

**Adventures in Our Own Backyards**  
**UUFM—Rev. Rita Capezzi**  
**April 10, 2022**

**Homily**

Our Soul Matters theme for the month of April is “Awakening.” And so, we begin our exploration today, gaining wisdom for our journey from the words of mystics and poets, from the expansive vistas of the natural world, and from our own experience. And let us explore with joy and open hearts.

Quite a while ago, when we lived in Buffalo, NY and my daughter was young, I walked with her each morning out to the corner of Parkside and Woodbridge Avenues so she could catch the bus to school. It was only four houses down from our own. In front of the last house was a scraggly, neglected bush. I never did learn the name of it. And one spring morning, I realized the bush was covered with buds just beginning to open, hints of greens and pinks ready to pop. I had walked past that bush for days on end and not noticed the wintered branches had awakened, the pale green of spring had taken hold and would yield soon to a new season. I had missed the end of winter. I had missed the coming of spring. And I wondered, how often had I missed this cycle of life, the details ordinary and so very precious? Far too often, my thoughts always pre-occupied with the repetitive problems of regular life as a mother, a wife, and a professor—of lost or unfinished homework, of plans for supper, of cleaning chores, and the endless piles of student essays to read and mark with honesty and encouragement. So much more. On that fine morning, however, I vowed that I would not miss the coming of the spring next year.

And I didn't. The next year, I observed that bush keenly, each day we walked to the bus stop. In the fall, I watched the greens become russet and brown, watched the leaves fall away. I watched the winter black shift to green, watched the buds erupt, watched the flowers fade away. I claimed that bush as my own personal clock, marking the passage of time, the change of seasons, my connection to more than my everyday self. I confess I did not then keep up the practice with any kind of faithfulness, but I also knew that something had become unsettled in me, that the way I had been living for a long time was no longer sustainable, though I did not yet know how to make a change in perception a change also of behavior. I did know, though, that the fear I was fleeing so well was imaginary, that my ambitions were a distraction, that there was no treasure there. I did know that I was consumed with feelings of helplessness, of being pulled on a tide I could not fight, of observing my life, a perfectly normal and good life, as somehow less vital than it ought to be.

I spoke a month ago about the tree outside my window, having taken up again during the pandemic the habit of daily observation of one solitary plant. Such observation, wonderfully, is never about one singular thing, but rather about the interconnections of all of reality. After 746 days of practice, I feel now I have so much to say about this tree and my experience with it. I've watched the snowfalls recede around its base. More closely, I've watched the snow fill the crevices of the rough oak bark and then watched snow melt away. I have watched the squirrels, larded with the fat of acorns from the year past, scamper up and down the trunk, and the petite downy woodpeckers hopping down and up the trunk hunting for insects that seem impossible in the cold. I have watched a pair of crows rising together

around the tree and out into the trees of the ravine, easily dodging branches and effortlessly catching the unseeable currents of air. I see the buds on new branches, waiting patiently for more sunshine and warming temperatures, for the sap to rise all the way from deep in the ground to the sky far above.

After so many photos, I feel that I might have learned something in this long pandemic time, time that shifted significantly how I spend my time. I feel that the practice and the tree and me, myself, we conspired to awaken thoughts and perceptions that may have been asleep in me, or that I may never have had before, which amounts to the same thing. You may have had such thoughts and perceptions, too. They are not new, so to speak. More like awakening. More like the scales falling from our eyes, things there all the time but not noticed. More like tender remembrance of things past that can still pierce the heart still. Certainly, a closer observation of the thriving natural world served to slow me down, only a little but still enabling me to pause in the busy-ness of life and remember that I have a special place in the vast reality. I wish this slowing down for you as well.

Tapping into the bushes and trees of my own backyards, then and now, has been especially important in the pandemic times, when constraint and restriction has confined us to our homes and the smaller range of travel. Our Soul Matters materials this month bring us the story of Alastair Humphreys, a serious British adventurer. He's cycled around the world, rowed the Atlantic, walked across southern India and all of Iceland, just to name a few. But lately, affected like all of us during this pandemic, he's gone from big to small, from global and grand to local and familiar. He ordered a 12-mile square map of the area where he lives, and he spent a year exploring each half-mile square on that map. The result? The world around him came alive again. In our own backyards, we can become alive once more to ourselves, to the understanding that we are intimately connected with all of nature and with each other.

Life had conspired to produce me, somehow, out of the particularities of DNA and unique experience. Life has conspired to produce exactly you, each of you, out of the particularities of your DNA and your unique experience. Yet our contemporary lifestyles often block us from contemplating our originality, the unique specialness of each of us. Contemporary life measures us and holds us to a set of artificial and flattened standards that often can erase our very beingness. As Eve Ensler put it, "I was raised in America. All value lies in the future, in the dream, in production. There is no present tense. There is no value in what is, only in what might be made or exploited from what already exists. Of course, the same was true for me. I had no inherent value. Without work or effort, without making myself into something significant, without proving my worth, I had no right or reason to be here. Life itself was inconsequential unless it led to something. Unless the tree would be wood, would be house, would be table, what value was there to tree?"

What a sad and unnecessary way to live! We think, "I am just like other people. I am nothing special." We think, "I have or don't have this or that quality or capacity, and having or not having this or that quality or capacity makes me less than or not good enough, lacking and inadequate." We think, "I have failed to measure up. I am not worthy." Or, we think, "I am self-serving in order to hide pain. I exaggerate a piece of myself in order to maintain a sense of superiority or power over others." In all cases, it is being resistant to deep awareness, it is from confusing a part for the whole, it is in forgetting

fundamental relationship that keeps us asleep to the real vitality of life and to the gift of our own lives. Such self-knowledge can be painful. And isn't there enough pain in this world? Why bring in more?

As I was writing on Friday, newsbreak messages kept flashing across my cellphone screen—Putin's war crimes in Ukraine, corrupt and lying politicians doing everything imaginable and unimaginable to hang onto power, cruel teardowns of a Black woman judge nominated for the Supreme Court, more evidence that the former administration supported a literal coup attempt in January 2021, more states passing more laws to restrict the lives of LGBTQ people and of people seeking abortions, little action on addressing climate crisis. What did not flash across the screen of my cellphone were all the personal traumas within all of your lives: the losses of jobs and worries about family members, the addictions, the lonely moments. So much horror and tragedy. Who also needs the pain of self-awareness, the rooting around in the compost of everyday life for ultimate purpose or meaning? Who needs to uncover the deeply personal, the existential angst of our being? Can't we just leave well-enough alone?

Actually, I think the answer to that question is "No." Because it is only through exploration of ourselves that we can find those real and validating answers, the ones that enable us to endure all the personal and social affronts of life, all the pain. We are, each and every one, of inherent beauty and worth. We are connected to each other. We don't have to produce in order to be relevant. These days, I seek to slow down. I seek to hear all that I am confronting and all that is requested of me, and I pause to decide—what really ought I to do? How really ought I to act? I invite you to slow down, so that you may know that each of you is a unique and vital part of the fabric of everything, one of you no more, but never any less, important and sacred than any other. These days, I seek to "awaken to this gift, this beauty, this chance that we might still begin again, and anew." These days, I wish for myself and for all of you "that we might be changed by the in and out of breath, that we might still surprise this earth with a new song sung together." Just for a moment, see if in the quiet of your space, of our space, you can imagine yourself into that place of wholeness, unperturbed by the pressure to produce or impress or strive. Let's try together.

That bush in front of the house next to the bus stop, that tree in my backyard I photograph daily, those growing bits of nature are also signs of a deeper, livelier existence, symbols of the effort to connect beyond the structures of society which push and badger and discipline us. Sometimes, the necessity of shifting attention comes in a flash, a build-up as of static electricity that simply overwhelms the normal and everyday reality. Sometimes, like for Eve Ensler, it comes from a prolonged illness, insights garnered from an enforced slowdown. "There was the tree. My tree. Not that I owned it. I had no desire for that. But it had come to be my friend, my point of connection and meditation, my new reason to live. I was not writing or producing or on the phone or making anything happen...I was not contributing much more than my appreciation of tree, my love of green, my commitment to trunk and bark, my celebration of branch, my insane delight over the gentle white May blossoms that were beginning to flower everywhere." Let us try together to be so insanely delighted, with our world, with each other, with ourselves.

## **Reflection**

Here, in this building, in this backyard, in this beloved congregation, we might seek and see the deeper value, the deeper connections within and between us, value and connections so easily sweep aside by everyday life. In the words of the Rev. Jonalu Johnstone, "Religious congregations help to change us by helping us know who we are. Not at a surface level: you're an American, a retiree, a teacher, an attorney. Or even at the deeper levels where we sometimes find ourselves: you're a dad, a lesbian, an artist, a friend. But at the deepest, most profound levels. At the place where we connect to our root, in our souls. You are a reflection of the divine; you are Buddha; you are Christ; you are one with the Spirit that infuses all that is good and holy in the world. [In] our religious congregations, [we are called] to that which is holy, to push us and prod us, to our own best selves." If you can bring yourself to believe that everything is holy, your every emotion, your every perception holds out to you a gift, a gift of connection, a gift of learning, a gift of contemplation awaiting clarity.

Let us look into our own deeps and see the beauty that we each are. Let us look into each other deeply, beyond the surface tensions and challenges, to see the beauty that we each are. Let us help each other, here and now, to see the beauty that we all are. Where others see scarcity, may we see a vase of plenty, a tree of miracles. If everything is holy now, if you can bring yourself to believe that, then there is no choice but to treat each moment of each day as a glorious gift of possibility. If we can all be still in the nature right next to us, we may find the peace and beauty it provides, so much there if we just be. May we hear the call of the earth and all the beings of it, including humans. As part of the boundless multitudes of living beings, may we bring sustenance and awakening, freedom from sorrow, and may we delight in our common existence, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together, "Amen."

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