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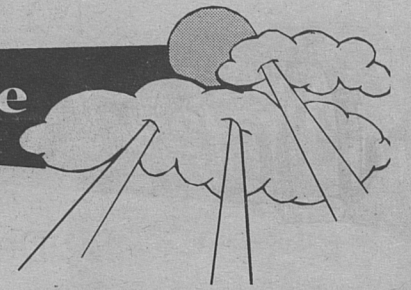
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**The Spiritual Essence**



By The Rev. Jane Dwinell

What moves you? What touches your innermost being? What causes you to stop and breathe and give thanks? What makes you realize you are just a tiny part of our vast and mysterious universe?

For me, it is usually something in the natural world – a hummingbird at the feeder, a thunderstorm that roars in from the west, a crystal-clear, fresh snow day on the mountain, a mother fox and her babies scurrying across the road, a flock of Canada geese that know where they're going.

Seeing, or being part of, these things causes me to stop what I'm doing and pay attention. They snap me out of my small life and into a sense of greater connection with all that is holy.

I recently had the special opportunity to travel to Alaska. I had always wanted to go to the far north and be in a world I could hardly imagine – sweeping vistas and long, long summer days, bear and moose and caribou, frozen tundra and glaciers. I was excited to be a part of it all and what the trip would bring to me personally.

Unfortunately, I traveled to Alaska via cruise ship along the Inside Passage and discovered a world I did not want to be part of. As the ship sailed past vast forests and rocky, snow-capped mountains rising from the sea, those on board learned about the shopping experiences that awaited us in Alaska. On our room TVs or in one of the many lounges on board, we could learn how to shop in Alaska: what native art was the most authentic, where to get the best deals on jewelry and watches and those ubiquitous tourist t-shirts. These talks were done by the Shopping Specialist crew member.

Thank goodness there was

also a Naturalist crew member who explained about the Alaskan geology and geography, about the wildlife and their habitat, and who sat on the bridge and announced whale sightings over the public address system. Whose lectures were more widely attended? Or was everyone too busy gambling in the on-board casino to bother?

My cynical side emerged when the ship came into port.

lunch on the shore, hunks of ice floating by. Here you could see history in the making, and understand at last how our beautiful state was carved out of such glaciers. Even though the crew was busy hawking Irish Coffee and Mulled Wine on deck as the passengers watched the glaciers calve massive chunks of ice, the natural world won out. I was pleased to learn that after this year cruise ships will no longer be

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There, alongside 2 or 3 other cruise ships, each carrying 1500 passengers, the throngs embarked to go shopping. These were small Alaskan towns with downtowns just made for the cruise industry, with locals hawking their wares, or their tour to the salmon fishery or the local glacier. Buy, buy, buy came from every corner, and the streets were so crowded one could hardly walk down them at all.

Just beyond the town, if you could get there, were those stunning peaks, and hidden mountain lakes, and wildlife unlike that at home. There were hiking trails, and for a brief period of time, Alaska opened up before you. And it was beautiful, and touching.

We spent one day cruising Glacier Bay where hundreds of glaciers were growing or receding, each dumping their lode of ice into the waters of the bay. Here you could see incredible natural beauty – 15,000 foot peaks, the eerie green water of glacial melt, a bear catching

allowed in Glacier Bay as their presence is damaging this unique place.

How do we want to live? Do we want to live as consumers, using up resources both natural and man-made alike? Or do we want to live in harmony with this planet – insects and mammals, sunflowers and pine trees, life-giving water, and fertile soil, and humans of all kinds? We have a choice. Living in harmony with the natural world, for me, is more than simply taking care of our home. It is a way to touch the deepest places inside me, it is a way to connect with something larger than myself, it is a way to give thanks for all that is my life.

*The Rev. Jane Dwinell serves the First Universalist Parish, a Unitarian Universalist congregation, in Derby Line, VT. She lives with her partner, Sky, and their two children, Dana and Sayer, on the shores of beautiful Lake Memphremagog.*

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**Jade continued from page seventeen**

'good for the soul'...I believe he saved his own during that meeting. His methods of service provision promoting a narrow focus of religious doctrine were actually being questioned. How dare I? How dare the funders? How dare that assaulted woman?

This was an extreme example of someone abusing their religious 'label'. Unpalatable as the recollection is, there are subtle abuses of individuals which do not come to light. Such as the quiet re-location of the psychiatric facilities.

Granted the letter to the Editor was one person's account of the situation. There are people in positions to answer questions, if anyone, as an individual asks.

The holidays are still approaching. And, I wonder how much any of us will be affected by these subtle shifts in our community, in our country? Individual responses vary with the seasons, personal issues and time constraints. The Bush administration is paying back the millions in support from the religious right

during the election. But that expense will be nothing in comparison to the cost in freedom for anyone seeking support who is different. Actually, the popular myths surrounding attitudes against anyone seeking services will be the real winners. How dare people have lives where things go wrong, they are homeless, have an addiction or experience a shift in functioning be it physical, emotional or mental resulting in a need for care? Who do they think they are? Where do they think they are? America?

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