

LANDSCAPE OF THE SPIRIT
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People often talk of sacred spaces, but I had a striking experience a few years ago that made me aware of how physical places are interwoven with the landscape of the spirit. My mother suffered a stroke and I went to Greeley, Colorado to help her with the transition from a nursing facility to an assisted living center. My mom is doing great now, she came to visit me for my birthday at the end of July and she walked along the river and went up the arch and went out on the Chain of Rocks Bridge. But at that time we did not know what would happen, how much she would heal, or how much had been lost. My younger brother was there when I arrived, but he left soon after and so I was alone. When not at the nursing center I stayed in the house where I had lived the first nineteen years of my life. It was a place I knew very well, but it was changed because no one was there. My mom, who had lived there for fifty years, was not there - and that was the strangest thing of all. My father had died years before. My wife, who I had first met and started dating when I was living in the basement apartment of that house, was not there. My brothers and sisters too: memories of them filled the house, but they were not around. No one I knew was there, and it was July so the summer streets were quiet in the morning when I went jogging to the park. I remembered looking for crayfish there when I was a boy and wondered if even they had left. The neighborhood was the same. The buildings were exactly the same, but the place now embodied my inner state of concern, loneliness, and fear of loss. Like Pilgrim, in the classic tale *Pilgrim's Progress*, I walked the landscape of the spirit.

Of course there are places on this earth that I visit and they instill wonder, awe or numinous beauty. They connect me to something larger than myself, and they nurture and deepen my spiritual life. Places are sacred because of the quality of experience of those places. There are some places that are made sacred by what happens there and by our decision to uphold the memories tied to that place. Sometimes there is something about the aesthetics of a place, felt, experienced, or discovered to be holy by the people who encounter them, like the place where Jacob dreams. However, many people who dream life changing dreams do not make temples of their beds.

Henry David Thoreau, early Unitarian essayist, wrote "We must keep wild spaces if only because they form part of the landscape of hope." Wilderness is not just a place for experiences of nature; it is part of the landscape of the spirit. It is so valuable and its sacred message so vital, that wilderness has inspired a political movement to set aside thousands and thousands of acres of public land and parks just to be. Forests and Prairie, Deserts and seashores become part of our spiritual landscape, invoking the parts of each and all of us that exist beyond the confines of our cities, our Facebook circles, our shopping choices, our political failings and our brilliant successes. Spirituality is recalling all of what we are, connecting the pieces into one mighty and luminous whole.

This is the goal of spirituality: to connect a person with the source of meaning and wholeness, of healing and vitality in this life. Some call that ground and source God, or the spirit of God. Trinitarian Christians may claim Jesus as the focus of the spiritual life. Once I heard of a drunken man who came upon some Baptists having a prayer service by a river, the Minister calling people to come forward to be baptized. The alcoholic who is wondering what this is about walks up and the preacher asks him "Brother, are you ready to find Jesus?" The drunk nods and the preacher dunks him into the river and lifts him up again. As the man sputters the water from his face the minister asks, "Have you found Jesus?" The drunk replies, "No sir." He is dunked a second time, but the same thing happens. On the third time when the preacher asks if he has found Jesus he replies, "No Sir, but are you sure this is the place you lost him?"

Spirituality is seeking connection with the source of meaning. But, several months ago, I was talking with a stranger about religion, (because I do that sort of thing) and he raised a problem for me. He told me that he was so busy he had not been to church in a very long time, "And besides," he clarified, "the place I feel closest to God, is in the forest." Now we had gotten far enough in the conversation for me to know that he did not mean by God a personal deity, but rather the source and ground of all that was good and true: the source of meaning and wholeness in his life. I understood him clearly. I thought of the times I had walked into the cool, vibrant, living refuge of trees. I heard echoes of the words of Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay "Nature,"

"At the gates of the forest... there is a sanctity which shames our religions and reality which discredits our heroes... The incommunicable trees begin [to communicate], to persuade us to live with them, and quit of life of solemn trifles. These enchantments are medicinal..., there we come to our own, and make friends with matter, which the ambitious chatter of the schools would persuade us to despise."

We can understand what Emerson was talking about. So often we forget the larger landscape of the spirit. So often we are so caught up in our solemn trifles we separate ourselves from the world and forget who we are. My daughter is an architect and she told me the other day that the single most common architectural form in America today is the box. We are surrounded by these utilitarian boxes. Oh we put fancy facades on them. Best Buy puts tall arching walls to make it look like the box has a different shape, but it is still just a box, a cheap box at that. Hotel chains add decorative cornices and cupolas to their boxes. The strip malls we must drive by are all just multiple boxes. We have forgotten these places are part of our spirit. We think only of practical use and financial goals, and forget about our relationships to one another. As the writer-farmer Wendell Berry noted: "At present our society is almost entirely nomadic, without the comfort of discipline of memories and old associations, and is moving about on the face of this continent with a mindful destructiveness, of substance and of meaning and value, that makes Sharman's march to the sea look like a prank."

But what troubled me about this comment was that he raised a forest when were talking about going to worship services on Sunday mornings. Thus he was telling me that his spirituality was better served by a walk in the woods than attending a service that I had spent more than half the week creating. So, why are we here today, in this church? Should we all be out taking walks in the woods, or going wherever it is that are souls are enlarged, where we are made whole and brought back to our fullest selves? Some people tell me that if there is any aspect of the mind that can be called 'soul' for them it is best nurtured reading a good book, or studying history, or painting, than in singing and meditating with a congregation, or listening to a sermon. In fact I was once told that a cow that achieved spiritual liberation while just standing in a field. Turned out it was dyslexic and instead of moo had spent all day lowing "ooooom."

Of course, when the weather is bad it is more convenient to come into an air cooled sanctuary. But there is something else, something essential for true spirituality. Here there are people. Too often when we connect with the larger landscape of the spirit we forget that people must be part of that landscape. There are endless ways that human beings are divided from each other and from the earth. Partly this is because we forget to connect people and things to the true meaning of things. And that is what the Church, the synagogue, the temple is about: connecting both nature and human nature. This is our purpose: creating the community of the biosphere, the ecosystem and human community all into one solid fabric of harmony and wholeness.

Now some theologies insist that God, ultimate reality and all that, is actually something utterly beyond this material world and existence. God is spirit; spirit is not material; thus spirituality is found in connecting with an otherworldly reality "out there," or beyond this bodily existence. For example, in Pure Land Buddhism, people chant the name of the Amida Buddha so that they will be reincarnated in the Pure Land, because life is too complicated here and now for real meditation. Spiritualisms deny the reality, or at least the primacy, of this material existence. As one bumper-sticker puts it "God's plan for salvation is out of this world."

However, as respectful as we might be of Spiritualist traditions, I am very resistant to this theology. In our Humanist roots we counsel one another to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science. And, through our Christian roots we speak of incarnation, immanence, and inviting the God to be love, to be peace, to be here on this earth in these good bodies. I know how hard this is. Our bodies are frail and can be wracked with pain. Once I was hit by a truck, literally thrown over its hood. Not long before I had begun practicing meditation and so, as I lay in that hospital bed with a tube down my throat I tried to meditate on my breath, to summon inner peace. I remember trying to meditate one time I had been hit by a car and was lying in a hospital room with a plastic tube down my throat. The pain and the medical equipment was terribly distracting. I know of people who suffer much worse chronic pain and illness.

The holy ground on which Jacob slept was made of earth and solid rock. Thus this must be the land where we find the gateway to Heaven. One of the first things I do when I move to a new place is walk the landscape. I get out of my house and walk as many streets nearby as possible. I often go out just to stand on the earth and feel the morning air, no matter how steamy or bitter cold. I do this to remember where I am; to

remember my wholeness, to call forth my connection. And I also I come here, every week, to connect with my people. I am here so that I do not walk the landscape alone as I did that July when I worried about my mother. If I had had my wife, my friends, even if I had connected with people who cared about me and my mom from the Unitarian church in that town, it would have changed everything. We need people to remind us “that we are not isolated beings, but connected “in mystery and miracle” as our hymnal reading #434 puts it “connected... to the universe, to this community and to each other.”

When I was in college, I decided to pick up some Bible study. It seemed like it might be useful if I did become a minister someday, and I really did not know much of the book. I joined with some young men from the traditional Church of Christ, the branch that eschews using musical instruments in worship services. At first I just went to Tuesday evening study sessions, and then I began attending Wednesday devotionals and even Sunday morning worship. Sometimes we just played Frisbee or went swimming. What impressed me the most about their lives was that they were always aware that they walked in the spirit. A meal was a time of devotion and gratitude to God, throwing a Frisbee or studying English grammar, everything always one was part of the religious life and was touched by the presence of Jesus Christ. If one got a good grade, everyone was lifted and shared in that victory. If one of them fell short or failed, they all took it as a loss and a chance to help do better. That experience impressed me and moved me. Even today they still influence my understanding of spirituality.

Of course, I could not accept the exclusivity of their doctrine. My theology draws on all of the human spirit. For example, Buddhists seek refuge not only with the dharma, or truth, not only with the Buddha, which is the enlightened one, but also the sanga, the community of those who have entered the stream of The Sacred Way. So it is essential to sit in meditation with others; they become part of meditation and the landscape of the spirit. The Buddhist teacher **Thich Nhat Hanh** teaches:

Many people want to go to the Pure Land of the Buddha, many people want to reach heaven. Going home to our bodies by mindful breathing will help us let go of our worries, our regret and our fear, and that is the basic condition for us to get in touch with the wonders of life that are truly present in the here and the now. I am sure that I would not offend Buddha or God by telling you a secret: You don't need to die in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. In fact, you have to be truly alive in order to do so. It's not too difficult. Just breathe in and bring your mind back to your body. That is the practice of mindfulness.

Where ever we walk, let it be also the landscape of the spirit, not one of emptiness, but the land that includes people. Especially let the power of this gathering, be in our lives. Let the sound of this music, echoing with the rhythms of peace and well-being, sound in our spirits. Let the Landscape of the Spirit include these people and this place. Amen.