

“Poetry and Distance”

(Poetry Sunday)

Delivered to the UU Church of Roanoke on Sunday, May 31, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

In September of 2011, I went on a solo silent retreat at Holy Cross Abbey in Berryville, Virginia. The monks there abide within their vows including that particular tenet of St. Benedict’s teachings, radical hospitality. Anyone of good faith - whatever faith they profess, or none at all - but any open-hearted seeker is welcome at the abbey, nestled amongst fields beside the Shenandoah River.

I was in a time of searching - I did not know what was next for me. I did know that I didn’t want to sit at home and watch all the news coverage and retrospective on that year’s 10th anniversary of the September 11 attacks in 2001. And so, on the recommendation of a friend, I booked this retreat.

Well beyond the Catholic faith of my youth, there was a quiet rhythm of prayer and life at the abbey - not that those who lived out their life’s vows there would draw any difference between the two. Prayer and life. Breath and love. Work and holiness. Rest and praise.

I had not yet found Unitarian Universalism. But I had found a space, a gap, a place in my life where something belonged, but I didn’t know what that something was. I wondered if I might find it at Holy Cross Abbey.

I looked in the fields. I looked in the river, spending hours walking back and forth, wondering, questioning, sometimes tossing in a stone, sometimes sitting, sometimes crying.

On Saturday, I decided to make my confession. It had been twenty-two years since I had last received the Sacrament of Reconciliation, as it is officially called - in my senior year of high school. Interesting thought, reconciliation - etymology: directly from Latin reconciliare "to bring together

again; regain; win over again, conciliate," from re- "again" (see re-) + conciliare "make friendly." I did not exactly think I was doing this to win over God again, nor to win over the monk who was serving as God's earthly ambassador. I just...wanted to share with someone the heaviness I was feeling.

As I sat in the room - no comforting anonymity of the confessional booth, nope! Just sitting right in a small room with two squishy chairs, a bookshelf, and an end table - and as I sat there, I looked at the monk and said, "Forgive me Father, for I have sinned. It has been twenty-two years since my last confession."

I paused. I looked down, then up. The monk's eyes were kind and patient. "I don't really remember what I'm supposed to say next," I said, and then the tears came, not a gentle welling but a flood. The monk, still kind and patient, got a box of tissues from somewhere else in the small room and handed them to me. I cried out that that I thought confession was stupid, that I hadn't done this since I was a literal child, that by any measure I could not possibly name every "sin" I had committed in that time, that I thought the very concept of "sin" was stupid, that I was very sorry I had already used most of his box of tissues.

He silently waited for me to stop wailing and sniffing and as I sat there, red faced and clutching a fistful of damp tissues, he looked at me and said, "All God wants of you is for you to become the woman that he meant you to be."

The monk did not give me any helpful tips on figuring out, exactly, who she was.

But he didn't need to. And if he had, I wouldn't have listened. I needed to bridge the distance between who I was and the person I was meant to be myself. But I didn't need to do it alone. I needed to go into the world and seek the peace beyond understanding, the peace of wild things, the peace

that I believe poetry to reveal to us, with so many other things besides. And if that means that poets are the ones who are seeing and hearing and sensing the truth behind and between and among all our lives, then we are blessed to have them, and are well served to listen to them.

There is a distance between who we are and who we wish to be, a distance between the world as it is and the world as we wish it were for all, a distance between our best selves and our worst selves that sometimes feels cavernous and sometimes feels vanishingly small. Poetry, and poets, are there to help us imagine how we can close that distance - and also to help us love the perspective that distance can give to us.

Thank you to our poets - here today, and everywhere, everyday - for illuminating our lives.

So may it ever be.