

Thinking Like a Mountain

Rev. Roger Jones
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UU Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #207, Earth Was Given As a Garden; #1064, Blue Boat Home. *Choral Music:* Gaia, by Joyce Poley; Earthrise, by Linda Williams. *Piano:* Erik Satie, Yuki Kuramoto.

Back in 1949, writing in his book *The Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold coined the phrase *thinking like a mountain*. It's his way of trying to respect the natural world. He says: "Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf" as it echoes from ridge top to ridge top.

Only by thinking like a mountain can we grasp the inter-connected forms of life *around* a mountain. He recalls a turning point from his early life. With a group, he was having lunch on an outcrop of rock on a mountain. They looked down and watched a mother wolf and her pack of grown pups swim across the river and frolic on the rocks. He writes: "In those days, we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf." And with excitement they raised their rifles, and shot them all.

Then, he says, "We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes, something known only to the wolf and the mountain."

Writing in repentance, he recalls: "I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer that no wolves would mean [deer-]hunters' paradise." (Leopold, 130)

In the years that followed, state after state killed off their wolf populations. Without natural predators, deer populations expanded, consuming "every edible bush and seedling," shearing leaves off the trees on the hills. The fast growth of the deer population wasn't good for the deer either. It led to starvation, says Leopold, who observed many of their sun-bleached bones. "While a [deer] pulled down by wolves can be replaced in two or three years," he notes, "a range [of trees] pulled down by too many deer" may not be replaced in two

or three decades. Leopold says that our governments were *not* thinking like a mountain whenever we allowed the overgrazing of cattle on the hills of a mountain. From such ignorance, he says, "we have dustbowls, and rivers washing the future into the sea." (Leopold, 132)

Leopold's epiphany, his turning point, was that moment of connection with a wolf whose life he was taking, a humbling moment. In such a humble spirit, he went on to learn and explain to others the big picture of our mutual dependence with all other forms of life on earth. It is part of our human nature that we *can* grasp the big picture, and imagine the perspective of the ecosystem of a mountain. We can take the time to imagine the mountain's ancient perspective, or that of an ocean or a river delta or a coastal marsh.

But for too much of the time we humans are thinking more like dinosaurs. We keep doing what we're doing, looking for our next meal, next home, next resting place, next watering hole, all the while not realizing the disasters now on their way which will give us no resting place and will rob us of our watering holes. Like dinosaurs, we worry about threats just beyond a nearby tree and ignore the greater perils coming towards us.

This morning I won't get into policy recommendations regarding climate change. After all, one of our favorite climate science experts will be giving a talk over lunch here today. Given all the facts he can bring to us, I won't fill my sermon with statistics about the perils of the planet. For many of us, it's enough merely to mention the wiped out rain forests and coral reefs, the spoiling of mountain tops for mining in Appalachia, the drought and wild fires, the collapsing of glaciers, thawing of permafrost and melting away of ice floes. It is all enough to make us weep.

Wendell Berry is a poet, farmer, and activist in Kentucky. He has put his poetry, his faith, and his body into the fight against coal mining by mountaintop removal. Two summers ago when the General Assembly of our Unitarian Universalist Association took place in Louisville, we UUs held an afternoon rally overlooking the Ohio River. Berry was among the local activists who spoke. We also heard from Appalachian families enduring loss of homes and community, and people suffering diseases brought on by the toxins of the mining

operations. I must confess: though I had been concerned about global warming, I had known little about the damage that coal mining has done. I was thinking about the gasses let off by the burning of coal, not about the mining of it. In an earlier interview, Berry says:

You can go to a little stream that's coming down off the mountain, and you know that one day that stream ran clear/ and you could have knelt down and drunk from it without any hesitation—it would have been clean. And now/ it's running orange or black. And what people have to understand is that there's heartbreak in that. (Biggers 2011)

He says: "'Tears beyond understanding' have been shed over this by people who love their land and have had to sit there and see it destroyed."

Weeping and lamenting is called for. It can be helpful when facing the facts. According to Joanna Macy, a Buddhist and environmental activist, our fears and anxieties can paralyze us. We can avoid feelings. We can be tempted to isolate our hearts from the despair.

This is why the global warming crisis is a spiritual matter as well as a scientific one. For it was the isolation of the human heart from our place in the natural world that enabled human beings to bring ourselves to this place of crisis.

The Hebrew poets of the book of Genesis predicted our powerful place in the world pretty well. In Genesis, God says to the humans:

And the fear of you/ and the dread of you/ shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, and upon all that moveth on the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea;/ into your hands are they delivered. (Genesis 9:2, King James Version)

Such an accurate prediction, one with tragic results. But not only the fish and fowl and beasts of the earth are dreading the hand of human power. All of us have cause to fear what our human family has been doing on this earth, and to this earth.

Three years ago in the capital city of Kentucky, Wendell Berry and thirteen others waged

a sit-in at the office of the governor. Berry says, "We ought to have done this 50 years ago. This has been going on that long—half a century. The damage from the beginning has been excessive. It's now grown from excessive to extreme." (Biggers 2011)

After four full days and nights of their sit-in, their governor agreed to visit the residents of the mountaintop communities. However, the governor did not change his mind. He still made the claim that surface mining could be done without harming the local environment. In spite of government inaction, Berry says, "People around the state are getting in touch with us, and there's activity going on in support of this effort. What will happen tomorrow, what will happen after tomorrow, we don't know. But . . . all of us who are interested in stopping this terrible damage and this terrible oppression of people . . . will go on and on."

Berry points out the motivation of the moral principle of "neighborliness." He says: "One of the deepest, most urgent instructions that we receive from our cultural tradition is the imperative to be a good neighbor, and this is ignored as an official policy by the coal companies—and therefore, by their government allies."

What outrages him about the policies he fights—the need for a spirit of neighborliness—is the same thing that motivates his demonstrations, the presence of that spirit.

Henry David Thoreau was a friend of Massachusetts Unitarians in the mid-1800s. Thanks to his writings, Thoreau is famous as a nature-lover and spiritual mystic. Writing in his journal in 1851, he says:

My heart leaps into my mouth at the sound of the wind in the woods. I, whose life was but yesterday so desultory and shallow, suddenly recover my spirits, my spirituality, through my hearing. Ah! If I could so live that there should be no desultory moment in all my life! (Andrews 2006)

Thoreau was also a social critic and a radical. Perhaps his spiritual refreshments gave him the courage to fight against slavery, defend the cause of the Native inhabitants of North America, and oppose our war with Mexico in 1848. His time

in jail led to “Civil Disobedience,” an essay which he originally titled: “Resistance to Civil Government.” His words have inspired the civil disobedience campaigns of Mohandas K. Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Bill McKibben, the Vermont environmentalist and leader in climate change activism. [See www.350.org]

A week from today is the People’s Climate March in New York City. It will coincide with a United Nations meeting about climate change. Some folks I know back East are headed there, and a few Sacramento activists are going by train.

Events in solidarity with the People’s Climate March will take place here, and around the nation and in 130 countries around the world, next weekend.

Speaking to a group in Sacramento last Friday evening, the British climate activist George Marshall says you cannot predict the *results* of a protest gathering. He says even a large rally and march may not really change policies, directly. But such large gatherings do change *the people who participate in them*. A rally, march, or festival can be an occasion for learning, connecting, and building coalitions.

Furthermore, by participating with others, we can revive our passion, restore hope, and feel the sense of belonging to something larger than ourselves. We gain courage to say what’s on our hearts, to show up, to give money or time, to write letters, to vote, and to stay connected to others. We gain inspiration to change our own habits. We grow in spirit. (Marshall 2014)

Am I concerned about the planet? You bet I am! I’ve been obsessed about energy conservation for years. I exercise daily at the Central YMCA. For a long time quietly I steamed about an amazing waste of water by many of my fellow YMCA users in the showers and restroom. Finally I made a suggestion to the new Executive Director. Now, signs in the showers proclaim: “In consideration of the drought, please limit your shower time.” Above the sinks it says: “Please conserve water. Thank you.” A small example. Doesn’t make me look obsessed. But let me tell you, I can get distracted by a wastebasket anywhere. I’m reaching in the trash to retrieve items disposed of in the wrong place, and moving them to the recycling bin. More than once I’ve leaned over into a nearly empty gray

plastic trash bin to reach a bottle or a box in the bottom that belonged in recycling, and almost fallen in.

At my apartment, there’s only a window air conditioner in the living room. I try not to use it. Most nights I don’t go home until the Delta breeze has begun cooling the air. On arrival at my furnace-like apartment, I open the windows and turn on the window fans and ceiling fans. I might go out for a walk till it cools down. If it stays warm, I go to bed with a wet washcloth over my face. (And I wonder why I’m still single!) Since my building has no compost bin, I’ve started saving compostable kitchen waste in the freezer. Once a week or so, I take it to our compost bins at UUSS when I go to the office. On the days leading up to that delivery, if you were to open my freezer, you’d scratch your head at the sight of melon rinds, broccoli stalks, apple cores, and old brown lettuce with rigor mortis.

I *can* be obsessive, as I said. I get upset, I get worried, I get angry about the situation, I get resentful.

But then I remember: *thinking like a mountain*. This means not only seeing the connections of our lives with all other forms of life. It means being still. It means listening--whether hearing the howl of a wolf or the song of birds, or feeling the breeze or your own heartbeat. Thinking like a mountain—a mountain has the long view—a very long view. A mountain is perhaps the closest thing to eternity we can rest our eyes on or put our feet on. The sense of eternity it conveys is reassuring, calming, humbling.

When Henry David Thoreau sauntered around the small corner of the planet which he called home, he wrote this: [If I could live so] That in each season/ when some part of nature especially flourishes, then a corresponding part of me may not fail to flourish!”

He goes on, wondering, “What if I could pray aloud or to myself as I went along by the brook sides/ a cheerful prayer/ like the birds! For joy I could embrace the earth.” (Andrews 2006)

There is yet more joy to be had, more life on this earth to embrace and celebrate.

The stakes *are* high. The facts are daunting. The other night, activist and author George Marshall admitted this to us. Doubt or frustration or despair will be a common experience, and an understandable one. Marshall says, “We need to be open to each other, and help each other through the frustration and the despair.”

He urges us to bring up climate change in conversations, and end the silence around it. Be brave, and speak our truth. Be loving, and speak the values that motivate us, the values of common humanity, protecting communities, and caring for others. Neighborliness.

You draw people to this movement, he says, or to any movement or any organization, by the simple example of “the joy and friendship you have with people who share your passion. People will see your joy and your social connection.”

Next Sunday, during the People’s Climate March, hundreds of thousands of people may or may not be thinking like a mountain. Yet it is my hope that the New York marchers and those who are showing solidarity around the world and those of us watching online or on television, will find ourselves thinking once more like neighbors, like relatives, like part of a whole human family, like members of the circle of life. So may it be, for all of us. Blessed be. Amen.

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