



Sermon

Four years ago, I spent two weeks hiking at Philmont Scout Ranch, a national Boy Scout reservation located in northern New Mexico next to the town of Cimarron. Now, say what you will about some of the Boy Scouts' policies (trust me, I have, on occasion), but there is no doubt that they managed to secure themselves a nice bit of property out West. The ranch covers approximately 137,500 acres of wilderness in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of the Rockies, and hundreds of Scouting and Venturing crews descend on the ranch every year to take part in backpacking trips through the numerous winding trails etched into the mountainous landscape.

I will be honest, however; before I arrived, I was not very excited to be a part of our troop's Philmont high adventure crew. It seemed fine at first – who doesn't love a bit of outdoor hiking? But as we began to prepare, I realized that my expectations were likely to be completely out of line with reality. Doing 10 miles a day with 70-pound packs for 10 days up and down mountains thousands of feet high was not my definition of a nice hike in the woods. And the more I read up on the ranch, the more it dawned on me that we would literally be out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded only by a vast, unfamiliar landscape. Sure, we would be assigned a guide, but he would promptly leave our group to hike back to base camp after the 3rd day, and we would then be completely on our own, armed only with our map and one or two compasses. At that point, you had better be sure that you trusted the navigator of your crew, otherwise you may very well end up taking 10-20 mile detours from your originally determined course (which we did on one or two occasions).

I wouldn't have admitted it to anyone in my crew at the time, but it is true to say that I was scared to go on our trip. I was in the best shape of my life during that time because I was on our high school's swim team, so I believed I had the capacity to achieve what was expected of us. However, I had no way of being sure where we would go or where we would end up. All I saw in front of me was a hazy, rigorous, undefined picture of our trip, and I wasn't comfortable with it. In fact, as we finished our preparations, fully aware of the possible implications and the fact that we were about to be cast into the grand unknown, all I could think was, "What the hell kind of parents would permit this sort of thing?"

The option of avoiding this trip was fully available to me. In fact, some members of our troop did choose to drop out after initial crew meetings. I also would have likely chosen not to attend had my friends and parents not pressed me to go. And so when our departure day finally arrived, I grudgingly put my pack in our trailer and settled in for the long car ride westward.

Before my trip, I had never much considered how I felt about the idea of a higher power. I was always hesitant to subscribe to any particular belief system, and this feeling manifested itself in a variety of ways (for example, during holidays or family celebrations, I would bow my head during prayers only out of deference to any friends and family that were present). Not long ago, I would not have even considered myself a spiritual person, and found personal satisfaction and fulfillment in different sources of intellectual stimulation, like programs on NPR or newspaper or academic journal articles or conversation around a nice dinner with friends and family.

But halfway through our Philmont trek I stood atop a 12,400 foot mountain and looked down on all of creation below me. I saw the kind of landscape people usually only see on postcards or on calendars. I saw the kind of beauty that makes you want to laugh at all of the magazine models because they have no idea what they're going up against. It literally took my breath away, although I was reminded when I was practicing this sermon that this was probably because I was standing atop a 12,400 foot mountain.

Regardless, I frequently refer to this image when I consider my own definition of spirituality. I have come to understand that being spiritual is recognizing the beauty of things or people or ideas that I value. And so over

these past two years, as I have explored the meaning behind environmental sustainability, this is an image that stands out clearly in my mind as a spiritual experience, even if I may not have held the values I have now during that time.

I am fully aware, however, that I almost didn't take the very chance that allowed me to experience what I felt atop this mountain. I was afraid – afraid of what we might encounter and of what we might face. Luckily, I was encouraged by my friends and family to take a chance.

I've encountered (and felt) this same fear of the unknown when I've had conversations with people about climate change. And understandably so; it is at once complicated, ubiquitous, and demanding. A problem with any one of these characteristics would be difficult to solve, and so it makes sense that many individuals do not enjoy talking about our environmental problems because they can quickly become overwhelmed about the scope and magnitude of the issue.

This same fear has surfaced in our discussions here at Emerson. After our service during which Krista introduced environmental sustainability as the Love First Social Justice team's focus for this year, we held one of the largest adult religious education sessions Emerson has ever seen to discuss the connection between Unitarian Universalism, our values, and the environment. Over 40 people showed up, including the entire senior youth group. That's roughly a third of our entire membership count. We were eager and excited to move forward to advance our values, but fears about our inability to address something so wide-reaching as climate change were expressed multiple times. I myself will still sometimes succumb to this same sense of despair when I think about the impending consequences of climate change, and it can take quite a while before I am able to successfully distract myself with homework or friends or music or some interesting article I find online.

And believe me, there is plenty about which we should be worried. The University of California, Berkeley has recently made public The Berkeley Earth Surface Temperature Project, which created a preliminary merged data set by combining 1.6 billion temperature reports from 15 preexisting archives. This project set out to do a new analysis of the surface temperature record in a rigorous manner to address previous criticisms over the way in which global land and sea surface temperatures were recorded. The conclusion from their data set analyses? A reaffirmation of the consensus of climate scientists across the world: Global warming is real, and it is happening.

What's even more frightening is the potential range of harsh impacts of climate change. For example, according to the Government Office for Science in London, in their report titled "Foresight: Migration and Global Environmental Change", environmental change will drastically affect the migration and displacement of persons across the world. 42 million people were displaced in 2010 by natural hazards, compared to just 19 million in 2009. Moreover, millions and millions more will be unable even to move away from locations in which they are extremely vulnerable to environmental hazards as they become "trapped" populations due to serious environmental change.

Unfortunately, descriptions such as these sometimes do not make the threat of climate change real enough for our country's citizens. For some, it is fairly easy to disregard millions of people in distant nations that they will never meet or look at or talk to or laugh with.

However, if we do not take direct and serious action soon, our country will also suffer. New York State's Energy Research and Development Authority commissioned a report titled "Responding to Climate Change in New York State: The ClimAID Integrated Assessment for Effective Climate Change Adaptation". According to their analyses, "As sea level rises, many more New York City streets will be at risk of flooding...Under current conditions, about 11 percent of city streets are at risk. With 2 feet of sea level rise, that increases to about 25 percent. And with 4 feet of sea level rise, about 34 percent of NY City streets are at risk". These sea level rises are consistent with the organization's projections. In addition, "Low-lying transportation systems such as subways and tunnels, especially in coastal and near-coastal areas, are at particular risk of flooding as a result of sea level rise, storm surge, and heavy precipitation events". It's disturbing to think that thousands upon thousands of our citizens will be under a very real threat of climate displacement or death. What's even worse is that this is just in the city of New York.

This is why, when I am required to focus on other things like studying for a math test or hanging out with friends or fulfilling a family obligation, if I have been thinking about the environment, I have to find some way of first taking my mind off of this harsh and dangerous future. And I'm usually pretty successful in this regard.

The real trick, however, is finding a way to comfort ourselves when we turn our attention to efforts to reduce or eliminate environmental degradation. It is so easy for us to use plastic bags from the store and then throw them away later. It is so tempting to comfort ourselves with the argument that not recycling our one aluminum can will really not make a difference in the long run.

For me, in New Mexico, these same sentiments produced my "screw this" moments. They didn't happen often, but they were there! "Screw this", I'd say to myself, when we were carrying our ridiculously heavy packs up inclines steeper than my driveway. "Screw this," when we would reach the end of some long trail, only to be told that we went the wrong way and had to turn around. "Screw this," when we were done hiking for the day but then still needed to unpack everything and cook dinner.

But you know, everything got easier as time went along, especially after I came down from that mountain. And when I wasn't to the point where it was easy, or when things got particularly hard, I had my friends to help me keep pressing ahead.

When working to help our environment, it can be extremely easy to succumb to that same sense of despair and futility, but I promise you, when we are able to recognize the link between our work and our spirituality, the burdens of our efforts become much easier to handle. That picturesque mountaintop view helped me through a strenuous trip, and I continue to cherish the image as a reminder of the beauty of the world we are trying to conserve.

In the same way, the new Joys and Concerns ritual that was produced here by the Worship Team and the Love First Social Justice team, and the new receptacle for our stones, made by our own Mark Fish, is beautiful. For those of you who do not know, we used to have two wooden bowls filled with sand that sat in front of this pulpit in which we would put lit candles that were supposed to symbolize a particular joy or concern we had at that point in time. We used to burn around fifty a service from this ritual, and we would always be required to throw out the sand because of the wax that would pool from the melting candles. As many of you know, for some in our congregation, the transition between the candles ritual to the ritual with stones was difficult since it held particular significance for a number of reasons. But as a congregation, when we were able to realize the connection between practicing this ritual and the environment around us, we became much more comfortable with the switch. And you know what? Every person I spoke with after the service during which we introduced this ritual was talking about how breathtaking it was.

To me, the John Mayer song that we heard today expresses the same idea; the chorus goes "Pain throws your heart to the ground. Love turns the whole thing around. No, it won't all go the way it should. But I know the heart of life is good." Finding the spiritual fulfillment in our work, that feeling you get when putting "Love First", is what makes our service, our lives at this church and in the outside world, good. And we might occasionally slip up, and things might take a turn for the worse, but we persevere in our goals because they reflect the values engrained in our seven UU principles.

The Beatles's lyrics from our prelude also hold significance because they remind us that no spiritually satisfying endeavor, no matter how well-intentioned, can make a big impact without the support of a community, or, without "a little help from our friends".

As our Love First team has worked over these past four months to help make our congregation a little greener, I have been reminded time and again of my favorite quote. President John F. Kennedy once said, "Let us focus instead on a more practical, more attainable peace, based not on a sudden revolution in human nature, but on a gradual evolution in human institutions." A gradual evolution in human institutions. Each time our Love First team and this congregation has seen success, whether it be by changing the Joys and Concerns ritual, by making it financially possible for this church to serve organic, fair-trade coffee, or by hosting educational sessions to inform members of local, national and international environmental issues, it becomes clear that our institution is

evolving to meet the ever-changing needs of this peace about which President Kennedy spoke. Moving forward on our path to environmental sustainability, together, will be what turns the world around.

Thank you so much for your time.