas Moore, agrees that "Care of the world soul...requires that we see things less for what they can do and more for what they are." Moore believes that our very souls crave beauty. He contends that the soul needs times where it takes a vacation. A time when we catch our breath. A time when we are taken out of the business of our practical lives and contemplate "timeless and eternal realities." There are ways we can use our senses to feed our souls, or you may choose to call it your human essence, or simply to find joy. The fact is that a significant part of our psyche is nurtured by beauty. Beauty can be heard, seen, touched, tasted, or even smelled and sometimes include all of these senses.

It follows then that religion is well aware that our senses are essential in our spiritual lives. Just think about our church for a moment. We have beautiful music, the sanctuary itself is awe-inspiring and our central feature is a glowing chalice, we have cushioned pews (believe me, my childhood catholic church pews were hard as rocks!), we greet each other through touching hands or hugging, we share a common meal together after the service, and even sometimes we can sit here in this sanctuary and anticipate the meal through the wafts from the oven downstairs. Some religions stimulate each sense much further than we do. Perhaps you have smelled the incense at a funeral or tasted communion. In many religions praying involves a physical movement. You feel the ground with your knees and even your head. Moore comments that churches and temples were "never built for truly practical considerations, but always for the imagination." Every religion capitalizes on our senses to intensify fear, reverence, or just the mystery that is life.

Religion and nature have long been associated with one another and even in many cases, synonymous. It is hard to find a UU church that does not speak with reverence about nature. In the not so distant past, Emerson wrote that, "In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,--no disgrace, no calamity, which nature cannot repair."

Even Shakespeare wrote the lines, "Tongues in trees, books in running brooks, sermons in stones and good in everything." The mountains, the trees, the brooks. Sometimes these are our cathedrals. I will be the first to admit that when I don't *have* to be at church, I like to "worship" outdoors. Don't think ministers don't know why attendance is down when the skies are blue and the temperatures moderate. In seminary, just a couple of blocks from campus, there was a small stand of redwoods on a tiny hill - perhaps too steep to build upon because everything else was concrete or filled with man-made structures. The trees were young but still towering and created a darkened circle on the needled ground. I stood there amongst them sometimes, looked up to see just slivers of the sky and I knew that this was my prayer.

This wasn't the only time I identified nature as my cathedral. Hikes in the Rockies, the smoky mountains, on east and west coast beaches, and even fields on my childhood farm all seemed to make me feel good deep inside my being; they are places that I can't really describe with words. They did more than touched my sense of sight or beauty. There were scents, and textures. I could hear rustling leaves or birds overhead. I would even sample an occasional edible plant; at least I hoped it was edible.

Everyone loves a label, so some scientists say that people like me are called HSP's. Highly sensitive people. One psychologist says that there are 15-20% highly sensitive people in the population. There are books on this. Really! I think we could all be identified as HSPs. Of course sensitivity can be both positive and negative and has many different degrees. Although we might feel the divine flow through us at a beautiful sight, we also might be so inspired, that we try to drag others into our wonder and appreciation and become disappointed when it isn't such a "religious" experience for them!

Not long ago, on a fall evening I was driving home when I noticed the biggest, most colorful moon beyond a cornfield than I could ever remember seeing. I stepped on the gas to rush home. I burst through the door and yelled to Jerry and my son to get their shoes on; they just had to see this. Jerry was in another room and I could almost hear his eyes roll. So, I picked up my son, no shoes, set him in the car, and drove down the road to the exact spot where I had originally gasped at the beauty. My son was not nearly so impressed and mentioned something about it being pretty and hoped he hadn't missed the entire Spongebob episode.

I have to tell you, this kind of thing happens to me a lot. I marvel at ordinary deer near our home, I've turned around the car to get a better look at flocks of wild turkeys and sandhill cranes.

Many years ago, I worked at a building located in an industrial park that had miles and miles of walking trails. Some employees would walk together at lunch. It didn't take too long before I was referred to as Lynn Perkins from Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom. I stopped often to look closely at a bird or a bug or a flower. I was able to identify certain foliage and often saw critters on the trail that ran off so fast that I barely had time to tell everyone to look. And I had quite a few "little-known fact" to share about most everything we saw. I didn't mind being teased. Being a nature lover and commentator was a badge of honor to me. Author Sue Bender writes of a friend's experience of hurting herself on a bike trip in a national park and having to walk slowly due to the pain. This would-be bicyclist "discovered a lizard in the process of devouring a centipede." She stopped to examine wildflowers. A hiker with a camera behind her remarked that she was seeing so many wonderful things. She said, "I'm seeing these wonderful things, because I can't walk very fast."

Sometimes we have to be forced to slow down to truly appreciate what is around us. Bender describes a conversation she had about a monk. Monks put out begging bowls. Bender wondered what a monk does if they get too much food? The answer was that when the monk is full, they put away the bowl because if they ate all the time, there would be no time to digest. Bender replies that, "Even when I am doing things I enjoy, I don't leave time to digest or savor what is happening. I almost never pause before going on to the next 'doing.'"

I think this is why we take our senses for granted. We don't pause long enough before we go on to something else. In our modern world, we are almost always on the move or at least thinking about the next step and there is rarely time for reflection or even digestion. I know this is a simplification, but I know that for me at times, pausing seems like wasting time! Perhaps we humans have lost our senses in more ways than one! The U.N. Environmental Sabbath Program wrote this prayer in 1990 for earth day.

*We who have lost our sense and our senses – our touch, our smell, our vision of who we are; we who frantically force and press all things, without rest for body or spirit, hurting our earth and injuring ourselves: we call a halt.*

*We want to rest. We need to rest and allow the earth to rest. We need to reflect and to rediscover the mystery that lives in us, that is the ground of every unique expression of life, the source of the fascination that calls all things to communion.*

*We declare a Sabbath, a space of quiet: for simple being and letting be; for recovering the great, forgotten truths; for learning how to live again.*

Is this why our environment is being destroyed? We don't have the sense to stop because we don't sense how important it is? We really don't let the senses travel through our bodies and soak it up. It reminds me of the Vacation movie with Chevy Chase. They are at the top of the grand canyon and Chevy is in such a hurry, that he stands at a viewing area with his family, nods his head 3 or 4 times and say's "ok kids, let's go!" It is meant to be funny but it is also true. And not just in our world today. Just remember these lines from this well-known 19<sup>th</sup> century poem:

*To live content with small means; to seek elegance rather than luxury,; to listen to stars and birds, babes and sages, with open heart; to study hard; await occasions, hurry never; in a word, to let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common--this is my symphony.*

It is as true today, people barely pause to let the spiritual grow up through us or "be glad at that star" before they are going on to the next "doing." Carl Jung also thought we should all pay more attention to the "simple and forgotten things." He once wrote to a colleague, "Why not go into the forest for a time, literally? Sometimes a tree tells you more than can be read in books." Ancient philosophers agreed. Anima mundi which in Latin means *world soul* was thought to inhabit all matter including humans.

Thomas Moore says we know we are caring for the soul "when our pleasures feel deeper than usual, when we can *let go of the need to be free* of complexity and confusion, and when compassion takes the place of distrust and fear."

Finally, a real relationship with the world requires that we spend time with it and be open to what it might offer to teach us. Perhaps the more we feed our souls by using our senses, the more we will care about the things beyond ourselves. Maybe we would destroy less and enjoy more. Maybe the world soul, including ours, will become a bit more sacred. It may not be a cure for Global warming, but it is a good start. Be glad at that star!