



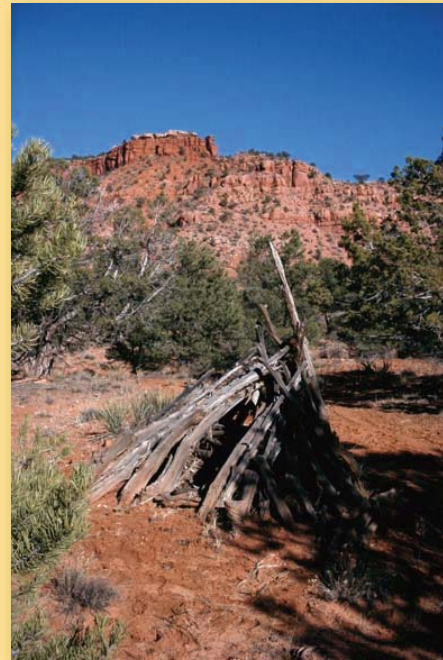
southern
utah
wilderness
alliance

SPRITUALITY AND WILDERNESS INTRODUCTORY READING

The connection between nature, wilderness, and spirituality goes back to the very origins of the human religious impulse. The primary epiphanies of many of the world's most central religious figures all took place in a natural setting.

For Moses it was the “holy ground” and the burning bush on Mt. Horeb in the Sinai wilderness. For Buddha enlightenment arrived while sitting under a papal tree. Jesus was baptized in the wilderness of the Jordan River and his transfiguration occurred atop a mountain. With Muhammad it was a cave in Mount Hira near Mecca.

Regardless of whether part of a religious community or not, many people have been drawn to wilderness conservation by similar experiences such as this one:



“My wife and I were day hiking at Guadalupe Mountains National Park in west Texas. We had completed a climb to the top of Guadalupe Peak and were on the way down coming into a small ponderosa grove in what is otherwise a pretty wide-open Chihuahuan desert environment. I noticed the shade and the birds singing right away. As I walked further into it a very strange feeling came over me. It was as though I was a permanent part of that place. But there was also a feeling of imminence – as though I was on the edge or verge of an infinite place and time... There was a presence of being that seemed to uphold and permeate all that was around me. This lasted maybe ten minutes. I found it to be a very strange experience. Yet it didn't seem all together unfamiliar...” *

How often have you had a spiritual experience in a natural setting?

How intrinsic was that wild place to your experience?

Is it important to protect such places?

Wallace Stegner described the red rock wilderness of southern Utah as “a lovely and terrible wilderness, such a wilderness as Christ and the prophets went out into; harshly and beautifully colored, broken and worn until its bones are exposed, its great sky without a smudge of taint from Technocracy, and in hidden corners and pockets under its cliffs the sudden poetry of springs.”



Not stopping there, Stegner added, “Save a piece of country like that intact, and it does not matter in the slightest that only a few people every year will go into it. That is precisely its value.”

This impulse to protect the natural world is a part of many religious traditions including the Judeo-Christian one to which Stegner alludes. For example, the story of the Garden of Eden cultivates a practice of stewardship. Humans are asked to help “keep” the garden and to protect the tree that is “in the middle of the garden” – the failure to do so is

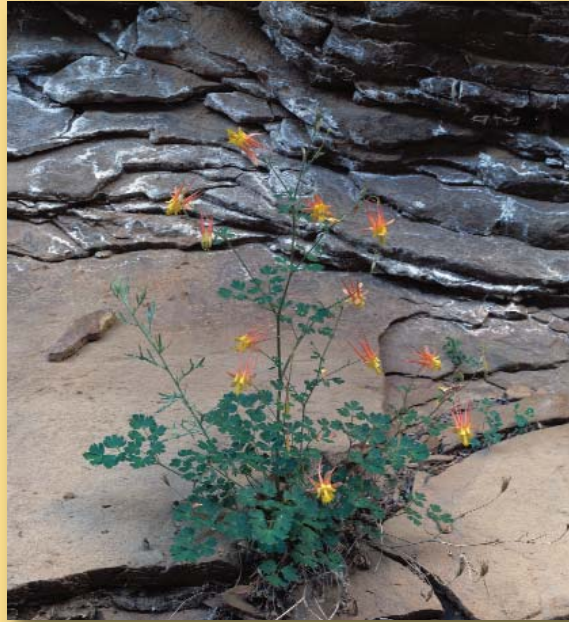
deemed to have consequences for the entirety of human history.

The place of worship for the Pueblo people, literally in the ground, is an embodiment of the place of humans in the created world. The “kiva” is dug into the earth, with dirt walls and roof rising above, and contains a “sipapu” or small hole that is symbolic of the emergence of humans from within the earth to dwell on its surface. This is a profound expression of the intimate and essential nature of the relationship between humans, the earth, and the spiritual.

In the “Wild Utah” video Mark Maryboy evokes the Navajo belief about the heavens as an explanation of why it is important to seek wilderness designation for the wild places of America’s red rock canyon lands. The Wilderness Act itself confirms this vision with its definition of wilderness as “a place in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape... an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain”.



Are efforts to protect wilderness an outgrowth of your spiritual experiences and an expression of your faith tradition? If so, we invite you to join the effort to protect one of America’s natural icons – Utah’s red rock wilderness



Great spirit whose voice we hear in the winds, and whose breath gives life to all the world, hear us.

We come before you as children.

We are small and weak; we need your strength and wisdom.

Let us walk in beauty and make our eyes ever behold the red and purple sunset.

May our hands respect the things you have made, our ears be sharp to hear your voice.

Make us wise, so that we may know the things you have taught your people, the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock.

We seek strength not to be superior to our brothers and sisters, but to live in harmony with ourselves and all of your creation.

--traditional Native American prayer

* Clayton Daughenbaugh as quoted in "How To Preach The Miracles" by Rev. John E. Sumwalt, p. 156.