



Faith and the Land: Conversations about Spirituality and Wilderness

November 11, 2008
Utah Catholic Diocese
Peace and Justice Commission

Introduction

On November 11, 2008, members of the Utah Catholic Diocese gathered together to share their perspectives about why Utah's wild places are important to them spiritually, and to talk about how the teachings and traditions of the Catholic Church call on us to care take the natural world.

The evening of dialogue was part of an exciting new effort sponsored by the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA) to create an interfaith statement about the importance of wilderness preservation to Utahns of all faith traditions. As a first step in that process, SUWA is convening conversations between members of different faith communities. Later, SUWA will bring people together across faith traditions to craft a compelling statement that weaves together the reflections, perspectives and ideas captured in these conversations.



The "Faith and the Land" initiative is based on the belief that Utahns from all religious traditions, as well as Utahns from no particular faith tradition, value Utah's wild lands as places of spiritual inspiration, connection, renewal and solace. It is also based on the belief that coming together to share what is important to us individually and collectively will reveal collective wisdom that can help guide the wild lands we love.

Below are highlights of the conversation:

How are Utah's wild places important to you spiritually?

> When I am in the wilderness, I experience an awesome sense of aloneness and separateness. But at the same time, I feel a oneness with the whole of creation and with all people and all things.

> I think of the Psalm: "Be still and know that I am God." The world is so busy. Until we enter the silent vast places that wilderness offers, we usually are not still enough to listen.



> I am more aware of God's presence when I am in the wilderness. I am not always as aware when I am simply in a room.

> Personal encounters with God is where faith is truly born. And personal encounters with God seem to happen for many people more naturally in wild places.

> Wild land opens your eyes to the beauty of creation and to the presence of God. I was brought up by the ocean and I had wonderful

teachers who pointed out the beauty that was all around us. Then I came to Utah and part of our mission was Capitol Reef. The wild land is so beautiful there -- all the red rock. Speaking of the glories of God -- Wow! Wild places are a perfect reminder of God's presence. That God would create all this is uplifting, awe-inspiring and healing.



> In the literal movement up a canyon or a mountain, a space is created for God to come in. It is a space we often do not feel so much in our everyday lives.

> I remember one time in the mountains. We were hiking in this dense fog, up and up and up. And then there was this moment where we hiked right out of the clouds. I was standing there exhausted and shivering in the freezing cold, and I thought: there should be a burning bush!

> My connection with Utah wilderness is life long. I grew up with the mountains surrounding the valley. It's like being held. I left when I was 18 and was away for about 18 years. Without the mountains I didn't have a sense of direction. The only thing that drew me back was the mountains. For me, climbing to the top of a mountain is important -- being the little thing on the top of the mountain, a tiny speck. There I can feel the power of God.

> I lived in Tucson for ten years and it really made me appreciate the desert. You drive out of the city or down from the mountains and suddenly there is 360 degrees all around you -- nothing but flat land and sky. When you're out there and there's nothing around you, you feel a sense of creation and spirituality like no where else. It brings me very close to the Lord.

> Your soul is filled when laying under the stars. How can your soul not be filled?

> If can't pray in this beautiful creation, something is wrong.

> The light in Utah is so unique -- maybe because it is so high up. But I find it still surprises me after two years. It makes me remember that there is a bigger God out there.

> Even driving down Highway 215 and looking at the mountains, your breath is taken away.

> I feel truly blessed to be alive when this beauty is available. But I want it to be around for children and grandchildren.

> When I visit wild places, I feel calm and quiet inside. I feel an appreciation for the Creator. Sometimes I feel very blessed simply to be alive. It is my hope that these places will be available for my grandchildren.



> I turn to nature sometimes when I am looking for spiritual retreat. I go to a mountain, a lake, a forest. And in doing that, I enjoy the beauty of creation. For me, that is a spiritual moment. But I ask myself: what is the task I have to do? And the answer is the task is preservation. We are created in the image of God and we have a responsibility to live in the image of God. In Canada, everywhere there is water. Yet I have never seen such an impressive campaign to preserve water. There is this tremendous effort to preserve for the future. We need that kind of campaign here to preserve wild land.



> As humans, we need places to replenish ourselves. Nature has that healing quality. Wild places are healing places.

> Wild places renew me. There's a cabin at Brighton that we often visit on weekends. I can go to it disliking myself, the world and everything in it. But by the time I come down on Sunday I am happy. It makes my soul happy to be in wild nature – it's my renewal. I don't get there often enough.



> When I am in wilderness, I experience the transcendence of God. I also experience the aloneness of the desert. Sometimes it feels threatening. But the older I get the more I want to be alone.

> I don't know about the word "wild" – it's not for me. Land helps me to pray. The psalms are filled with images of land. Across from where I work is a field of horses. There are wetlands there and we take children from the school to see them. There is a presence in this place for me.

> I turn to the desert to clear my mind a bit. I go out and try to imagine what it was like 150 years ago. I go hike for a few hours. I soak it in. It's been a good experience for me.

> Even for people who can not go to wild places, simply knowing that they exist is spiritually nourishing and stabilizing.

> In the scriptures, it is said that Jesus went into the desert, and heard God's voice in a small wind.

> I had a nephew who climbed K2. And he would say "God is on that mountain." He never went to church. I judged him for it for some time. And then I thought: there's a spirituality I can't deny.



> Even if you are just driving along the highway and looking at the wilderness, you take it in and it is such an experience! You feel how small you are and how infinite it is. Or if you look up at the stars, you realize we are just a speck. And yet, God became one of us. So if I am out by myself in a wild place, or sitting by a camp fire – well, it's good stuff.

> There is a long tradition that the desert experience is a spiritual experience. Jesus Christ went into the desert to prepare for his life and death on earth.

> Wild lands are very biblical. When I think of the Bible, I think of wilderness.

> Wilderness is all about diversity – wild horses, eagles, rattlesnakes. And you know, it's their environment, their home. We need to realize that we share the same earth with them. I go up any of these canyons and I realize 150 years ago it was all trees. And we've just stripped away the trees.

> I have often thought that wilderness is to the earth as the soul is to the body. Our souls are inherently wild as they are the Divine part of us and we do not control God just as we ultimately don't control nature and especially wilderness. We can destroy wilderness and we can destroy our relationship with God, but we cannot control them. The wildness and the deepest part of our souls are perhaps most accessible in wilderness because the soul breathes more deeply in an environment which lets God be God and wildness be wildness.



Two quotes that speak to me:

“I will lead you into the wilderness and speak to your heart.” Hosea 2:16



“(The) mystical Wisdom occasionally so engulfs souls in its secret abyss that they have the keen awareness of being brought into a place far removed from every creature. They accordingly feel that they have been led into a remarkably deep and vast wilderness unattainable by any human creature, into an immense unbounded desert, the more delightful, savourous, and loving, the deeper, vaster and more solitary it is.” St. John the Cross, 16th Century Spanish Priest, Mystic and Doctor of the Church, from a commentary on the Dark Night of the Spirit.

How do the teachings and traditions of the Episcopal Church call on us to care take the natural world, including our wild land heritage?

> In the Bible story of creation it says that God created the earth and said “That is good.” It is a recognition that creation is sacred and blessed by God.

> The Catholic faith teaches that God reveals himself in creation and if we lose creation we lose some of God.



> Christians are called to love God and their neighbor. Traditionally we may think of that as going to church, working on poverty, etc. But loving God and neighbor also means care taking the earth.

> Our liturgy calls on us to be stewards. God made humans to be stewards. This is a call to action in our own liturgy.

> As stewards of the earth, we are asked to care for and tend wild places.

> The greatest commandment is “Love your neighbor.” It is easy to make the argument that taking care of the environment is a way of loving your neighbor and honoring God.

> Just look at the commandment: “Thou shalt not kill.” At first thought, this may appear narrow. But this teaching can be understood as the true basis of environmental stewardship. Thou shalt not kill the mother earth.

> St. Francis of Assisi – one of the best known saints – calls for care taking the natural world. St. Theresa refused to kill spiders when she found them inside the nunnery. Despite her fear of them, she moved them outside.

> Living a life full of grace means more gracefully living on the earth.

> All the religious orders in the Catholic tradition are very careful about taking care of the property they own. This is a prime example of good stewardship. It serves as a model for the rest of us.

> Many of the sacraments and signs in the Catholic tradition are based in nature – the wood of the cross, the water of baptism, the anointment of oil. Nature plays a huge role in the symbolism of the Catholic faith.



> Jesus often offered examples from Nature to teach us about God and show us God's love, like, the lilies in the field. The psalms are full of nature.

> Our social principles include care of God's creation. The social principles include such powerful statements and inspirational images. But sometimes I worry that there is sometimes a lack of connection between the principles and our practices. I worry we are not living the principles, or hearing enough about them from the pulpit.

> One of reasons stewardship is not talked about as much as we might think is appropriate is that people are sometimes fearful. You can feel that fear in our community and clergy when an issue involves political activity. So often, people prefer to focus on charitable issues.



A word or phrase that reflects what you are taking away from this evening

The potentiality beyond the fear.

Inspired and awakened.

Hopeful and encouraged.

Refreshed.

Gratefulness.

Thankful for the time to reflect on nature, spirituality, connection to earth

An alive presence.

Increased love of God.

Opportunities for bridging our rich tradition with our world.

More aware. In particular, more aware of how delicate our wilderness is.

More involved in my commitment.

A call to action in favor of nature.

Activism – what can be accomplished if aware and organized.

Common ground will help policies for wild land.

Don't I have the most wonderful group of friends!