

## Things that Make Me Go “Hmmmmmm”

Rev. Yme Woensdregt

As a stamp collector, it was a real delight for me to take a road trip to attend the Great American Stamp Show in Sacramento and to connect with new friends whom I had only met on Zoom. I drove home via the Oregon coast, a well-beloved trip for me. Unfortunately, a dense fog blanketed the coast, which meant I couldn't see much of the wonderful scenery of the seashore. On the other hand, it added to the mystery of that sacred space where sea and land meet.

Being near the ocean evokes a deep spirituality in me. Celtic spirituality calls this a “thin place,” where the veil between this world and the next world is diaphanous and I get a sense of the wonder, mystery, and majesty of this beautiful world. As Bruce Cockburn sings it, it got me “thinking about eternity” which puts everything else into perspective. “Sun’s up, uh huh, looks okay, the world survives into another day, and I’m thinking about eternity, some kind of ecstasy got a hold on me.” In thin places, eternity and ecstasy are linked.

On vacation, a few things happened to cause me to step back and reflect on our human hunger for connection. This is the heart of spirituality for me: the gift of connection and moments of insight which cause me to stop and say, “Hmmmmmm.”

The first, oddly enough, was the “Today” show. I don’t normally watch the show, but whenever I’m in a hotel, I’ll turn the tv on as I get ready for the day. This particular morning, they were talking about something they called the “30-day detox”. At first, I thought it was another diet fad. But as they continued, they mentioned that the focus of this detox was to do without something—anything—for 30 days: salt, sugar, Coke, electronics, saying negative things about yourself; whatever.

It occurred to me that they were talking about Lent. They wouldn’t have used that language, but this is the purpose of “giving something up for Lent.” It’s not just for the sake of self-denial. The purpose of Lent is to help us focus on some of the central things in our lives rather than the many distractions of life. In other words, Lent is a detox program. We set ourselves free and focus on our truer and deeper selves.

Granted, for some people, Lent has become either a bit of a punch line or a season of more intense church-fueled guilt. But at its heart, the purpose of Lent is to cut through the noise of life so that we have time for a deeper, more profound reality. We delve beneath the surface to discern a richer life in which we can live with greater compassion and grace.

In the early church, Lent was a season to prepare for baptism. If you had already been baptized, Lent was an opportunity to reflect more deeply on our baptismal identity as people who belong to Jesus Christ, and to renew our calling to love God and love our neighbours.

I couldn’t help but wonder if somehow the Today show is tapping into that kind of spiritual hunger in the North American public. Hmmmmmm.

The second moment was a delightful conversation with a shopkeeper along the Oregon coast. I was the only one in the shop and he asked me what I did. I told him I was a retired Anglican priest. He was Buddhist and married to a woman who was what he called “convenient Orthodox.” With a small smile, he said, “We don’t talk about religion much.”

I asked him how he came to be a Buddhist. “It was 40 years ago,” he said. “I was in Vietnam, and I came back a mess. You don’t go to war like that and come home whole. I got uglier and uglier, and then I turned to martial arts and found Zen. The rest is history.”

We talked more, and he told me that the most important thing he had learned was that we are spiritual beings, and that without a spiritual centre—no matter how we name that centre—we are

nothing. I agreed with him ... and he was more than a little surprised. "My wife says it has to be her God," he said, "so I don't say anything to her."

I told him that although we might give different names to our spiritual centres, I believe we are talking about the same reality. Our names for that reality don't really matter much. We made a spiritual connection in that small shop. Hmmmmm.

A third moment came as I drove through the magnificent redwood forests in northern California. These are the ancestral lands of the Yurok people. I had never heard of them before. I learned at the information centre that they adopted a new Constitution in 1993. The Preamble begins, "Our people have always lived on this sacred and wondrous land... since the Creator placed us here. From the beginning, we have followed all the laws of the Creator, which became the whole fabric of our tribal sovereignty."

Their identity is rooted in the knowledge that Yurok people have always lived in harmony with "the deep river, the tall redwood trees, the rocks, the mounds, and the trails." Today, the Yurok people are reconnecting with their past, and honouring a spirituality in which we all live in an indivisible web of life with all creatures. Hmmmmm.

A final moment was filled with sadness. Since I'm travelling alone, I usually read while I eat. Three separate times, my server (Hispanic in each case) asked if I read a lot. I smiled and nodded. "What do you read?" "Mostly novels, but really all kinds of books."

Each time, the server said, "I wish I could read, too." Once again, it occurred to me how blessed I am in my life. Hmmmmm.