

Intern Minister Hillary Collins-Gilpatrick
February 8, 2015
Theme: Sacred Place
Sermon: Over and Over

Reading from Godrakpa, the Hermit of Go Cliffs:

“Body impermanent like spring mist;
Mind insubstantial like empty sky;
Thoughts unestablished like breezes in space.
Think about these three points over and over.”

Sermon: Over and Over

My local coffee shop sets out two tip jars every morning with a daily question placed in front of them. It is always an either/or question. Depending upon your opinion you can drop your change in one jar or the other. When the tips are counted up at the end of the day, one jar is chosen as the winner and announced the following morning - above the next tip jar question of the day.

Usually the question is something fairly benign: flight or invisibility, shovel snow or mow the lawn, Princess Leia or Princess Kate, ninjas or pirates, chocolates or flowers, etc. – A few weeks ago however, the tip jar question of the day gave me pause. All the time while standing in line I mulled it over in my head, and when I finally ordered and was handed my change I hesitated - dangling my hand over the jars until finally choosing to drop my coins in both before the customers behind me began to mutter under their breaths. I did not feel good about my wishy-washy tip jar choice. Now, weeks later, I am still thinking about it.

The question – Would you rather be able to talk to trees or animals?
Ok, ok, no it's not life or death,
But it definitely has more of an impact than choosing ninjas or pirates, right?

There is something so nice about the thought of sitting drinking tea with your cat on your lap and talking to her as if she were an old friend. Or coming home and having your dog rush to the door and excitedly ask about your day. Walking around town and hearing words in the bird songs? Legitimately being able to communicate with your pet to –quit begging, stop barking, don't scratch the furniture, you can't poop here, please groom yourself a bit. Seeing animals in the wild would have a whole new thrill, as well as driving through the cattle laden farmlands of rural New England.

Yes - Talking to animals could definitely be pretty fun, but equally, how great would it be to be able to hear all the stories and knowledge of the trees? The old, wise, strong oaks, the soft, delicate, sensitive birches, the tall pines that live their lives looking out far and wide across the land. All the decades they've survived, all the changes they've seen, all the experiences they've shared. Being able to communicate with trees would be like being able to talk daily with our ancestors. We all would become environmentalists, I bet, or if nothing else, really adamant tree huggers.

Of course, along with all their wonder and magic, these new forms of communication could also go terribly wrong. It's fairly likely that your pet or the animals you see might not be all that pleasant to talk to, after all. Your cat might be super bossy and moody, your dog might be needy and have no boundaries or social queues, the birds might just be singing about how ridiculous our outfits and hairdos are – or tweeting depressing lamentations for their favorite trees and fields that have been chopped and paved. And you might really want to eat a burger sometimes, but feel really horrible about it.

Likewise, remember that scene in the Wizard of Oz when Dorothy and her companions stumble into that apple orchard where the apple trees are extremely grumpy and mean and end up throwing all their apples at her? If we could talk to trees, we would probably kiss our happy autumn apple picking outings goodbye. We could also kiss our quiet walks in the woods goodbye, especially if we are stepping on tree roots the whole way. Can you imagine the groans and moans our Christmas trees would make all throughout our yuletide festivities? What if trees don't like being hugged, or climbed, or leaned up against – what would we do then??

So with all of that said – along with whatever thoughts you've been considering in your head – Would you rather be able to talk to the trees or to the animals??

Along with extremely snowy, it's been extremely windy lately. I imagine the trees are "oooooh"-ing and "brrrr"-ing as the mid-winter gusts of air rattle their naked branches. My roommate's little dog, Ted, has begun wearing his winter sweaters not only when he goes out for walks but also indoors around the house. I'm sure he's thanking my roomie for the added insulation – but I imagine he could also be complaining about how embarrassed he is in those pastel fleeces. We are deep in soup making and hibernation mode at my house. People come home and immediately turn on the tea kettle and put on a bathrobe. It's dark and cold and dense with quiet. It's easy to hear and see the wind.

What if we could talk to the wind? If I were to humanize it, I would say that the wind is the most confident of all weather elements. It is invisible *and* it can fly. It pushes us back and thrusts us forward, it refreshes us and it makes us cower, destroys and clears away. Even when the wind just gently breezes through the trees, it seems like it knows

what it's doing as it blows the leaves through the air in delicate spirals. To me, sprinkling raindrops and spitting snowflakes do not fly with the same self-assuredness as a slight breeze. And a downpour or blizzard cannot manage and control their power, in a way a strong sudden gust of wind can blow the door off a house in one fast fell swoop. The wind is fast, strong, graceful. When the snow and rain are strong, it is often because the wind is strong. When the sun is hot, the wind can come from nowhere and cover it with clouds. The wind. It's confident. If I could talk to it, I think I would be intimidated.

Despite my Catholic and Buddhist leanings, I think when it comes down to it I'm actually just a humanist, because the first thing I thought of when I learned the theme this month was sacred space was our bodies. Our living, bleeding, beating, breathing bodies. Of all different shapes, sizes and colors. Made of all earthly things – water, salts and minerals, gases and air, bacteria and acids, and even stardust some say. Our impermanent bodies, with insubstantial minds, and unestablished thoughts that mean the world to us. That make the world to us, that come up with notions of God and sacred spaces. That want to connect and relate with other bodies – be they human, animal, or tree.

As I've been spending time lately listening to the wind, contemplating our sacred bodies, and also considering what living beings I could talk to besides humans, I have been thinking a lot about words. When you think about it, the words that we speak are wind. I would never go so far as to say we have mastered the wind through the movements of our mouths and vibrations of our vocal chords. I would argue though, that we have, like the snowflakes on a breeze, learned to play with the wind.

Working now pretty much full time at this church, I've been spending a lot of time developing worship services, writing and listening to sermons, singing and memorizing hymns, reading and re-reading scriptures, and thus, have not just been thinking about words and wind, I've been thinking about prayers.

Prayers and wind.

In Tibetan Buddhism there is a concept called the "Windhorse." Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche describes "windhorse" as the "self existing energy of basic goodness in our lives." Trungpa Rinpoche believed that at our core we are all basically good – and he didn't mean it like, "yeah, we're all *basically* good," there was no ambivalent or patronizing tone in his teachings. He meant that at the base of our existence, our body, speech and mind, we are good – we are basically good. Windhorse is the energy of this goodness. It has the "strong, exuberant, brilliant" energy of wind, he writes, and but it can be ridden and will carry you forward like a horse.

Perhaps at some point in your life you have seen Tibetan Prayer flags strung outside someone's house, or around a sacred space, or maybe in a movie or a photograph. The bright multi-colored cloth flags are printed with compassionate and empowering

prayers and mantras and are meant to be strung in a place where they will blow in the wind – between trees, rooftops, doorways. Every time the wind blows through them, it is believed the air that glides through the flags is imprinted with their prayers, and those prayers are carried by the wind across the land and into the atmosphere. The imprinted air will brush the faces and bodies of many living beings, will print itself upon leaves, mountains, and buildings, will blow through the clouds and touch the moisture of the raindrops that fall from them. Although there are many different styles of prayer flags, with many different mantras and devotional prayers printed on them, more often than not, in the center of Tibetan prayer flags is an image of the windhorse.

The windhorse is the energy of goodness that these prayers ride into world upon the breeze. It communicates with us, with words and wind. It makes sacred the air, and all the touches, enters, and exits.

Buddhism is not alone in its pairing of prayer and nature, or even prayer in wind. Rabbi Nachman, a prominent and revered teacher amongst certain Hasidic sects, professed the great importance of the practice of Hitbodedut. Translated from Hebrew as “Self-seclusion,” Hitbodedut refers to an unstructured spontaneous and individualized form of prayer and meditation. Rabbi Nachman called people to cultivate a relationship with G_d based on living life as intensely and joyfully as possible through honesty, emotion, and intimacy with the world. “It is a great deed to be happy,” he wrote. The forms of his religious worship were ecstatic, involving clapping, singing, shouting, and dancing.

Hitbodedut is the contemplative form of this emotive and extroverted worship style. Rabbi Nachman believed it was highest act of prayer and worship one could commit. To practice Hitbodedut a person secludes themselves from others, talks to G_d, and does not stop talking to G_d, not even for a two seconds - for a while. To practice Hitbodedut, you go out and you just start talking and do not stop. “Speak your thoughts and concerns to G_d as if talking to an old friend,” Rabbi Nachman taught. “Hold the conversations in whatever language you speak best, pour out your heart, and say everything you need. Talk a lot,” he writes.

While Hitbodedut can be confessional, it is devotional in essence, a time to discuss your life with G_d, or the divine, or the trees, or the animals, or the windhorse. In this time of telling the divine beings around you about what its like to be alive, what you are feeling, thinking, experiencing – about your joys, sorrows, fears, love, you are essentially offering gratitude for your life and your ability to feel all these different feelings and live through all these moments. Nachman believed that Hitbodedut, if only practiced for a few minutes, would establish a clearer understanding of one’s personal motives and goals, and also a momentary union with G_d.

Nachman also believed that although no one should be denied the opportunity to practice Hitbodedut, and no particular restrictions should be placed on the practice, if a person could practice Hitbodedut in nature, in an open field, especially, than they should, as there will be more wind in an open field to carry their words – the highest form of devotion and prayer, mind you, farther into the atmosphere. “And the vast grasses and leaves will join in your prayers, and magnify their power,” he wrote.

Wind and prayer. Words and nature. Sacred bodies and sacred spaces. Its quieter and windier lately. What words can we speak that will imprint themselves on the wind? What can we say to G_d, to all that is alive around us, that will be magnified by the grasses and leaves, or snowflakes? What intentions ride upon our windhorses? The world around us is deep in hibernation, but in what ways can we remember it's still alive? And the sacredness inherent in the bodies of the humans, animals, trees, and even wind and snow.

For me, winter is the perfect time to talk to the trees, whose shapes and fractals become so vivid, and to the animals whose sounds and movements become much louder and visible in the midst of the still, pale world. Speak to the silence, within the silence, and the windy channels the silence provides to carry our messages. I propose we do this through prayer. Prayer in our own language, with our own emotions, that holds our own blessings and pleas. Perhaps touching and releasing parts of ourselves that have been in hibernation. Lets imprint the wind with our benevolent intentions, and watch silently as our bare truths are carried away on the breeze. Impermanent, insubstantial, unestablished. Over and over. Let's speak to the trees, and the animals, and ourselves. We don't have to choose one or the other. Let's let go, and let the sacred wind blow sacred us where it will. Over and over. Over and over. Over and over.