

Covenant Group Session March 2017

Follen Community Church, Lexington, MA

### **Wilderness**

**ANNOUNCEMENTS:** The main reading (The Moose) is intended to be read aloud with everyone in the group taking a turn. We wanted to make this Covenant Group experience more like a shared story (around the hearth?). Leaders might consider bringing the group into a tighter circle, (maybe with dim lights and the chalice.) Perhaps this feels silly!?! but we're trying create an atmosphere of intimate sharing... where everyone gets to say their piece and the winding 'plot' (which is the sum of all of our lives) and the act of telling binds listeners together—in this case, in a nighttime 'story' a timeless human activity whose roots go deep. We think the poem itself calls this mood and setting to mind.

### **CANDLE-LIGHTING AND OPENING WORDS:**

Wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit. Edward Abbey

### **SILENCE**

### **CHECK-IN:**

1. Many of our experiences especially in Winter, are mediated, insulated and interpreted by 'civilization'-- have you felt the need to escape? Tell us.
2. What is draining or lifting up your spirit?
3. Tell us about your experience with month's spiritual exercise (see exercise below).

**March – Wilderness.** Take a walk in the woods this month. The only thing predictable about March weather is that it is usually kind of yucky: it will be rainy and muddy or chilly and snowing or unseasonably warm and pollen-y—we don't get to pick our wilderness! (If you are not able to walk, dress appropriately and sit outside for as long as you can.) While you are outside, notice all the changes in the world around you; pay attention to the weather and what it reminds you of, smells of, looks like, feels like. Think about other journeys through wilderness you have taken. Reflect on the wilderness journeys of some of the world's refugees the past few years—from Syria and beyond. What blessings have we been given in our lives? What lessons does the wilderness hold for us?

### **SILENCE**

**MAIN READING.** (next page)

**THE MOOSE.** *Elizabeth Bishop*

From narrow provinces  
of fish and bread and tea,  
home of the long tides  
where the bay leaves the sea  
twice a day and takes  
the herrings long rides,

where if the river  
enters or retreats  
in a wall of brown foam  
depends on if it meets  
the bay coming in,  
the bay not at home;

where, silted red,  
sometimes the sun sets  
facing a red sea,  
and others, veins the flats  
lavender, rich mud  
in burning rivulets;

on red, gravelly roads,  
down rows of sugar maples,  
past clapboard farmhouses  
and neat, clapboard churches,  
bleached, ridged as clamshells,  
past twin silver birches,

through late afternoon  
a bus journeys west,  
the windshield flashing pink,  
pink glancing off of metal,  
brushing the dented flank  
of blue, beat-up enamel;

down hollows, up rises,  
and waits, patient, while  
a lone traveller gives  
kisses and embraces  
to seven relatives  
and a collie supervises.

Goodbye to the elms,  
to the farm, to the dog.  
The bus starts. The light  
grows richer; the fog,  
shifting, salty, thin,  
comes closing in.

Its cold, round crystals  
form and slide and settle  
in the white hens' feathers,  
in gray glazed cabbages,  
on the cabbage roses  
and lupins like apostles;

the sweet peas cling  
to their wet white string  
on the whitewashed fences;  
bumblebees creep  
inside the foxgloves,  
and evening commences.

One stop at Bass River.  
Then the Economies—

Lower, Middle, Upper;  
Five Islands, Five Houses,  
where a woman shakes a tablecloth  
out after supper.

A pale flickering. Gone.  
The Tantramar marshes  
and the smell of salt hay.  
An iron bridge trembles  
and a loose plank rattles  
but doesn't give way.

On the left, a red light  
swims through the dark:  
a ship's port lantern.  
Two rubber boots show,  
illuminated, solemn.  
A dog gives one bark.

A woman climbs in  
with two market bags,  
brisk, freckled, elderly.  
"A grand night. Yes, sir,  
all the way to Boston."  
She regards us amicably.

Moonlight as we enter  
the New Brunswick woods,  
hairy, scratchy, splintery;  
moonlight and mist  
caught in them like lamb's wool  
on bushes in a pasture.

The passengers lie back.  
Snores. Some long sighs.  
A dreamy divagation  
begins in the night,  
a gentle, auditory,  
slow hallucination....

In the creakings and noises,  
an old conversation  
—not concerning us,  
but recognizable,  
somewhere,  
back in the bus:  
Grandparents' voices

uninterruptedly  
talking, in Eternity:  
names being mentioned,  
things cleared up finally;  
what he said, what she said,  
who got pensioned;

deaths, deaths and sicknesses;  
the year he remarried;  
the year (something) happened.  
She died in childbirth.  
That was the son lost  
when the schooner foundered.

He took to drink. Yes.  
She went to the bad.  
When Amos began to pray  
even in the store and  
finally the family had

to put him away.

"Yes ..." that peculiar  
affirmative. "Yes ..."  
A sharp, indrawn breath,  
half groan, half acceptance,  
that means "Life's like that.  
We know *it* (also death)."

Talking the way they talked  
in the old featherbed,  
peacefully, on and on,  
dim lamplight in the hall,  
down in the kitchen, the dog  
tucked in her shawl.

Now, it's all right now  
even to fall asleep  
just as on all those nights.  
—Suddenly the bus driver  
stops with a jolt,  
turns off his lights.

A moose has come out of  
the impenetrable wood  
and stands there, looms, rather,  
in the middle of the road.  
It approaches; it sniffs at  
the bus's hot hood.

Towering, antlerless,  
high as a church,  
homely as a house  
(or, safe as houses).  
A man's voice assures us  
"Perfectly harmless...."

Some of the passengers  
exclaim in whispers,  
childishly, softly,  
"Sure are big creatures."  
"It's awful plain."  
"Look! It's a she!"

Taking her time,  
she looks the bus over,  
grand, otherworldly.  
Why, why do we feel  
(we all feel) this sweet  
sensation of joy?

"Curious creatures,"  
says our quiet driver,  
rolling his *r*'s.  
"Look at that, would you."  
Then he shifts gears.  
For a moment longer,

by craning backward,  
the moose can be seen  
on the moonlit macadam;  
then there's a dim  
smell of moose, an acrid  
smell of gasoline.

## Questions

1. Have you had an experience where the everyday flow of your life was interrupted, changed, disturbed or shattered by the appearance of something more primal and wild, uncertain and mysterious?
2. Comment on some aspect of 'wilderness' that you carry within you, how easy is it to accept? What reasons might there be for pushing it away? embracing it?
3. The poem asks 'Why do we feel (we all feel) this sweet sensation of joy?' Have you been part of an unexpected experience that brought you closer to others?' Is there a way this experience could be a form of 'wilderness?'
4. How does your experience of the Spiritual Exercise reflect on 'The Moose'.

## AFFIRMATIONS

This is a time for the whole group to consider quietly what was experienced or spoken, to describe what might have shifted for you or someone else, or to express gratitude or appreciation for something that you or another person revealed or expressed. The purpose of this section is to reflect silently on what was moving or meaningful, and then to offer a single comment into the circle without further response or conversation.

## CHECKOUT – Like/Wish/Wonder:

This is a time to consider the experience we have had together, and share gratitude, appreciation, concerns, or ideas. Try to start your sharing with "I like..." "I wish..." or "I wonder..."

## CLOSING WORDS

**Keep close to Nature's heart... and break clear away, once in awhile, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods. Wash your spirit clean.** John Muir

**Until we meet again, let us go forth, sharing the gifts of Sacred Listening.**

**The light within me honors the light within you. Go in peace.**

## Spiritual Practice for April – Freedom

What does freedom mean to you?

This month, do something that helps someone or something become a little more free.

Maybe you write a letter to an elected official in support of an American freedom you hold dear.

Maybe you clear away dead leaves and dirt from around the green tendrils of a daffodil trying to push its way up into the light.

Maybe you jettison some old stuff that's been weighing you down and cluttering your home.

Maybe you decide on a long-term plan to pay off some debt that has been holding you back.

Maybe you make a donation to an organization dedicated to supporting people's freedoms.

Maybe you let go of the desire for someone else to do a certain thing or be a certain way—and let them and you be free of expectations.

What does freedom mean to you? How can we be creators of freedom?

