

Experiencing the Sacred in Nature

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May 2005

NOTE: This article is adapted from a workshop given at the "Nature and the Sacred: A Fierce Green Fire" Conference in Corvallis, Oregon on October 30, 2004. As a consequence, the writing reflects this presentation style and group activities are included.

Viewing nature as a living presence infused with the divine has a long and ancient history. Anthropologists maintain that our religious origins emerged out of our response to feeling the awesome powers of nature. Nature and wildlife have served as sources of inspiration and revelation for religious mystics and prophets throughout the ages. The revelations of Moses, Jesus, Mohammed and Black Elk all occurred during vigils in the wilderness. I could cite Wordsworth, Emerson, Thoreau, St. Francis of Assisi, or Christian writer C. S. Lewis who said, "Nature gave the word glory a meaning for me. If nature had never awakened certain longings in me, huge areas of what I mean by the love of God would never have existed." I could go on and on; countless volumes have been written.

However, my purpose here is not to sell this idea, to convince you by citing authorities or presenting theological arguments, but rather *to explore how we come to know the sacred through our personal experiences in*

nature. Rather than citing scripture, I will focus on the religious experience of nature, the mystical rather than the theological. For those of you who do not believe that nature is infused with the divine, I invite you to suspend your disbelief enough to enable you to explore the possibility that you can connect with the sacred in nature. Rather than provide answers, I invite you to question, to quest for yourself into these mysteries. How can we better know through our own experience, the sacred in nature?

This article: looks into ways we experience the sacred in nature; identifies the common characteristics of these experiences; and explores ways to cultivate them.

Sharing a little bit of my own spiritual journey might help you understand where I'm coming from and my motivation to share these ideas with you. Raised Presbyterian, I learned "Our father who art in heaven." The divine resided up there somewhere in the spiritual world, not down here in the fallen material world. As a young man, materialistic explanations of existence replaced religious explanations. I found the natural scientific creation story of evolution most convincing. And I still do, but these scientific understandings now enhance rather than supplant my sacred experiencing.

In 1987, through some amazing serendipity, a plan for a backpacking trip turned into a self-designed "vision quest." The quest was so powerful it turned into an annual event. These annual quests have become the central way that I monitor and orient my life journey. These quests and other nature experiences have put me on a path to integrate my understandings of human relationships that come from thirty years as a mental health professional with my love of nature. This led to my becoming a pioneer in the study of ecopsychology which examines the human-nature relationship; and to the publishing of a book a few years ago entitled *Communing with Nature: A guidebook for enhancing your relationship with the living earth*. You can find much of what is presented in this article and more in my book.

Today, I not only believe, but I intimately know nature as a primal wellspring for my personal and spiritual growth. Over the years my beliefs about nature have changed dramatically and continue to develop, not primarily by intellectual inquiry, but because my ongoing transformative experiences in nature challenge me to re-evaluate them. So, this is how I've become very interested in exploring how we experience the sacred in nature, and how we can help each other on our journeys of understanding our place in the world.

Sharing Activity: (10 mins - groups of 3 two minutes each, 2 minutes for brainstorming words or phrases; time allotted can vary depending on length of workshop) **Recall an important experience in nature that you would call sacred.** Guided Visualization: Have participants close their eyes and relive it. Share with their small group. For safety in the groups, respect for each other's experiences. Please do not challenge their authenticity nor put your religious interpretations or judgments onto their experience. Honor the diversity: some experience God, some don't, some experience the transcendent, others not, each has their own theology, beliefs, and language for trying to describe their experiences. Simply share your experience and what you got out of it.

Think of a few words or phrases that best capture the essence of that experience. Share with your group and write them up for all to see. Participants close their eyes while I read back to them the words and phrases. Then show them Maslow's list below and participants compare it with their descriptors.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow, a pioneer in the study of Peak Experiences has delineated their common characteristics:

- A feeling of merging, belonging, unity or oneness with one's surroundings or even all of creation.
- A sense of some ultimate meaning, reality, or truth being revealed.
- Ordinary time and space seem to dissolve as one becomes so fully present in the moment that one seems to touch the eternal.
- A sense of holy or divine presence.
- The impossibility of describing the experience in words.

- Resolution or understanding of opposites or paradoxes.
- Feelings of blessedness, joy, ecstasy, serenity.

By the way, Maslow and subsequent researchers have found nature to be the most common setting in which peak experiences occur.*

*(Alister Hardy in *The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience*, Oxford Univ. Press 1979, p.1, cites studies by Wuthnow 1978; Greeley 1974; Keutzer 1978)

My first Point is: We do not have to be religious prophets to explore nature as an inspirational resource. The beauty and grandeur of nature invite us all to awaken to the spiritual dimensions of our existence.

OK, so you and I aren't likely to be in the big leagues of great mystics and prophets like Jesus & Mohammed or Black Elk. What about us ordinary folk? Psychologist William James was one of the first to study and report on this in his classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* published in 1929. Here's a sample account from his book written 75 years ago.

“I remember the night, and almost the very spot on the hilltop, where my soul opened out into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer. It was deep calling unto deep -- the deep that my own struggle had opened up within being answered by the unfathomable deep without, reaching beyond the stars. I stood alone with He who had made me, and all the beauty of the world, and love, and sorrow, and

even temptation. I did not seek Him, but felt the perfect unison of my spirit with His. The ordinary sense of things around me faded. For the moment nothing but an ineffable joy and exultation remained. It is impossible fully to describe the experience. It was like the effect of some great orchestra when all the separate notes have melted into one swelling harmony that leaves the listener conscious of nothing save that his soul is being wafted upwards, and almost bursting with its own emotion. The perfect stillness of the night was thrilled by a more solemn silence. The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen. I could not anymore have doubted He was there than I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two.”

People throughout the ages have broken through their everyday mundane experience of the world to experience the underlying unity between themselves and nature-as-a-whole. Carl Jung's description of his experiences of merging with nature is a case in point, “At times I feel as if I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons.” A mystical “oceanic feeling” accompanies the flowing together of the person and the world into a single unbounded whole. Anthropologist Levi Bruhl called this sense of belonging

to the underlying and animating energy of all finite things - whether it be trees, birds, animals, grass, sky, or insects - *participation mystique*.

We may feel dwarfed in the presence of whales, giant redwoods, and the starry skies. These are important experiences for us to have at the hands of nature, to help us recognize that we're not the sole stars of the show.

Humbling experiences break us out of the egocentric and anthropocentric self-preoccupations that isolate us. They enlarge our perspective. Most importantly they introduce awe and wonder into our lives, which are the primary generators of spiritual and religious experiences. The powers of nature can cause feelings of ecstasy that we'll never get watching television. Nature's powers command our attention and respect. These experiences of nature can take hold of us in ways that cause us to change our ways, sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically. The language used to describe these changes will effect us differently based on our unique religious background. Each of us will have very different responses to terms such as: rites of passage, revelation, satori, healing, exorcism, born again, receiving god's grace, and spiritual transformation.

The most grand and magnificent in nature is not always what breaks through to touch us in powerful ways. **The ordinary can become the occasion for a peak experience.** In such moments, we may become aware

of a sharpness or luminosity in our experience of the world - a leaf stands out as bright, green, 'leafy,' in a new way, which is, at the same time, completely ordinary. Obviously a leaf is still a leaf, but the depth of our openness to experience has changed. In these little awakenings we catch a fleeting glimpse of how we're fundamentally connected to the whole of life. We discover the world in ourselves, and ourselves in the world.

So, most of you, on at least a few occasions, have experienced the sacred in nature. Most often, however, we easily slip into a frame of mind that makes for dullness rather than for vibrancy. Nature is not dull. It is overflowing with wonderful opportunities. The ordinary is more sensational than what we imagine it to be. Ralph Waldo Emerson reminds us of how we take life for granted, losing our sense for the tremendous mystery before us, when he writes "If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore!"

Wouldn't you like to experience the sacred in nature more often and more powerfully? **I believe we can learn to cultivate a relationship with nature that enhances our experiencing of the sacred.** These experiences are not produced by an act of will. Learning methods of spiritual discipline will never supplant our need for divine grace. However, we can learn gateways for leaving our habitually dull modes of consciousness behind and

entering into a more open and receptive state for discovering nature's inspirational gifts of wisdom and beauty.

Next, I'd like to share with you some keys that I've found helpful for opening the gateways to the sacred in nature. The first two involve being in the right place at the right time.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL GATEWAY: ENTERING INTO SACRED PLACES

In our highly secularized culture, land has lost its spiritual dimension. We view it primarily as a commodity, an economic resource, to be bought, developed and resold, hopefully at a profit. In our culture, sacred sites of worship typically are located inside the walls of churches, mosques, or synagogues. The land they are built upon is not typically acclaimed as sacred.

Sharing: Do you have a sacred place in nature? If yes, how did you find it? What makes this place sacred for you more than others?

So, how do you find yourself a good sacred place? A sacred place is not arbitrarily chosen, but is sought after and reveals itself to us. The experience of place is something you sense. You *feel drawn* to a sacred place. It has *allure*. It *calls you*. When you connect with that special place, *you sense a*

special feeling of well being. It *energizes you*. When in such a place, you might notice your *voice dropping to a whisper*, a *shiver going up your spine*, or some other *inner response indicative of the its powerful qualities*. When drawn to special places, people frequently have strong and meaningful experiences, and go away transformed and renewed.

To tap into sacred consciousness, visit an established sacred site, or venture into nature listening for mother earth to call to you. Hopefully you will *receive signs that lead you to a special place* where she will reveal her secrets to you. You may find a special place that speaks uniquely to you, a “personal power spot.” If you are fortunate enough to find such a place, go there regularly, when called, or when the occasion calls for it. In any case, go to the places that call you, and be open to their influence.

In *The Power of Myth*, Bill Moyers asked Joseph Campbell, “What does it mean to have a sacred place?” Campbell replied, “This is an absolute necessity for anybody today. You must have room for a certain hour or so a day, where you don’t know what was in the newspapers that morning, you don’t know who your friends are, you don’t know what you owe anybody, you don’t know what anybody owes you. This is a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be. This is the place of creative incubation. At first you may find that nothing

happens there. But if you have a sacred place and use it, something eventually will happen.”

Repeated visits to special places help develop your sense of connection to nature. A special place, for you, might be in your backyard, your garden, a nearby park, a special tree, stream, hill or mountaintop. Ideally, you will find a place you can return to frequently so you will be able to experience it at various times of day and night, and throughout the seasons. You will develop a sense of familiarity and deep understanding that is earned through prolonged contact just like you experience with long-standing friendships. And special places can be as precious to you, in their own way, as longtime friends. Going to your own personal sacred place is a returning to your spiritual Home.

THE TEMPORAL GATEWAY: PASSING THROUGH FROM

CHRONOS (CLOCK TIME) TO KAIROS (SACRED TIME) The key

is knowing when the gate is typically open.

How do you open the gates to sacred time, the time that touches on eternity? First we must *put our watches away* and stop chopping up time into hours, minutes and seconds. *Meditations which focus on attuning oneself to the ceaseless rhythms and cycles of nature open the gateway to*

eternity. Meditating to the waves of the ocean is just one example. We experience the sacred in between waves, in between breaths, in between sounds, in the spaces and pauses between . . .

The sacred is most powerfully available to us during times of transition -- sunrise, sunset, midday, phases of the moon, equinoxes and solstices.

These insertions of sacred time are linked together in cycles, repeated every day, every Sabbath, every season, every year.

Seasonal festivals connect communities to the rhythms of the earth through common participation in ritual ceremonies linked to changes in weather and vegetation, such as times for planting and harvesting in agrarian societies, and animal migrations in herding societies. Cultures maintain meaning and significance for their people by providing a map for traveling in time. Seasonal festivals act as lodgings for travelers making their way through the seasons of the year. They provide opportunities for both rest from daily toils and joyous celebration. The festival cycle answers the human need for periodic purifications, regeneration, creation, re-balancing, and renewal.

Some people take exception to the idea that some times are more sacred than others. They believe that all times are equally sacred, equally pregnant with holiness. Religious experiences, if we open ourselves to them, can

strike at any moment. The eternal now is forever present if we can but find the doorway and cross the threshold. On the other hand, epiphanies may function like lightning. Perhaps, at certain times and under certain conditions, nature is much more likely to strike us with an epiphany.

THE AUDITORY GATEWAY: SILENCE

Silence is the key to opening this gateway into solitude and communion with the divine. Silence has a voice, a spiritual voice. A Serbian Proverb tells us that, “Solitude is full of God.” Francois Fenelon, wrote in his Spiritual Letters, “How can you expect God to speak in that gentle and inward voice which melts the soul, when you are making so much noise with your rapid reflections?.Be silent and God will speak again.”

Seekers, both east and west, have sought out places of silence to find solitude. They maintain vows of silence, choose a monastic life, live alone in a hermitage, even go off alone to meditate in caves for months at a time.

Thomas Merton, who himself lived in a hermitage, wrote “I have only one desire and that is the desire for solitude - to disappear into God.”

Psychologist Clark Moustakas found through his studies of loneliness that, “In absolute solitary moments humans experiences truth, beauty, nature,

reverence, humanity.” Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead defined religion as “what man does with his solitariness.”

The practice of meditation offers a systematic method for entering into a state of solitude. Meditators become centered by sitting still in a meditative posture, the opposite of busywork. They often struggle with restlessness, boredom, and emptiness in their efforts to reach that place of inner calm. The key is to take your meditation practice out into nature; and instead of staying inwardly focused, open outwardly to take in your natural surroundings.

As with most religious experiences, moments of solitude are usually rare and fleeting. Each moment of solitude must be earned anew. Out of solitude, we may receive a new vision for our lives. Solitude may set the stage, but it doesn't start the new drama. We re-emerge from our solitude, hopefully renewed, inspired, and with a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world ready to re-engage ourselves in the business of our daily lives.

When going into nature with others, talking is often the norm, silence the exception. When hiking with friends, I often go ahead or drop behind to commune with my natural surroundings rather than socialize.

Next is **THE VERBAL GATEWAY: INVOCATIONS.**

Language is both our jailer and our liberator. We can use language in ways that cut us off from our experiencing; and we can also use language in ways that plunge us ever more deeply and intimately into our world.

We need to be wary of using words in ways that disconnect us from our concrete life experience. Emptying the mind of distracting chatter helps us focus on our sensory experience. Seeking causes and reasons, interpreting, and explaining are mental activities that often take us away from our direct experiencing. When we name our experience and immediately move on to the next, the label becomes a conceptual box that signals the end of exploring and discovery. We box ourselves in with words by limiting and selecting out experiences to conform to our preconceptions about how the world is. Caught up in the cognitive dimension of interacting with signs and symbols, we abstract ourselves out of participating in our organic connection with the living earth.

On the other hand, language can reflect an authentic effort to fully describe our experiencing. You can learn to recognize when your thinking is disconnected from your senses and when it is being informed by and grounded in your perceptual experience. We can discover ways to use language that validate our ongoing life experiences and creatively reveal to

us new perspectives and depths of meaning as we penetrate the mysteries of our existence. Whether *through the recitation of poetry, prayer, sacred chanting, or the ritual use of “mantras,” the repeated sounding of sacred words of invocation, we can rediscover the transformative power of the word.* They provide a means of acting upon ourselves to create a greater receptivity to the living earth so that it can flow through us in all its manifestations. The following prayer by Rabbi Nachman is a favorite invocation of mine,

“Master of the Universe, grant me the ability to be alone; may it be my custom to go outdoors each day among the trees and grass - among all growing things - and there may I be alone and enter into prayer, to talk to the One to whom I belong. May I express there everything in my heart, and may all the foliage of the field - all grasses, trees, and plants - awake at my coming, to send the powers of their life into the words of my prayer so that my prayer and speech are made whole through the life and spirit of all growing things, which are made as one by their transcendent Source.”

Sharing: Do you have an invocation/prayer that you use to invite in the sacred when you're in nature?

RESOURCE: *Earth Prayers From Around the World* edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elia Amidon

In conclusion, If God is the verb energizing the universe, then turning toward God is attuning oneself to be in rhythm and harmony with this universal energy. In defining the religious life, William James asserted that this “harmonious relatedness is the supreme good.”

Developing an intimate connection with nature can plunge us into realms not typically explored. There is a mysterious process by which perception turns into vision, in Wordsworth’s words, “planting, for immortality, images of sound and sight in the celestial soil of the imagination.”

Nature is a valid source from which we may collect divine inspiration.

When in intimate dialogue with nature, we can have powerful moments of insight and illumination. These moments are powerful confirmations of our faith in the possibility of integration and wholeness, a confirmation of the healing process by which one can restore one’s relation to the world. The meaning of human existence is revealed, even if it’s only a glimpse. In these moments, we are put in profound contact with our own basic humanity and the nature of *Being*. We experience being part of the whole. Our individual *being* merges with *Being-as-a-whole*.

Our religion, defined in its broadest sense as reconnecting with our Source or Ground of our Being, comes most intimately alive for us through being deeply immersed in the experiencing of ourselves and the world in which we live. By avoiding intimate experiencing, we often end up seeking god solely in the confines of the mental gymnastics of analyzing and debating dogma and creed. Theology and reasoning have their place, but religion lacks substance if it is all menu and no meal.

I'd like to conclude our workshop with a quote from Chief Fools Crow of the Oglala Lakota, "The Creator gave to us all the living things so that we would know how to act. The natural world is our Bible; by watching the chipmunk and the meadowlark and even the tiniest flower we learn the lessons that the Creator has put before us. Everything is sacred. This very land is our church."

- John Swanson, PhD is a pioneer in the field of ecopsychology and the author of *Communing With Nature: A Guidebook for Enhancing Your Relationship with the Living Earth*. You can contact him at IllahProject@aol.com.

Outline for: Experiencing the Sacred in Nature

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May 2005

Nature has a spiritual dimension.

Nature is a living presence infused with divinity. We are part of nature, one of the evolutionary branches on the cosmic tree of life.

Nature is a valid source from which we may collect divine inspiration.

Nature and wildlife have served as sources of divine inspiration and revelation for religious mystics and prophets throughout the ages. When we explore the sacred qualities of the natural realm, we tap into a great resource for our spiritual-religious growth.

Peak experiences have common characteristics: (from Maslow)

- A feeling of merging, belonging, unity or oneness with one's surroundings or even all of creation.
- A sense of some ultimate meaning, reality, or truth being revealed.
- Ordinary time and space seem to dissolve as one becomes so fully present in the moment that one seems to touch the eternal.
- A sense of sacredness or divine presence.
- The impossibility of describing the experience in words.
- Resolution or understanding of opposites or paradoxes.
- Feelings of blessedness, joy, ecstasy, serenity.

Each of us can learn to cultivate a relationship with nature which enhances our experiencing of the sacred.

Peak experiences need not be so rare.

Gateways to the Sacred in Nature

We can cultivate these experiences by learning about the gateways or thresholds that help us leave the mundane world behind to enter into the sacred.

- **The geographical gateway: Sacred Places**
- **The temporal gateway: Sacred Time**
- **The auditory gateway: Silence.**
- **The verbal gateway: Invocations.**

- **Concluding comments.**