

# Faith and the Land: Conversations about Spirituality and Wilderness

February 22, 2009  
First Unitarian Church

## Introduction

On February 22, 2009, members of the First Unitarian Church 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 Unitarian Universalist 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?

> In wildness we go from this experience of feeling small, alone, afraid, to feeling part of something much larger.



> It is easier to connect with your spirituality when there are no roads or power lines in your field of vision. I think of the enormity of the desert, the red rock wild lands, the sky at night. We find our connection to the spiritual in our connection to that great expanse.

> After being ordained a priest, I lost God. But when I went out into the wilderness – hiking and playing in the Fiery Furnace -- I came to understand that's where I felt spiritual. It has to do with being away from the city. And all the energy that is out there. Plus it's beautiful. There is no way to not be in awe.

> I've been working in the wilderness here in Utah for the last three years with a program for at risk youths. In the last twelve months, I've spent more time under the stars than under a roof. In many ways I serve as a spiritual guide and teacher, fostering reverence and respect for all forms of life. Being in the wild gives me and these youths time alone, time to think without the distractions of daily life, time to contemplate the circle of life. I constantly see things that are alive and things that are dead, and I think a lot about my life and my eventual death. At night, looking up at the stars, I know I am part of something much larger than me.



> One of the closest connections I've ever felt with God was wandering through a Utah aspen forest.

> "In wilderness is the preservation of the world." I loved that phrase when I first heard it when I was 20, and I love it even more now. It's so full. I think about a hike I took in Monument Valley. It's sort of frightening how small you feel there. There are these huge

boulders all around. The history of the earth is right there in front of you. You can almost feel eternity. And then, the stars come out and I begin to feel: I'm here too. I'm part of this thing, the presence of the earth. It's an emotional experience – I can't name it. But I feel it again and again, by boulders, by streams, in the woods.

> I was always outdoors as a kid. We did everything on the land. We would go to the country and roam around and collect things – rocks, animals. When we were inside, we knew we were inside because the outside was our home. When I moved here three years ago, I fell in love with the landscape. How big it is. How much peace I feel in it. I go to southern Utah and am utterly amazed. I can get lost in myself and feel part of something so much larger. I shed the shields of society and know who I am. I see where blue sky meets the horizon and it brings a smile from my heart to my lips.

> I keep hearing people speak these words -- humbling, infinite, eternal, expanse, a hugeness that can't be grasped. And feeling one's place within all that.

> Wilderness is us. It is everything.

> I grew up in southwestern Louisiana. If you visited me, you would meet me outside, because I was almost always outside. All around are crawfish, frogs, crickets. And a rainbow of color – oreoles, jays, robins. And lots and lots and lots of snakes. It is a world of smells and sounds, including the constant melody of bullfrogs.

The experience of that living world is something I never felt separate from. It was what I was grounded in. I feel that wilderness is not an "other" thing or something I go to. For me, wilderness is everything. It's me. I feel



implanted in the mud. My “church” has been in Escalante sitting in the aspen. I have been here in Utah for 11 years. I worry that the experience of my children is virtual – one of asphalt and concrete. I feel imprisoned in this culture, and I feel that the living world is imprisoned too. If we don’t have the passion to free ourselves, we won’t survive.

> Wilderness helps to define the direction and meaning of your life. Thoreau went into the woods so he could understand at the end of his life that he had lived. He saw time in wilderness as confronting life, not escaping it.

> I have never experienced the ecstasy I feel in wilderness anywhere else.

> Wilderness heightens my senses. I can see better, hear better. In the city, I learn how to tune the world out.



> I feel most whole when I am out in the wilderness. I think my breaths are bigger and when I’m out in the wilderness.

> Wilderness provides solace and rejuvenation.

> Being with the earth in all that space ... I loved it. The mountains and lands make me feel like I’m being nurtured.

> I was born in Germany. My grandmother and grandfather loved taking walks – although always to a destination. A café! I would walk with them and we would walk through the fields. My grandfather knew about flowers and he would recite poetry. This combination of nature and poetry was very powerful. I think of my grandfather and his love of all things in the natural world, his joy in seeing a wildflower.



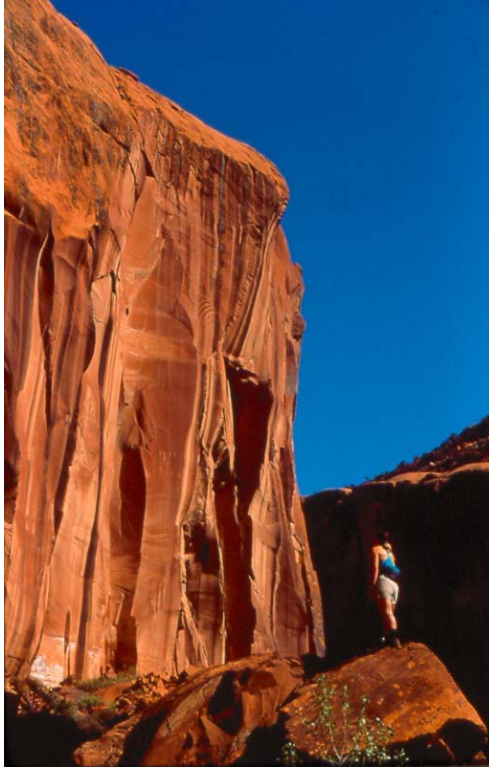
> Wilderness provides peace. There is something about getting away from people and the places that people have touched.

> Geography shows the expanse of times’ infinity.

> I look at the 1000 foot high cliff walls and see the ways water has carved the canyon. Right there in front of your eyes is an example of how old the earth is and how long it takes places to form. Wild places provide an in your face connection to time and a sense of eternity.

> Wilderness is a place where you find a general feeling of home.

> I actually feel like a part of the earth when I’m in the wild. I feel like I’m in the womb again.



> My father was a land surveyor and I would spend all day long outside in the woods. It was easy to wilderness for granted. As a child, I never considered that it wouldn't be there forever. Now it's gated communities and I feel like I don't belong. I've realized that the woods were what made me feel at home.

> In Rhode Island I formed a deep connection with the ocean and the green forest around that area. Living in the city is just a whole different mindset.

> I grew up in Provo and some of my earliest memories are of Provo Canyon – going on picnics and walking the trails there. I left Utah as a teenager for the Midwest. And in 1991, I went on a vision quest with group in Moab. I spent three days alone, fasting. It was the first time I was totally alone in the wilderness. I experienced a breakthrough. Weeping by a creek, this tremendous “letting go” feeling came over me. I saw everything in a new way. And now this place feels like home to me.

> What amazed me about coming to Utah, was that that I felt at home. It was the expansiveness that opened me up.

> I grew up near Bakersfield, California in a town called Oildale. I was about ten or eleven when I went to Glen Canyon, right after the dam had been built. My dad and I went exploring in the area. Something clicked there. Something inside switched when I knew the area would disappear. It just felt wrong. Even as a kid, I knew we were losing something. The sense of urgency that something would disappear forever helped me feel the importance of wilderness.

> I grew up in southern Florida and I lived outside all the time – it was where life happened!

We would go to the beach every day and there were all these things to explore – fish, frogs, birds. As I grew up I began to realize how fragile the wildlife in Florida is, and would just ache for the things that were lost. When I first came out here to Utah I thought it was a tough place. I thought the wilderness here would be OK. But then I realized that they also are fragile. It is so important for us to take care of nature and wild places because it is who we are. We are part of the wild. It's what we came from.



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

> Unitarians believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but really we extend this attitude toward all things.

> Unitarians also affirm the interdependent web of being. Our 7<sup>th</sup> Principle is respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. We see care taking wilderness as a part of a sacred responsibility.

> Unitarians share a commitment to make the world better. We believe we have a responsibility to not just sit by but to act.

> We have a tradition of helping those who can't help themselves. This is naturally extended to the land, because the land can't help itself.

> The words Unitarian and Universalist connote "one" – the universe as one. We believe everything is interconnected, although sometimes we tend to exclude ourselves! When we think about the essence of our being, it is not our cars, or our houses, but our interconnectedness. Wilderness is part of that.

> We try to increase the amount of love in the world. What draws me to this faith and fellowship is the focus on deeds of love. We believe we have a responsibility to fulfill our thoughts into actions. We believe in walking the talk.

> Unitarianism is a philosophy of action. We are the ones who have to take action. It's up to us. We can't sit around and let things run amok and expect God to jump in at the last minute and save us. We must save ourselves. We have a history of action – using the chalice as a sign of safety for persecuted Jews, burning draft cards during the Vietnam war. Environmental stewardship is part of that action too.

> There is also the notion of covenant – a promise between us all, a sacred agreement, a community promise. Care taking wilderness is part of that sacred responsibility. We owe it to people who do not know yet know the wilderness. And to people who are not even here yet.



## **A word or phrase that reflects what you are taking away from this afternoon**

Geography shows the expansive time of the infinite.

Vastness

Ecstasy

Enthusiasm

Connection

Commitment

Making the world better

Ours

Saving

Action

We're not about performance,  
we are about action.

