

**Wildness and Wonder**  
**A sermon by the Rev. Robert L. Morriss**  
**September 19, 2004**

It is hard to know when I first experienced a sense of transcendence brought about by the mystery and wonder of nature. Perhaps it was when I was 5 or 6 and my brother and I would spend hours exploring the woods that surrounded the golf course that was across the street from the row apartment house in which we lived in Baltimore. (Did you know that if a small boy or girl climbs the appropriate sized sapling to the very top and kicks out far enough, it really will give you a ride to the ground - or at least close enough that you can let go and fall the rest of the way without hurting yourself? Nature really does offer us experiences that video games can't touch, but I'm not sure such exploration of the natural world on my part involved transcendence.)

A time when I was transfixed by the beauty of nature was the night following a snowstorm, when we took our flexible flyers out to a sloping fairway on that same golf course and slid down the hill till well past our bed time. The only light for this adventure came from a full moon reflecting brilliantly off the new fallen snow and the occasional sparks that appeared as the metal runners of our sleds scraped the flint flecked gravel at the bottom of the hill. I couldn't have been more than 7 at the time and yet the scene left such a vivid impression on me that I can recall the beauty of it as well as if it had happened yesterday.

There was nothing particularly wild about these early experiences except for the wildness they aroused in me, being the sort of direct experience of nature unfiltered by any consideration other than the sheer power of the experience. A few years later when we were living in Salisbury, my brother's and my sense of adventure would lead us into experiences that brought us into more direct contact with untamed nature. The Wicomico river ran within a half mile of our house and in those days it was not too difficult to get a tire store to give you their used inner tubes. With 8 or so old tubes, a patching kit, and scrap lumber from nearby building sites, industrious 10-12 year olds could build a semi-respectable raft with which to venture out onto the river. Our goal – aside from finding something to do on a series of summer afternoons, was to make it to the marshes and inlets on the other side of the river where, sure enough, we encountered such birds as great blue herons, bitterns, and egrets, patrolling the marshes for the small fish and frogs that lived there among the cattails and river grasses.

This was a section of the river below the town's sewage outlet, and in the days before sewage treatment plants there was a reason the grasses grew so well, and that the riverfront was not developed. Still, being able to pole and paddle one's way into territory where we were the only humans present and where we could observe the cycles of nature as they occurred provided an exceptional quality of experience. It was an experience that paralleled the sense of excitement we felt wondering whether or not we would make it home on a raft that listed noticeably after an inner tube was punctured by underwater reeds and we contemplated the additional booster shots we

would undoubtedly be obliged to get if we really did end up falling into that section of the river.

Such experiences cultivated in me an early appreciation of nature. It was an appreciation that would be amplified by numerous camping trips undertaken as a boy scout and weeks spent at scout camp, and amplified again by bird watching and early morning ventures into the woods with my 22, hunting for squirrels to contribute to our much loved Brunswick stew.

None of these experiences took place in what would be called a real wilderness, but as Renee Askins points out in her wonderful book, *Shadow Mountain*, that while we often associate it with wilderness, “Wildness is sometimes used to describe the fierce, elemental spirit that lives in us, underneath our civilized facades (...undomesticated and unaltered from our original state.)”

She continues: “Some believe the wild is only accessible when one is teetering on the brink of survival, danger and adrenaline flushing away any flickerings of self consciousness. I disagree. Experiencing the wild does not require conquest or challenge. Pitting one’s wits and brawn against mountain, river, or creature is an approach that can separate rather than integrate. I believe experiencing the wild is a process of allowing our senses to infiltrate, not overwhelm, the self. Our sense of self does not disappear, for we too are of the wild; it is simply intermingled with a sensibility that is larger than we are, creating a vivid alertness and attentiveness. I think of it as being breathed by the world. Certainly recognizing the wild involves a certain relinquishing of control, which is why so many believe we must renounce the symbols of control to experience it. I believe it is not so much the leaving as the letting go. We can experience wildness as truly through being vividly conscious during sex or a symphony as we can by venturing to the most remote regions of the planet. Wildness resides in us, around us, and between us.”

Askins strongly believes that “It is not that our ability to experience wildness has been lost, but rather that it has been buried and unrealized in the world in which our senses have been cauterized by the constant din of industry and entertainment. The reciprocity between wild nature and the wild in our selves, between knowledge of the wild and knowledge of the self, still exists but lies dormant.”

One way of returning to our sense of wholeness is by paying attention to our relationship to animals. Askins observes that “something mysterious happens when we look into the eyes of an animal, whether it be a panther or a poodle – we see something familiar looking back. Ourselves? Yes, but we also see an ‘other’. We see something that is in us and yet without us, something we recognize and yet is unfamiliar, something we fear but for which we long. We see the wild. The animals have always been a part of our survival and healing, and we, sometimes theirs. At a time when our relationship to land and soil and place has been diminished, we still turn to our animals, domestic and wild, as a conduit to healing. And through our animals – those of our

childhood, those in our homes, and those in the wild – we can begin to find our way back to being whole.”

Of course for Renee Askins, the relationship between experiencing the wild in oneself and the wild in animals is an extremely significant one, as she was one of the people who was instrumental in the long process of reintroducing wolves into Yellowstone. If you are at all curious about this process and what the ongoing controversy regarding wolves brings up in people, her book, *Shadow Mountain*, is a great read. Of particular interest is how much feeling about the nature of wildness is evoked when people encounter even their fantasy of what wolves represent in our modern domesticated world. What people have to deal with in themselves to be comfortable sharing an ecosystem with wolves eventually moves us to a place where we are prepared for a new level of relationship both with nature and with ourselves, for we have to get to that place in our own experience where we are willing to relate to and have respect for that which is uncontrolled – both in the other and ultimately in ourselves.

I'll have to admit that looking for an element of the sacred in the wild instead of expecting to find it only in that which is neat and well ordered involves a major shift from the Calvinist theology of my youth. If God is to be found only in that which is logical, controlled, and well ordered and all else represents the influence of satanic forces it is easy to understand the mentality that led to the extermination of hundreds of thousands of wolves in the late 1800s.

Looking for the sacred in all of nature requires a very different perspective. It invites us to not only make peace with the cycles of life, but to go beyond that and to embrace them. Of course it is easy to celebrate birth, and to affirm life. We have a harder time in our culture affirming death, or our continuation in a new and different form of the ongoing cycle.

On the one hand, this is as it should be. We can come to know great joy from our attachments to the way things are. And embracing the whole cycle means not only embracing our attachments, it means embracing our fear and our grief as the cycles shift – particularly when they shift in ways that are not of our choosing.

Most of us rebel at this point. Rather than trust a natural flow that has space within it for that which is wild, we busy ourselves with the process of creating order, as though we could really gain more than the illusion of control that way. This is where I think Askins is particularly on target as she recognizes that both our passion for industry and for entertainment can dull our senses to the point that we are no longer aware of that which is in us or around us - and we are certainly not ready to celebrate that of which we are not even aware.

Of course few of us will ever adopt the type of lifestyle that places us where we are surrounded by nature and undomesticated animals as Renee Askins has. Perhaps

that is why I enjoyed her book so much, because it gave me the opportunity to experience vicariously something I am unlikely to create at least to that degree for myself.

And yet I have found myself resolving to pay more attention to the wildness and wonder around me. For me, that means doing things as simple as taking the time to actually relate to our horses, dogs and cats, as well as structuring the time needed to take care of them. And bothering to notice when our resident foxes are taking advantages of the opportunities we are creating for them to control the mice in our barn.

And for those of you for whom the first steps you take towards expanding the scope of what your senses take in may need to be more of a vicarious experience, I want to conclude our time this morning with a reading that Randy Bruns shared with me a year or so ago. While I have preferred to do my own hunting with a camera lately, Randy's essay invites me into the world of nature in a way that few of us make the time for – and so I want to share it with you. It is titled, "In pursuit of elk."

#### In Pursuit of Elk

We say we come here to hunt elk. We say that it is elk that bring us to this rocky, windswept, high place. In part, that is true.

It is elk season that, more than anything else, has come to mark the passage of time for me -- more so than birthdays, New Year's Eve celebrations or other anniversaries. The time of the year has something to do with that. Mid October is a poignant time at this latitude and altitude. The green that was so intense in early summer has given itself up to the warm colors of abundance. The aspen blaze beautifully subtle variations of gold for a few weeks and then in mid October they strip to bare-bones white in preparation for the whiteness to come. Birds tiny and large are flocking for companionship on upcoming journeys. Those that remain are noisily indulging in the remains of summer's production. For birds and beasts the competitions for procreative rights are being set aside and the duties of rearing are at an end. This is a time to soak in warm rays of sun and readily available rations. This is a time of completeness.

It is at this time that I carve out a handful of precious days to make my pilgrimage to this essential landscape of sage and rock and pine and routines and skills and patterns. Here I can shed layers of learned modernity and employ more fundamental resources. Here, in pursuit of elk, I am able to tap ancient capabilities upon which all subsequent layers are built. And in exercising these base capabilities I find myself exploring them, tracing their influence up through the layers that define my actions in the modern world. It is here, in the cold, in the dark, on a tiny trail winding its way up a remote mountainside; it is here that I come closest to those underlying attributes upon which we as a species have so successfully built. It is here that I get a sense of how surely these attributes shape all that lies over them.

In pursuit of elk our small tribe gathers on a high plateau at the edge of a forest at the base of a mountain. We all have scheduled this on our respective day planners and made the necessary adjustments to business and family plans so that we can step out of the world of meetings, calendars, pavement, paper and keyboards.

We have developed certain rituals for the transition and for the activity that nominally brings us here. We set up camp. This will become our outpost, our bridge -- the place between our modern world and the mountain. This is where we will return each night, unwilling to turn our backs totally on the advancements of modern mankind. We are not purists. We are pursuers.

It is in pursuit of elk that we awake long before our side of the planet has spun itself in view of the warming sun. It is in pursuit of elk that we talk in hushed tones and clipped phrases briefly before heading up a tiny trail on a nondescript mountain in the velvet darkness.

As we walk we are each absorbed in the task of walking -- and in our own thoughts. By now I know this trail perhaps better than the hallway in my own home. Here logic plays, at best, only a supporting role. Often it is more hindrance than help. Here I become aware that I am capable of an awareness that transcends the conscious mind. Here I avoid rocks and branches and logs without them ever being "seen" clearly by my conscious mind. Sound and temperature changes, wind currents, foot angles, sole pressure and thousands of other inputs I haven't begun to understand, all move me along the path.

Now this predawn hike is an essential element of our ritual. It is somehow cathartic to tense at unseen sounds in the darkness, at the sudden whiff of an unseen creature nearby, at the shadow that doesn't fit the pattern, at the recognition of smallness and vulnerability in the unorganized darkness. It is refreshing for the whole body to be sucking in thin air and soaking up sensory inputs long ago sublimated and ignored.

As we near our destination we split off, each completing the trek to separate commanding points. We arrive at the edge of the forest on a high windswept ridge. Now the forest that was dark and mysterious and full of unseen dangers seems benevolent and protective. Now the wind fills the darkness with pinewhisper white noise and the terrain drops away in an exposed, rocky, scrub-sage slope. Here the immensity of the landscape re-introduces me to my own smallness and vulnerability. Treading carefully the margin between forest and ridgeline I make my way to a high rock outcropping. It is here behind rocks and under limber pine snags that I will add a few layers of warmth-preserving clothing and prepare for approaching dawn.

It is here that I hope to find elk. It is here that I watch the landscape grow large and rugged in the early glow of low light. It is here that the guardian stars that monitored my progress up the mountain now fade from view. It is here that I notice the wealth of information carried in the air, the power of even small spears of sunlight; the beauty of gray-green lichens; the peace and stillness and violence and noise of the natural world. It is here that I contemplate my ability to see trails and tracks and patterns and interruptions to patterns. It is here that I consider how all these skills aided survival and now create computers and conveniences and management systems and worldwide connectivity

and cathedrals and gulags.

It is here that I embrace the cold and the warmth; the modern and the primitive; the solitude and the companionship; the breathless stillness and the roaring assaulting wind; the monochromatic darkness and the richly warm light. It is here that I experience humbling success and instructive failure. It is here, between seasons, between consciousness, between states; it is here that I find sanctity. It is here that I find spirituality.

It is here that I will transport myself in moments of crisis or confusion or consternation.

It is here that I come in pursuit of...elk.

May we all discover some such place or set of rituals in which we come to encounter as much of ourselves.  
So Be It