

Hidden Lives

HIDDEN LIVES

A Homily Delivered to the

Unitarian Society of Menomonie, WI

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About a month ago I was driving back home from Star Prairie, the town where Jayne and I lived before we moved here. We keep the records of our oldest animals at the veterinarian's there, and I had taken Sassy, our 13 year old cat, up for some blood tests. I like to drive the back roads when I'm not in a hurry, and I wasn't then, so I had swung around on County Road T to head back through Hammond, when I suddenly felt the call of nature. It was a rather insistent call, so I pulled alongside some overgrown trees at what I recognized used to be a driveway.

The house there has long been gone, at least since before we moved to Star Prairie, so at least 15 years by my guess. I don't know if it was before its abandonment or after, but there'd

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been a fire that destroyed the house, leaving just charred timber that's long since grown over with ivy and crumbled the cement foundation. There's an old tumbling down barn still within a stone's throw of the foundation, and a single stand of trees planted in a rectangle that cut the house and barn out from the surrounding fields, and the trees are all about 20 feet tall, so my guess is it was a farmhouse dating probably from the turn of the century. All this is easily visible from the road.

Anyway, I stepped inside the rectangle of trees and answered nature's call, and I was just about to step back onto the road and into my car and drive off, when I saw a sudden flash of yellow through the green to my left. It was a bright yellow, the yellow of tennis balls and those neon shirts road construction crews wear so you can see them. I stepped closer. The yellow was daffodils, bright, glittery, gorgeous daffodils, surrounded and all but drowned in weeds and grass. It was a patch a couple dozen yards and across the drive from the house's foundation, facing what had probably been the front door.

There wasn't especially anything strange about these daffodils. After a few minutes of just looking at them and appreciating them, I got back in my car and drove off. But they stuck with me for days afterward. For a while, I wondered who had planted them, and why. Some lonely farmwife, desperate for bright colors in the midst of that drab sameness, hay and cattle and earth? Some bachelor farmer, who loved to look out at pretty things? Perhaps they'd been simply stuck in the earth by someone whose child had given her a potfull for Easter one year, and rather than letting them die off planted them in the ground to give them a fighting chance. Ultimately it didn't matter. It only mattered that they had been growing there, in that semi-circular spot, year in and year out, for nearly two decades. At least. And while it's probable I

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wasn't the only one who'd seen them since the farm's occupants left, I might be the only one who knows they're still coming up.

I'm reminded of a time I went hiking in a new area in rural New York with a friend. We followed a road to its end and then bushwhacked up the slope of a mountain and back down. On our return to the car, we decided to explore a house we had seen just off the road. People tend to think of New York State as overpopulated, easy to imagine given the crowdedness of New York City. But the state was among the first colonized, and before that it was one of the more populous centers of American Indian populations, home to good game and easily navigable waters including the Hudson River. As a result, it's not unusual to find abandoned houses and the remnants of formerly bustling towns now reduced to a handful of people. You won't find the sort of ghost town you'd see in Colorado or Arizona, but you will find overgrown and crumbling homesteads.

In general, these places are decades old and it's not unusual in New York for people to make a living by scavenging the homes for antiques or anything salable. When I worked in an antique store in New Paltz, there were several people who supplied us who went tramping through the more remote areas in search of salvageable furniture or glass or toys or even books that could be refurbished and put on the market. The Hudson River Valley antique market thrives on those sorts of things.

My friend and I weren't looking for anything we could sell. We expected that the house had long since been picked over. What we found instead was a crumbling newer sort of place whose back rooms had split off the house by the inclement weather, but whose rooms were otherwise full of stuff. I don't mean they hadn't been picked through—they obviously had,

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clothes thrown all over the place; empty beer and liquor bottles all over the place; mattresses taken off beds, probably used when the passion for destruction gave way to other passions ; the contents of the refrigerator flung here and there and left to rot. There were expiration dates on some of the containers, so the place had only been abandoned relatively recently, probably in the last ten years. My friend searched the furniture which was still in relatively good shape but it was all modern particle board stuff, the sort of thing that used by renters that could easily be abandoned at one apartment and replaced cheaply.

What struck me though were the boxes and boxes of photographs. Some had been opened and the photos spilled out and exposed to the weather, but a lot of them were untouched. The photos weren't odd or anything like that—they were exactly the sorts of photos I'd find in your house. Family portraits, candid snapshots. People leaning against new cars and children playing on swing sets. Christmas mornings, kids opening packages. You could date the photos by the length of hair on the men and the cut of skirts on the women. The type of photos too would have suggested they had been collected for a long time—there were Kodak snaps with their printing dates stamped into the back, most from the early 60s, and Polaroid instamatics with their telltale jagged edges, and the big plastic pictures with lots of white space from the blocky Handle instant cameras that were popular when I was a teen.

The normalness of it all in the midst of the chaos of the rest of the place was disquieting. I envisioned perhaps the whole family had been scooped up by aliens or the government and spirited away, and when they returned the pictures would be there for them to remember who they were and what they'd been.

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This brings me to today again. When I walk my dogs on the trail near my house I'm often accosted by scents and sounds I can't identify. There are woods all around me and Robert Frost was right when describing them as "lovely, dark and deep." I've tromped around woods and forests much of my life, hiked them, explored them, lived in them. They still hold mystery for me—even a narrow roadside strand planted for show will, after a time, take on mystery. There are strong sweet smells suggestive of flowers and flowering trees and rotting vegetable and animal matter I can't identify. I can get lost there for hours, wandering. I hear birds or I think they're birds screaming and shrieking in the undergrowth with a caustic sound that grates on my ears and makes me wince at its violence.

What do all these things—the daffodils, the photos, the smells and sounds—have in common? Not a one of them is there for me. To be sure, the photos and the trail I walk the dogs on and the roadside stands are man-made, the daffodils obviously planted by someone. But the photos didn't remain in their boxes for me. The daffodils don't bloom every year for me. The flowers I smell bring pleasant and unpleasant sensations to me, but the smell is there irrespective of me. The bird cries grate on my ears but they aren't intended to frighten me.

We are tempted to think of all these things in their relation to humanity and specifically in their relation to the individual us. But as we know from books like Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us* and television shows like the History Channel's *Life After People*, we aren't necessary. Even a film like M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening*, which has received all sorts of nasty reviews, and from what I've seen of it deservedly so, posits that the world might actively seek to be rid of us. Frankly, the sad truth is we're not that important. Lives go on without us. Daffodils continue to bloom when no one is there to tend to them or even to see them. Photos stay in boxes when there is no one there to take them out, flowers smell when no

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one is there to appreciate them, animals shriek when there's no one there to hear them. Yes, when a tree falls in the forest and there's no one to hear, it does make a sound.

The humbling reality is that, contra pre-Socratic philosopher Protagoras and our own self-reflective feeling, man is not the measure of all things. Things are the measure of things. Daffodils, trees, birds, photos—they exist outside us, outside any meaning we might want to give them. They *are*, in all the complexity that word conjures and they *are* outside us. It is, in fact, our relation to *them* that gives *us* meaning.