

Unto the Seventh Generation

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

October 26, 2008

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In his book Blink Malcolm Gladwell talks about the power of first impressions. He says that you get more information about someone or something in the first five seconds than you will likely ever get in terms of your impression or feeling about them. My first impression of Delaware came last February when I came here to interview for the position of Senior Minister. It was my final interview of the season, and the one that I had been looking forward to the most. Much to the horror of the Search Committee, it snowed that weekend. But it was only about two inches. Nebraska had one of its snowiest winters in recent memory last year, so Sharon and I brushed off the rental car, much like we did every morning in Omaha and off we went. Despite the anxiety of those showing us around, the snow barely registered.

I had many positive impressions of the church and the people here. But perhaps the thing that stuck out in my mind from that visit was the land. You see I grew up in Michigan, went to school in Chicago, and my first ministry was in Omaha. I am a Midwestern guy. I had been to

Washington DC, and the obligatory Unitarian pilgrimage to Boston a couple of times, but had not really been in this area before. My first impression was: “its old!” It reminded me of my handful of trips to New England. It was very different from the Midwestern towns I had been touring lately. Delaware has a feeling of history that comes up out of the ground; even to a visitor ignorant of that history. You just sort of feel it.

You see Nebraska is a very intentional state. It was settled by homesteaders, meaning that the federal government literally gave the land away to anyone who was willing to move there and try to scratch a living out of it. My wife and I have commented on the beauty of the fall foliage here in Delaware. It is bright and vibrant—it makes you feel connected to the change of seasons. Nebraska has only five kinds of trees that are native to the state, and all of them grow along the Missouri River; the eastern border with Iowa. Every other tree west of the river, meaning actually in the state of Nebraska, was intentionally put there by someone. Nebraska is the home of Arbor Day; tree planting day. They had to be! If they hadn’t then all there would be is rolling prairies and farm land. So while there are some trees that change color, they do so very quickly and are then barren.

I think that was what my “blink” moment was when I first came to Delaware. There are trees here where no one had intended to put trees. No one had to sit down and figure nature out like they did in the Midwest; it was just here. I remember Perry Norling driving Sharon and

me around the back roads winding along these old DuPont estates. I told him, “When I was reading Lord of the Rings by JRR Tolkien, this is what the Shire looked like in my mind.” I almost expected a Hobbit to emerge from the round door in his house and lean against these fantastic old stone walls that line the fields of New Castle County. Or saunter into one of the old stone barns that seem not to have a use other than aesthetic. Now I drive those same winding roads during my commute. In Nebraska my commute was half as long, but it was along an interstate freeway. Now every day when I drive to and from church, I smile in gratitude for making the choice to come here.

In the Midwest, nature is useful. It is historically the primary resource for living, and to a large extent this is still true. It is the source of life and livelihood. In the Midwest they would have torn down that stone barn that no one is using. But here in Delaware nature just is. We leave that old barn up; I don’t know why probably because there is no reason not to. We don’t need a reason. We don’t need to interfere with nature, to hem it in and to dominate it.

Indeed, I learned at the Hagley Museum that DuPont set up shop in this area because of the swift moving Brandywine River. (Those of you who are LOTR fans may remember that the Brandywine River is the eastern boarder of the Shire.) These early settlers didn’t divert the river to Philadelphia because that would have been more convenient. No,

they built their mills here. Diverting rivers to go where you want them to, is something people do in Chicago, not Wilmington.

It was not always that way. The original Midwesterners, the Sioux Indians, understood nature. In the legend of the world being recreated, the human beings are molded out of the different colors of the earth. Instead of the people shaping the land, the land shapes them. Even in the modern reading by Ed McGaa, people are made up of the elements of nature and the four directions. This unity of creation, the earth and humans that inhabit the land, is called *Mitakuye Oyasin*—“We are related to all things.” This is perhaps a familiar concept.

I have had a long interest in Native American spirituality and religion. I am not a practitioner of it; just a student. I am particularly interested in the Chippewa of northern Michigan and around Lake Superior. Visitors to my office may have noticed the Chippewa dream catcher I have there. It should be noted that not all Native Americans were environmentally friendly. There are instances of Native people over-hunting and over-fishing particular areas, but it was a lot harder for them to do, than it is for us. Our technology leaves such a vast environmental footprint on the earth; it behooves us to be much more careful on how we plant that footprint.

In making decisions for the tribe, the elders would consider the consequences of their actions, certainly for the immediate needs of the

tribe, but would also consider the long term effects. One of their criteria was, “How would this affect us down to the seventh generation?”

Imagine thinking about how a decision might impact people not just today or tomorrow, or even next fiscal quarter, but to take seriously the welfare of your descendents seven generations hence. By way of perspective, seven generations ago America fought the Civil War. It is not often that one thinks about how something we do today will affect people approximately one hundred and fifty years from now. This kind of long view is needed as we move forward into the future.

Perhaps not surprisingly Delaware is ahead of the game in this regard. One of our Board’s polices that talks about how we want to be as a church community, the difference we want to make in the world, says, “A community dedicated to the growth of Unitarian Universalism within and beyond our walls, enabling our Unitarian Universalist message to have transformative impact in the world for generations to come.” Now that is thinking about the seventh generation. It is no wonder that the Governor that passed the Coastal Protection Act would be a part of such a church. I am not yet an expert in Delaware history, but from what I do know Governor Peterson’s administration thought about, or at least acted like they thought about, the kind of state they would be leaving to that seventh generation.

The Native Americans did from time to time over-hunt or in some ways exploit the natural environment in which they lived. But when

they did so, they felt the consequence of that action almost immediately. There was no more fish or buffalo or corn in the area, and so they had to leave and find a new resource to live on. This sometimes gave the plants and animals time to rebound and replenish themselves by laying fallow for awhile. But whether they did or not, the Native Americans had to adapt immediately to their own mismanagement of the environment. They were so closely tied to the land and to the seasons that they had no choice. *Mitakuye Oyasin*, “we are all related,” was a very obvious fact of life for them.

For us the environment is more removed from our survival. You can buy vegetables all year that are out of season because we import them from California or from South America. We cannot “feel” our destruction of the environment as closely as the Native Americans did. It is like smoking or eating a high fat diet. The consequence of this action is too far removed from the action itself. By the time one reaps the consequence of a heart attack or cancer, it is too late to undo those lifestyle choices that lead up to our health problem. Similarly, when corporations, oh like say DuPont’s competitor Dow Chemical, dumps chemicals into Lake Huron, the consequence to them is minimal. It helps their fiscal quarter for not having to pay for expensive clean up procedures, but the real consequence is far greater. In college I had a friend who worked in the theatre in Midland Michigan where Dow is headquartered. She said that the theater she worked at had to get all of

the seats reupholstered because of the high amount of air pollution that discolored the fabric. If it did that over time, imagine what it is doing to the lungs of the people who live there? Imagine what it is doing to the land and water that the seventh generation must live on?

I like this practice of thinking about the seventh generation; because it is a form of mindfulness. In the Sioux legend, the people are made out of the land. McGaa says that our bodies are composed of the elements and directions of the earth. Environmental destruction affects the beautiful fields and rivers that give Delaware its beauty. But it would also affect our bodies, our fundamental being, and the bodies of our descendants. Notice that in the creation story, the animals help the Creating Power out. In a way, the Creating Power messes up creation of the world. It didn't balance land and water very well, and so appeals to the animals in its pouch. These animals dive down to find land so as to help their friend the crow to rest. But really it isn't just to help out the Creating Power or the crow, there is a real sense of enlightened self-interest here. If I help them out, I am helping myself out. We are all related. This is true of all aspects of the world. If I save the whales or save the trees, I am surely doing the whales and trees a favor. But I am also doing myself a favor. Through the insight of *Mitakuye Oyasin*, I know that I have helped out a fellow being and therefore my own being. I depend on them, and they depend on me. We are therefore

“interdependent”; hence the term used in the UUA’s seventh principle that deals with environmental ethics.

In southern Michigan, there is some land that has been in the Snyder family for generations. It is the land that my grandfather farmed for many years. Later, he raised horses on that land. My great grandmother lived in the house that my grandfather was raised in on the back acres. I remember visiting her when I was very small. After she died, my parents and I spent my toddler years in that house. Now, my uncle has renovated the old house and lives there with my aunt. He still raises horses.

When I was in my pre-teen years, my grandfather sold most of the front acres to an insurance company. They built their office building right where the old farmhouse used to be. It is odd, driving down one of the main streets in town seeing this insurance company knowing that I used to spend my childhood birthdays and Christmases in what is now their lobby! But as I said, the back acres are still owned by my father and his two surviving brothers now that my grandparents are gone. My other uncle cleared part of it away, and built a house next to his brother. His backyard yields two to three deer per hunting season for him, my Dad, and my brother.

There is something about land that is yours. Not just that you own it, for as the Native Americans would point out to us, no one really owns land, any more than I can lay claim to the Sun or the stars. But when we

think of ourselves as the owners, then it allows something in us to do either really great or really terrible things to that land. Some companies like Dow Chemical, see this as a license to pollute if the government were not there to regulate them. For regular people, however, I think having land that you identify with has a different effect. You feel yourself connected to it. You are the steward of that patch of earth, that little piece of America or Delaware, is yours to tend. In some spiritual sense, the land becomes a part of you, much like in the Sioux recreation legend.

Now I don't know if I necessarily would like a Creating Power that seems so haphazard about his or her creations. This is a god that seems to be making things up as he goes along. Say what you will about the God of John Calvin, and I have a lot of problems with Calvin's theology, but at least that God takes time to preordain and predestine everything before it happens. He is careful and thinks things through. The Sioux Creating Power is willing to go through a few drafts before he gets it right. And I don't know about you but it seemed like the Creating Power was a bit cavalier about crumpling up the mistakes and starting all over again. Not sure I would want to be a part of one of those worlds.

But it is not really that the Creating Power destroys the world on a whim. It claims that the reason for starting over is because the people in those worlds have messed things up. In an obvious influence from the

flood story from the book of Genesis, the people have not been good stewards of the earth, and therefore it has to be remade. It is not out of our sinfulness exactly, or even the wrath of God exactly, that the world must be destroyed. It is just common sense. When the people damage the world beyond repair, it needs to be redone. The Creating Power implores us, “Now, if you have learned how to behave like human beings and how to live in peace with each other and with the other living things—the two-legged, the four-legged, the many-legged, the fliers, the no-legs, the green plants of this universe—then all will be well. But if you make this world bad and ugly, then I will destroy this world too. It’s up to you.”

Whatever other problems I may have with the Creating Power, I admit that find that kind of upfront honesty refreshing. More deities should follow the example I think. Let us not mess it up this time. Let us be stewards of this earth for its elements are in our blood and in our breath. Let us preserve it not just for its utility for us today, but so that people seven generations from now can come to this slice of land called Delaware and be surprised by its beauty in their first “blink” moment. I know I for one have been grateful for that vigilance. Amen Blessed Be.