

## Seeing in a Cloud

Rev. John Allen

Two years ago, Molli and I went with our newborn daughter Cora to see a work of public art entitled Fog by Flo. The piece was a sculpture by the Japanese artist Fujiko Nakaya installed beside Jamaica Pond. And the artists chosen medium:

Fog.

Thousands of tiny nozzles, in trees, and in the ground, behind rocks, and just over hillsides, meticulously placed by the artist to create a specific and truly momentous effect. Every thirty minutes they would come to life and spill vapor into this little knoll on the shore of Jamaica Pond, the fog would then waft out across the water becoming wispy until it disappeared.

Here's a photo of Cora and I from 2018 standing in this sculpture.



Its hard to capture, but the sensation of suddenly being wrapped in fog on an otherwise sunny day is all at once disorienting, eerie, calm, and fun.

And it changes every time. A gust of wind. The shadow of a cloud. Even a bus rushing past on the Jamaicaway, could make the sculpture completely different from one performance to the next.

Nakaya has been creating fog sculptures for over 50 years.

And in many ways it's the family business. Her father Ukichiro Nakaya, a physicist at the University of Hokkaido, was the first person to ever produce an artificial snowflake.

The best art I think lingers with you. And Nakaya's fog sculptures have definitely stuck around in my spirit, which I think is an especially noteworthy achievement for a work that is already decomposing as it is being composed.

Lately, I have been reminded of that strange feeling of suddenly being absorbed by fog on an otherwise sunny day. The familiar dissolving into indistinction. Each next moment feeling pretty unpredictable.

We are right now living in a moment where the horizon to which we can plan is maybe at best two-weeks ahead of us at any given moment. Just as one example, reaching the end of July without a clear idea of what school will look like in September, is like standing in a cloud.

Or to not know whether our livelihood will hold up. Whether unemployment benefits will be extended. Whether the cases will go up, or down... Whether we should cancel that wedding, or just postpone it another month and cross our fingers.

Most of us have dealt in the past with one or two areas of uncertainty at a time. But the experience of pandemic has disrupted almost everything at once. And many basic features of our 'ordinary lives' seem to be not just paused now, but really put on the table.

I think that is part of what has me remembering the fog sculpture. When I get in touch with those feelings, I remember that peculiar, eerie, disorientation of the fog. The way it seemed to just take away the landscape, one reference point at a time...

But there is more to this clouded moment. As a white person, I have felt the disorientation of being challenged to see the racism of our society plainly. To finally attend to the pain so many have been naming for so long. We are being pressed to interrogate the biases that lie in our own hearts and that are perpetuated by nearly every system and organization that makes up our culture.

I have lived with extraordinary privilege in my life to schedule my engagement with racism. To pick what moments I want to be thinking about it, and when I don't. To decide what situations to engage, and which to ignore.

Others do not have that choice. The world makes them aware of their race nearly every moment of every day. They cannot avoid the truth that racism is part of the atmosphere we all move within.

Taking even small steps to see the world with honest eyes, rather than selectively, suddenly things start to take on new form.

And that reminds me of the fog too. Because when I endeavor to lean into those feelings, I remember that standing in that fog felt bracing, but also surprisingly healing. And I pray that there will be healing, honesty, and reckoning as those of us who are white become willing to stand in the cloud of all we do not yet know or understand, loosen our grasp on the comfort of stability and familiarity, and become part of something new that is taking shape.

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There was one moment this week when it all came together. One moment that made the experience of Nakaya's work flood back into my heart.

On Friday the Red Sox played their home opener. And you couldn't miss any of this.

Empty stands. Coaches with surgical masks. Tribute to those we have lost, and those three powerful words that have called our nation to repentance, echoed over the ageless Fenway Park public address. Black lives matter.

It was opening day, something I felt like I would recognize and know well. And of course I did. But it was also something else entirely.

Something that felt eerie, and peculiar. But also, newly and beautifully honest, clarified, and healing.

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So I would like us to embrace the fog. To encounter the healing that comes when we don't cling to our own narrow, individual, idea of what should happen next.

To let the fog tell us the truth that our plan was never promised, and nothing was ever as simple as we had wanted to imagine.

Let the fog rob you of your bearings so that you can truly find a new way.

Let it strip our pretensions, remind us of our connectedness and vulnerability.

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God really seemed to love Solomon's prayer. The young man had just become king, no doubt elevated with great pomp.

And God says, "I'll give you whatever you want. Just ask."

He could have asked for wealth, power, for a long reign, for victory.

But in his wisdom he surveyed the vastness of the task ahead of him and realized there was no way that he could possibly know where this was headed or what he might need.

“Give me wisdom” he prayed, “and a discerning heart.”

I don’t know what is going to happen next.

Neither do you.

That was always true. But its especially true right now.

My own experiences give me a tiny glimpse into the true world. But what I know and understand is dwarfed by what I don’t.

And the same is true of you.

So I like this prayer for us right now. “Grant us wisdom and discerning hearts.”

Praying in this way will help shield us from the temptation to try to force the world into the mold that serves us best.

Praying in this way will remind of our limits, and draw us toward depending more fully on one another and on God.

Praying in this way acknowledges that it is God, not us, who is the author of our lives.

And praying in this way helps us to see that for all its obscuring, this foggy-time is actually a revelation.

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Fujiko Nakaya has created sculpture that has moved millions. She has done this not by exerting her dominion over a piece of marble, or forcefully forming and firing clay.

But by giving over her delicate creation to the turbulent and uncertain air.

“The atmosphere is my mold,” she says. “And the wind is my chisel.”