Reflection: Dandelion Christ
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Ah, not to be cut off,
not through the slightest partition
shut out from the law of the stars.
The inner—what is it?
if not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming.

That was a Rainer Maria Rilke poem that is close to my heart, resonating as it does with my own sense of spiritual experience; it's blending of the perceiver and perceived and other and self.

You may recall that, to me, a spiritual experience is any meaningful experience, from being pierced by an angel, to connecting with an ancestor, to witnessing a birth or a smile, to grocery shopping or trimming the hedges - any meaningful experience wherein the meaning of the experience expands your sense of identity.

Meaning is the yeast of experience. It infuses matter with spirit. Today's sermon is part of a loosely joined 5 part sermon series exploring methods of meaning. It began last week and running all the way through April with timely departures for Easter/Equinox, a pop cantata, and Earth Day.

That is a lot of time to spend dancing with one topic. But then, I think my whole ministry boils down inviting you to explore with me the cultivation, recognition, and response to meaning. I also think getting curions and even proficient at this is necessary in an age of transition. More and more folks feel that the shifting of familiar paradigms and worldviews has deprived them of meaning. This leads to all sorts of pain and isolation and terrible politics and, ultimately, violence.

On the other hand, exploring the cultivation, recognition, and response to meaning leads to deep satisfaction, connection, and occasional ecstasy. Which is not to say it is easy or without arduousness. So how do we do this?

You have, with some frequency, heard me talk about home as a spiritual experience. Maybe you're tired of it or not sure why. I think I like this notion so much because it makes the idea of

spiritual experience approachable and non-spooky. We all know how home feels. It is saturated with meaning.. Knowing that feeling unlocks an ecological kind of theology.

The eco of ecology comes from the Greek Oikos meaning *home*. So *home* as spiritual experience begins to build an ecotheology. And to me, an ecotheology is required if we are to reverse climate catastrophe in any way that lasts. If we can figure out how to experience the ecorange in which we find ourselves with the same intimacy with which we experience home, we are more likely to love it with consequence. One does not burn one's home to keep warm or look good.

Expanding our home-sense is about something more primary than survival though. It is about meaning, perceiving, and identity. Ecotheology prioritizes the states of recognizing and being recognized. And then, it's also about saving the world.

Aside from all that, it's not a big deal really. I mean, you know, take it or leave it.

My last pulpit was far from my place of origin. Sometimes I think I went there, far from my home, in order to make the need for home personally pressing. How do we let a place settle into us rather than us settling it? How do settlers become *of a place*, which is to say, indigenous without doubling down on theft? How do we eco-integrate so we don't anthro-segregate? How do we resource but not exploit? And in our culture, based on uprooting and migrating, how do we have wings and roots?

To that end, I very much courted that land with purpose. I heard counsel to give significant aspects of the ecorange 7 secret names. I was instructed to memorize a poem and offer it aloud to a specific bit of geography. The wisdom there resonates with that of oral knowledge systems as we considered last week.

Short version is that the investment of memory or story into a landscape establishes both a relationship and a kind of medium. Eventually, the land uses the medium as well. Connection made, the land talks back after a fashion. Obviously not vocally. Right? Trees don't have lips. Waterfalls don't have voice boxes.

Meaning is sometimes understood linguistically. But it is understood other than linguistically to a far greater extent. So I hope it's obvious that when I say, matter "talks back," I am speaking in analogy. This talking back is an intuitive, interpretative, sometimes symbolic ordeal. It is as though you were really adept at reading tarot or runes and the whole world was made of tarot or runes. Something like that. It's about living in a meaningful world that has some means of connecting with you. It's really not all that woo woo.

That's the dream.

Anyway, when I was up there living in the rainforest I really wanted to cultivate this sense of home. So I picked a specific and truly beautiful place, memorized a short poem by Rilke, and returned many times to sing my poem. And yet…

See, I know what it is to be recognized by a place… and, well, it just wasn't happening. The puzzle persisted. I remained homeless.

Undeterred, I made this question the intention that set my course through a conference and retreat for religious leaders interested in exploring the spiritual application of plant medicine in institutional religion. I am delighted to say that experience moved me significantly down the path. The big take away was that the power of intention, processed through a supportive container is powerful.

In this case, the supportive container of the conference was important. Our professional paths, spiritual geekery, and particular interest made, of strangers, a pre-ordained cohort. We became immediate friends. Not homogeneous, nor always in accord. But ultimately, if not always, safe and loving.

This made all the difference as the container of our community allowed us to unfurl and be fully seen and, thus, fully present to our intention. I realized that intention in community was, itself, a spiritual experience, a home-making. It patterned recognizing and being recognized. It allowed us to open our sensory and emotional capacities all the way.

Within that container we engaged in meditation, prayer, song, conversation, walks beneath a transcendent canopy of ancient, girthy trees, and, of course, various ceremonies. Each experience added another layer to both our bond and my query; how to become home in a transient culture?

The world, you might say, started talking back. It did so, by and large, by processing coincidence through our intention and therein finding meaning.

For instance, I remember, during a service early in the week, a prayer poem was read to us in which I heard something like, "image yourself as Christ so that god might recognize you." Now thinking within the Christian frame, I actually found that thought to be potentially problematic. But I'm not Christian.

The god I wanted to be recognized by was, basically, you know, a tree. So, as we UU's do, I translated the line which, in my rendering became, "image yourself a tree to be recognized by a tree." This felt like a real clue to homebeing. It felt like a message. An invitation.

You probably think I'm nuts. But blessed by this new insight, I made my way outside to this one particular tree who had a knot where a branch used to be that looked kind of like an eye right at eye level. I stood there and beheld the thing up and down, root to leaf, in all its ancient vivacious altitude. I then had what may sound to you like an incredibly obvious revelation: I cannot image myself as a tree.

I cannot approximate this magnificent creature before me; ancient and generous in ways I can not hope to comprehend. It was simply a difference in scale. To it I was as a gnat is to me. Except that other gnats, in this case, had done great damage to this god's ancestral kin and soil. And I was probably coming off as an overly adoring tree-creep, increasingly desperate for approval and acknowledgement. I mean, no one wants to go to that guy's party, much less a god.

It was a necessary humbling. I was myopic without it. It occurred to me then that I needed to adjust my scale. Image myself then, not as tree-god but as… what… a sapling maybe? A bush? I wasn't sure. But the week was young.

Later, as another ceremony was drawing to a close and I was simmering back into a more mundane quality, I found myself wandering the edge of a small manicured meadow just outside the retreat center and reflecting on that lesson in humility, returning to the puzzle: image yourself as what so that land might recognize you?

I scanned the meadow's rim for inspiration, my eyes drifting over flowers blue and red, and tall grasses, and just a bit further out, the hopeful yearning of adolescent trees. Lovely all, but not numinous, not calling me.

The meadow's rim then came to a bit of an angle. Before me, a path seemed to emerge from the angle toward the woods. Though, as I discovered when I began to walk it, the path was all of two feet long and terminated at the feet, or rather, roots of precisely that for which I sought.

For there before me, rose a startlingly tall, fuzzy-crowned dandelion, rocking in a soft breeze. I found myself rocking likewise. And I remember thinking, "You have a head. And I have a head. We are both small!"

Here was an appropriate scale. I can image myself as a dandelion. It felt like both an invitation and a confirmation. The world talking back.

A gentle rain blessed our pact. Thus have I entered into a dandelion discipleship. It is my teacher, my medium of recognition, my map into holy terrain, my Dandelion Christ.

And here is what I have learned in taking my first, decidedly superficial steps into what I believe will be a path of increasingly subtle depths: Dandelions are remediative, regenerative, invasive but integrated, fortifying, humble, vibrant, generous, adaptive, medicinal, unpicky, first responders, and make a lovely tea.

Key to my puzzle of home; dandelions are not native to this continent. They were brought here, like most of us. Thus they, like us, are considered invasive. And yet, they have integrated themselves into the land such that I'm pretty sure they are a net benefit.

They are both pollinators and nectar flowers and have become essential for bees.

Where you see dandelions, you are seeing plants repairing land. They are among the first plants back into damaged ecosystems. They heal the ground. They loosen soil for worms to do their work where other plants are not hardy enough to do so. They act as fertilizer and are calcium pumps; mother's milk for reborn earth.

So these are just some of many amazing facts about dandelions. But, more importantly, establishing a discipleship creates that medium for relating that I spoke of earlier. I do feel, oddly, a little more seen and see, in turn, a little more.

But how do I image myself as a regenerative, redemptive, invasive but integrated, fortifying, humble, vibrant, generous, adaptive, medicinal, unpicky, first responder? How do I loosen compacted soil? How do I make of myself a lovely tea?

Those are the questions that emerged and continue still. I like to think we found each other due to some affinity, that I have some similar, if not fully developed, characteristics in common with this being.

The dandelions have invited my attention. They are infused with this very story. My hope, and experience thus far, is that the story becomes a doorway into sacred terrain, the threshold of home, a spiritual experience. It does get a little spooky.

Should you wish, I offer this same path to you. I offer you my story as a doorway. My trip is your trip. What is shown to me is shown to you and visa versa. Let us make a home with one another.