

Coming Down From the Mountain  
by Julianne Lepp  
Delivered at Georgia Mountains Unitarian Universalist Church, Dahlonega, GA  
July 12, 2009

Meditation by Kimberly Beyer-Nelson

In the hours before the birds  
stream airborne  
with chiming voice,  
a silent breath rests in the pines,  
and upholds the surface of the lake  
as if it were a fragile bubble  
in the very hand of God.  
And I think,  
this is how we are called.  
To cup our hands and hold  
this peace,  
even when the sirens begin,  
even when sorrow cries out, old and gnarled,  
even when words grow fangs and rend.  
Cupped hands  
gently open,  
supporting peace  
like the golden hollow of a singing bowl,  
like the towering rim of mountains  
cradling  
this slumbering and mist-draped valley.

Coming Down From the Mountain

It isn't hard to picture...standing in the quiet of the morning mist, we look up and there is a glorious peak in front of us. Draped in green and lush trees, the birds are nagging the morning to wake. This lush mystery of otherness and escape calls to something primal in us to discover new horizons... within and without. There is something romantic about going to the mountain top. In the Sound of Music, I was fascinated watching the escape of the Von Trapp family into the mountains. You know the song... (singing)Climb every mountain....

Escaping to the mountain top is certainly not a new phenomenon. There is the ancient image of the reclusive sage or oracle on the mountain top. For thousands of years ordinary people have made

mountain sojourns and pilgrimage to holy wells, hermitages, or monasteries. Yet the mountain top has many connotations. It has the connotation of retreat and escape. It can also be something to conquer. There are those who have died and struggled to climb Everest and other great peaks. Yet, that which is considered a great time in our life is called a “mountain top experience!” The mountain is not only a place that calls us, but a metaphor that captures the imagination.

There is no doubt that we are tempted to go to the top of the mountain. Here in Dahlenega, how many of you were attracted to the mountains for the beauty, peace, and retreating feeling of it all? There are those that move to the mountains away from bustling cities and lives and try to find a different pace or a different lifestyle. My father, stepmother, and mother-in-law have all done this in their retirement. In Dahlenega, I know there is quite a community of artistic and creative people that find inspiration and freedom in the natural world to create and commune among such a lovely place and people. Yet even here in Dahlenega, it is hard to keep the mountain top mentality in the stress of everyday life. There are bills, struggles, and mentality in the stress of everyday life. There are bills, struggles, and even traffic. Even in lovely surroundings, retreat can be elusive.

In Rabbi David Cooper's book, *Entering the Sacred Mountain*, the rabbi writes of his first retreat and sojourn. He was drawn to a famous mountain retreat where many famous spiritual gurus from the sixties and seventies had retreated and studied. The High Hermitage of Lama mountain is situated just below a ridge of the San Cristobal range, overlooking a spacious portion of northern New Mexico. The name Lama means *mud*, and a local spring on that mountain was reported to have healing qualities by local Native Americans. A well worn path cuts across the mountain, passing not many meters from the hermitage where the rabbi first retreated. For dozens of generations the trail has been known as the Peace trail, because many hundreds of years ago an unwritten treaty by hostile tribes covenanted that no acts of war would be tolerated on that path. Lama mountain besides being a symbolic healing place, is truly a place of mystical healing and peace. People continue to be transformed and healed in the heights and solitude of Lama mountain.

What is your Lama mountain?

Where do you find the renewal and peace that you need?

We are primarily earth-bound creatures, perhaps it is in the heights and majesty of the ancient mountains we feel connected to something much deeper...something primal and powerful. Rabbi Cooper recounted, "From this height, over nine thousand feet above sea level, weather fronts can be sighted hundreds of miles away. Thunderclouds, larger than cities, move ponderously across the valley below. A thousand shades of gray swirl into each other, mixing in a huge cauldron like a witches brew....When the clouds come closer, thunder prevails, and the sisters of bedlam, chaos, and pandemonium shriek into the wind." I understand completely what the rabbi found in this wild moment of weather magic. There is an ancient sense of mountain and sky – the elements stirring and broiling. To be caught up in a storm on a mountain peak is to be laid bare to mother nature, and stripped of the safety of modern things. It connects to that sense that there is something larger than ourselves. What is my power and strength, when the driving wind and rain propel me to cover and shelter? Yet hundreds-year-old trees shake and bend in the elements, as if dancing to an unheard beat.

When I was retreating at The Unitarian Universalist Mountain retreat in Highlands, North Carolina, I have gotten a sense of this wild glory of the erupting weather. The uniquely wind gnarled trees that decorate the landscape of the Mountain attest to the strength and fortitude of nature. During my stay at the mountain I experienced the winds and storm that can come up suddenly and fiercely. Yet even in the maelstrom, there is a certain peace – a certain eternity of experience. Retreating to the mountain top is not all meditation mats and peaceful vistas. A person can reconnect with that powerful sense of the mystery and strength of the elements. The force of the storm reminds us of that while we have many modern gadgets and computers, the storm is yet still stronger.

Sometimes we go to the mountaintop to be reminded of our connection to something larger, and a sense of our connection in the greater balance of life and death. Some find God on the mountain and

in nature, others find a sense of wonder of the interconnected web of life. The mountain top experience is about transformation. The mountain top experience is about shedding the safety of cubicle and computer and experiencing the wonder of the heights – that awareness of the magic of where earth and sky meet. I have little doubt that many of you know why you might be called to the mountaintop, yet I wonder how many of us know *why* we should come down!

For some of us it is easy to retreat to the mountain, the hard part is bringing the mountain back with us. How can we bring the peace of the mountain top experience to modern life? While we are called to retreat and feed our spirits at the wellspring of renewal – how can we translate that feeling into the everyday routine of life? How often have you taken a vacation and then needed another one after one day back at work? Holding peace is a challenge

I think one trick in this is to find that we don't always have to *physically* go to the mountaintop to experience powerful retreat or spiritual connection. It doesn't necessarily take a mystical sojourn to tune into the sacred. In times of questioning seekers would often go out into unfamiliar wild spaces, into the deserts, into mountain caves or to mountain peaks for contemplation. There are accounts of the seekers Jesus, Buddha, and Moses who journeyed into the wilderness. Unless one counts the womb-like quality of a cozy coffee house that is not often left to us in these times. One of the challenges of emptying ourselves and looking inward, is that the modern value for emptiness often symbolizes a “lack of.” How can we make time for this in our scheduled and busy lives?

There are ways to journey, besides a pilgrimage or a vacation. It can be as simple as creating a sacred space, where you honor yourself with quiet or meditative time. Rabbi Cooper, who had the mountain experience on Lama mountain, had increasingly more powerful experiences simply on his meditation mat. When he discovered that he did not need to relocate his body to experience new vistas, that he simply needed to open his mind, he began to have visions, awakenings, and understandings that powerfully transformed his life. The mountaintop transformation experience was met in the vistas of his mind's eye and his readiness to travel inward, instead of simply outward.

Taking this time for retreat might mean waking up 30 minutes before the rest of the family for some quiet, centering or a maybe go for a jog alone. In our process oriented and results valued society, these periods of searching and dislocation can seem pointless and frustrating. The question often comes up, can't I just hurry up and figure it out? Can't I speed up this whole self discovery thing? In my own frustrations I have found that these times can be excruciating, and go at the speed they will. But, these times are absolutely necessary to recharge, reorient. It is essential to go through this inward time to make ready for the next move forward in life. William Bridges in his book *Transitions* says it is something akin to Alice at the bottom of the rabbit hole, muttering "It'll be no use their putting their heads down and saying, 'Come up again, dear!' I shall only look up and say, 'Who am I, then? Tell me that first, and then if I like being that person, I'll come up: if not, I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else – but, oh dear!'", cried Alice with a sudden burst of tears, "I do wish they would put their heads down! I am so *very* tired of being all alone here!"

Self searching can be a lonely business, but it has been in those places of retreat and aloneness that we have been birthed and where traditionally people have gone to birth themselves anew. These are the spaces of transformation. You don't have to go to Tibet or to the mountain top hermitage to have them – they can happen in solitary walks. They can happen while stirring the morning coffee, if the mind is ready and the heart is willing.

There are also times, when being alone is not the option we want – nor necessarily the right choice at the time. We can also seek truth in groups. Our mountaintop experiences and “aha” moments can also happen among friends, loved ones, and even total strangers. Community is often what holds us aloft, when we are riding rough currents. It is beloved community where we can let down defenses, and refresh ourselves. In groups someone might say the right word or do the one action you really need at that time. With others the pilgrimage can also seem a bit less lonely or scary.

So what does this mountaintop experience – these moments of transformation and realization call us to? Transformation is a funny thing. It not only stirs up our insides, but it also stirs up our

outsides. Just like the sudden storms at the Mountain retreat, it buffets us around as if we are leaves on the wind and sometimes we are shaped by the strength of the gales. Yet, this disorientation of discovery - this relocation of self and truth can transform *others* as well.

The biblical text tells us that Jesus retreated to the desert to renew himself, soul search and to dialog with God. Did he stay in the desert? No, he came forth and acted on the world. Plato drew up a constitution in the *Republic*, because he wanted to transform society. Rousseau developed the notion of the social contract. Karl Marx brought the idea that thought being transformed into action was the ultimate truth of a doctrine. Buddhism looks to the metaphor that if a prisoner want to free her fellow prisoners in misfortune, she must first break her own chains - then she will have the strength to move and change the world. There is a movement within Buddhism that calls for an engaged spirituality. There is a Jewish understanding of action in the world called *tikkun olam*. This literally means repairing the world, and for many it means repairing the world through acts of kindness and social justice. One can begin to understand that even acting on the world, one can also act on oneself. To be able to act in the world, one must first work on the self. It is a relationship, an interconnected understanding of relationship and transformation. In our transformation, we transform each other.

You may have been moved in the experiences of working side by side building homes for habitat or feeding people in a soup kitchen. Feeding and clothing are one side to *tikkun olam*. If our actions in the world come from a place of moving and shaping not only others, but also being open to our own transformation – that is when deep work happens. I have felt this in my work as a Chaplain at Crossroads Community Ministries for the homeless this summer. I might extend a prayer, shelter, or food, but I have learned deep lessons about gratitude and living life. I often hear in response to my questions of “How are you?” I will get the response, “Well Chaplain, I woke up this morning. I'm still here. I am blessed.” That gratitude for simple, yet profound things such as life and health, give you a great deal of perspective.

Just as the laws of physics speak to an equal and opposite reaction to every action, that can also

be felt in our lives. Our actions ripple outward, and even inward.

Unitarian Universalists come together with all of our differences and many truths, yet we are transformed and made whole when we engage together. We are made whole in the sharing of our joys and sorrows. We are made whole in the embrace of diversity and standing on the side of love – rather than exclusion and oppression. Yet, it is hard to move out of the pew. It is hard to come down from the mountaintop to the scary messy work of transformation. Because at some level, we know that by reaching out – we are taking a chance.

Joseph Campbell said, “We must be willing to get rid of the life we've planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us. The old skin has to be shed before the new one can come.”

May we find the time to renew ourselves, so that we can better engage in this radical, risky work that is our life. May the mountaintop be in your shopping trips and every day life. May it be in this community of ordinary pilgrims on the road to finding the sacred. May our cupped hands, gently open, support peace like the golden hollow of a singing bowl, like the towering rim of mountains cradling this slumbering mist-draped valley. May it be in this fellow community of pilgrims on the road to finding the sacred.

Amen.