

## **“Rooted in Place”**

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

September 25, 2016

### **Readings:<sup>1</sup>**

“Here at Summer’s End” by Sydney Lea

selection from “Staying Put: Making Home in a Restless World” by Scott Russell Sanders

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My freshman year hall was comprised of an eclectic mix of seventeen and eighteen year-olds. I had moved from Chicago to suburban Philadelphia and encountered for the first time individuals from California, Tennessee, Iowa, New Jersey, Maine. I was the only person on my hall from Chicago, and it didn’t take long for my accent to become the butt of more than a few jokes. One of my hall mates, whom I consider a dear friend, would repeatedly come into my room to ask me to say words like “bathroom.” My nasal-y vowels were quite the novelty for my friend from California.

This was the first time in my life that I understood myself as being the product of a place. I wasn’t just Joan anymore, but “Joan from Chicago.” And, in my own mind, all the people around me became attached to a place as well.

The places we inhabit, especially for some length of time, come to define us. My Chicago accent was just one of the many characteristics that could be traced back to my Chicago upbringing (and it’s one that I’ve long since lost).

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<sup>1</sup> Readings not printed due to copyright restrictions

I also had developed a kinesthetic orientation to always expect major bodies of water to lie to the east.

My legs had never felt the pain of hiking up steep mountains.

And, I took for granted that one could find an eclectic variety of ethnic cuisines available within minutes of home.

I have carried these traits with me wherever I have gone since leaving home.

And, I continue to be shaped by the landscapes I encounter in life including by the green mountains and the valleys and rivers of Vermont.

Here in Vermont, the connection to place and to the land is strong.

For some of us, that connection is historical. This place and its land contain within it the stories and struggles of ancestors.

For others, it is simply the beauty of the natural environment that draws you in. And, you are making history in your own lifetime here that will be passed on to those who come after you.

Place is a core part of our identities. Connection to place offers us a sense of origin and rootedness to people and a natural environment beyond ourselves. This connection, I believe, is spiritual in nature.

Scott Russell Sanders writes, "I cannot have a spiritual center without having a geographical one; I cannot live a grounded life without being grounded in place."

Place gives us a context from which we can engage the world.

For that reason, understanding the role of particular places in shaping who we are is central to our ability to make meaning of the world, and sometimes this means returning to places of our past.

I have shared with you in the past that my family is from the Philippines. My parents immigrated to Chicago from the province of Batangas in the late 1970s and have lived there ever since. I have taken just four trips to the Philippines with them. One when I was only 5 years old. The next when I was 8. The next just after I graduated college. And, the most recent visit in 2007.

On that most recent visit, my parents decided to take a walking tour through the countryside that they had grown up in as children. Our tour started down the road from my aunt's house in the courtyard of the elementary school. The children were outside at the time singing songs and doing morning exercises. Planted in a garden were medicinal plants of the area. We entered a narrow path that led up a hill. At the top of the hill, we could see through a small grove of palm trees out into a field where a few cattle were grazing. We followed that path into an open field and I gazed out onto the open sky knowing that this was the same atmosphere of Earth that encloses me in Chicago or wherever I might be living at the time but knowing that this piece of land is also so different. We continued on coming upon a small house with a mango tree outside. The old woman who lived there came outside to wave at us. The final part of our tour took us through a series of small farms. Each time we passed a neighbor they called out to say hello some surprised to see my mother after all these years. Finally, a dirt path took us back to the main road, a more frequented thoroughfare, that my aunt lived on.

Some of you have had the experience of returning to the land of your ancestors whether it's England or Ireland or the Netherlands or Austria.

My trips to the Philippines have always felt like a returning and a reclaiming of some part of me that is rooted somewhere else. Those trips helped shed light on different aspects of myself and my parents than I had previously understood and give new shades of meaning to my life experiences.

I am also aware that for my mother and father, who grew up there, those trips bring up a whole different set of feelings. On the one hand, many things remain the same, and yet so much has changed in the place of their upbringing.

For any of us, returning “home” to a place that is different from what we remember can be disorienting.

We can sometimes feel a sense of displacement and uprootedness when places are no longer as we remembered them or even when the places we inhabit now change rapidly before our eyes. Our connection to place is so powerful that this kind of change can have a significant impact on our psyches.

The term “solastalgia” was coined by the philosopher Glenn Albrecht in the early 2000s to describe just this feeling. A portmanteau of the words “solace” and “nostalgia,” solastalgia refers to the emotional distress one feels in response to the environmental changes in one’s home environment. Albrecht, who is based in Australia, developed the term after he was contacted by local people about the impacts of coal mining and power station pollution on their local environments.

For many people around the globe, the conditions of local environments are changing rapidly especially due to climate change.

You may have heard the news of the first official “climate refugees” in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Back in January, the Department of Housing and Urban Development announced its first ever grant to move an entire community facing the impacts of climate change. Isle de Jean Charles, a small island off the coast of Louisiana, faces regular flooding. Most of the residents of the island are Native Americans belonging to the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe. For over a century, the people there have fished, hunted, trapped, and farmed among the banana and pecan trees that once spread out for acres. Since 1955, over half of the island’s landmass has washed away.

The United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security and the International Organization for Migration estimate that by 2050 between 50 million and 200 million people could be displaced because of climate change.

Plans are still underway for this resettlement project and there are many residents who do not want to leave. Who feel a deep attachment to the land, who were born there, lived their all their lives, and want to die there. For the native people of that land, there is a real pain and distress in the possibility of losing that connection to place.

“Solastalgia” reminds us that the condition of our immediate environments has a profound impact on our well-being.

To be able to feel a sense of rootedness, you have to be able to take in the here-ness of whatever place you are in.

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<sup>2</sup> “Resettling the First American ‘Climate Refugees,’ by Coral Davenport and Campbell Robertson, The New York Times, May 3, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/us/resettling-the-first-american-climate-refugees.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/us/resettling-the-first-american-climate-refugees.html?_r=0)

Like the line at the end of Sydney Lea's poem, we have to be able to say "we're here, we're here, we're here" with reassurance and joy.

We are lucky here in Vermont to have a relatively stable environment. Yet, we are not immune to the potential short and long-term impacts of climate change and other natural disasters.

And, here, I will give a brief word of encouragement for us all to do what we can to engage in local efforts to ensure the protection of this precious place. This past month, we've been reminded of the precious resource of water through the Fall Water Fest. Some of you may have participated in the river clean up a couple weeks ago.

You can also work to ensure our lived environment remains a place that is both sustainable and welcoming for future generations. One way to do this is by participating in the upcoming Net Zero Vermont design competition. A number of designs for a sustainable, downtown Montpelier will be on view October 3, 4, and 5 just down the street where One More Time used to be. You can vote on your favorite designs and help shape the future of this city.

As I close, I have to say that my mind and heart this week has largely been on the most recent shooting deaths of black men at the hands of police officers and the unrest and protest that has ensued, especially in Charlotte.

The words of Wendell Berry have been especially ringing true for me this week:

"When despair for the world grows in me  
I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water,  
and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things

For a time I rest in the grace of the world,  
and am free.”

This place we inhabit is a place in which we can rest in the grace of the world, and the healing power of this place is felt by many different people.

I was reminded of this just a few weeks ago now. Many of you took part in hosting a robust group of about 20 adults and children from the Bhutanese community who mostly live up in the Burlington area.

During that lunch, I sat with a small group and asked them a few questions about life here. One question I asked was, what have you found most surprising living in Vermont?

One of them answered that while he was living in the refugee camp in Nepal, he had been told (by whom I don't know exactly) that in the United States you can't grow anything. This man loved to farm in Bhutan, so he found this a bit distressing. And, then he got to Vermont and discovered not only that he could grow lots of things but that the topography and climate of Vermont is very reminiscent of his home in Bhutan. He said all this with a huge smile on his face.

This beautiful place of wild things all around can be a place of renewal whether we have been here all our lives or just arrived last week.

May you find rest and renewal in the land that surrounds us  
and with renewed spirit  
may you engage with your despair and your hope  
to be peace-makers and justice-seekers in our world.