Spirituality
Soul Seeing
EarthBeat



A red salmonberry on a bush on Baranof Island near Sitka, Alaska (Wikimedia Commons/Arthur T. LaBar)



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It was the middle of July and I was visiting my son who lives on Kodiak Island, Alaska, working for an NPR-affiliate radio station. My visit had a twofold purpose: spend time with my only child and escape the relentless heat and depressing immigration tactics at my southern New Mexico home near the U.S.-Mexico border. The idea seemed pretty sane and straightforward enough at the time. But, as usual, God had something more in store for me.

While Davis and his girlfriend worked during the weekdays of my 10-day visit, I planned to explore this 100-mile-long island, hike in the forests, hang out by the bay, all the while looking for the abundance of marine life and, fingers crossed, hoping to spot one of the estimated 3,000 humongous Kodiak bears sharing the island — from a distance, of course.

On my first full day, I headed to town on foot along the narrow road from Davis' home that parallels Chiniak Bay leading to the Gulf of Alaska. If you look closely and long enough, you might spy an otter floating on his back while knocking the hell out of a clamshell, or an ambitious sea lion surfacing alongside a fishing boat hoping to retrieve entrails from the day's catch.

But this morning it was the bushes along the roadway that caught my attention. Plump orange and red berries dotted the greenery, looking a lot like raspberries. They confused me for a moment before I realized what they were: salmonberries!

Plucking the darkest red berry among them, I popped it into my mouth. So sweet! I slowed my pace, no longer caring how long it took to get to town, because I simply had to stop every foot or so as one beautiful berry after another revealed itself, clearly wanting to be picked. I just had to oblige.

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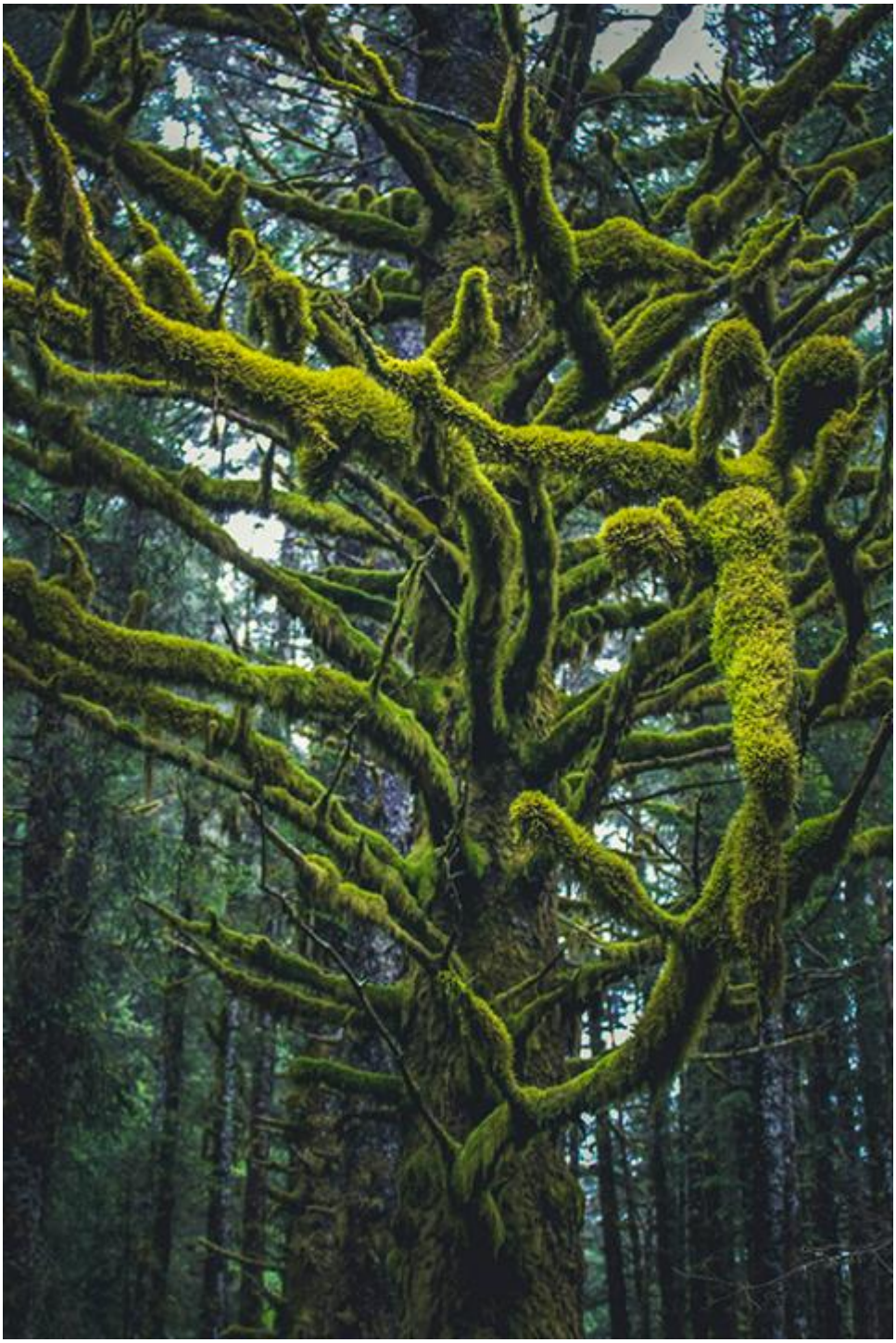
The next day, I returned with a small plastic bucket and a tin can. Soon I'd filled both containers, even with sampling more than I could count. Turns out, according to the locals, this year's crop of salmonberries was extraordinary. They were everywhere.

Growing along roadways, on hiking trails, in forests and on neighborhood streets. I wisened up and started bringing gallon-sized Ziploc bags along.

One very late afternoon, the sunlight still warm on my back because in July in Alaska it takes a long time for the sun to set, if ever, I began singing silly senseless songs as I traipsed through the forest. Partly to keep from surprising any bear that might be in the vicinity, but mostly because the girl in me was simply happy. As I turned to leave, clutching the berry-filled, oozing-with-juice plastic bag, an almost unnamable feeling hit me. Unnamable because it had been so long since I'd experienced it.

Delight!

And it wasn't just picking berries that delighted me. It was the way the forest spread out a mossy emerald carpet to welcome me each time I entered her canopy, her greenery exploding in all directions, delighting my senses. The evening sunlight glistened on tree bark and branches, filtering strands of gold across verdant leaves that danced in the coastal breeze, making me ignore that it was already 9 p.m. and nearly my bedtime.



Forest in Kodiak, Alaska (Unsplash/Siera Chadwick)

Delight was also awakening in the early mornings to the constant clanging of the green buoy in the bay as local fishing boats motored out of the harbor; seeing how golden kelp splayed itself along wet rocks as if competing for first prize in an art show; being surprised by salmon suddenly leaping from the water's surface like

excited acrobatic children; dazzled by fuchsia-colored fireweed covering the roadways and hillsides, looking more gorgeous than any weed has a right to be.

Every day, summer unfolded before my eyes in varying shades of color and light, water and sky; a million amazing gifts, all of them sweet and salty and sacred, reminding me a lot of when I was a kid growing up on the southeastern coast of Massachusetts where the July air was cool and briny, the grass stained my heels a deep green from running barefoot, and my usual bedtime hours fell by the wayside.

"Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart." A memory of Psalm 37 popped in unbidden. Could it be that this was what God was asking of me? To take stock in the simple, abundant gifts all around me, delight in them like a child and find myself delighting in the Holy One right in front of me?

Lately, the slogan "Joy is an act of resistance" has been surfacing a lot. Posted on social media, scrawled in bright block letters on protest signs, uttered from the lips of activists who want to offer something hopeful in an otherwise seemingly overwhelming political situation.

And it's true, isn't it? Joy is an act of resistance. Because in this climate, being joyful feels countercultural, almost sinful.

But you have to admit that our master teacher, Jesus, in the midst of Roman oppression, heartbreaking injustices and all things frustrating, showed up on the scene joyfully much of the time. Yes, the poor you will always have with you, Jesus assured us. Along with injustice and greed and a lot of inhumanity. All of which is currently happening and is disturbing and not to be ignored.



A sea otter floats near boats in St. Herman Harbor of Kodiak, Alaska. (Dreamstime/Karen Foley)

But what I was experiencing in Kodiak was not to be ignored either. Because if God is love and mercy and a mother's lap, then isn't this what I'm supposed to see and feel? Aren't moments of beauty, delight and joy what God wants for me? For all of us?

Yes, there's rampant pain and suffering in the world. And the cruelty and injustice toward folks who are considered "the other" or "less than" aren't going to end any time soon, from the looks of things. But I hear God telling me not to miss seeing this too.

As a parent, I remember how much my own son's delight delighted me. When I took Davis, at 5 years old, on his first berry-picking adventure in a Virginia strawberry field, red juice glistening from his lips and staining his T-shirt, I had grinned through it. Sure, it was sticky and messy. And it was going to take a whole other kind of adventure to wash those deep crimson stains out of his T-shirt. But if all he

remembered from that summer was the taste of strawberries bursting in his mouth, the feel of warm sunshine on his face and arms as he sat in the dirt in the middle of that field, the juice running down his chin and the sweet scent of strawberries engulfing him with delight, then I know that I succeeded in showing my boy what God is like.

"You must become like children to enter the kingdom of God," Jesus declared to his ragtag band of disciples who, like me, wanted clear answers. During one week on Kodiak Island, I got young enough and joyful enough to clearly see the entrance.