



Faith and the Land: Conversations about Spirituality and Wilderness

October 26, 2008
Salt Lake Quakers
Quaker Meeting House
Midvale, Utah

Introduction

On October 26, 2008, a group of Salt Lake Quakers gathered together after Sunday morning worship to share their perspectives about why Utah's wild places are important to them spiritually, and to talk about how the Quaker tradition calls on us to care take the natural world.

The morning 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?

> One of my earliest memories was of watching an argument between my mother and father over my grandmother when I was five years old. My whole life was one of turbulence and agitation. But we lived on the edge of a small town and I would go out almost daily and sit next to this meadow. I would watch the stream flowing across it, notice what things were growing, spy bunnies hopping by, and observe the seasons coming and going. In that place, I found a great sense of peace. Even today, I settle down into a sensibility of quiet contentment and groundedness when I am in wild places. I find in wild nature a kind of community and complexity, and by inference, I find these things in myself.

> When I was a child there was a huge elm tree near my house. It was my playroom. But this tree was just one of many in our town. They lined the streets; the town was like a cathedral of trees. When I was five years old, Dutch elm disease invaded the area and killed all the elms. I was very young, but even so, I felt something had died. And I don't mean just the trees. Something more than the trees died. It was a sense of renewal -- the voice of the spirit -- that is so readily available, that speaks so loudly to me, whenever I go down a street and see an arrow of trees.



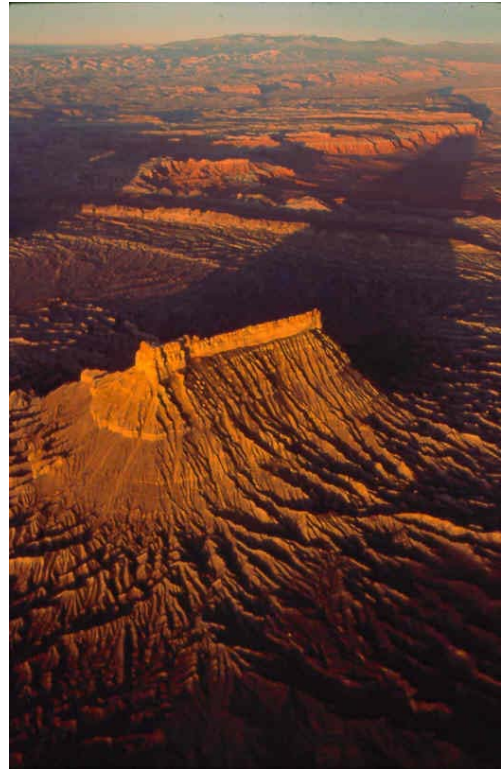
> Wild places provide me a sense of inspiration and spirituality. When I am in touch with nature I feel in balance. Wild nature is so vital to our existence.

> When I was a kid, my family had a summer place in North Carolina – a house way out in the woods in the mountains. I think that to be part of the mountain is the objective of almost everyone living in a wooded area. So when I was 12, I built my own trail. It was about eight miles long. And it was incredibly hard work. I spent the summer competing with wasps, snakes, and vines, and bumping my head on branches. This was my first experience with nature, and for me nature wasn't just a place for getting away. It also had the potential to be an adversary.

A few years ago, as an adult, I went back to hike the trail I built. I got in about a mile and then suddenly, there was a fence – a high, barbwire fence. I thought: Why in the world would anyone build a fence in the middle of the woods? I found out later that the fence surrounded a condominium complex that had been built on the mountain. I have to say, I felt violated by that.

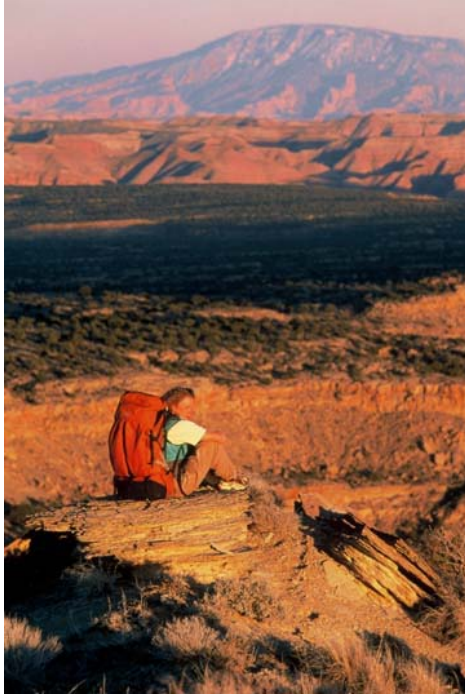
Personally, I'm not sure how best to think about the relationship between humans and nature. Wilderness is not always a place of spirituality and solace. It can also be experienced as brutal, unforgiving and threatening. For each country, this question about the relationship between humans and nature becomes a political question; we often end up fighting about it. But I come back to that trail I built as a kid that now has a fence across it. And I feel that we are all in danger of being violated if we close ourselves off from wild places.

> I saw this exhibit about the evolution of the world. About how in the beginning there was just rocks and gasses and water. And how life began under water, and somehow out of the water came all of us! Some came as trees, some as lions. Maybe some came as rocks! But what I felt from seeing this exhibit was this sense of universality – how everything out there is in relation to us in a very personal way. How everything has a soul.



> I grew up with a separation between religion and what I experienced when I was out of doors. But as I grew older, the outdoor experience became more and more important to me. During the last 14 years, I've been going to the Andes in Peru to study with people who have not been influenced by the West. Here, God is often perceived as separate from nature and from creation. In the Andes, people believe in a creator, but not one that is separate from creation. Everything is seen as sacred and the sacred is seen in everything. The self is not seen as better than the other, just part of it. When the people need to kill a llama, they put its head in their lap, apologize for taking its life, and then perform a ritual to set its spirit free. Even though there are people living there, the Andes feel like wilderness to me because of the relationship people have with nature.

> When I was eight years old, I picked up a rock, and when I picked it up I knew it had a soul. I then went on a quest looking for a religion that would resonate with that knowledge. Wendell Berry says it best for me in his poem:



The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron
feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

> I grew up as an atheist in China. When I was ten, my family moved to Hong Kong. Sometimes we would visit outdoor places where there were waterfalls and such, but I remember those experiences as social events, an opportunity to have fun with friends and family. Then I came to Utah and saw the wilderness here. I still vividly remember

how I was absolutely awed by the beauty. I was really challenged by it. The presence of such absolute beauty was the beginning of my spiritual search. Now the wilderness is very important to my own spirituality and the spirituality of my children. After being shocked into seeing God and Spirit in the beauty of southern Utah, I am now able to see the presence of God and Spirit in everyday ordinary things, such as a simple flower. The wilderness of southern Utah was a gateway – an opening – to my sense of spirit so I am eternally grateful for its existence.

> There is a cabin near Jasper National Park up in Canada that my family has had for 70 years. It is located right on a lake and has a view of the mountains you couldn't make up if you tried. The last time I was there I was recovering from a very stressful school year. One day I was out in the middle of the lake with these humongous mountains all around when this heron

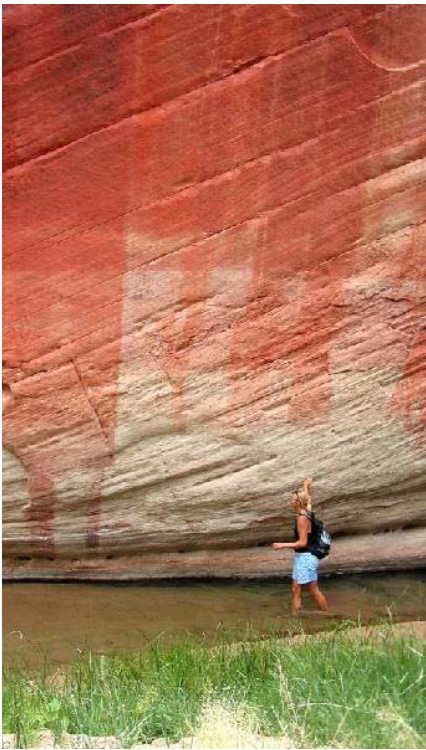
landed on a peninsular of land that juts out into the middle of the lake. Then this herd of elk came walking out the peninsula. I didn't know what would happen. So I watched. When the elk reached the heron, they just stopped, and the elk and the heron just stood there and stared at each other for about 10 minutes. It is hard to put into words, but I could feel the enormous space surrounding me. I



I could feel the vastness. I felt incredibly small. But at the same time, I felt that I was part of it all. And what happened yesterday or a year ago was irrelevant. It was like I found eternity in that moment.

> I have a long history of being in the wilderness, of hiking and backpacking many places. My experiences have often reminded me that wilderness is not always kind, not always forgiving.

But to live in simplicity is to have humility in the face of the terrifying awfulness of the wild. I think of that poem by Mary Oliver that speaks about loving the soft animal of your body. We are just animals. And that's where the peace comes in.



Wild Geese
by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

> I have taken many trips into the wilderness. Just three weeks ago, I hiked the Grand Canyon from rim to rim – 50 miles! What is most important about being outdoors is that it strengthens bonds between people. There is something that happens when you are outside with friends, especially those who tolerate your mistakes. I hope I will always be able to go into the wilderness. For some people, the relationship to the Divine comes not from a building or a person standing up in front of a group, but some place else. Wilderness is one of those places for me.

> I just went to southern Utah for the first time. It made me think of the first time I saw the ocean. I was with some of my best friends, but I just left them and took off running. It's how I am when I feel spiritually connected to wilderness.

> I grew up in Arkansas with nature all around me. No fences. Just wonderful land full of song birds and tadpoles. I think God loves variety. It is so beautiful to see what happens when nobody touches anything.



> I think the reason my kids have such good relationships with each other is because of the time they spent backpacking together in southern Utah without video games, tv, and other distractions. They had to rely on each other for extended periods of time. It gave a depth and secure foundation to their relationships that is really beautiful.

> To me this is a no brainer. Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha – they all went out into the wilderness. None of the spiritual leaders ever said about their inspiration, “Oh, I got it in a building.” They were always wandering off somewhere into the wilderness.

> It is such a joy to be here where the mountains are always a frame for our human foolishness and to have trails on the edge of town where one can feel one with God. I grew up next to Boundary Waters and Hudson Bay – really really really wild land! My father did a lot of hunting and fishing (which gave him an acceptable excuse to be outside). I learned to hike quietly with him, but as I’ve grown older I’ve gotten quieter and quieter. I’ve learned that if I just stop and sit still all the critters will include me in their landscape. Now I find myself at home in the quiet of Quaker meetings.



> I don't see any boundary between life and spirit. I don't see any walls that constrain spirit. Now we have the Hubble telescope to look out in to space. I think we will discover that life is everywhere. But right now our challenge is to take care of our beautiful planet – to realize we are not a boundless planet. Stewardship is one of those words that just means respect. I think we build fences out of fear. I think our spiritual work is to be conscious in life – to build understanding, to cultivate peace, to be willing to be vulnerable.

> There is an area of nature near my house; you might describe it as “undeveloped land.” I have seen it shrink over the years with the construction of apartment complexes. I will wander in there with my camera one or two times a month and take pictures of the bits and pieces of things that are left there. And I find myself wondering: Is this the relationship we have with nature? Is it a place where we throw things we no longer want? Is nature to be harvested and contained? When I go out in wilderness it is almost as if I am looking at the face of God. The smaller wild places get the smaller the force of God feels. And I wonder, are we throwing things into the face of God?

> I think of my experience as a boy scout in Arizona and missing the chance to float down Glen Canyon before it was dammed. And of living on Chesapeake Bay – despite all the time and money spent trying to restore it, they say its condition is worsening. And during my lifetime the Brazilian rain forest has been destroyed. I wonder: What will be the legacy we leave for our grandchildren? What will life be like for them? When I was a child I was reading “The Little Engine That Could.” Now my granddaughter is reading about the destruction of the earth.



How do Quaker traditions call on us to care take the natural world, including our wild land heritage?

> One of the early Quakers said “All He has is Thee, and Thee better do it.” That idea is central to Quakers. We expect to be active. We believe that spiritual growth and prayer ought to be reflected in your activities. Quakers have been in the forefront of slavery, anti-war movements, women’s rights, gay rights. So it is the very nature of Quakers to be responsible environmentally. In fact, it is essential to our faith tradition.

> Quakers do not have a creed. There may be 20 of us sitting here and we do not have the same definition of belief except that there is that of the Divine within us and we are responsible for nurturing and developing the Divine. But the Divine is not limited in any fashion. The Divine could be in a tree. It could be either or neither or both.

> A corollary to the belief that there is that of the Divine within us is that we respect that of the Divine in everything else. In part, this is where our sense of stewardship of nature comes from.

> We as Quakers seek truth and spend our entire lives on this question of truth. We are all questing after truth and answers that work for us. And we are responsible for own insights and truths. If our answers don’t work for the next guy that’s OK. This is all part of our ongoing practice.



> We can sit and argue ideas, but what is important to Quakers is the direct experience of community. We share a realization that we are all the same; we are not separate. That is why many of us may not speak of “the natural world.” We are that world. And we are responsible for that world.

> Man does have dominion over the earth. It is in our power to cause extinction. What a responsibility that is! I read in a National Geographic article that one half of the coral reefs in the world have been destroyed in one generation. My mother said to me: Maybe the solution is for humans to go extinct. Then things would go back into balance. That idea made me blink. But it does point out our responsibility for the state of things.

> As Quakers we are all called on individually to praise God whether in meeting house or wilderness. I read recently something by Jared Diamond, an anthropologist from Princeton, who wrote about how people in the South Pacific islands worshipped trees. Yet over the last decade, almost every single tree has been cut down. The effects have been devastating. And I wondered: How could that happen? And what does it herald for the rest of us? But if you think of the earth as an island in the universe, you realize this kind of destruction could happen to our planet. As a Quaker, I feel called to acknowledge that and ask how to save the wilderness and everything else.

> There is a tradition among Quakers to act for people who not have voice for themselves. I think nature falls into that category.

> Over the centuries there have been testimonies that individual Quakers accept on a certain level even though how we interpret those testimonies is very individual and personal. Acting on our beliefs is the most famous testimonial. There is also the testimonial of integrity, or acting with a moral consistency. And there is the testimony of opposition to violent behavior. These testimonies all support acting to prevent the destruction of nature.

> Quakers do not relegate the responsibility of being a voice of the Divine to a hired person. Rather, when we sit in worship, whether in this meeting house or wilderness, we believe that each one of us is the vehicle for the Divine. If a message comes to us and it is a message that needs to be shared, we have a responsibility to share it. And if there is a message in worship, it implies that we are listening to the voice of God. So part of how Quakerism calls on us to care take the natural world is that we speak about the need to live in harmony with nature during worship and the rest of us listen.

> As Quakers, we listen until someone speaks. Then we decide how to act. Our first step is to come to understand. And then our second step is to give testimony, witness, and take action. It is part of our overall responsibility to take action. There are things we can do as Quakers to protect wild places. Sometimes that may mean sitting down in front of the bulldozer. Sometimes that may mean speaking with our elected officials. We also have a Quaker lobby in Washington and it is charged with speaking truth to power.



> I went to a compassionate listening workshop and the leader talked about how he has participated in peace demonstrations and for years felt that soldiers or others hated him for it. This was the impetus for him to become a teacher of what is called “compassionate listening.” As Quakers, we realize that the heart of the issue is often something underneath what is being argued about. We need to listen to the needs and issues raised by others. And somehow out of this deep listening, there can be a transformational process.

A word on what you are taking away from this morning

Greater awareness. I saw God and she is innocent! Enlightened and encouraged. Thrilled. A reminder how important wild places are. Hope. Hope. Hope.