

# Celebrating Mountains

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 23 September 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Craig Linn

Creation 4B – Mountain Sunday

**Isaiah 65: 17-25, Contemporary Reading: *The poet dreams of the mountain*  
by Mary Oliver**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Gatherings” tab

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Well, good morning everybody, and welcome to Mountain Sunday.

About a month ago I received an email from Jolyon, Jolyon was asking me would I give a talk on the mountains. Now this seemed singularly appropriate to me because I was born in the New England region, and I've lived nearly 40 years in the Blue Mountains, so it seemed apt. There was however a small hitch, in just a few days after that my partner Amanda and I were heading off to Japan for the best part of a month. But I gave it some thought and I said to myself, “well yes”, I could put something together on the road, probably related to environmentalism in the Blue Mountains. However, it's turned out that it's taken a completely different tack, and rather than talking about environmentalism in the Blue Mountains, it's taken on a particular Japanese theme. No doubt, spending a month in Japan, what would you think about?

But before I move on to things Japanese let's just consider a few ideas about the notion of sacred space in general, and the common idea that mountains, in particular, are sacred.

In this, we commonly encounter two views. The first, is that space is essentially neutral but that it can over time, by the presence of holy people, particularly their continuing presence, . . . take on a holiness. In a sense we can have an imprint in the space from the aura of reverence of these good people. There is a strong argument for this in the case of churches for instance.

The second, is that there are some places that are intrinsically holy quite independent of human activity, where the divine is imminent to a degree far in excess of the norm. These are most often places of natural origin: springs, hills, and mountains of course.

Now, a third view combines the previous two, in that there are indeed naturally holy places, and that the spiritually inclined are, as a matter of course, drawn to such places. Here we have the potential for a virtuous loop of self-reinforcement, where holy places, drawing the holy to them, make them even holier. Many places of pilgrimage seem to embody such self-reinforcement.

While these ideas may grate with strict materialists, they seem natural enough to many spiritually inclined souls. Thankfully for many, they are also vague enough that they do not rock the intellectual boat unduly. But now, let me rock it just a little bit more.

Lama Anagarika Govinda, was a German who originally studied Hinayana Buddhism in Sri Lanka, but eventually found his spiritual home in Tibetan Buddhism, living his faith for many years

in Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion of 1950. Here is an abridged quote from his 1966 work, the "The Way of the White Clouds", in which he discusses the great mountain Kailas (Kailash), also known as Mount Meru:

*"There are mountains which are just mountains and there are mountains with personality. The personality of a mountain is more than merely a strange shape that makes it different from others.*

*... Personality consists in the power to influence others, and this power is due to consistency, harmony, and one pointedness of character. If these qualities are present in an individual, in their highest perfection, then this individual is a fit leader of humanity, either as a ruler, a thinker, or a saint, and we recognise that person as a vessel of divine power. If these qualities are present in a mountain we recognise it as a vessel of cosmic power, and we call it a sacred mountain.*

*The power of such a mountain is so great and yet so subtle that, without compulsion, people are drawn to it from near and far, as if by the force of some invisible magnet. . . . Nobody has conferred the title of sacredness on such a mountain, and yet everybody recognises it; nobody has to defend its claim, because nobody doubts it; nobody has to organise its worship, because people are overwhelmed by the mere presence of such a mountain and cannot express their feelings other than by worship."*

That's a big statement, a very big statement indeed, and it's worth noting that Mount Kailash, the mountain referred to, is revered, not by just one faith, but by four: the Bon, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism.

There is a tradition associated with many holy mountains, Kailash is one in particular, that the correct way to show respect for the divine presence is circumambulation, that is walking around the mountain on a low altitude track. Attempts to climb to the summit, and "conquer" the mountain in western terms, is seen as disrespectful at best, sacrilegious at worst. So this talk is not so much a climb to the top to provide an ultimate statement, as it is a circumambulation around the idea of sacred mountains, and I hope that perhaps one of the perspectives revealed resonates somewhat with you.

All faith traditions have their sacred mountains, in the Judeo-Christian tradition Mount Sinai, Mount Tabor, and Mount Gerizim are very well known. In the Australian First Peoples' context, for me, Gundabooka south-west of Bourke comes immediately to mind. It was originally brought to our attention by a Baakandji man from Bourke, probably 2005/2006, and it is a place we have been drawn to repeatedly and we have camped on the plains below it too many times to remember. It's the place we always go to when we travel out west.

However, in the context of Japan it's not just one or two mountains, . . .it's is well-nigh impossible to separate the divine from mountains, and ancient temples and shrines grace the sides of mountains across the entire country. Moreover, as Japan is located on the Pacific Ring of Fire, many of the mountains are not just conscious presences in a spiritual sense, they are also physically active entities making their personality felt through grumblings, through shaking, through smoking, and at times erupting. And this is dangerous, but with this danger comes many benefits. The rich volcanic soils, clean mountain streams, and abundance . . . agricultural abundance in the valleys below.

Our most recent trip to Japan was to the northern part of the main island of Honshu – a region known as the Tohoku, an area that I hadn't visited for nearly 20 years. Prior to, and during this trip I was reading a book by the great 17th century poet Matsuo Basho. Some of you may know him from *haikus* that are often quoted. The book's title is usually rendered in English as “The Narrow Road to the Deep North” because it was into the north that Basho travelled; but its real title, “*Oku no hosono michi*”, really means the The Narrow Way to the Interior which immediately for any Christian brings echoes of “narrow is the way”, and “the kingdom within”. This is really quite apt, for though Basho's work had its basis in a physical journey, it is really, to quote the scholar Noboyuki Yuasa, “*a study in eternity*”, “*seeking a vision of eternity in things that are, by their own very nature, destined to perish.*” Not surprisingly, sacred mountains feature prominently in Basho's work, representing in many ways the eternal anchor points around which the flux of time and life flow. Here are two quotes from the *Oku no hosono michi*:

First, in a sombre mood, amid the ruins of a castle, Basho is reflecting on the defeat, collapse, and passing away of the mighty Fujiwara clan, which in our day could just as well be any of the dominion-obsessed industrial and post-industrial societies:

*“The Fujiwara family passed away like a snatch of empty dream . . .*

*When a country is defeated, there remain only mountains and rivers, and on a ruined castle in spring only grasses thrive.”*

That's a pretty Japanese style quote.

In a more exultant mood, recognising the power of the divine, Basho writes:

*“On the first day of April, I climbed Mount Nikko to do homage to the holiest of shrines upon it. This mountain used [to have another name], but when the high priest Kukai\* built a temple upon it, he changed its name to Nikko, which means the bright beams of the sun. Kukai must have had the power to see a thousand years into the future, for the mountain is now the seat of the most sacred of all shrines, and its benevolent power prevails throughout the land, embracing the entire people, like the bright beams of the sun.”*

Now it wasn't our intention to follow Basho's footprints precisely, in his journey to the north, but we did follow the general route, visiting many of the mountain temples and shrines he visited several hundred years ago. But when we reached Matsushima, the point at which Basho headed to the north west, we continued on into the “Deep North”, the Tohoku region of Honshu – this is the area so savagely hit in the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. In particular we visited the small town of Tono surrounded by mountains, and the Sanriku coast on the eastern side of these mountains. Mountains are an integral part of life, religion, and culture for both of these communities, but let me turn first to Tono.

For the people of Tono, the mountains that surround them are sacred and powerful. Their stories tell us that God, in the aspect of the Great Mother, came with her three daughters to Tono. Around Tono there are three great mountains, and the Great Mother gave one to each of her three daughters, and to this day her daughters reside in and act through their respective mountains - inspiring awe and protecting all in the valley below.

So we have the mountains as protective beings, places of divine presence.

These mountains were also the places to which the wise ones of Tono turned for inspiration, and the tradition of Yamabushi developed. Yamabushi is usually translated simply as mountain-priest, but the two Japanese kanji characters that make it up literally mean “mountain”-“yama” and “bushi”-“to bow down”. The Yamabushi were the mountain ascetics of Tono and lived their lives in the high forests - praying, meditating, and practicing rigorous spiritual exercises. Their roles were many but included guiding pilgrims to religious sites in the mountains and coming down to the villages to perform regular religious ceremonies. The Yamabushi are now long gone, gone for many hundreds of years, but many of the local festivals and particularly the dances reflect their origin in the Yamabushi.

So we have the mountains as places of inspiration.

A tradition, known as *denderano*, also developed. In this tradition when people reached the age of 60, and that is many of us here today, they had to leave their valley homes, and dwell in mountain huts. They would come down to the valley to help in the fields as needed, but received only meagre rations and basically they lived out their final years frugally in the relative seclusion of the mountains. To us this seems harsh, indeed “way harsh” to use the expression, but in many respects it provided an opportunity to detach from earthly matters and reflect.

So we have the mountains as places of final reflection.

I would now like to take you over the mountains to the east of Tono and fast forward several hundred years. Here we find ourselves in the fishing village of Otsuchi – situated in a narrow valley with steep mountains on either side, with this valley opening onto the ocean. It was on the 11<sup>th</sup> March 2011 (3/11 as they call it in Japan) that the post-earthquake tsunami struck the Sanriku coast, totally devastating many of the fishing villages like Otsuchi.

Several weeks ago we visited this village with one of the founders of a local NGO, an NGO still focussed on post-tsunami restoration, not just restoration of infrastructure but restoration of individual lives and restoration of community cohesion. This is still a huge issue, even 7 – 8 years later.

In the post tsunami devastation, there were simply no buildings that could house or provide a base for the Red Cross rescue and medical teams. So they set up slightly to the west in the mountains of Tono, and each day they came back down to the disaster area with new supplies and fresh support.

So we have the mountains as the place from which help comes, not just once, but day after day after day.

Now to conclude I would like to tell you a story of faith and survival. When the earthquake struck many in the town of Otsuchi turned to their mobile phones (they were looking for emergency updates and guidance), others jumped into their cars only to find themselves on gridlocked narrow roads, and others decided to rely on the existing 6 metre tsunami wall that protected them from the sea. But one old woman, in her eighties, was working in her garden when she felt the severity of the earthquake (it was a magnitude 9.1 undersea mega-earthquake, a truly huge event in geological terms). She did not reach for her mobile phone (I doubt she even owned one), she did not return to

her home for valuables, nor did she seek a ride with her neighbours in their car. She simply grabbed her Zimmer frame and headed off steadily through the back streets of the village towards the mountain. Twenty minutes ticked by and she reached the base of the mountain and very slowly (Zimmer frame and all) began her climb. Fifteen minutes later (35 minutes in all) she reached a small school on the side of the mountain. There she stopped, she had reached safety. She turned to watch the sea and 5 minutes later the tsunami struck. The existing 6 metre tsunami wall meant nothing at all for the tsunami waves were 16 metres tall. The entire village was literally washed away.

So for this old woman, and thankfully many others, the mountain was a place of sanctuary.

And if you are wondering, yes she is still alive and yes she is still living in Otsuchi as it recovers from the devastation.

So in our brief reflective visits to the villages of Tono and Otsuchi we have seen that mountains are indeed worth celebrating. For mountains:

- are places of divine presence;
- and from them we receive spiritual guidance, and help, and inspiration;
- they are places of reflection in quiet times,
- and they are places of sanctuary in stormy times.

I note as a final word that just two weeks ago my partner Amanda and I found ourselves in the path of super typhoon, typhoon Jebi, it's a true child of the Anthropocene – it's a category 5 North-Pacific cyclone. At the time we were staying with several Japanese friends in a small wooden hut deep in the forest. Thankfully this forest was on the leeward side of a large mountain. Yes it was a wild night, but in the morning we were all fine; for us the mountain had provided sanctuary.

Thank you, and may sacred mountains be part of your life also.

### **References:**

Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds*, 1966, The Overlook Press 2005 hardback edition, pp. 271-272.

Matsuo Basho, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, 1690s approx, translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa 1966, Penguin Classics 1966, p.37, p.100, p118.

### **Notes:**

\* In the above p.4 quote Basho refers to the extremely famous Kukai (aka Kobo Daishi) as being the founder of the Nikko temple complex. In the interests of historical accuracy it should be noted that in fact the less well known Shodo (737-817) was the founder of the World Heritage Listed Nikko temple complex.

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