

FOREST OF THE SOUL
Sermon by Desmond Ravenstone
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Growing up in the suburbs of New Jersey, my brother and I attended an elementary school which was partly surrounded by woods. The principal and the teachers often admonished us never to go in there during recess; after all, they were obligated to keep an eye on us, and could not do so through the dense cover of trees. Yet there were those of us who loved to explore the woods, learning every path and landmark within, taking shortcuts through it between home and school. We laughed and made fun of those who took the teachers' warnings so very seriously, those fraidy cats! Yet perhaps it was their very fear of the woods which gave us, in their eyes, an almost outlaw cachet.

Those woods are still there. I searched online to find a satellite map of my old school, and sure enough, those lush green canopies still surround the campus. How it stirs my heart! How I wonder if others are as drawn to those woods so lovely, dark and deep.

Such primeval landscapes have a sublime draw to our spirits. As pagan author Morgan La Fey says in her article "Sacred Trees":

When walking through a warm and lush forest setting one's thoughts can easily take flights of fancy. It is not difficult to shed the layers of modern life and find one's more subtle or primitive beginnings. Somewhere from deep within the spirit and majesty of each single tree steps forth and at once one can find themselves transported to a world of shadow and shade.

So it is with the landscape of our souls, where the shadows of our more primal selves seem very much like those dense, deep woods – attractive to some, while others hesitate to even set foot inside.

Why do we hesitate? Perhaps it is because we have been taught to think of the soul or spirit as divine light, distinct from and even transcending the material or "mundane" world. By extension, we tend to react to the idea of darkness as a metaphor for evil. But when we speak of a literal forest as dark, we do not mean it is literally evil. No, we mean that it is hard to see into it, from the dense foliage blocking outside sources of light. It is in this sense that psychologists like Jung refer to our shadow selves, hidden from the light of conscious thought.

So often we think of emotions like fear, anger and want as inherently negative, even destructive – and surely they can be. But they also have their place in human life, and can even be utilized for good. We can be fearful of harm, angry at injustice, and wanting of love. What we must caution against is allowing such feelings to be all-consuming – to let fear become blind terror, anger become blind rage, and want become blind addiction.

The question is not simply whether we repress or unleash those parts of ourselves which are hidden, but whether we can acknowledge and draw from them – or, to borrow the language of Carl Jung, whether we can “own” them. It was Jung in fact who warned that, as we continue to disown our shadow, to deny and repress it, we begin to project it onto others. Imagine trying to contain a forest, only to have the untamed plants and animals within it start to encroach on our so-called “civilized” territory. Or, we can learn to live with and learn from the forest, with humility and appreciation.

One area for me is the fear invoked by my father. Dad has a temper – the bellowing, throw-things-against-the-wall kind of temper that would scare the pants off of anyone. One weekend at their house, he couldn’t get his computer printer to work, and erupted, actually hurling a big bottle of soda on the floor in front of me.

I was scared, yet strangely calm. Holding out my hands, I said: “O-o-okay, I’m going to put the cats outside and go for a walk before you *kill* one of us.”

That shook him. He stood there, all six feet five inches of him, dumbfounded, utterly quiet. He didn’t have to apologize – the expression on his face said it all.

Two things happened after that. First, I’ve never seen him lose his temper like that again. Angry, yes – but not out of control. Second, we’ve been able to talk on more equal footing, with less distance. In a sense, we unwittingly healed one another, by prompting each to become aware of that within us which we would rather not face, so that we could better come to terms with them, and with one another.

It reminds me of one of the great mythic tales, that of Percival and the Grail King, the young adventurer and the wounded old man. Here, from his interview program with Bill Moyers, “The Power of Myth”, is how the late Joseph Campbell sums it up:

Now, when Percival comes to the Grail castle, he meets the Grail King, who is brought in on a litter, wounded, kept alive simply by the presence of the Grail. Percival’s compassion moves him to ask, “What ails you, Uncle?” But he doesn’t ask the question because he has been taught by his instructor that a knight doesn’t ask unnecessary questions. So he obeys the rule, and the adventure fails.

And then it takes him five years of ordeals and embarrassments and all kinds of things to get back to that castle and ask the question that heals the king and heals society. The question is an expression, not of the rules of the society, but of compassion, the natural opening of the human heart to another human being. That’s the Grail.

And, by the way, before Percival was trained as a knight and instructed to stifle questions and curiosity, he had been raised by his mother apart from courtly society – in a forest. And, the Grail castle which he visits is surrounded by a wasteland which, once the Grail king has been healed, is likewise rejuvenated into ... a forest.

We are often given rules for living with others in society, and surely there is reason to understand and respect such customs. But there is also need to return to the very core of our humanity – our compassion, our desires, our fears, and even our anger – rather than let ourselves be so bound to tradition that we cannot heal one another and make ourselves whole.

One of those rules, borne of our Western ideal of individualism, is to neither intrude into the lives of others, nor burden others with the details of our own lives. Yet what are the consequences of living this way, isolated from one another? Go into the forest, and you'll see that every plant and animal depends upon one another, with even the mighty trees depending on lowly bugs and worms to break down waste matter and replenish the soil. So it is with our humanity, for we are meant to live in community, not in isolation. Children starved of embrace and touch, suffer just as much as if they were starved of food. How, then, do we starve one another when we fail to ask in compassion: "What ails you, friend?"

When Percival failed to ask this question, he awoke the next day in an empty castle, utterly alone. It took a wild woman – a woman of the forest – to show him that this was a sign that his adventure had failed, and that he must begin his quest anew.

My friends, let us begin our quest anew. Let us help to make one another whole, to bring together shadow and light, cultivated homes and primeval forest. In seeking to build the beloved community, let us not be afraid to bring – and to welcome – all of ourselves, so that we may realize more fully how we may sustain one another, grow together, and heal ourselves and our world.

AMEN AND BLESSED BE