

Kith and Kin: Reflections on Rest, Rootedness, and Relationship

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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Reading

“Called by Many Names,” Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

What is the name of the one who likes their roots to stay dry and who bends hungrily towards the hot, southern light?

What is the name of the one who only appears in the darkness of night when the air is heavy with moisture?

What is the name of the one who travels hundreds of miles pushing eastward the ashes of disintegrated dreams?

If I call you by name, am I any closer to love?

If I call you by name, am I any closer to salvation?

If I call you by name, am I any closer to the lost part of my own soul?

The name of all things is whispered between blades of grass.

The name of all things pounds down to the clay-laden earth and rushes forth seeking no destination but farther down.

The name of all things is hidden in our forgetting and revealed in our remembering.

A living god - named and nameless - is here and now

In all things

waiting.

Sermon

Swing on the swings,

watch the clouds and the sky,

lay in bed and read a book,

put your feet in the river,

visit with family,

go outside and enjoy nature while everything is in bloom,

lay in the sun,

enjoy the smell of lavender,
listen to the birds,
sit and watch the animals run by,
wrap up in a cozy blanket at night and go outside,
do something active with your body,
drink water,
Take a nap with me.

Before I left for sabbatical in July, the children sent me on my way with those very intentions. I want all of you to know that I took your beautiful instructions to heart.

Thank you, Ananda, Alex, Beatrice, Haydn, Cyrus, Lucia, Clara, Esme, Genevieve, and Liam, as well as the adults who shared their intentions with me, Liza, JC, Janet, Maria, and Melisa.

The main purpose of my sabbatical leave was to engage deeply in Rest. In my last sermon before the break, I talked with you about the “Nine Types of Rest.” 1) Time Away, 2) Permission to not be helpful, 3) Something unproductive, 4) Connection with art and nature, 5) Solitude, 6) A break from responsibility, 7) Stillness, 8) Safe space, and 9) Alone time at home.

You will be pleased to know that by these measures, my sabbatical was, indeed, deeply restful and fulfilling.

I know that, given current structures of work in America and the production-driven biases of a capitalist system, being able to take three months off is a huge privilege. So, thank you for being a congregation that offers this kind of leave time to your Minister and thank you for all the ways so many of you supported one another and the many ministries of the church in my absence.

Truth be told, I was very much ready for a break at the end of June. Although I was certainly needing rest, I also went into my sabbatical time with a few other intentions.

One of these is written about in the book, *Rooted: Life at the Crossroads of Science, Nature, and Spirit* by Lyanda Lynn Haupt. This was one of the books on the Sabbatical Common Read list that I invited you to join me in.

Haupt lists a dozen “Tenets of Rootedness” to ground her writing in this book. One of these is based on a word that was only vaguely familiar to me before I came upon it in this list. Yet, it captures very well a longing that I wanted to make room for in my sabbatical. That is the word “kith.”

If you have had any exposure to Old English, you may have come across this word before. The word “kith,” in today’s form, first emerged in the 1200s as an expression for friends, fellow countrymen, or neighbors. Over the years, the word “kith” was also used as an expression for one’s native land and more generally to refer to one’s knowledge of something.

Haupt builds her own definition of “kithship” from these traditional understandings. She writes, “Kithship is intimacy with the landscape in which one dwells and is entangled... kith is intimacy with a place, its landmarks, its fragrance, the habits of its wildlings.” (26)

“Kithship” invites us to get curious about our neighbors and to foster a desire for intimacy forged through knowledge and familiarity.

It was this sense of kithship that called to me as I began my sabbatical time.

Despite being confined to my home for much of the pandemic time, I still had this need to feel even more deeply rooted. I longed to know more intimately the literal ground beneath my feet.

As I began my sabbatical, I got curious about the condition of the soil on our property. It’s amazing how many plants, mostly goutweed, have found a sustainable home in the heavy clay dirt in our yard. It’s also amazing that soil can be made healthier with enough attention to what is there and what is needed. For a heavy clay soil, it turns out a LOT of compost helps.

More time out on our porch meant that I could notice what was growing around me and who was sharing this little piece of earth with my family. I discovered a Chokecherry tree which was a favorite for sparrows and robins and even an oriole.

A mama robin decided the Korean maple next to the porch looked like a fine place to make her nest. She was sure to let us know when we had come in too close or lingered too long. We watched as the fledglings finally alighted. Soon, the Paradise Apple tree

became a nice spot for testing their wings and growing stronger as they darted from that apple tree to the box elder or even all the way across the road to the big pine.

I marveled at a tiny hummingbird at the Bee Balm outside our dining room window and noticed the first signs of a skunk making its den under the breezeway when the temperatures began to drop.

Perhaps you, too, found yourself in a place of more intimate awareness of your closest surroundings over the summer and into the fall. Tending a garden crop of cucumbers. Noticing the movements and dam-building of the beavers in the river. Removing invasive vines to give the native wildflowers a chance to survive.

As I settled more into my body and into my relationship to the natural world, I found that I recovered a deep sense of my connection to all things and to the sacred in it all.

The poem I shared earlier came to me as an expression of this deeply felt sense of sacredness revealed in learning the names of the many living beings with whom I share place. My kith.

This deeper sense of kithship enlivened another feeling, a related feeling - that is, kinship.

Kinship speaks of our belonging. In a Eurocentric worldview, it is a belonging born of blood. An indigenous understanding of kinship asserts our relatedness to all beings, not only human.

Sherri Mitchell, an Indigenous rights activist, spiritual teacher, and transformational change maker, writes: “The two legged, the four legged, the winged, the beings that crawl and slide along the ground, the plants, the trees, and the living Earth are all our relatives.”¹

Lyanda Lynn Haupt expresses the sentiment of deep connection to all of earth’s inhabitants this way: “The earth and all that dwell herein...are relations, our dear kindred.” She continues, “We live in a wild communion of absolute mutual dependence, connected in our ancestry and our continuation...Kithship enlivens kinship.”

¹ Sherri Mitchell, *Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-Based Change* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2018), 188.

It is this intersection of kith and kin that feels so important to me right now. Sacred and holy. Worthy of our attention.

As we grapple with large-scale crises of a global climate emergency and the Covid pandemic, as well as with local struggles around whether and where people who are homeless can pitch a tent for shelter and how it is we as a state can drastically reduce our carbon emissions, we are faced with the question of who we consider neighbor and relative, and how it is we can show our love and care.

Being able to address these bigger issues starts with tending to the quality of our most intimate relationships.

An unexpected consequence of my intention to deepen my sense of intimacy with the earth just beyond my fingertips was that it led to deeper relationships with the people in my life as well. Growing kithship was not a solo activity.

It turned out that my father was eager to help establish a new flower bed which opened up our time together in a richer way. We shared flowers with neighbors who later in the season brought us a beautiful bouquet of their own. And, noticing and naming the flora and fauna that make up our home became a regular family activity growing our curiosity and bringing us joy.

The enlivening of both our kinship and our kithship can lead us back to ourselves and back to the earth, and enfold us in the intimacy of another's love and care. We can rediscover our deep relatedness and, rooted there, find healing and liberation.

I know it is has been difficult over these past 20 months of pandemic life to find that our connections with one another, with kith and kin alike, have been fractured.

It has been an unyielding time of change and adaptation, loss and transition. We have been forced to come up with new ways to celebrate birthdays, get married, have funerals, visit with friends, do church.

In all areas of society, we are still trying to figure out how to be together, how to relate in ways that meet our need for human connection as well as safety.

This is where I believe the intersection of kith and kin can guide us. If we turn that word “kith” around we have the word “thick.” And, it is the thickening of our relationships that is needed right now. Layering up the ways we connect and relate to those we are closest to - whether that is geographic or emotional proximity.

Building thick relationships takes curiosity, consistency, and, given the times we are in, creativity. We may not yet have all the means of connection available to us that we need or want, yet there are still possibilities.

I encourage you to get curious and really pay attention to what might make someone you are in relationship with feel more connected. A simple text message or phone call on a bad day might be what someone really needs. Leaving a small gift on their doorstep just to say, I appreciate you.

Be consistent in reaching out and in asking for help and support. Make a point of following up with that friend or neighbor you happened to pass on the street that told you about an unexpected loss in their family. Remember the name of the person who checked you out at the grocery store and call them by name the next time you see them.

And, be creative. We are in a time of adaptation that can sometimes feel like a drag but can also be fun. Bring a celebration outdoors, maybe even to a favorite spot in the woods or your own backyard. Add some artistic flourish to that “thinking of you” note for that friend who’s having a hard time. Let that creativity light you up and lighten another’s heart in turn.

It is in cultivating our relationships, with other people and other living beings, that we can find our own roots growing strong.

As I return from my sabbatical, I hope to grow into thicker relationship with all of you - my kith and my kin, fellow sojourners on this unpredictable path of life.

Together, may we seek to be known and to know one another.
May we be rooted in our connection to the earth and all its inhabitants.
May we foster and build a sacred kinship in which all of us are home.

So may it be.