

Lots of Green Things
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson
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There are many advantages to having major surgery, and so let me recommend it to all of you.

First, of course, is that surgery typically fixes what is wrong, and that is certainly a good thing. And all of us have something wrong with us – though obviously not all those things are appropriate for surgery – except perhaps metaphorically.

Second, surgery is a highly skilled activity and I believe it is good to have skills performed – whether it be surgery or cooking or sports or writing or accounting. Doing something well is positive.

A third benefit of surgery is that it is a wonderful and direct reminder that we are physical beings, bodies, things, objects – that our being is real. There is nothing imaginary or false about our physicality. We are bodies. Of course we are not just bodies, but we cannot deny our physicality. And being physical bodies, surgery is an exact reminder that we exist in time and space – being physical, we are limited. For a faith that has been known as being for the neck up only, surgery brings us closer to earth.

A fourth benefit is that surgery reminds us that we are not perfect though with the promise that we can improve. As highly as we might regard our selves [this is an individual issue, of course] surgery fixes things; it corrects what is wrong. It reminds us that we are mortal, that we will die, that our bodies wear out or fail in some way. Surgery should encourage some humility and that is always a spiritually positive result.

Surgery also involves pain of some kind, and my surgery, at least, has taught me a profound respect and admiration for people who live with chronic pain, or pain of limited duration. Pain is wearing and difficult, and that so many bear it with grace and courage is inspiring.

A fifth benefit is that surgery creates community and relationships; it brings out good things in others. I received so many wonderful get-well cards, so many have asked after me. I have been touched – thank you. Kindness is the most important thing, my Mother claims, and your kindness has touched me deeply. I am now a part of the joint replacement team – there are a number of us here – and we share some new bond.

And sixth, and finally – there may be others – but a sixth is that surgery requires recovery, and recovery requires patience and slowing down. And in this world, this is a very good thing. A very good thing. For many of us, we live as though salvation was earned through hyperactivity. This is, of course, not true, and may be exactly wrong. Do you know that the Chinese pictogram for 'busy' is a combination of the symbols for heart and for killing?

Hyperactivity – the need or desire to be always doing something, accomplishing something, achieving goals always – is a remnant of our Puritan past, of the notion that the saved are known by their success. It was not, for the Puritans, that you could earn salvation – God decided that – but that if you were successful you were obviously favored by God and must be among the elect.

I know that we talk about this often here - about slowing down, about finding space in our lives. I am not so sure we ever do much more than talk about it though. We seem to act as if we could just slow down in this one hour of worship a week, that, well, that could be checked off our to-do list. But then we cram the service full – announcements, readings, music and on and on. I know I mention this often, tell you that this is what you should do – slow down, find space. And I know that what I say probably has made little or no difference to you. Has anyone here really slowed the rush of their lives down? Have your children? Be honest.

So, let me try again. I want to think about Earth Day today in a little different way than we often do – not in terms of what we can do to live in a physically sustainable way, or what we can do to live ethically, but more in terms of what we can learn from the earth for our spiritual benefit.

Now it is right and good and admirable that we think about what we do – all of our efforts, all of your efforts at sustainability are good. We have come such a long ways in the last ten years in terms of awareness – it is remarkable, really. Recycling, bringing bags to the stores, all the hybrid cars out there in the lot, the home gardens, different light bulbs and appliances, the local buying, getting rid of water in plastic bottles, using ceramic cups for our coffee – these are all good things and we should keep it up.

But you know all of that. It is not a matter of inadequate information or access to information. We cannot plead ignorance at all. No, those are all good things we are doing.

But – and this is a BUT spelled with capital letters – but that still treats the world as an object – something over which we have dominion [which we do to some extent] – to be manipulated in one way or another.

This is not wrong. Hear me on that. This is not wrong. But there is more.

Perhaps it is a little like understanding the difference between ethical and spiritual – they are connected, and in a whole life are intertwined, but they are not the same thing.

I want to think with you about the spiritual element of earth day, of being a body on this earth. This is about living a sustainable spiritual life.

Over the last several weeks, as I have slowly recovered, moving a bit more each day, walking with a cane and then without a cane, spending a little less time lying down, reading and just reflecting, my whole life slowed down. There were spaces in my life. I got up each morning and walked our very old dog around the block – oh so slowly – and noticed more around me. I let ideas come and go. I iced my leg and slowed down the flow of blood.

I found room in my life. One of the theories of the Kabbala – the medieval Jewish mystical movement - is that originally the universe and God were the same; there was nothing else, and in order to begin the creation, God had to contract - sort of the reverse of the Big Bang theory - to draw in on herself/himself to make room for the creation. As God did that, as room was made for the creation in the space where God was, bits of the divine were embedded in all the bits of creation.

The Kabbalists also thought that our duty was to be God-like, and so the responsibility of humankind was also to make room. To make room for the rest of creation, not to take over but to make room. I think this is what Barry Lopez is getting at and what Thoreau meant when he said that in wildness is the salvation of the world, that we need to experiences places and times in which our limits are transgressed, that is when we make room in our enormous individual and collective ego and listen or watch and let reverence occur.

A little less than a month ago, Kathe and I, and our best friends went out to the Antelope Valley to look at the wildflowers. It was a windy day and so many of the poppies were curled tight, but there were still quite a few open, nestled with the yellow coreopsis and blue of lupine, the grey and green grasses. It was lovely. In the distance we could see the San Gabriels, still with snow. Hills rolled out to the horizon, covered in flowers and grasses, a road here and there, a few buildings.

And wind. Open space filled with wind. Free. It reminded me, somewhat of the plains of the Midwest, and visiting my Uncle's farm in Western Minnesota, the horizon far away, the sky big, space all around, and wind. Empty but not empty. A little like the desert, like going out to Joshua Tree, a bit like the expanse of the ocean – a space larger than me.

Open and free. Lots of room.

It was just before my surgery, and I hobbled along the paths. It hurt to walk; I leaned on my walking stick and sat at every bench along the paths. We drove up along the California aqueduct, looking at flowers, pretty much alone, but free of the rush of the city.

In spite of the pain in my hip, I felt refreshed. I had retreated a bit, found space in the great space of the valley to be, to just be for some moments. The world was alive with light. The open space was a refuge, a well of healing and comfort. Like Lopez, I was with friends, and like Lopez I was able to rest – as Wendell Berry says ‘rest in the grace of the world and be free.’

I want to read something for you that is a deep well for me. When my spirit is dry, it is a wellspring for me. I hope you have one yourself – maybe a song, maybe a poem, some prose piece – some expression that is sustaining, and healing. Maybe your wellspring is some place – some place in nature, perhaps in the Sierras or along the ocean, up in the hills here or out in the desert. Someplace where you find room, where you are not constrained by duty or demand, but where you can be free.

It is from Anne Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: [she has this wonderful paragraph in another book in which she writes about how Christianity and science emptied out the sacred groves of the world of their spirits, they, in her phrase ‘de-spookified the world.’ What I am saying today is that we need to ‘re-spookify the world. Here is the passage]

‘There is another way of seeing, ‘ she writes, ‘that involves a letting go. The world’s spiritual geniuses seem to discover universally that the mind’s muddy river ... cannot be dammed and that trying to dam it is a waste of effort that might lead to madness. Instead you must allow the muddy river to flow unheeded in the dim channels of consciousness. “Launch into the deep,’ says Jaques Ellul, ‘and you shall see.’’

‘The secret of seeing is the pearl of great price. If I thought he could teach me to find it and keep it forever I would stagger across a hundred deserts after any lunatic at all. But although the pearl may be found, it may not be sought. The literature of illumination reveals this above all: although it comes to those who wait for it, it is always, even to the most practiced and adept, a gift and a total surprise. I return from one walk knowing where the killdeer nests in the field by the creek and the hour the laurel blooms. I return from the same walk a day later scarcely knowing my own name.

I cannot cause light; the most I can try to do is put myself in the path of its beam. It is possible, in deep space, to sail on solar wind. Light, be it particle or wave, has force; you rig a giant sail and go. The secret of seeing is to sail on solar wind. Hone and spread your spirit till you yourself are a sail, whetted, translucent, broadside to the merest puff.

One day when I was walking along Tinker Creek, thinking of nothing at all, I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I am still spending the power. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until that moment I was lifted and struck. I have since only very rarely seen the tree with the lights in it. The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it, for the moment when the mountains open and a new light roars in spate through the crack, and the mountains slam.’

As you might imagine, or hope, I spend some good bit of time thinking about religion and faith, and about you. I think about the programs and the people and how we might find meaning and depth in our lives by what we do here. I think about our being a bell that is lifted and struck, about each one of us and all of us together; I think about our seeing – seeing what lies at the heart of it all, seeing in a spiritual way – seeing through to meaning. I think about how we might hear that deep song of the world, about how we can experience reverence. I think about our creating space to be alive and be free. I have thought about all of these over the past several weeks.

I have always thought that the main purpose of a church is to enable its members to experience the deeper dimensions of living, to seek meaning together, to be comforted and challenged – comfort the

afflicted and afflict the comfortable as Emerson used to say. You see, I think we matter, or should matter. I think what we do here is really important – the justice and peace seeking, the truth exploring, the educating, the worshipping. We matter.

We matter most, or best, when we are healthy. Sometimes it takes surgery to find health – my hip was pretty bad, my surgeon said, I was past due. It hurt, the surgery, and I am still often sore, but I am healthier for it. Physically to be sure. But I am healthier spiritually as well.

I could not rush my healing – if I had, I would have set myself back. I took my time; I made space for my body to recover on its time. I let there be room for strength to return.

You know all of this is true. Judith Warner has an excellent essay in the NY Times this past week about stress. She urges us to slow down too. Now I know this is different for us at different ages – slowness is probably more important to me now than it was 20 years ago.

But we all need it. We know that the earth moves to its own rhythms; in the end, whether we do well by the health of the world or not, the earth will still be here. We can learn from its rhythms – from the wind over open plains, the blooming of flowers in a dry land, the slow flow of glacial ice, the meandering of rivers – and let go, at least every now and then.

I am walking pretty well now, but there is still some way to go. I hope I remember these past weeks. Help me with that and I will help you.

So here is your assignment: every day – I mean every day – take ten minutes, either sitting outside or where you can see the outside, or walk slowly outside, and just notice what is there. No iPods or cell phones, no books on tape, no talking. Ten minutes. I cannot be more serious about this – everyone of us needs this.

You have the time – stop with Facebook or put away the NY Times, turn off NPR or playing solitaire on the internet. Turn off TV – no food or golf channel, or Deadliest Catch. Ten minutes – that is all. Every day. Do that for at least a year straight and see how it changes you - because it will.

Surgery is a good thing – this is surgery for the soul. Surgery is a good thing – remember that.

Thank you all for all you do. This is a place where we can find reverence, where we can slow down and listen and look, where we can do good things, where we can find courage and love. Thank you for the last couple of weeks – it has been good for my hip and even better for my soul. And that is not a bad deal.

Amen