

**NAME**

Nature Podcast.mp3

**DATE**

February 28, 2021

**DURATION**

30m 25s

**START OF TRANSCRIPT****[00:00:00]**

The following is a message from Wellspring's congregation.

**[00:00:04]**

Did you have a place outside as a kid where you could just go and get away? I'm talking about the time before driver's license, right somewhere where you could walk or bike some place in nature where you spent hours. I know for me there was a sugar maple in our front yard and it had the perfect climbing branches, it had one that was maybe at my shoulder height when I was seven, eight, nine years old, and I could grab it and swing my body up, plant my foot in that spot between the branch and the trunk of the tree and hoist myself up to stand off the ground. And then it was perfect. It had another branch at like three o'clock from that branch that was tilted at like a 45 degree angle, almost like a recliner. And so I could swing my body again around the trunk, plant my foot again and lie back and just rest there held by this tree. I daydreamed for hours. I would go up there to think sometimes I would take a book or something to draw with. But I spent so much time up there. And I can't tell you any great ideas I had or big realizations I had spending time in that tree, but I know that I felt safe and held. And I know that it was a place where I would rest. There was nobody I needed to talk to the animals and the plants and the tree branches didn't need me to say anything to them, I didn't have to do anything special to fit in.

**[00:01:57]**

There was nothing to clean up. Right. The dirt is supposed to be there when you're outside. And so I remember that feeling more than anything else of just being able to be there and to belong. Our message series this winter has been all about coming home, finding those practices that help us come home to ourselves, finding places, yes, maybe out in the world, maybe you had a place like that as a kid to tell us about it in the chat if you do or if you did. Right. But also about finding places inside ourselves and finding practices that help us see any place that we might find ourselves as a potential home, as a place where we can trust our belonging and our beloved ness in this messed up world. We've tried out eight different practices now one each week in each of our services since January, with the hope that by introducing us all to a variety of different ways to practice, maybe you will find one that works for you, that settles your body and your mind and your spirit so you can show up a little bit clearer and stronger and kinder. Right now, I set out intentionally to end this series this week with what I'm calling nature based practices.

**[00:03:33]**

And when I did that, I confess that I forgot for a moment that nature and spirituality is an entirely huge subject. It's entirely too big for one message. I can barely give you an introduction today, let alone the opportunity to practice within the service itself. And part of that is just because there's so many different ways in to that nature based spiritual practices. In our UU tradition, we have a tremendous respect for science. For example, as Chris was talking about earlier. Right. That leads to all of the natural universe and wonder. We also, in our UU tradition, acknowledge the spiritual wisdom that's found in all different practices, including ancient Earth centered traditions like paganism and Wicca in native and indigenous practices. Right. That have histories way older than modern science. Plus, we have the influence of Unitarians like Thoreau and Emerson, these big greats of the Transcendentalist movement, who were the ones that really brought this idea into our tradition that we can see everything we encounter in nature as infused with spirit and holiness. So I'm officially putting a pin in this today, at some point, I think we should do a message series about nature and spirituality. But for now, we'll stay focused on the purpose of this series and I'll invite you all into an experiential practice that we can do and that you can do in nature.

**[00:05:14]**

To do that, I will be taking you on a trip with me today. A little later in the message, I'll give you an opportunity to go outside if you'd like, but I know that if you're watching this on Sunday, February 28th, it's probably raining where you are. So I thought about that. And during the warm Wednesday afternoon that we had last week, I took my camera out so that you could come along with me for a day outside. I went to one of my favorite new places. It's not a new place. It's new to me. It's just a 15 minute drive from where I live in South Philadelphia. I can't believe I didn't

know it was here for so many years. I went to the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge. The Heinz refuge protects the largest remaining freshwater tidal marsh in our state. It's a thousand acres of preserved land right by the Philadelphia International Airport. And for me, discovering it this year was one of those pandemic's silver linings. When everything closed last March, it took me a few weeks. But after a while, like most of us, I was just looking for any place that I could go to get out of the house. And I rediscovered, like many of you, I know a lot of these natural, beautiful places that were right under my nose that I didn't know about.

**[00:06:43]**

A few weeks ago, The New York Times ran an article. Called If winter feels extra hard this year, you're not alone. I clicked on that article because, yes, thank you. And one of the people that they interviewed was an author named Katherine Mae who wrote a book before the pandemic, but that was just released this past December called Wintering. Even though it was not a book about the pandemic in an interesting way, Catherine May's book was also about how plans get interrupted by difficult times. You see, Catherine had intended to write kind of an interesting nonfiction research text about people in different parts of the world and how they coped through harsh winters. But just as she was getting ready to travel for her research, her family was struck by illness. Her husband contracted a life threatening illness. And then Catherine herself also got sick. The two of them on these parallel paths, both recovering physically over time, but with all of the stress and challenge, their young son, they realized, began to fall into a depression. And so Catherine suddenly found herself writing about a whole different kind of winter as she found herself staying closer to home and weaving her research about the season itself into a story about what happens when we face those inevitable times in our life when we can't keep going the way we planned.

**[00:08:30]**

I'd like to read you a short passage from Catherine May's book, Wintering is a Season in the Cold. It's a fallow period in life.

**[00:08:46]**

When you're cut off from the world, we like to imagine that it's possible for life to be one big eternal summer and that somehow we have uniquely failed to achieve that for ourselves. We dream of an equatorial habitat forever close to the sun and endless unvarying high season.

**[00:09:10]**

But life is simply not like that. And we need people in winter who acknowledge that we can't always hang on. That sometimes everything breaks. Short of that we need to find ways to perform those functions for ourselves, to give ourselves a break when we need it and to be kind. The thing is, in nature, plants and animals, they don't fight the winter. They don't pretend it's not happening and attempt to carry on living the same lives that they lived in the summer.

**[00:10:00]**

Plants and animals prepare, they adapt, they perform extraordinary acts of metamorphosis to get them through wintering is a time of withdrawing from the world, maximizing scant resources, carrying out acts of brutal efficiency and vanishing from sight. But that's where our transformation occurs. Maybe winter is not the death of the life cycle, but the crucible, the time for reflection and recuperation, for slow replenishment, for putting your house in order, doing these deeply unfashionable things, slowing down, letting your spare time expand, actually getting enough sleep, resting. These deeply unfashionable things feel like radical acts now, but they are essential in nature.

**[00:11:20]**

Learning about Katherine May's book reminded me of another one that I have had sitting on my bookshelf unread for a while. It's called Braiding Sweetgrass. It was sort of a surprise New York Times bestseller. It shot up on the list years after it came out. This year, Braiding Sweetgrass is put together by a pretty unique author, a woman named Robin Wall Kemmerer, who is on the one hand, a botanist and a professor who is well versed in the science of plants. But Robin is also a member of the Potawatomi nation, a descendant of indigenous people of North America. I hadn't cracked Robin's book, to be honest, because I was a little intimidated by it. It is thick and it's dense. And for me, reading about nature has never really been where it at. I would much rather go out and be in it, but I knew so many people who raved about this book, so I decided to listen to it being read online and after listening, I was just a total convert. Robin Wall Kammerer has that ability because she knows both of these languages, both of these ways of knowing and relating to nature, to translate and to share in both of them, to share what it's like in that physical and experiential and relational way to be a living being on this planet, in relationship to the world, and also to share the scientific and the explanatory and what it's like to see the inner workings of how things are.

**[00:13:01]**

The second chapter of Braiding Sweetgrass is kind of an allegory for her whole point in writing the book, it's called The Council of Pecans. And in it, Robin describes how pecan trees survive in a way that human beings might learn from. She says the first thing you have to know, like humans, pecan trees grow together in community, they grow in groves. But unlike humans, palm trees are something that's called in the science massed fruiting trees. So that means that it's not every tree for themselves. Individual trees don't decide it's time to produce and drop nuts on their own. Instead, the entire grove of trees all comes together and has a fruiting year. At the same time they grow

and drop their nuts at the same time. Why might that be? She says, well, it turns out that when the pecan groves create that overabundance of pecans, when they intentionally all work together to drop way more nuts than the local ecosystem can use. Then after the squirrels eat their fill, they bury the nuts in their shells in the ground. They bury them for the winter. And even those nuts, it turns out, are too much for that local economy of squirrels to take in. And so they dig up pecans all winter and feed their families a little baby squirrels. And yet, inevitably, there are still some nuts left behind, buried under the ground. And so when winter turns to spring and the ground thaws, those buried nuts become seeds.

**[00:14:56]**

And new groves of pecan trees are born.

**[00:15:02]**

The survival and reproduction of pecan trees Robin points out, does not happen because they follow their schedule because they faithfully produce every year, mass fruiting trees do not have a recurring schedule like clockwork. Their production years are irregular. There's nobody telling them that it's time to produce pecans just because it's Monday or just because it's 9:00 a.m., just because the calendar tells them it's time.

**[00:15:33]**

It produce when they are ready.

**[00:15:37]**

They produce when there is enough energy to go around.

**[00:15:46]**

And maybe some of you are thinking, wow, wouldn't it be nice to be a pecan tree, especially right now? A lot of my colleagues online were sharing this quote this week from a Presbyterian minister in New York named Benjamin Parry. It says, "Never feel bad for not being productive when you read about five hundred thousand people dying." I'm reminded of what Katherine Mae said, sometimes everything breaks and soul anguish, Reverend Perry says, is what happens when grieving rituals are replaced by normalcy. Rituals, he says, don't power through the heart of your humanity, the heart of our humanity. Is what lets us know that we're not ready yet and the heart of our humanity is what calls us back after a long winter, back to creation, back to relationship. Back to remembering that there are places where we can belong and that we need to build more and more of those places for all of us to feel safe.

**[00:17:15]**

And to be tenderly cared for as precious humans with hearts like ours. When the pecan tree is decided, it's time. To produce all that fruit, that's an energy intensive activity, making all of those nuts. Scientists are learning more every day about a relatively new discovery, a vast network of fungus that grows on and between the roots of trees underground. Scientists believe that the fungal network actually serves as a communication network and a network for resource transfer. It allows the trees to share carbon, which is what they need to make those nuts to grow and reproduce and share. They use that communication network underground to wait together until they've heard from all the other trees in the grove that, yes, every tree has enough of what it needs and every tree is ready.

**[00:18:40]**

They might wait through more than one winter, but when it's time, they are all in together.

**[00:18:52]**

Robin Wall Kemerer says the way they generate abundance is not by stress or exhaustion or just pushing through the way they generate the abundance is by sharing. The other main point of Robin's book also has to do with that system of communication among the trees, it's something she calls the grammar of animacy, animacy, meaning animate or inanimate. Right. She kind of disrupts this idea that we have about what is animate and what is inanimate in the world. Now she draws on native traditions, indigenous traditions, and her ideas about this do honestly come closer to my experience of being back in that tree in childhood, because my experience was one of realising that the earth can keep you company.

**[00:19:55]**

When we feel lonely, we can be reminded that we are actually surrounded by beings. If we go outside, if we open a window, if we even look out of a window, we will see entertainment and interest and movement and life.

**[00:20:19]**

We'll have company, the best kind of company really to the kind that can listen without asking much, the kind that can offer a place to cry or curse or feel, the kind of company that doesn't demand we show up looking good or feeling good or being any particular kind of way, the kind of company that gives us a place to belong on this earth. I mentioned earlier that I would give us an opportunity to practice in nature today, and so it's time for that. Now, if you would like to, I invite you to join this practice in one of two ways. The first being to find some nature in your own environment. For just the next few minutes, you could decide that you're going to go outside. You can maybe open a window or a door, and you could sit by it. You could even just look out a closed window. That's one way that you can practice the other way. If your own nature is not feeling particularly juicy right now or if you're tucked in

bed and you're watching this on your phone, I will show you a scene for just a few minutes here on the screen from our day at the Heinz Wildlife Refuge. And the specific practice that will engage is a simple one. It's from a place called the Center for Spirituality in Nature, a wonderful organization with a great website that I recommend with all kinds of helpful hints for spiritual practices in nature. This one is very basic.

**[00:22:02]**

They call it watching for movement, go to a place and be still. And watch for what moves.

**[00:22:17]**

I couldn't help but remember when I heard about this practice, the Quaker author Parker Palmer, who uses the same idea as an analogy for what all spiritual practice does.

**[00:22:32]**

He talks about this idea of the soul being like a wild animal. So if we want to see a wild animal, right, and we go out into the woods, crashing through hunting, turning over rocks, looking for that soul, that wild animal of our soul, we won't have much luck doing it that way.

**[00:22:53]**

But he says if we can sit in the woods and be still and wait and watch, then the soul might just emerge. It's our stillness, paradoxically, in our search that helps us find a wild animal or a soul.

**[00:23:15]**

And so we can literally practice that skill that is part of all spiritual practice of being and paying attention. We can practice it in nature. I'll give you an example. I recorded a few minutes of this scene waiting silently just next to the camera in Heinz Refuge, perfectly still for all of you so that my movement wouldn't rustle leaves or create any disruptive sounds that would end up captured on that recording. And after about seven minutes of sitting there, bored at times occupied by thought about the message, noticing my cold, wet feet. After some time, I stilled inside myself and I started watching more carefully for movement in the scene. And finally I saw this. Far off in the distance, way too small to see in that first video frame, but they're in front of me, two ducks bobbing under the cold water for food.

**[00:24:22]**

They'd been there the whole time.

**[00:24:27]**

Nature is the perfect place to practice being still. A practice of patients where we learn not to push for the production of a particular experience, but instead to receive the gifts that the Earth just wants to share with us.

**[00:24:45]**

And so take a few minutes now, whether within your own environment or here along with me in the Hynde's Preserve.

**[00:24:56]**

Nothing expected of you, but watching for movement and taking it all in. And feeling the comfort of simply belonging on this earth. So whether you are watching at your window or here on your screen. I'll call us back together now to close our service today.

**[00:28:14]**

If you saw Reverend Michael's guest sermon last week, you'll know that I'm walking right into his joke about Unitarian Universalist and Mary Oliver's poetry, but I'd like to offer one of her most well-known poems.

**[00:28:29]**

As our closing prayer for today. It's called Wild Geese.

**[00:28:39]**

You do not have to be good.

**[00:28:44]**

You do not have to walk on your knees for 100 miles through the desert repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves. Tell me about despair, yours and I will tell you mine. Meanwhile, the world goes on. Meanwhile, the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscapes, over the prairies and the deep trees, the mountains and the rivers. Meanwhile, the wild geese high in the clean blue air are heading home again. Whoever you are, no matter how lonely this world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you. Like the wild geese, harsh and exciting over and over, announcing your place and the family of things amen friends and may you live in Blessing.

**[00:30:13]**

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