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Love for wilderness unites various faiths seeking to protect it

By George Handley

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It is a curious thing to consider why we are impelled to love wild landscapes and why contemplation of their physical beauty bears spiritual fruit.

It is more curious still why, as Wallace Stegner once warned, we can love a place and still be dangerous to it. Utah is blessed with an abundance of magnificent landscapes: the castellated peaks of the Uintas and the Wasatch, the water-haunted museums of redrock in southern Utah, and the solitary grandeur of Utah's west desert. This wild beauty is a source of solace and pride for citizens of this state and of our entire country; more than 9 million acres of public land in Utah still retains its wilderness character.

Yet everything from poorly considered public policy, unrestrained economic practices and global processes of environmental degradation threaten the fate of these wild lands. What threatens them threatens us and diminishes the value and meaning of our very affections for our home.

Over the past 12 months, Utahns from Episcopalian, Islamic, Jewish, Latter-day Saint, Methodist, Presbyterian, Quaker, Roman Catholic, Unitarian Universalist and United Church of Christ backgrounds have met in their respective faith communities to consider the spiritual importance of Utah's wild lands. In all, more than 230 people took part in these two-hour "Faith and the Land" dialogues, sharing powerful personal stories about the impact of wilderness on their lives and discussing how their faith traditions call on them to care for Utah's wild lands. It showed that spiritual devotion and love of nature are entirely compatible, and special claims of belief that sometimes divide us can work for the greater whole when believers are more invested in doing good than in being right.

At the dialogue I helped to host for my fellow Latter-day Saints, I listened to a moving outpouring of appreciation for what LDS doctrines suggest about the strange allure of the wild: that wilderness reminds us that the world was created spiritually before it was created physically, that plants and animals are "living souls" and that wilderness experience fosters awareness of the majesty of the Creator, the wonder of our humanity and deepening bonds of family and community. We spoke of the holy wanderers in the woods, mountains and deserts: Jesus, Moses, John the Baptist, the Book of Mormon prophet Enos and our modern LDS models, including Joseph Smith and Spencer W. Kimball. We recalled those enduring, endearing memories of the outdoors from our youth and considered Malachi's prophecy about the hearts of the fathers turning to the children and its implied ethic to act on behalf of Utahns yet to come.

Other faith communities had similar conversations with similar results. When an inter-faith group of us read anonymous comments by believers across so many faiths, it was hard to miss the common thread of respect for creation and our inherent need for wild places for spiritual renewal, connection, nourishment and for deepening human bonds. It was hard to miss a shared sense of apprehension that affection for natural beauty was not enough, that these special places needed our self-restraint and protection. We have gathered these comments into a remarkable document entitled "Faith and the Land: A Call for Wilderness Stewardship." It shows that human community does not have to come at a cost to others and to the more-than-human world that nurtures us.

In these times of economic uncertainty, it is important to honor what sustains us spiritually. Our various faith traditions suggest that this includes the wild landscapes that grace our state. Stewardship pertains to our human needs, but our faiths also teach that we must balance our needs with care for the well-being of all creation.

Last week, participants in this effort presented the interfaith statement at the steps of the Federal Building and delivered it to Utah's Congressional delegation. In the coming weeks, we hope to meet with our elected leaders and other interested communities of faith to discuss ways to protect Utah's wild land heritage. Our hope is that a new spirit of shared and reverent commitment can dispel old-time tensions so that we can work together to protect our magnificent wilderness lands for generations to come.

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