

Lessons from the Underground: What the mushrooms have taught me about UU Values

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The Other Kingdoms - Mary Oliver

Consider the other kingdoms. The trees, for example, with their mellow-sounding titles: oak, aspen, willow.

Or the snow, for which the peoples of the north have dozens of words to describe its different arrivals. Or the creatures, with their thick fur, their shy and wordless gaze. Their infallible sense of what their lives are meant to be. Thus the world grows rich, grows wild, and you too, grow rich, grow sweetly wild, as you too were born to be.

“You too, grow rich, grow sweetly wild, as you too were born to be,”

This is a story about how I have been growing more rich, and more sweetly wild over the past year. It is a story of how I am learning to live more into our Unitarian values, particularly of interdependence, and how mushrooms have supported me along that path.

Eight years ago we chose to move to rural Nova Scotia for my husband’s work. While the move brought economic security to our family, it presented a number of challenges, including pulling me from my spiritual home at FirstU, and displacing me from my place of birth. The nearest UU church is in Halifax, a two-hour drive away, hardly conducive to weekly attendance.

In a heavily Catholic town, I struggled to find others who shared my spiritual values. In fact, my values felt more aligned with the local Mi’kmaw community, than with any of the places of worship attended by other White, Anglo Settlers. But as a non-Mi’kmaw person and a “come from away”, I felt like an imposter. Like so many of us, I was living on land disconnected from my ancestors. I felt a hunger to be in true relationship with the land but lacked a vocabulary and community to support me in doing so.

Since accessing a UU congregation seemed to be off the table, I focused on forging a relationship with the land as my source of spiritual renewal. I took up beekeeping because I had studied a form of European shamanism based on the sacred honeybee. During the pandemic we raised ducks and grew our own fruits and vegetables. I spent a lot of time outdoors, cultivating and caring for things, but much of it felt utilitarian and in retrospect, colonial. Honeybees are not native to North America. Rather than appreciating and cultivating a relationship with the more than two hundred species of native bees, I was trying to keep honeybees alive in a climate and hive environment that were not suited to their survival. After three years of losing bee colonies, I admitted defeat. I couldn't put another hive through that suffering again.

I have deep appreciation for the land here in Nova Scotia – the gorgeous vistas of rolling hills, the sunset over the ocean, the fresh, wild, blackberries outside my doorstep. But it often felt like my appreciation was voyeuristic and superficial. I would take photographs of the local wildlife, the beaches and the wild strawberries and post them to my Instagram feed, as if to craft a story of land connection that would be believable, not just to folks back in Ontario, but to myself.

Then a series of events began to unfold that shifted everything.

As part of my professional commitment to providing effective mental health services for veterans and others suffering from post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression, I enrolled in a new training program at Vancouver Island University to study psychedelic-assisted therapy. There, I met a fellow Nova Scotian, Keith Williams, who has family roots in a Mohawk community in southern Ontario. Keith's biography on Athabasca's faculty page states simply and humbly that his "main interest is learning how to be a better relative to the more-than-human world and supporting others to do the same." Keith is a trained mycologist but also has a deep personal relationship with mushrooms which he cultivates and attends to in the same way we would attend to relationships with our family members. Through him I began to see mushrooms not just as a tool for mental health treatment, but as members of our other-than-human family, members that deserve our respect.

As part of a series of events related to my education in psychedelic-assisted therapy, this past October I attended a psilocybin experiential training for health care professionals focusing on end-of-life care. Having spent a year training in psychedelic-assisted therapy, I knew intellectually that psilocybin mushrooms are one of the safest mind-altering substances in the world. There is no known lethal dose. Nonetheless, as I prepared to leave my husband and daughter and fly to Jamaica for the training, where

psilocybin is legal, I couldn't help but contemplate the theme of the training. My own mortality was very much on my mind.

The five-day training consisted of two medicine journeys. Both were facilitated by a skilled therapist with decades of experience in the field. The setting couldn't be more idyllic. Nestled in a small guest house in Treasure Bay, on the south of the island, hours away from the tourist resorts, we had access to a small but private beach and there was a herd of wild goats that would run by the gates of the property twice a day.

For my first journey, my intentions were somewhat vague. I wanted to learn what the mushrooms could teach me. I wanted to be introduced to its medicine, and I wanted to introduce myself back, with humility.

What I got was humility in spades. My hammock turned out to be located right over an anthill. There were times in my journey when ants were crawling all over me and my belongings. I was reminded of the giant anthill I had run over with my ride-on lawnmower the summer before. I was told through the medicine that I should have made an apology and an offering when that happened. In retrospect, this seems obvious. I would never think to drive over a family member and just keep going without stopping to apologize or make amends. I was thousands of kilometers away from Nova Scotia, and yet the ants had a message for me, which was being delivered via the mushroom spirits. As Unitarians we affirm the interdependence of all beings. In this journey I felt the embodiment of this truth.

Our second medicine journey two days later brought a whole new energy. It fell on November 1st, celebrated in many cultures as All Saints Day. It also happened to be the 18th birthday of my daughter, our only child. Our small group gathered objects and created an altar to our ancestors, calling in and honouring our deceased loved ones. Given the focus of our intentions, perhaps it is not surprising that in this second journey, I was greeted by my grandparents, and with some encouragement, invited to join them in experiencing unity conscious – a place of profound and limitless love that I cannot possibly convey with words.

During one part of this medicine journey, my grandfather, who came from a family lineage of Anglican Ministers, invited me to consider ministry as a calling, an invitation so surprising that I nearly fell off my hammock. But he made it abundantly clear that if I were to pursue that path, I should do it in a way that honoured women, and the earth. The part about honouring women felt like he was making repairs for the limiting gender beliefs he'd held while he was alive; beliefs that didn't have any noticeable impact on me, but that I know impacted my mother. The part about honouring the earth did *not*

come as a surprise. My grandfather lived a thrifty life, recycled long before it was a cultural norm, and treasured his daily walks right into his nineties. He also enjoyed photographing nature, a passion I inherited.

As I came out of that journey, I felt called to walk to the beach, where I watched the sunset over the ocean as an intense storm rolled in. As lightning cracked over the sea, I walked barefoot back to the guest house, with the mud squishing between my toes and the warm rain drenching my clothing. I erupted into giggles. I'm not sure if I have ever felt more alive.

Since that day I have frequently stopped to ponder how much we miss out on as humans in our attempts to avoid discomfort. If I were at home I would have run inside before the rain came, or donned an umbrella and raincoat and rainboots. For years I had a nightmare that I couldn't leave a building because my shoes had gone missing. It took me years to understand the meaning of this dream. It was trying to show me that the domestication and "civilization" process that brings us the slogan "No shirt, no shoes, no service" was preventing me from touching the earth. We have forgotten the magic in touching our skin to the earth, and bathing in a heavenly shower. In Exodus, God says to Moses "Take off your shoes. This is holy ground." God doesn't say "Put on your shoes. This is holy ground."

Not long after I returned from Jamaica, my friend Keith was asked on a webinar how White people can begin to develop an authentic relationship to place. His response touched me. He spoke of the importance of learning the preferences of things. He talked about his relationship to the mushrooms and how he notices *their* preferences. Where do they like to grow? What are the conditions that support them? What do they like to eat? It was simple yet powerful advice.

A couple of months after hearing this advice, I discovered the Merlin app. For those of you who don't know, the Merlin App was developed at Cornell University and enables bird identification through the recording feature on your phone. I come from a family of birders, and I have two bird tattoos, so birding felt immediately like an authentic way to explore the land around me and learn "the preferences of things." All of a sudden, walks have become not just an opportunity to exercise and enjoy good conversation with my friends and family. They have become daily adventures of bird discovery that bring delight and curiosity as I begin to learn of the preferences of the robins, finches, Cedar waxwings and other species of birds living in the woods around my home.

But one Sunday morning this summer, I woke and went out to listen to the birds, with my Merlin app primed on my phone in one hand, and my binoculars in the other, and I

began to notice a discomfort in my body. I had an uneasiness that I was stalking these birds so I could add them to my birding list, collecting them like trophies. I wondered if they were scared of me, and the thought saddened me. I felt a spontaneous desire to communicate with them. I, too, wanted to join them in greeting the sun at the beginning of the day. I wanted to tell them of my gratitude for their song. And so, without the normal self-consciousness I feel about singing, I began to sing to the birds. "Good morning, good morning, hello little birdies. Good morning, good morning, hello to you too." As I spotted birds I recognized, I began to sing to them individually. "Good morning, good morning, hello little warbler. Good morning, good morning, hello to you too." Perhaps it was my imagination, but I felt a shift in the energy, as if the birds had become delighted and curious about me too.

I was slowly developing a more intimate relationship with place, but still struggling with the community aspect of things. Thankfully, a series of web searches related to my newfound interest in ministry led me to something called the Wild Church Network. According to their website, "Wild Church gatherings offer opportunities for contemplation, grief and praise, movement and song, solo wandering and wondering, advocacy, ecological restoration and activism on behalf of and in collaboration with the beloved others in our watersheds."

Thomas Berry goes on to say: "Popping up all over the land, like wild mushrooms after a spring rain, Wild Church communities are responding to a call from deep within to change the way we relate to the natural world, moving *"from a collection of objects, to a communion of subjects."*

As serendipity would have it, there is a Wild Church in my little town of Antigonish, run by the local Anglican Priest, Natasha. I attended my first service last month, in which we took 40 minutes to saunter the beach before returning to share our stories and insights. Yesterday we gathered again, this time on the land of the Sisters of Saint Martha, and I chose to walk a contemplative path through the woods. Knowing this was holy ground, I took *off* my shoes, and walked the path barefoot.

As I walked, I sang my morning bird song. Without even realizing I had done it, I shifted the second part of the song from "Hello to you too" to "Hello *how are you?*" When I noticed what I had done, I realized I couldn't ask this question unless I was prepared to pause and listen for the answer. So I paused and listened, and I felt I could hear not just the birds, but the insects and land answering back. Those woods are a holy place, used for decades for deep spiritual contemplation. The beings seemed to echo back that contentment to me.

As I scurried to get back to the group in time for our storytelling, I began wondering what I might hear if I truly began listening to the answer to that simple question “how are you?” every time I went outside my home. What might the birds and bees reply to my inquiry after I ran my lawnmower around the yard? What might a bird reply after accidentally colliding into my window? In this moment I was struck by what a different world we would live in if everyone on earth was in relationship with the more-than-human world right outside their doorstep.

As Unitarians, we affirm values of love, interdependence, transformation and equity. But how often do we feel the resonance of these values in every cell of our body? How might a willingness to ingest and partner with a sacred medicine like psilocybe mushrooms support us in more deeply embodying our UU values?

While there is a flurry of research and capital investment going into using and producing these medicines for the benefit of our mental health care system, there is a less talked about aspect, which has to do with how we can use these medicines to change our relationship to each other, ourselves, and the planet.

As Terence McKenna says: *“Psychedelics are illegal not because a loving government is concerned that you may jump out of a third story window. Psychedelics are illegal because they dissolve opinion structures and culturally laid down models of behaviour and information processing. They open you up to the possibility that everything you know is wrong.”*

In fact, the legal case that is currently making its way through the courts in Ontario is not a case about access to psilocybin as a mental health treatment. It is about access on the basis of freedom of thought. Lawyers Paul Lewin and Jim Dean are arguing the case by demonstrating evidence that psilocybin promotes interpersonal closeness, gratitude, well-being, compassion, empathy, and spiritual experiences, among other qualities. When I read this list and reflect on my own experiences, I can't help but agree. I also can't help but see the parallels between these qualities and our UU values.

I am by no means suggesting that psilocybin specifically, or psychedelics more broadly, are a panacea or are appropriate for everyone. Far from it. But I am suggesting that there is an interesting alignment between the gifts of sacred medicine, an Indigenous worldview, and our UU values that is worth exploring. There is something fundamentally ironic about taking a mushroom, synthesizing it in a lab, getting a prescription for it from a doctor, and dispensing it in a clinic under artificial lighting. As UUs who are committed to values such as interdependence, pluralism, and equity, I believe we have a moral duty to protect these medicines from cultural appropriation and commodification, and

encourage a relationship of reciprocity with these plants, rather than exploiting them for our own benefit.

I know I still have a long way to go to move into right relationship with the other-than-human world, and to feel that I have earned my place amongst the trees and river and creatures that surround my home. But I also know they are rooting for me. I know that the mushrooms my friend Keith gathers from the land want to give me the patience to sit and watch a spider build her web for three hours, as I did one afternoon. I know that I am becoming more tolerant of the mosquitos and blackflies, knowing that my blood sustains them, which then sustains the birds and their songs. I know that the bees and butterflies appreciate my garden, as I appreciate the fruit that comes from their labour. Ultimately, what this journey has helped me with is to move beyond a cognitive understanding that we are all part of an interdependent web of all beings, to living this truth in an embodied way.

I want to close with a quote from Victoria Lorz, the founder of the [Wild Church Network](#), and the [Seminary of the Wild Earth](#), where I will begin training in eco-ministry next week:

“The time has come to lift that veil of fog and return to intimate relationship with the living world. More and more of us are taking our place, once again, as full participants in the web of life, which we remember is held together by love. There are no magic words to incant, no spiritual laws to memorize, no ruby-slippered heels to click three times. You don’t need to read a hundred new ecotheology books or to leave the church or become an animist or pantheist. (But you can if you want to.) You simply need to learn how to listen. And allow your heart to be broken, just like you do every time you fall in love.”