

Reflections in Solitude — Week 6

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Two weeks ago, on a Sunday evening, fatigued with my own anxious quest for answers amidst the drone of speculation about the what, when and how of this pandemic, I turned to the familiar and consoling voice of Wendell Berry. I could have pulled any number of trusted companions from the shelf, but Berry is one of my oldest and dearest.

Since that evening, I have been reading Berry's collection of *Sabbath Poems* again. These poems, written by Berry on Sunday mornings, speak of the gifts some of us are unearthing during these slower, largely close-to-home days. Here's the beginning of one such poem written in the autumn of 1988:

*Always in the distance
the sound of cars is passing
on the road, that simplest form
going only two ways,
both ways away. And I
have been there in that going.*

*But now I rest and am
apart, a part of the form
of the woods always arriving
from all directions home...*



Like Berry's occasional Sabbath practice of sauntering through the fields and woods of his farm, many of us are spending more time outside where we are noticing the minute details in our gardens, having adventures in and marvelling at the rain, exercising, exploring and befriending places close to home. Some are cleaning neglected cupboards and sheds—not only stumbling across useful yet long-forgotten things, but also memories. Others are reaching out to give and care in new ways, discovering community beyond the bounds of familiar friends and family. And finally, hopefully most of us are growing in our realisation that church is not the building and worship is not just a Sunday morning thing as we weave moments of gratitude and prayer into our days, encountering the sacred everywhere.

As we begin to anticipate a return to freedom of movement, I hear both welcome relief and resistance. As a fellow Minister said this week, "I want more time for this new way of being to really take hold!"

It occurs to me that sometimes we feel as though we are victim to our schedules and actions. We speak as though the external demands and expectations are the drivers of our lives, as if we don't have a choice in the matter.

In John 10, a shepherding image is used to identify our vulnerability to competing claims and voices. Along with the beckoning of life we have moved towards recently, perhaps we have also heard the muttering of "thieves and bandits", voices inside and outside of us that lead to shadowy places of desolation.

These voices squeeze in through openings such as self-doubt and criticism, a lack of self-awareness or refusal to look closely at certain habits, attitudes and behaviours. However they make their way in, whatever their sound, these voices rob us of so much.

But like the sheep in the Gospel, we *already know* the Shepherd's voice. When we are attentive, *we can hear* the calling of the One who leads us toward the abundant life God intends.

Indeed, these weeks have highlighted for me what life could look like, not just for me but for others and for creation. I feel a strong invitation to move with greater intention towards that which leads to justice, peace, and love for all of creation.

My experience of turning to Wendell Berry has reminded me that voices that guide us well do not simply placate or sooth. They will not leave us as we are. In listening to Berry, I am stretched at times. For even as his familiar voice is comforting, Berry, like all wise companions, challenges and coaxes me beyond my comfort zones.

During Tuesday evening's Emergency Relief meal, for instance, one of our friends shared his experience of marginalisation. He spoke of the treatment some receive because, in his words, "we look different or act different." I gently asked if he had experienced this before. "Oh yeah..." he said, his eyes dropping and the conversation pausing as we sat with the hurt that had been revealed and my part in it at times.

Then we spoke about the possibilities for more life-giving ways of being—in particular at St. Andrews. As I asked him about his ideas, I gestured around the hall space where we were gathered in a circle eating.

Without hesitation, he said confidently, "This needs to be a place where everyone feels special. Each of us is unique, and when we treat one another that way, then we all feel welcome and there are no problems."

I am moved and challenged by his wise offering. I sense in it one of the many doors that are opening for me—for us—at this time.

"I am the gate." Jesus said. "Whoever enters by me... will find pasture." The tense of the Greek word translated as "find" is a vibrant one that denotes an ongoing action. It speaks of a discovery that is more expansive than when we locate our keys under a piece of paper on the kitchen bench. Rather, when we listen for the voice of the Living Christ—in creation, in others, deep within ourselves—there will be a continual encounter with the divine that is beyond expectation.

As our days pick up the pace, perhaps, and competing demands press in, may we have eyes and ears to see and hear the voice of True Life. May we have the courage to listen and follow into generous spaces within and beyond us that are always opening to deeper, truer love.

A poem about attentiveness and being alert to the Voice calling us to Life everywhere.

Sabbath Poem: 1987.I

by Wendell Berry

Coming to the woods' edge
on my Sunday morning walk,
I stand resting a moment beside
a ragged half-dead wild plum
in bloom, its perfume
a moment enclosing me,
and standing side by side
with the old broken blooming tree,
I almost understand,
I almost recognise as a friend
the great impertinence of beauty
that comes even to the dying,
even to the fallen, without reason
sweetening the air.

I walk on,
distracted by a letter accusing me
of distraction, which distracts me
only from the hundred things
that would otherwise distract me
from this whiteness, lightness,
sweetness in the air. The mind
is broken by the thousand
calling voices it is always too late
to answer, and that is why it yearns
for some hard task, lifelong, longer
than life, to concentrate it
and to make it whole.

But where is the all-welcoming,
all-consecrating Sabbath
that would do the same? Where
the quietness of the heart
and the eye's clarity
that would be a friend's reply
to the white-blossoming plum tree?

