

# “Return Again”

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

One morning in late July,  
Dave and I were walking in the Annex,  
when he took me over to see something:

A huge rock in the middle of the road,  
which had recently been uncovered during  
a construction project.

The granite boulder was said to be  
about 1.5 billion years old.<sup>1</sup>

It had appeared unexpectedly in this particular location, having  
somehow moved from its home many kilometers north of here,  
picked up and carried by a glacier.

The boulder was about the size of a very small car.

We immediately wanted to touch it,  
as did another woman who came along after us,  
saying that she'd come all the way from Scarborough.

“I thought I was the only crazy person,” she said.

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<sup>1</sup> CBC News: “How did a boulder over a billion years old wind up on Toronto’s Bloor Street?” <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-rock-billion-years-1.5225478>

Soon a family of four came along,  
and offered to take our picture with the rock.

And then we took their picture,  
and then a man in a Blue Jays cap came along,  
apparently live-streaming the experience  
with commentary in Spanish.

It was an interesting juxtaposition:

A handful of humans, who by some accounts are  
now at risk of becoming extinct...  
meeting up with the steadfast boulder,  
who stood clearly unmoved by our comings and goings.

During a summer of feeling rattled about the state of the world, I  
found our encounter with the rock to be steadying.

After all, it was here long before we were...  
and will be here long after we are not.

The rock's relative permanence was a reminder  
of my own impermanence...  
which strangely made me feel less afraid.

It was a tangible, physical reminder of the fact  
that we're part of a universe so much larger than us,  
which continues to form and re-form  
in a continual dance of creative and unexpected movement.

Being drawn to that rock in the middle of the road,  
Dave and I and all the others were somehow "returning again" to  
something we didn't even have a name for.

The "home of our soul," perhaps.

The ground of our being.

In being moved to connect with it,  
to be in its presence,  
we weren't "crazy people" at all...

In fact we were, for that moment,  
perhaps more sane than we usually are.

§

That was one way we "returned again" this summer:  
an unexpected kind of homecoming...  
and I'd like to tell you about another one too.

This summer we attended the 35<sup>th</sup> reunion of our  
Ryerson graduating class.

I think it was the writer Thomas Moore,  
author of *Care of the Soul*,  
who said that any reunion is a soul-ful experience...

Though not always an easy one.

At such gatherings,  
whether they're with classmates or family members,  
we're forced to reflect on the choices of our past...

We see ourselves reflected through the memories of others...

We're reminded how deeply we are intertwined,  
even though our lives may have moved in unexpected ways.

At this particular reunion, I reconnected with a woman

who'd given me a home when I really needed one.

Cynthia, who now lives in Ohio,  
offered me a couch in an already-crowded apartment  
when I was kicked out of my room-and-board  
situation at Christmas during my first year at Ryerson.

With no place to go,  
I might have returned to Winnipeg  
and dropped out of school if she  
hadn't given me a place to stay.

It was in some ways an almost "chance" event,  
but with the passage of time I've seen how very important her act of  
kindness was,  
allowing me to make a move  
that gave my life the foundation it has today.

The reunion also gave us a chance to notice  
that with the passage of time,  
our various accomplishments  
mattered a lot less than we thought they would.

By this point in life,  
we were reflecting not so much on our careers,  
but on life itself.

On aging, illness, and death.  
On meaning and purpose.

No-one had answers,  
but it seemed we were sharing the same questions.

And we were all seeking steadiness,  
which we found—that one evening at least—

with people who'd known us a long time,  
and who shared with us  
at least a fragment of our past.

*Return...to who you are,  
what you are,  
where you are.*

*Born and reborn again.*

## §

Perhaps like many of you,  
I have times when I feel far away from the  
“home of my soul.”

It stands to reason, living as we do in a society  
that's focused on superficial things  
such as accomplishments, material possessions  
and individual differences.

Staying focused on these externals,  
we lose contact with the bedrock of life:  
the Tao, the Source, the Ground of Being.

We forget how this “rock of ages”  
which some may call God,  
connects us in mysterious and unexpected ways,  
and supports us through the storms of time.

It should be noted that  
this connection with God and Ground  
is always solid and complete,  
even when we lose our awareness of it.

But when we take the opportunities to “return again,”

however they present themselves,  
we create a foundation upon which we can stand,  
to do the work that is now needed in the world.

When we dare to “return again,”  
to come home in this way,  
each time we may go a little deeper...

Get a little closer to our deepest longings,  
our deepest connection not only with ourselves  
but with all people and all living things.

For by “returning again” to the home of our  
individual soul, we also return to the collective...

and to whatever we might conceive of  
as the sacred or the divine.

## §

In July of 2018, Dr. Jem Bendell of the University of Cumbria in the UK wrote an influential and challenging paper on the current state of the world.

In a later essay, he offered advice on how to cope with our changing planet, and his number one recommendation was to develop one’s spiritual life.

To, quote, “return to, or explore afresh, the idea of [the] divine or [the] spirit or a consciousness or a God that is prior to the Earth and moves through the Universe right now and forever more.

[To] do so without seeking a simple story of explanation but [with] a sense of faith that there is an existence and a meaning beyond our culture, our species and our planet.”

“Such ‘faith’,” he says, “helps anyone to experience and process the inevitable difficulties and traumas of life.”<sup>2</sup>

## §

As a minister, I completely support this call to develop a relationship with God or the Cosmos...some source of power and meaning that is greater than our limited frame of human reference.

I, too, see this as essential in order to adapt positively to the coming changes in our world.

And yet, I’m all too aware that even today,  
I’m prone to bypass my spiritual life  
in favour of material meaning-making.

To skip “returning again to home base”  
because I have so many other  
seemingly important destinations in mind.

Today though, I want to keep my focus  
on that homing signal, that Source of Life  
that I sense in me that is deeper and stronger  
than my accomplishments,  
my comfort level,  
and my stuff.

I want to stay connected to  
that which connects me to all beings.

To that which steadies me,  
takes away my fear and lifts me up.

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<sup>2</sup> Jem Bendell, “Fourteen Recommendations on Living Beyond Collapse-Denial,” April 12, 2019. <https://jembendell.com/2019/04/12/fourteen-recommendations-on-living-beyond-collapse-denial/>

Like so many of us in our culture,  
I've been taught to measure meaning  
through achievements  
and acquisitions.

Yet the earth teaches us  
that the only thing that matters  
is collective well-being.

I think back to the rock in the middle of the road,  
patiently waiting for us to get the message.

I think back to how we were drawn to touch that rock,  
compelled to linger in the presence of the eternal.

I think back to how we stopped,  
in the middle of the road we happened to be on,  
to hear a message beyond words.

A message connecting all of us,  
perhaps even an expression of love, in its way.

A message powerful and steady enough to  
ground us in unsteady times...

So that we might care for the earth  
and each other.

§

The contemporary Sufi teacher Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee has this to say:

“It is our love for the Earth that will...help us bring light back into our darkening world.

Love links us all together in the most mysterious ways, and love can guide our hearts and hands. [...]

Love can open us to our deep participation in the life of the whole;

It can teach us once again how to listen to life, and life’s heartbeat, [to] sense its soul.

It can open us to the sacred within all creation and can reconnect us with our primal knowing that the Divine is present in everything—

In every breath, every stone, every animate and inanimate thing.

In the oneness of love, everything is included, and everything is sacred.”<sup>3</sup>

## §

After we met the rock on Bloor Street,  
Dave and I were reluctant to leave and get on with our day.

But of course we did.

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<sup>3</sup> Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, “The Call of the Earth,” in *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*, ed. Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee (The Golden Sufi Centre, 2016), 303-304.

Meanwhile, the rock is still there, resting comfortably  
at Bloor and Major.

And the bedrock of connection with Something More remains  
present, underneath the current of our individual lives.

We can always, and everywhere,  
return to the “home of our soul.”

No matter what our circumstances,  
these moments of returning, again and again,  
can keep us in touch  
with the spiritual foundation of our lives.

Something as mundane as a class reunion...  
Or as significant as a birth or a death...

Even something as routine as a meal or a walk...

Can reveal our  
inherent interconnection  
with the All That Is...  
and give us strength.

## §

My friend Cynthia is now a born-again Christian,  
and when we spoke at the reunion,  
she used the words  
God and Christ to reflect on  
what happened when she gave me a home.

But as the billion-year-old boulder reveals,  
it's not about the words we use.

It's about the presence of—and our presence to—  
something so much more than we can understand or name.

In the face of this Something More,  
we may experience what's called “spiritual humility”—

Not the ability to explain how or why we're moved,  
but simply the awareness that we are,  
and our gratitude for that.

Our presence to one another,  
accepting and encouraging,  
invites each of us to return to the home of our soul:

The home that is unconditionally loving,  
and completely connected to all that is.

Spiritual growth is not, ultimately, some individual pursuit...though  
in our culture that's what we might mistake it for.

Spiritual growth is more of a growing  
into deeper connection with all Beings.

We undertake this growing alone,  
but in parallel with others,  
and we all are, I believe, drawn toward  
the Source which contains us.

With that, I'll close with words from  
wisdom teacher Ram Dass:

“We're all going to the same place,  
and we're all on a path.  
Sometimes our paths converge.

Sometimes they separate,  
and we can hardly see each other,  
much less hear each other.

But on the good days,  
we're walking on the same path,  
close together,  
and we're walking each other home.”

It's good to be here on the path with you.

Amen.