

# A Walk Through Fry Creek Wilderness Camp<sup>1</sup>

A sermon by David Marmorek

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## Kindling the Chalice Flame

Beauty is before me, and  
Beauty behind me,  
Above me and below me  
Hovers the beautiful.  
I am surrounded by it,  
I am immersed in it.  
In my youth, I am aware of it,  
And, in old age,  
I shall walk quietly the beautiful trail.  
In beauty it is begun.  
In beauty, it is ended.

- (Navajo prayer, #682 in hymnal)

## Meditation

I'd like you to imagine yourself sitting next to a small river, listening to the river's many voices, as it rushes over and around the rocks, gurgling and bubbling away. Perhaps it's Fry Creek, or another place you fondly remember. It's a small enough river, and it's a hot enough day that you step onto the sand in the shallows and feel the cool water rushing over your feet. Then you reach down and dip your hands in the water. As you do so, I'd like you to ponder these words from Leonardo da Vinci:

“In rivers the water you touch is the last of what has passed and the first of that which comes. So too with time present.” (da Vinci, *Codex Trivulziano* fol 34 r., Milan)

## Homily - Wilderness Camp

Our family was first inspired to visit Fry Creek by hearing Garry Lees speak on March 11, 2007, right here at UCV. Gary and his wife Carol were the Camp Directors at Fry Creek for eight years, from 1998 to 2005, and spent 10 weeks there each summer. I've spent only 3 weeks at the Fry Creek camp, one week in each of 2007, 2008 and 2013, so I want to clarify right off that I have less than 4% of the sample size of Garry and Carol. But it's been a **very** tasty sample, and my goal today is to encourage you to visit this magical place. So this talk is a blend of Garry's thoughts and mine, the latter including some haiku and other excerpts from camp journals.

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<sup>1</sup> Delivered by David Marmorek at the Unitarian Church of Vancouver on July 20, 2014. Content from David Marmorek and Garry Lees.

The camp is located on the eastern shores of Kootenay Lake about 18 km from its northern end (there's a simple map on the back of the brochure in your order of service). There are about 160 acres of forest, and 2 miles of beach front, much of it sand. Four Unitarians bought the land in 1965 for \$35,000. Those visionaries included our own Phillip Hewett, and also Robert Fulghum, who apparently learned about real estate acquisition in kindergarten, in addition to sharing and playing fair. They had a wonderful vision of a place where Unitarians, and all people who revere the wilderness, could go. They formed the Northwest Wilderness Society of the Unitarian Church, which in 1966 opened the camp. The camp is open during July and August and is administered by a volunteer Board of Directors. We apply Unitarian values in running the camp, and welcome everyone who loves wilderness. A Camp Director, currently the amazing Don Vaillancourt, arranges boat transport, collects fees and helps campers as needs arise.

*Shortly after leaving Kaslo on the last leg of the long drive to Wilderness, Simon asks me: "So Dad, is there going to be any religious stuff going on at this Unitarian Camp?". I reply: "Well, all families **do** need to sacrifice their first born child on the first night after they arrive, but other than that, no, there's no religious stuff." All quiet in the back seat for a long time...*

We are very fortunate that the land, situated on the beautiful sand and forest delta of Fry Creek, is surrounded to the east by a huge tract of untouched land called the Purcell Conservancy, with fantastic hiking trails that lead up and over some magnificent mountains. In the early 1970's, many Unitarians (including Phillip Hewett) worked with residents and many environmental groups to prevent the BC Forest Service and a local sawmill from logging the watershed. The Fry Creek watershed remains the only valley entering Kootenay Lake that has never been logged. The creek descends through old growth forests and rushes through a spectacular canyon down to the lake.

*From the dark forest  
To the jade white river's roar  
We feel her power*

*Layer by layer  
The river wears down the rock  
Inexorably*

*We walk when we walk,  
Then stop, and look when we look  
In calm mindfulness*

You can get a feeling for what the camp is all about from the brochure inside your order of service. Just this year Keith Wiley (who lives in Nelson and serves on the Board) has created a wonderful new web site, [kootenaywildernesscamping.org](http://kootenaywildernesscamping.org), that thoroughly describes the camp and offers much useful advice for the prospective camper. You will end up carrying all of your supplies from your car to the boat, and from the boat to your campsite, so you must be discerning in what you choose to bring. You will be living in a tent and tarpaulin structure, rain or shine, alone or with family and friends, for the duration of your stay. If wilderness is your thing, you will be enchanted. But first let me warn you. If you are a person who doesn't appreciate the majesty of high mountain peaks, a huge silence that enables one to hear faint, rolling thunder 20 miles away, or the rush of a waterfall in the distance, then you won't like Wilderness. If you can't endure a very slow pace of existence where time is measured by hunger or sleepiness, or if you don't crave that wonderful sleep that comes from breathing fresh mountain air and a pleasant fatigue that you don't understand, then you won't enjoy wilderness. If what I just described doesn't move your spirit, then this place is probably not for you. You will be disappointed, because there is nothing else there.

Wilderness is only accessible by boat, and the current pickup spot is the Schroeder Creek resort about 15 km north of Kaslo, BC, on the west side of Kootenay Lake. Kaslo is about 9 hours drive from Vancouver or Seattle, and about 4 hours drive from Spokane. We usually break the drive up and stay in Nelson so that we can arrive early the next day at Schroeder Creek. When you get to Schroeder Creek resort you contact the Camp Director by walkie talkie, and wait for him or her to cross Kootenay Lake. Your wait could be as little as 25 minutes or as much as a few hours depending on the wind and wave conditions on the lake. The Camp Director will let you know. There's camping at Schroeder Creek resort if you arrive late and need to stay overnight. Don't let the boat access scare you – it's all part of the wilderness experience, and some of the same people have been coming back for four decades. You may well wonder why people drive so far and bob up and down in a boat just to go camping. After all, there are many nice campgrounds that are much more accessible. That's true, but it isn't just the camping. It's the total experience of being there, and what wilderness can show you and teach you. While you're waiting for the boat, take the opportunity to look around. Breathe in the mountain air, listen to the waves, and begin to enjoy what wilderness has to offer. If the day is warm and sunny, which it usually is, you cannot help but marvel at the beauty of the lake and mountains. Some new people make a pledge then and there that they will return, and they haven't even seen the campsite yet.

*Back at Fry Creek! Unlike last year's experience of no rain we were greeted with a big downpour last night. Our tarp set up was OK, but not ideal, as we arrived late at 6 pm, having waited from 2 to 5 for the waves to calm down. Some friendly campers helped us unload, set up the tarps and get wood for a fire, which was shortly doused by the rain, so we'll need to wait until tomorrow night for marshmallows.*

The campsites are well spread out and private. They have a funky mixture of shelves and tables from found materials. This is your chance to let out your inner carpenter child. Once established, it's up to you as to how you wish to spend your time there. There are no scheduled programs or activities. You make your own fun. There is the beach, the lake, the forest, and the mountains. You can have a lazy day of reading by the beach, or spending a mindful yet mindless few hours making precarious rock sculptures, the more precarious the better (like the one on your order of service, created by wife Betty), or losing yet another game of cribbage to your clever son, or getting very deeply into a good book.

*I'm reading Animals in Translation, by Temple Grandin. It's fantastic. She writes about how our reptilian, limbic brain (the amygdala) reacts reflexively very fast, in 12/100 of a second, but often unnecessarily when there is no real danger. The neocortex responds more slowly, in 24/100 of a second, but logically sorts out real dangers from pretend ones. In the case of real danger (say a cougar), that extra quick amygdala response would be worthwhile. Tonight as I walked the 40m through the forest to the tent my headlamp created a moving shadow on a big tree, and I jumped in amygdalian fashion, thinking for a split second that the shadow was an animal. One twelfth of a second later the neocortex clicked in: "Chill out man. That's the shadow of your head lamp!"*

Each time I go to the camp I spend one afternoon painting, gazing at the changing light and colours, and playing with paints. I try to be both very focused on what I see and yet unattached to the outcomes of my efforts. Sometimes I succeed in the detachment bit, and regardless of whether the painting "looks good", it reminds me of a quiet meditative time of just looking. *What IS the colour of that shadow on the sand? How do I create that colour? What happens if I just mix in some sand with the paint?* Or we get ambitious and paddle the canoes down and up the lake, attentive to the wind and waves.

*We stop our chatter  
The canoe drifts towards the shore  
Listen to the birds!*

*As I push the log,  
The log pushes the canoe,  
Did Newton do this?*

We do have some rules, but only 4 of them. No firearms, no drugs, no pets, and no cutting down living trees. We also adhere to the credo that when you come to Wilderness, "take only pictures, and leave only footprints".

What can one get from wilderness? Disconnection and Reconnection. Disconnect from the tendrils that bind us – there's no phone or Internet service, no Inbox with 40 emails, no office, no cars, no shopping malls, no Starbucks. Time to reconnect – with nature, with your thoughts, and with kind, interesting people, if you are in the mood for socializing.

*How wonderful it feels to not have to DO anything! At this moment two of my work compadres are down in Arcata California running a workshop. How nice to be here and not there!*

Here there is beauty in all of its forms. There are sunsets reflecting their magnificent myriad of colours on a marble smooth lake, carpets of green forest reaching up to the magnificent rocky peaks, an ever-changing sky that extends forever, and cloud buildups that make the mountains look small by comparison. One can also have terrific wind and rainstorms that whip up the waves on the lake in fifteen minutes, and make you grateful for the tarp you so carefully placed over your eating area. The staccato of the rain on the tarp or your tent fly makes a relentless rhythm that would impress Paul Simon and Ladysmith Black Mambazo. It's always a fun game to grab a stick and push off the puddles of rain off the tarpaulin without having a whoosh of water roll down the stick and your arm. Eventually the wind dies down, the clouds dissipate, and the sun returns, sometimes after only an hour or two of intense wind and rain. Fortunately, we get a lot of beautiful sunsets and rarely see such windstorms, but these occasions can't help but to give one an opportunity to pause and reflect. Nature is not in the least reticent about showing any of her attributes.

*Dark clouds rolling in  
Enough time for a quick swim?  
Yes! Just enough time!*

Wilderness allows you to see. At night there is nothing to obscure that magnificent galactic cloud called the Milky Way and a sky so full of stars that you gaze in wonderment. With binoculars one can see the moons of Jupiter if conditions are right. Our own moon reveals its cratered surface in glorious detail and casts a light one can almost read by. When you see all of this you can't help but ponder abstract subjects like space, infinity, the universe, and how it all got there. Even if you could see the night sky in the same way at home you might be too busy doing something else to notice.

Wilderness allows you to listen – even  
e are sounds that can stir the soul.

Wilderness teaches you to be still. You have to be still in order to see and hear the loon cry, the fish jump, the osprey diving into the lake, the bald eagle bathe, the mama merganser swimming by with her ducklings on her back, or the deer in the shadows carefully gauging your next move.

*The deer on the trail*  
*Surprised to see five of us*  
*Calmly leaves the scene*

Wilderness makes you feel a part of your surroundings. When you walk through the forest you can't help but feel that somehow you're connected with everything around you - that whatever you do, something is going to be affected by it –and that feeling makes you careful to lessen your impact. You are very much in tune with the interdependent web of life.

Wilderness teaches awareness and respect. Deltas are created by floods and sediment deposition, and are very dynamic places. Until June 2013, there were two arms of Fry Creek, one to the north, and one to the south. On June 20th, the same storm that flooded Calgary caused some big changes to our property: blocked the north arm of Fry Creek with rocks and logs, widened and deepened the south arm of Fry Creek, washed some land into the lake, and created several enormous new sandy beaches. It would take an even larger rain than in June 2013 to fill the newly enlarged south arm of Fry Creek and concern our campers. We camp near the creek so we are always aware of its flow in our daily activities. The Camp Director has a rain gauge, and has a safety plan should any emergencies arise, though high flows are much less likely in July and August after the snow is gone. Campers should be tuned in to all conditions around us – that is why we spend time in nature.

*The flooding river*  
*Ripped right down through the forest*  
*Obeying physics*

Wilderness teaches patience. The high waters of the lake will subside and show the beach once more. The storm and waves will eventually abate. The sun will always come out again. The camp boat will eventually come and get you. Wilderness opens your mind and heart to simplicity. All we need is shelter and food, plus some companionship. We only use the materials that are already there, in the forest or washed up on the beach.

We are equal at Wilderness. Everyone is living in tents and makeshift tarpaulin shelters and no one cares how they look as long as they are comfortable. You can't tell a hamburger chef from a surgeon, or a minister from a bank manager. Removed from other distractions, we really listen. Everyone is open to a chat, and some of those chats become very deep conversations. We have the time to discover the inherent worth and dignity of every person...

Wilderness is a safe place. During the height of the summer there have been as many as 40 children at camp ranging in age from a few months old to teenagers. It's great to see kids exploring and building stuff, like a sauna on the beach, or a diving platform. Many adult campers came to wilderness as children and, now with children of their own, have returned to renew fond memories and to pass on the wilderness experience. Lifelong friendships have begun at camp.

We've several times done hiking excursions in the mountains, dropped off by boat early in the morning, and picked up close to sunset after a long day's hike. On occasion the Camp Director has had to pick up hikers who misjudged their timing and arrived back after sunset. The return boat trip was in total darkness, except for the beacons of light coming from the beach at the campsite. When the hikers and their boat saviour finally arrive back at camp, they're welcomed home by campers on shore waving flashlights and Coleman lanterns and cheering the return of their compadres.

*What a great day! Up to Jumbo Pass with Mary Lage, Andy Sitko, Alison Pearson and Phillip Hewett. Phillip was amazing. At 83, he hiked up 730m of elevation in less than three and a half hours. When we got to the Jumbo Pass hut, Philip asked me what the elevation gain was. I said "730m". He replied: "You know David, I think that 700m is about my limit!"*

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*Another great hike today, up Salisbury Creek. David the Prius-driving, greenhouse gas conserving environmentalist has come to believe in the benefits of 4 wheel drive SUV's for Kootenay mountain logging roads. On the last 4 km stretch on a side spur to the trail head we had to traverse two creek beds. One creek had a fairly steep 1m drop. The other creek was about 10m wide and had flowing water, but only 10 cm deep. Both places, impassable to the Prius, were not a problem for our rented Ford Escape SUV. When we were half way across, Evan asked me to stop so he could get out a take a picture. He thought that he would post it at UCV with the title "Former environmentalist David Marmorek driving Ford SUV across fish habitat". I declined his generous offer and kept driving.*

Many people who go to Fry Creek call it a spiritual experience. Why is that? For me that feeling comes through my senses: seeing and hearing the rushing water in Fry Creek canyon; feeling the wind as I paddle a canoe home (hopefully behind me!), touching rock as I make a precarious sculpture, walking alertly through the forest at night back to my tent. I also get that feeling by just sitting and calmly pondering the powerful natural forces that have shaped and reshaped this dynamic landscape over millennia. I feel very small in both space and time, but so very grateful to be alive in this magical place. Standing on one of the beaches at sunset and doing a slow,

reverent circle, I truly feel that Navajo prayer with which we lit the chalice: beauty is before me, and beauty is behind me, above me and below me.

Wise people have said that the closer we are to our own spirituality, the closer we are to the spirituality of others. Of course amongst any 3 Unitarian campers there are 6 or 7 distinct feelings about spirituality, so this can be a challenge. Getting close to our own spirituality is difficult because of the constant distractions in our daily lives. In the city, it requires dedicated effort to set aside quiet time for reflection. At Fry Creek our day-to-day distractions are very much lessened. We become more aware of our own spirits and spirituality. Many people meditate, at a time of their own choosing. It's especially peaceful at sunset when the lake is calm, the sun is setting and you have a beach all to yourself.

Many great friendships have been initiated and blossomed at Wilderness, bringing people back again and again to hang out with good friends. Fry Creek embodies the phrase, "there are no strangers here, only friends we haven't met yet". We have had visitors from as far away as England, Hawaii and Australia.

Many campers have commented that camping at Fry Creek brought them many gifts: time to reflect inward, feel at peace, sleep a comfortable 9 to 10 hours every night, have more perspective on their very small but precious place in the universe, and (as they meditatively look at the expanse of lake and mountains and sky) feel deep gratitude.

I hope that you'll be able to visit Fry Creek soon and have all of those experiences, plus others that only you will feel and treasure.

Thank you.