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NATURE, WONDER, AND DESERT WILDERNESS...

There is something deeply ‘human’-ising being in a garden.

Listening to the rustle of eucalyptus leaves in a light spring wind overhead.
Watching abee flirt with a yellow daisy bush.

Kneeling onto a patch of soil planting a newly purchased seedling,
while gently moving aside a startled reddish-purple Squirter earthworm or two...
Biophilia—the love of nature and living things.

Now... some of you may have recognised those words, having heard them before.
If you didn’t let me confess: they shaped the Closing Words I wrote
for the Australia & New Zealand Unitarian Universalist Association Service
in late August, when they were read at the end by Clay Nelson.

But in the spirit of most TV salespeople, there’s more!
They were originally written as part of a chapter in a forthcoming book
being edited by Australian biblical scholar Greg Jenks, the book’s working title being
Afterlives: Jesus in Global Perspective.

My chapter is titled “In Celebration of a ‘wild’ faith: Jesus in the Australian Landscape”.

And there’s even more!
Just after I had submitted my chapter to Greg, I was asked by another colleague
to write a commendation for his new book...
Christian Sex Today: Lessons from Moses, Paul, Jesus and Darwin.

While the latter may arouse more interest,
I want to spend time this morning on the former:
some of what I wrote in my landscape and ‘wild’ faith chapter.
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Earthlings have a special connection to the planet... ‘out of the stars have we come’ says the poet.
The human story and the universe story are the same story, says the geologist.
We are not encapsulated, separated, isolated beings, says the cosmologist.

Earth’s climate, warm and stable, allows for life to thrive in a bewildering diversity.
And for those looking for a link between my chapter and my colleague’s book on sex...
“A short stroll through a jungle or a coral reef and we are overcome by the ecological
wealth, plants and animals that fight for survival, searching for food, struggling to
preserve their genetic imprint from generation to generation. Life uses the
present to create the future.”

Earth—a pale blue dot as dubbed by Carl Sagan—is our home in the universe.
Responsibility for the future of the planet rests with us.
Or as Rabbi Abraham Heschel noted, human beings are the cantors of the universe.

So how we picture the world and ourselves is important.

The capacity of the natural world
to inspire a religious response from humans
has long been recognised.

So instead of being perceived as 'rulers of the universe'
we need to see ourselves as part of an interconnected web.
As the golden wattle is the universe in the form of a tree
we are the universe in the form of a human, with or without arthritic fingers!
oo0oo

Australia is an ancient and distinctive land, with animals and plant life
—"the colours have an almost savage intensity, which accords with the primeval quality of the
Australian bush"—that are quite remarkable in their own right.

During a visit to the MacDonal Rangers in Central Australia some years back,
ethnographer Debrah Bird Rose wrote of the surrounding landscape:
"These rocks were ancient, and their colours suggested that instead of fading with age,
geological eons had intensified them... Below us the riverbed was pale, pebbly sand,
above us the sky was bluer than blue, and here and there we met eucalypts—most
spectacularly, the white-barked ghost gums that articulate themselves so definitely
against the red earth and blue sky."

An ancient land indeed!
The oldest rocks in Western Australia, for example, are 4.3 billion years old,
almost twice that of the rocks in South Australia,
and seven times older than the oldest rocks of the east coast.

Yet those deserts soils produce the planet's greatest diversity of flowering plants,
with up to twelve thousand species.
And for the record... flowering plants are the dominant plants of the earth,
and are the reason the surface of the planet is not lifeless.

Australia has ten named deserts,
the largest being the Great Victoria Desert which crosses the border
into both Western Australia and South Australia.

It is over 800 kilometers wide with an area of 348,750 square kilometers.
In total the ten deserts cover nearly 1.4 million square kilometers
or 18% of the Australian mainland.
Result? Australia has been called the driest continent on earth.
A desert surrounded by a coastal fringe.

Perception of what is a desert or wilderness area, varies greatly.
It depends on the different exposures people have to nature and the 'great outdoors'.
To a person living on the coast, the desert is often dry, arid, and dusty.
A place without life. Empty. Expendable wasteland.
Sites for the detonation of nuclear weapons, often by foreign powers!

For desert dwellers the 'outback' has a compelling fascination, a place vibrant with life.
The spinifex are blue grey with amber glints.

It may look as if nothing can live in the desert,
but underneath the spinifex, the desert creatures leave their tracks in the red sand.
as they live out their delicate but vastly tough lives in this harsh habitat.

In the heart of the Australian 'red centre' is a massive sandstone monolith: Uluru or 'The Rock'.
As you would know Uluru is more than just a rock.

It is a living cultural landscape considered sacred
to the Yankunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara people.

The spirits of their ancestral beings continue to reside in these sacred places
making the land a deeply important part of Aboriginal cultural identity
and 'Dreaming stories'.

The three major Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—are all desert-born faiths.
The desert is seen as a place where a person can more readily commune with the divine.

And desert wilderness was deemed important in establishing one's 'credentials,
even if some aspects of the traditions, including the Jesus tradition,
are now considered legend

The challenge for us is to see deserts as they really are;
the interrelationship of human, rocks, plants, and animals,
which for many form a sacred and healing story.
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The epigraph of my chapter was some words which appears
in a collection of the sage's teaching scenarios
and which I read today:

'Study—get to know intimately—the wild lilies and how they grow...'

What interested me was not the historical question—did Joe say them?—but the congruence
between nature and beauty in the scenario.

It prompted me to ask:

What role, if any, did beauty play in Jesus' teachings?
What are we to make of beauty?

In my chapter I offered the following...
The lilies scenario is not just a throw-away line
about some unnamed wildflowers in a desert,
which Jesus just happened to see.

Whatever else the sage is suggesting in this teaching
he seems to draw his listeners attention that everywhere they look—
from the ground under their feet to the stars in the sky,
to sunsets and sunrises, mountains and valleys... and wildflowers—
the universe appears to be saturated with beauty—intrinsic beauty.

Could this be an unspoken gift from the very human sage, Jesus?
Provoking hearers to remember that beauty is the guiding lure in every becoming moment?
Because when we awaken to the call of beauty,
we become aware of new ways of being in the world.

Could this also be for us the 'afterlife' of that same human Jesus
as it inspires in us an ethic of ecological care
to make us passionate supporters of actions and regulations
aimed at protecting air, water, soil, endangered species, and wilderness?
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We have lost touch with our wildness.
As others have observed, when outside often our gaze is fixed on our smartphones
taking selfies to post on YouTube for others to appreciate,
instead of being in the moment appreciating the wonders and beauty
of the natural world and how amazing it is.

All religious traditions need to appreciate that the primary sacred community is the universe itself.
Every other community becomes sacred by participation in this primary community.
It invites a larger sense of life.
It requires the language of reverence.
In moments of wonder we delight in what is.

When we lose our sense of awe, wonder, and beauty, we objectivise the Earth.
If there is to be a valid experience of spirituality for our age
its basis must be found in a reciprocal relation between human
and the natural environment.

So, with help from a colleague's recent magazine editorial, I end where I began... in a garden.
Each year at spring we wait as the first buds appear,
the coming of the flowers,
the harmony of colours, and
the spreading of the plants to match the garden space.

When the reality happily corresponds to our vision and planning,
our first response is normally one of wonder and gratitude.
If frost, drought or insect infestation devastate the planned garden,
we are not deterred but move to Plan B to adapt to the conditions.

The garden is not something that we lord over but something that we serve.
Its flowering is a gift that surprises us. (*Andrew Hamilton*)
Us.
Each an earth creature.
At home in the universe.

Now... anymore than this,
you'll have to be present at my next Address in this place, should that occur.
Or buy Greg's book when it is published next year!