

Faith And the Land: Conversations about Spirituality and Wilderness

June 1, 2008
Holladay United
Church of Christ

Introduction

On June 1, 2008, members of the Holladay United Church of Christ 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 teachings and traditions of the United Church of Christ call 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?

> Wild places remind us of who we really are.

> I take people with disabilities on river rips, and they are overwhelmed by the beauty around them. They say to me: "When I'm out here, I don't feel like I have a disability."

> I look out the window at the quaking aspens. Or that huge tree. And I think: these trees are doing exactly what they should be doing. And it reminds me that *I too am perfect*. Look at the honey bee – it is perfectly engineered to get pollen from the flowers. Or that tree. I'm not sure if it is alive or dead. But if it falls down it will compost and become dirt that will support the growth of new trees. It's all part of a perfect cycle of balance – flowers and bees, life, death, rebirth.

> Wilderness provides an opportunity to be with the essence of who you are.

> Wilderness strips you down to be more human. Here in the city, we often take each other for granted. Out in the wilderness, we remember that we depend on each other.

> I take kids into the wilderness and it's amazing what the kids experience when they spend time without all their stuff and high tech toys. Because they don't have things to distract them, the kids are compelled to face who they are as a human being in the world. Some love this. For others, it can be tough. I remember one kid who was afraid of the wind. He was in tears every night. But I believe that the tougher the issue you face, the deeper the journey. Wild places bring us face to face with our vulnerability. And that experience teaches us who we are as human beings in the world.

> I like feeling small and anonymous in wilderness. In the city, I don't feel comfortable feeling small. But if I am out in the wilderness, I do. Why? I think it's because in wild places I feel part of something larger that matters.

> In our urban setting, I find myself needing to feel "in control." But wilderness reminds me that I am in God's presence and that I am not in control of things. It's a wonderful feeling – to be OK with that.

> When I spend time in nature, I begin to see my self in perspective. It becomes clear to me that things I tend to think of as so important in the urban environment are not really so important.

> Wild spaces remind us our time on earth is a blink of an eye. They remind us of what is really important in our daily lives.

> Wild places provide unstructured time for self exploration. We are bombarded by information in our daily lives. It creates a lot of fear and paranoia. Wilderness returns us to a sense of serenity and provides a pause for self-reflection.

> We need wilderness to nourish the soul. The silence and serenity of wild places, the opportunity to just be -- it is vital to the soul.

> When I am out in wild nature, I connect with a life force – a God force – especially if I am out by myself.

> In wilderness, I learn again to live with the rhythm of the natural world. *I feel part of creation.* The sun goes up, the sun goes down. You have to get things done at a certain time of the day. I feel great solace, and re-connected to spirituality.



> I find a sense of Providence in nature. When I am able to be in the natural world without all the noise and business of my day-to-day life, I sense that things are OK. All my human made problems fall away. I feel things are happening as they are supposed to.

> Fellowship is important, but there is something about being in wilderness without all the human distractions that allows me to get in touch with God. In my urban existence, I always feel like I'm in a hurry and that's all that exists.



> When I go out in wilderness and stop and look around, I think – this landscape is awesome. It is something you simply can not create at home. That feeling of balance in nature – you can't find it anywhere else.

> It is easier to have a quiet mind in wild places. It is easier to be in the moment.

> If something is bothering me, getting out in nature puts things in perspective. We were skiing yesterday, and no one was there. We wouldn't see anyone for five, even ten minutes. It was just so quiet.

> Wilderness reminds us to find joy in simple things. One day I spent hours just playing with a stick.

> I finally got up to Red Pine Lake here in the Wasatch, and – Wow! I took a hike and got lost in the place for a day. The water in the stream. The wild flowers. It was simply incredible.

> Wilderness teaches me about compassion and spiritual connection -- not only with other human beings, but also with non-human beings.

> Wilderness is a place where you can connect deeply and spiritually with family and friends.

> I find wildness – the spirit – in people. God is within us. God is in our hands. God is wild.

> A few years ago we took our first overnight river trip as a family. We took a couple of our kids down Cataract Canyon in southern Utah. I just remember the morning we were coming down the last stretch. It was a Sunday morning, and no one was on the river but us. We were floating past cliffs, and there were bald eagles roosting in the cracks and crevices, and we were stirring up lots of them as we passed by. Not to be dramatic, but it was, well, it was incredible. And so spiritually nourishing. Just being in that beauty.



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

> The members of this church understand faith not just as a word, but also as work or action. We do not come from the view that none of this – the physical world – matters. Rather we believe that the world in which we live does matter. We believe in working towards justice and equality. And we believe that the only way to improve things is to take action. So we better get busy! *To have faith, is to have the strength to go forward.*

> We believe in being with God and others in the here and now of nature, and in putting our faith into practice by taking action.

> Our faith tradition focuses less on the after-life or “getting somewhere” and more on today. It is a call to be present, to work on issues we can change, to look at the world and act. Care taking the earth and its wild places is part of that call to action.

> Our Faith calls us to action -- to create more just, equitable, peaceful world. This includes stewardship of the environment.

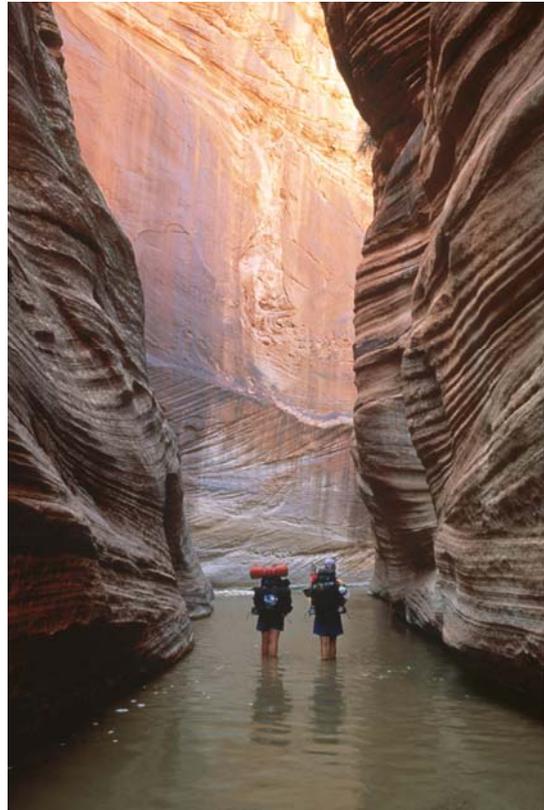
> A key tradition in our faith community is the notion of *inclusivity*. We are a church where everyone is welcome, whoever they are and wherever they are in their life's journey. We believe in drawing ever widening circles of inclusion. As humans, we are embedded in the natural world. We are inextricably a part of it. So it is inherent in our tradition to embrace responsibility for caretaking the natural world, including wild places.

> We believe that we are all in this together, and we must work together, whether it is for social justice or environmental awareness.

> Just like we believe that everyone is welcome at the table, we believe that wilderness has its own inherent value and deserves protection. The physical world is part of creation and all the life that comes with it.

> Our theology appreciates and celebrates the uniqueness of life. A core part of our philosophy is to explore and celebrate diversity in all its myriad forms. We don't think that because you are not like me you are wrong. We try to appreciate the uniqueness of every one. And as we value and celebrate the diversity of the human community, we also value and celebrate the diversity of the natural community.

> We believe that nature is in God's image, that nature is sacred.



> For me, God is not separate from nature. We are the image of God. So is that tree. So take off your shoes because the land you are standing on is sacred! The earth is not just “resources.” Our scriptures teach us that. To care for the earth is so intrinsic to why we are here. It’s like the words in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Living God’s will is acting in the now.

> From my spiritual perspective, there is no “other.” We are the other.

> Members of the United Church of Christ do not tend to be “literalists.” This is because we believe God is still speaking. Creation is still speaking. We need to pay attention and care take the natural world or we risk losing that connection to the voice of God.

> As members of the United Church of Christ we are called upon to provide a voice for those who do not have a voice. This includes people, critters and the land.



> Peace, justice and equality are important goals for members of this church. Part of our sense of environmental stewardship comes from this. We are not creating a peaceful just world when natural resources are made part of a general system of extraction and removed for personal gain rather than managed for the general good.

> For members of this church, peace and justice issues extend beyond the human aspect and into the “creation” aspect.

> Our faith tradition is built around what you might call a “flattened hierarchy.”

We try to work together in partnership in a democratic process, rather than exercise dominion over each other. This view extends to our relationship to the natural world.

> The way our church understands the concept of “dominion” as referenced in the Bible is not that the earth is ours to do whatever we want with, but rather, that the earth is ours to take care of. Similarly, the way we understand the Ten Commandments is that they call on us to love God *and our neighbor*. And we understand our neighbor to include not only humans, but every part of an ecosystem – the plants, the air, the water, creatures of fur, creatures of feather.

> We understand the commandment – “Thou shalt not steal” – not only as a prohibition against theft as we normally think of it, but as a prohibition against “stealing” the health and beauty of the earth from future generations.

> Our faith emphasizes interconnectedness – we are interconnected with the natural world as well as each other. We have a responsibility to care for the natural world as well as each other.

> The church is like a body, many up of many parts. One part suffers. We all suffer. This includes nature.

> Our church's relationship to the natural world is reflected in the architecture of our building. Our sanctuary does not close out nature. It brings nature in! You can see and feel the seasons! My favorite service of the year is when we worship at the Spruces campground in the mountains.

> The United Church of Christ has a longstanding tradition of paying attention to the relationship between humans and earth. Our efforts at environmental stewardship date back to the 1970's and have expanded through each succeeding decade. This includes environmental education programs, recycling programs, the use of eco-friendly resources, reducing waste in our church operations, modeling environmentally-responsible behavior in our personal lives. We embrace a "Whole Earth" covenant that calls on us to be good stewards of the earth.

> The Holladay United Church of Christ is committed to being a "whole earth" church, and to fostering environmental awareness and environmentally-responsible action. We have an Eco-Friends group that meets monthly and provides consistent education about green issues. Our children organized themselves for Earth Day and made a contribution to protect wildlife protection.

> When I look at the petroglyphs inscribed on the cliff walls of southern Utah, I am reminded that human beings have always reflected on their relationship to nature, that there has always been this deep spiritual connection between the human world and the natural world. We are only one tradition celebrating that connection.

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

Renewed in my interest, desire, commitment and spirituality.

Strengthened in my connection between deep spirituality and the earth.

Deep gratitude.
Reconnection.
Hopeful.

I am inspired that we shared a community-wide discussion rather than just sitting in our heads individually.

I often feel on the outside looking in – like "you have weird thoughts" – but this conversation leaves me feeling that people are turning around, appreciating the earth.

I am hopeful that the conversation about wilderness in Utah can shift from you don't like me and I don't like you to a recognition that we are all in this together.



I'm not just one voice.
I am reminded that there
are many voices.
A chorus of voices in unity.

I am strengthened just by
talking within this group.

I am just thinking about a
slogan I saw on a t-shirt:
"Live simply so that others
may simply live."

It's hip to be green.

Inspired
Re-energized
Ready to go.

