

“Twenty-Two Views of Mount Diablo”  
Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church  
August 29, 2010  
Reverend Leslie Takahashi Morris

Preview:

Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) created the works in his series, *36 Views of Mt. Fuji*, over an eight-year period. They are all color woodblock print. This great artist is believed to have made more than 30,000 works of art and to have published more than 270 books. These images are from the collection of the Honolulu Gallery of Art which has a full set of the prints. Though we are not set up to have this work for all, we ask for your indulgence as we take in a bit of the beauty of this art. To see a brief presentation of this art, go to:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2dqtcu2NN8>

Sermon:

Perhaps I should start with the disclaimer our little high tech moment is not a mega-church wannabee moment, rather is only because in all my thinking about this service, the one thing I could not figure out was how to bring the beauty of that art into this room.

Katsushika Hosukai’s images have that expansive quality that captures, for me, the synergistic relationship of humankind and mountains. Seeing them, the facts that over 1,300 shrines have been erected on Mt. Fuji’s peaks or that over 200,000 people take the eight-hour trek up the mountain’s slopes each year are somehow implied. The sacred nature of the mountain, with its snow-cap and volcanic core, ensured that it would be home to more than its share of “kami,” the Shinto spirits thought to inhabit all natural objects.

That said, if one has talked a good, big game, say, for example, that one was going to talk about 22 views of a mountain, perhaps Mt. Diablo, there comes a point (preferably early in the smallish canvas that is a sermon) when it is time to start sharing views. I begin today with five:

- View One. Firm as real knowledge,  
Gentle as truest power,  
Your watch is constant.
- Two. Pretty in pink, you  
Toss your cloud boa  
Around your springing green.
- Three A necklace of lights—  
Red, common, yet cast true in  
Dignity’s shadow.
- Four: Trees stand in your gold  
With modest immortality  
Their branches pained with grace.

Five:           By proud moonlight seen  
                  A mere ghost's outline you be:  
                  Sleep now, you bid, sleep.

Of course I bring no pretense that what I have seen in my limited vision over a few years of casual reflection is like what the great artist Hokusai saw in the eight years of intensive, artistic study of Mt. Fuji. What I can speak to with all clarity is the creative tension in the relationship between the finite and the infinite, the mundane and the sacred, the mountain and the person.

Art historians tell us that Hosukai's paintings were successful because of the mountain's relationship with human activity. This is not to belittle or discount the importance of nature for nature's self—people could comprehend its mountainness more when they saw themselves beside it. And something remarkable and magical is found in the relationship between human life and the rest of nature, even when it is incidental and when people seem almost not to notice. Hosukai brings the essential quality of that relationship to life, showing small details like a man stopping to tie a sandal with Mt. Fuji framed between the branches of an idyllic grove. These are not nature-worshippers, rather roofers and carpenters, clam diggers and lumbermen engaged in their trades, mothers tending babes, and yet shown in their inextricable relationship. Hosukai painted these works during Japan's Edo period, a time when the focus of the government was military and when a wealthy merchant class was lost in worldly pleasures. The art of this time was called "ukiyo-e" after the Buddhist term, "ukiyo" or "floating world."

Today, in a world still falling from its own floating days, Diablo stands behind us, almost always seen in relationship to human commerce and living. This is an awesome presence that has for many generations been in relationship to human life, the respect and worship of the Miwok peoples, the respect and fear of those who came to claim it later to today with our distracted and often unseeing presences whizzing past on freeway, BART or plane.

Here language has its limits. The mountain is not just backdrop, it is context and dialogue partner: the mountain is the foil for our comings and goings as ordinary people, and, it is more, a sort of witness, offering us a glimpse at a greater significance in our lives. Perhaps I can say it better in views, this time anecdotal rather than poetic:

View Six is the almost-first view, when, after days and days of driving, we turned the last elbow of highway and saw the watchful—almost flirtatious—presence of the mountain murmuring, yes, you are tired, yes, you are disoriented, orient yourself to me....

View Seven was a few weeks later when driving east on 680 for the first time in the illuminating morning light, I took a turn and almost flinched at the enormity of MOUNTAIN in front of me—even today I am extra careful that I do not drive off the road gazing at the majesty of that summer lunar landscape so close.

Eight was an ungraceful pose, a twist of my head to be reassured by a glimpse of Diablo between rooftops and trees as I scurried to school with my then third-grader.

Nine was no view at all—what happened when the jealous morning mist kept the mountain to itself.

Ten was also an absence—when I didn't look for a while the next summer because the steep and sun-punished slopes had claimed a precious life.

What I wish to share today is more of a sense than a concept or a fact. I believe that we need a firmness when the world is most soft and unreliable, that what we need does not have to be constructed of fundamental truths, rigid and unwelcoming, but rather can be something else—a beauty, a presence, a relationship with something that is tangible and also intangible, large and yet reachable, other worldly and yet part of our routines. At certain times in our lives, when we are reminded of human mortality and loss, this need is stronger—for something both sure and yet fluid, both truth and metaphor, as much about what cannot be said as what can. Part of our journey as human beings is to be in right relationship with this mystery.

Until very recently, ours has been a floating world—and the recent economic downturn and the ceaseless political wrangling, our persistent status as a nation at war, has sent it all tumbling down, making us more aware of what is in the background, what is real and solid and what is illusionary and deceptive. In so many ways, we have been reminded that we are floating with little beneath us.

The mountain catches my attention almost every day now since we moved to Martinez last spring, I can see it from a very utilitarian part of Center Avenue and yet it unites me with a greater sense of creation when I am walking in the morning or late at night, the two times when I am likely to amble. It is there when I am open and happy and taking in and also when I am closed and overwhelmed and down. The mountain is a context, it is not just landscape, it is my landscape, and it invites me just by its presence to place my life in its tableaux. In that wider perspective, my life is always more anchored, more rooted, more real.

In the face of life and love and promise—and death, and loss and change—the odd part is that one can develop a deeper sense of wonder in mystery. In the words of poet Mary Oliver:

*And, therefore, let the immeasurable come.  
Let the unknowable touch the buckle of my spine.  
Let the wind turn in the trees,  
and the mystery hidden in the dirt*

*swing through the air.*

The knowable mystery is there, comforting in its mundane splendor. Like a friendly neighborhood ghost, a knowable and approachable neighborhood god: this too could be the play space of the *kami* spirits.

View Eleven is cozy with a cloud blanket pulled up to the knees. Twelve is a bit stand-offish, seen through a haze that is part mist and part unfortunate human activity. Thirteen is almost giddy, capped with snow and taunting school children who must still go to classes. Fourteen is a rich green celebration of spring. Fifteen wears yellow flowers

woven in its golden skirt. Sixteen is indistinct and abstract, distancing immutable truth from the pettiness of smog and noise and traffic fumes. Seventeen is the view the indigenous peoples of this land held that is largely lost to us now and yet remains like a mist of regret.

Why do we need mountains? Perhaps to remind ourselves that there is something bigger than us, that there is something larger that frames our lives, that as precious as we are, that we are part of the larger miracle that is greater than the sum of its parts, as the writer Frederick Buechner said.

Perhaps so that when the hard words fall and the cold winds blow, the heat bores, the rain falls and when the world seems friendless and frightening, or simply grey and drab and well-worn, we are lifted back into the vivid color and relief of the painter who unites us back with a whole picture. We are reminded that something solid is within our grasp and somehow, mysterious, we are part of its world and it is part of ours. Mountains are antidotes to two great human traps: one being thinking ourselves more important than we are and the other thinking ourselves less important than we are.

Mountains, as the lions of geology, remind us of our own proper scale—that we are a part of all and yet not all, that our joys and our sorrows, even our lives and our deaths are significant—and only part of the significance. Not by chance mountains are a metaphor for immortality in this world. Mountains remind us, by their presence, of the brevity of ours and invite us to wake and notice, to pay attention to the larger frames of life.

Joanie sensibly asked me why 22 views when two great Japanese artists had their official 33 and Hosukai painted more than 100 views. I reminded her that while this was a patient congregation, still, there are limits. Take courage friends, we near the summit.

View Eighteen is unseen on a dark and moonless night when one takes one's worries walking long after all neighboring windows are dark. Nineteen is the brilliance of hope in the morning sun glinting off the rock faces. Twenty is the landmark from an airplane window which tells me I am home. Twenty-one, has moonlit Pegasus wings of clouds and is seen through tears, of joy or sorrow, for both speak to the greatest truths of this life. Twenty-two is the view from upclose—just a single square foot of lichen-marked rock and gold-spangled weeds that hold all the beauty of the world.

And there it is. And, of course, you have your own views, which perhaps you will share with me or with one another. And perhaps your views are of the moon, a lake, a magnificent decade-knowing tree or a place vivid in imagination. Maybe just a rock if you like your visions of the immortal smaller and more manageable.

I share this set of perspectives today because they have been, and are, such great joys in my life and because, as one who thinks about what resources can nourish our spirits in this time of heavy gravity—I find it helpful to remember the inexorable lift of mountains, the eternity of the human struggle to find a larger meaning and the need to base our own lives in practices of presence and perspective. May we each have the audacity to reach out and claim our own balances in the world, our own shelters, our own places of refuge, our own larger frames. So may it be.