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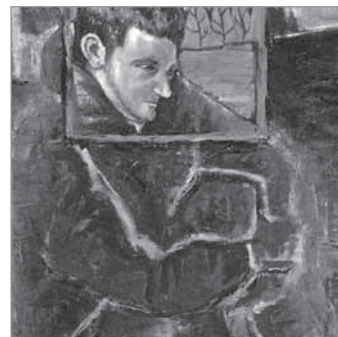
Motherhood as Training for Spiritual Companionship • Time and Spiritual Direction
Spiritual Direction in Wild Places • Spiritual Direction and Standing in the Tragic Gap

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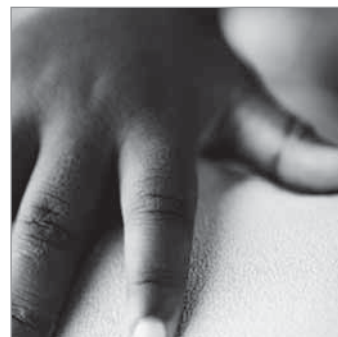
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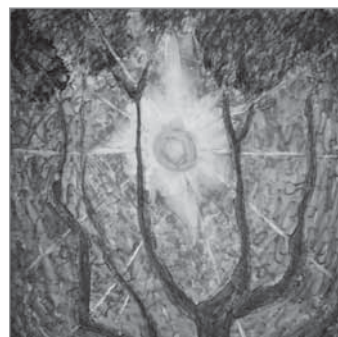
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Spiritual Direction in Wild Places

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I'm *not* coming on your canoe trip for spiritual direction, John," Don said pointedly, his chin set and his eyes narrowed with a hint of challenge. "I'm an agnostic ... probably an atheist ... and since I'm Jewish, I'm *obviously* nonobservant. I simply don't think in spiritual terms, so I'd go just for the adventure. Can you live with that? And do you take Jews, and atheist Jews, to boot?"

Since 2001, I've taken adults on wilderness trips (by canoe and kayak) of spiritual direction and renewal. The trips have been life-changing for many; but to Don's point, do I take Jews? Can I live with the "fact" that Don's probably an atheist? Given my own history as a former atheist, the answer to both is unequivocally, resoundingly *yes!* The wilderness has a way with atheists. I know that firsthand.

Don is a big man, tall, balding, about sixty-five, with an open face and a habit of standing close when he talks with you. And he's a neighbor; at the time, ours was an across-the-fence friendship. I didn't know him very well, but I liked him for what I perceived to be his huge heart, his wonderful intelligence, and his curiosity. I also knew he wasn't a spiritual man, so I was amazed that he'd want to join me on a canoe trip in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area of northern Minnesota, USA, which is one of the

most sublimely spiritual places in this world. But there it was. He, along with seven other people, would join me for a week of canoeing, camping, fun, and intentionally seeking and exploring a deeper relationship with God.

Seeking God in the wilderness is perhaps *the* most elemental and ancient form of spiritual direction. And it still works, probably as well now as it did millennia ago. When I make presentations to business groups, I ask them how old their business models are, and then I tell them that mine is at least six thousand years old. So far, no one has been able to top that.

Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Moses, John the Baptist; the Inuit, the Mayans, and the Quechua; the Shinto and the Confucians; the Hindu and the American Indians—and this is the short list of people, from all around the world, in all periods of recorded history, from most of the world's religions—have all used the wilderness for spiritual direction, whatever deity they worshiped. Instinctively, I think, they knew to go there because away from the trappings of society—and what an appropriate word *trappings* is in this context—it is possible for people to have a deeper, more connected and more authentic relationship with God. Almost nothing stands in the way. Spending intentional time in the wilderness creates a sense of both "Ohmygod!" awe and intense personal closeness and



peace. In wild places, those two seemingly contradictory experiences are not contradictory, and not uncommon: they often go hand in hand and lead not only to spiritual direction but also to openness *to* spiritual direction. That's what I was hoping would happen for Don.

So I welcomed Don to the trip, delighted that he was coming and curious to see what wonders the wilderness would work on this group, and certainly on him. And on me, too, because as a recovering atheist who was ambushed (in the kindest sense of the word) by God in the wilderness, I still need refreshers.

The Trip

Two months later we gather at the edge of the Kawishiwi River, twelve miles outside of Ely, Minnesota, nine middle-aged strangers from different parts of the country: three clergy and six laypeople; three Jews, one atheist, five Christians; one African American; two women—a glorious mix!

After we've shaken out our travel kinks, we circle up by the river for about thirty minutes, sitting on the dropped needles of the thick pine tree that protects us from the brilliant sun and embraces us with its pitchy pine smell. Each person briefly explains why he or she is there, where he or she is spiritually, and what he or she hopes to get from the trip. Don goes last, and he looks at each person until he's made sure eye contact. "You people *amaze* me ... the *thought* you've given this ... the things you *feel!*" There's a long pause as he looks around the circle again. "I ... just ... don't ... *think* ... in those terms." His tone is respectful, maybe even admiring, but it also intimates that we are from different worlds.

As we're serenaded by the yodel of loons, I talk about the history and importance of the wilderness in most religions and the deep vein of spiritual guidance that people have sought in wild places for thousands of years, which we will soon be part of. I share my hopes, goals, and expectations for our week together. My number one human-scale hope is that we can stop being human *doings* and become human *beings* again—with all that implies. They will hear this many times during the week; it will become our mantra, and they will gently catch themselves and each other backsliding.

After lessons in repacking their civilized bags into wilderness bags, ultimately leaving behind about half

of what they thought they needed—a great metaphor for life—we have paddling instruction, we cover safety protocols, and we show how to safely enter and exit a canoe, how to portage a canoe, and how to support each other. I ask them the first question of the day (we'll have one each day, meant to guide us progressively deeper into our spiritual lives¹), and then I ask one of them to pray us into the wilderness. We load the canoes, check our maps, and set off onto the deep, dark, clean waters of northern Minnesota to spend some time with God. A surge of loon warbles heralds our beginning.

Our Disconnect from Nature

People don't spend a lot of time in the natural world anymore. As a species, we've done everything we can to put barriers between us and whatever nature throws at us, and we've done it very well; in the twenty-first century we are by far the most physically comfortable generation that has ever lived. Think about that. In certain countries we need never, ever go outside. So ... *success!* We've thwarted nature! With the turn of a dial we control the hot or cold of our environment. With the flip of a switch we create light or darkness. We are god-like, masters of all we survey. At least, that's what we've come to believe.

So given the level of creature comforts we've finally achieved, why would we now choose to give up, for even a short time, our soft beds for a sleeping bag and an air mattress, solid walls and roofs for a flimsy tent, our showers and sit-down toilets for, well, *no* sit-down toilets or showers?

One of the laws of physics says that for every action there's an opposite and equal reaction, and that applies to our disconnect from the wilderness. In gaining our comforts, we have lost much of our ancient and intimate connection with nature, with ourselves, and with God. John Calvin (the sixteenth-century French lawyer and theologian who championed Protestantism) once said that nature is "the theater of God's glory," and he was exactly right. Building on that, Henry David Thoreau (the nineteenth-century American author, naturalist, and transcendentalist) said that the salvation of the world is in the wilderness because humans come to realize and know God's continued existence by their immersion in the glory of God's theater. And if you believe as I do that nature is God's oldest, perhaps purest work on this



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earth, then in our isolation from nature we have lost that direct, personal connection to the holy and the spiritual direction it offers. We see nature through the window but have little direct involvement because we are not “in” it, not a part of it, not out in creation. Our concept of the divine, then, becomes centered almost completely in our heads, in our rational intellects.

But what, I ask you, is rational about a spiritual pursuit?

Such a pursuit belongs, instead, mostly in our hearts. This is important because it has been my experience that we respond to natural places far more with our hearts than with our heads. You have only to recall your own responses to great natural beauty to know what I’m talking about. I’ve come to believe that this response is built in to our DNA.

Let me hasten to add that I am not relegating the mind to secondary status. I am quite fond of my mind, and as a younger man, I thought it was all I needed to do well in the world. But as the years and the results of some of my highly rational choices accumulated, I discovered, to my horror, two things: (1) not every rational decision is a good one, and (2) in those rational decisions, somewhere in my nearly buried soul I *knew* I was making a mistake. But I wouldn’t listen to that quiet voice that I now think was my heart-voice. So what I *am* advocating is a better balance between head and heart: a conversation. What I know is that my head could, and did, talk me out of God

very quickly, so when God ambushed me in the wilderness, it was through my heart, which was both wiser in God matters and less well-defended than my mind.

My own wilderness experience compelled me to abandon a lifetime of angry atheism to start my “Renewal in the Wilderness” (RITW) ministry after many years in business. I know intimately how the wilderness can change, redirect, a person.

Through RITW, over and over again I’ve witnessed the power of the wilderness to affect the lives of people willing to relinquish for a short time some creature comforts (and frequently their type A behavior—the hard-driving personality types who have to be doing something measurably productive all the time). They go into the wild in hopes of encountering God in ways that our comfortable, civilized settings usually do not allow. The miracle is that whether Jewish or Christian or Buddhist or atheist or whatever, people have nearly identical experiences.

It has always been this way. The spiritual direction of a wilderness experience is an equal-opportunity opening because it ignores religious, cultural, and temporal boundaries. People from the Middle East six thousand years ago would recognize the rites and rituals of the Hindus of India or the Confucians of China from four thousand years ago, who would in turn understand the rites and rituals of American Indians from four hundred years ago, who would recognize the rites and rituals that we will use on our canoe trip. We are tapping in to



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something *profoundly* ancient that continues because it continues to work.

As our multireligious, multiracial group plies the boreal waterways deeper into the wilderness, even on the first day I can see people's tensions dropping away. Their faces are relaxing; they're learning by degrees to move at nature's pace, leaving behind the false urgencies of civilization. True, they're concentrating hard on paddling in straight lines and portaging safely, setting up tents, gathering firewood, and learning how to thrive in a strange setting, but they are changing. As we canoe together, talk with each other, work together toward a common set of goals, watch each other's backs, lend encouragement, and help with chores, we nine strangers are already becoming a bonded unit that, by the end of our week together, will know each other in meaningful ways that even our families or best friends do not know us. At some unconscious level, they're beginning to realize that. When we're not listening to the sounds of nature, there is a lot of laughter, a lot of joking—and a lot of informal spiritual conversation that becomes its own kind of spiritual direction.

On the second night, after dinner and cleanup, we sit around the campfire in a tired-but-very-satisfied circle, watching the sparks corkscrew up like agitated lightning bugs to the star-burdened sky.

Our eyes are fixed by the fire, as human eyes have been fixed by campfires for eons. No one speaks for a while; somehow, in a setting like this, filler-talking would seem an affront. The only sounds are the pop and rattle of the fire, hooting owls, an occasional loon, and the slap of a jumping fish. As a huge, three-quarter, pumpkin-colored moon begins to rise from below the tree line, we can see the glow long before we can see the source. Nights like this don't exist in the city.

"Talk about your day," I say softly to the group. A couple of minutes pass before Jen, sitting on a log, never taking her eyes from the flames, answers quietly. "I've been a minister for twenty-three years. I love what I do,

and the people, but I work seventy hours a week, and I carry such tension that I haven't ... I haven't been able to draw a full breath for months. I simply can't do it. The doctors say it's not a physical problem." She pauses for a moment, wrestling with whether to continue, and then she does. "And also, and more importantly, I haven't really had a sense of God's presence for at least five years." She looks up from the fire, into the darkness, and flashes a tight-lipped, ironic half-smile. "Seems strange, doesn't it ... a minister who doesn't experience God's presence for so long?"

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The other clergy are quick to assure Jen that her experience is not uncommon. "I know it's true," she says, shaking her head, "but isn't it sad!?" Her eyes go back to the fire. Then, sitting up straight,

she looks at us with a real smile and says, "I tell you this because ... well, because we're certainly here to share these things, but also because I want you to know that I spent the afternoon *filling* my lungs with this incredible air. I'm taking deep breaths again—deeeeeeep breaths!—and it feels ... so ... good!" Jen's face is luminous in the firelight. Everyone "woo hoos," and several people hug her. "So that's my 'talk' about *my* day," she continues, "and I can't wait to see what the rest of the trip brings."

Jen sets the tone. The others don't share anything quite as dramatic, but they talk about the joy of slowing down, the beauty of the surroundings, the incredible quiet, the pride of accomplishment, the pervading sense of God's presence, and (on a practical level) their delight in how good the food is. They also talk of tired muscles and how well they'll sleep tonight.

Don goes last again. "Welllll ...," he starts slowly, "I'm very happy for Jen, and I love being here, and I love both the solitude *and* your company. And I love being back in a canoe! But your talk of God and how you can feel his presence ... I don't get it. I've said it before, but I just don't think in those terms. I get the rest of it, just not the God thing. I'm an engineer!" A bit of frustration seems to be in Don's voice. Wonderfully, and because we've





all signed a covenant that we will allow each person to come to God (or not) in his or her own way and in each person's (and God's) own time, no one tries to convince Don of anything—one of the key ingredients of effective, welcoming spiritual direction.

The next morning, after breakfast, we have our daily yoga session to limber up our middle-aged bodies and then thirty minutes of guided meditation, which most of us do not do in our daily lives. On Renewal in the Wilderness trips, we meditate for two important reasons:

1. Like spending time in nature, meditation is also a way to be very aware of the present moment instead of thinking of the past or future, where most of us spend our mental time, which then means that we are not open to God's presence; and

2. Meditation is a way to offer *self* spiritual direction. It's calming and centering, and it slows the world down. I encourage people to practice meditation when they go back to "reality" so they can recapture some of the peace and clarity of their wilderness experience.

As we stand at the canoes, about to leave, I give them the next question of the day, to be discussed tonight unless something better comes up (as it sometimes does). I ask one of them to pray us into the day. Then we head deeper into the wilderness.

This is the general pattern of each day. There is some structure, with each guided meditation and each question of the day meant to guide us more deeply into our spiritual lives, but we try very hard to leave much of the day unstructured, because the highly organized lives we've all come from are part of the problem. We try to leave room for God to come into our lives—which leaves *us* room to recognize that God is wooing us and wants a relationship with us. Each day, weather and travel conditions permitting, we build in time to journal, meditate, sit on a rock and look (and *be*), pray, sleep, and have conversations with our companions. This formula seems to work. Spiritual direction is ongoing yet almost unrecognized because it flows so naturally. It happens in moments of solitude and reflection; it happens in conversation between the voyagers in the canoes, on portage, or in the campsites; it happens in conversations between the voyagers and me; it happens in our guided communal meetings, in which the spiritual direction becomes "informally formal"; it happens simply by being in this

environment, which encourages and rewards spiritual searches.

The Power of the Wilderness

What makes natural places so remarkably effective in bringing people into a more intimate relationship with God? Why, for thousands of years, have people, longing for intimate spiritual connection, left the comforts (and false surety) of civilization to go to the wilderness? I can think of eight reasons.

1. The wilderness stretches our physical and spiritual boundaries, opening us to the possibility of radical change.

2. The impulse to see and be in a natural setting when we want to be in communion with God seems to be universal, as if it's in our DNA. Religions across the world, in all periods of recorded history, have recognized the power of the wilderness to bring people into authentic and personal relationships with the Divine. The experiences are almost exactly alike regardless of cultural, religious, national, or temporal differences (even for atheists, who would not attribute it to God, but they become aware of Something Bigger Than I Am). I have come to believe that experiences in nature give all who participate such a common, universal "language" of experiencing God that we can sit down with each other and talk about God without shedding blood.

3. The very unfamiliarity of the wilderness environment keeps us in the present moment, keenly aware of nearly everything. We can take nothing for granted, so we have to think intentionally about everything we do. At these times, when we're so totally present, God can get through to us.

4. The wilderness is God's "hull-scraper"; it strips us of the barnacles of civilization that slow us, distract us, and divert us in our pursuit of God—and God's pursuit of us—and we are freed to be our cleaner, truer, better selves.

5. In freeing us of our civilized "barriers," the wilderness experience breaks down the walls of expectation that we've created to contain God but that really only contain us and keep us from experiencing God. The door opens for God to woo us and wow us—and for us to recognize that we are being courted.

6. When things aren't quite so comfortable or predictable, when we are in unfamiliar territory that is so



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vast and we feel so small, we come to realize both our finitude and God's infinitude. God is most often found at the edges, in the places where our civilized niceties lose some of their grip and we realize, perhaps for the first time, that we are not in control.

7. An important part of every religious tradition is intentional periods of solitude and silence. The wilderness encourages and rewards both, and both allow us to spend intimate time in spiritual direction with ourselves and with God.

8. Unlike human societies, God's wild places have no agenda, which allows us to live with more open, honest hearts and minds than civilized places ever seem to permit. Actually, I think wild places *demand* that we live openly and honestly. In the wilderness we move beyond what the rational mind can explain to experience the transcendent, to rediscover a life-renewing joy.

The Third Day

The third day is almost always "hump" day, when people new to the wilderness cross over the hump of their concern or fear about being in wild places. By the third day, their "OhmygodIminthewilderness" breathlessness is replaced by "Oh my God ... I'm in the wilderness ... and I'm not just surviving ... I'm thriving!"

And so it is with this group. We have arrived: we're working as a team; we understand what needs to be done; we know pretty much how to do it; and we know that it's do-able even if it's a challenge. In fact, the group is now looking forward to the challenges because they've seen how they've grown in response to them. Importantly, we know that our questions and doubts are safe with each other and actually encouraged.

Prayer ...

Often on the third day I introduce the concept of



apophatic prayer, a form of prayer that seems tailor-made for these wilderness experiences, when words are never quite sufficient to express what we're experiencing and feeling. Words have limits, even to the most gifted speaker or writer. If we pray with words, then our prayers also have limits. This is called *kataphatic* prayer; it's how most of us pray, and it's a wonderful form of prayer, except that sometimes it's simply not big enough for experiences like these.

Apophatic prayer, in contrast, is prayer *without* words. In apophatic prayer our entire being becomes the prayer—body, mind, heart, and soul—and can go so deep that it's probably the *zen* state that Buddhists—the moments when we become “one with the universe”—and what Carl Jung (the twentieth-century Swiss psychiatrist) called tapping into the universal “collective unconscious.” This prayer goes way beyond what the mind can express, because it comes from the heart and soul and it takes us from the limits of the possible into the limitlessness of possibility. It's also a reason we do meditation each day on our trips; a meditative state is almost required to get to apophatic prayer. It's not easy to reach, but once reached the sense of utter peace and “rightness” and belonging to the thread of creation is beyond anything most of us have ever experienced.

So we practice apophatic prayer because in the next day or so we'll embark on a twenty-four-hour period of solitude and silence, in which this prayer form fits perfectly, and in which we connect again to the countless generations of people who have sought spiritual direction in quiet places of solitude, in the wilderness. Religious literature is filled with their stories.

... Then Silence and Solitude

“What are your thoughts about the solo?” I ask the night before it begins. The RITW pre-trip questionnaire also asks that question (Q: “What concerns do you have about your trip with RITW?” A: “I'm more concerned about spending twenty-four hours by myself than I am about any animals or other difficulty we might encounter”), but I was curious to know if anything had changed now that they had four days of wilderness travel and experience behind them. There were no dramatic shifts.

We all want a bit of solitude from time to time. Yet, for the most part, people in our culture do not spend time alone on purpose. Perhaps we never did; we're social ani-

mals by nature, meant to be in community.

Humans have always found solitude both a magnificent and a scary thing—often simultaneously. Magnificent because it is solely ours, and the possibilities for enrichment and growth seem endless, including the chance to contemplate some of life's deepest questions: Who am I? Why am I here? Whose life am I living, and why? Where is God in all this? Where do God and I figure in each other's plans? And scary for precisely the same reasons that it is magnificent. Solitude is serious spiritual direction, one-on-one between God and me. These questions are not small, and most of us would prefer to avoid wrestling with them.

After breakfast the next morning we stand in a circle and link elbows, which is our custom, and I speak about the rich and ancient vein of spiritual direction that we are about to become part of. Solitude and silence have been key ingredients of a spiritual quest for millennia, in nearly every religion, around the world.

We have with us what we need to be safe and reasonably comfortable—a tarp, a sleeping bag and pad, food (though most of these voyagers have chosen to fast during this time), water, headlamp, raingear, a whistle, journal and pen, and one page of writings that will help people burrow into their experience. I suggest that people leave behind their Bibles or other religious tracts so that their solo experience is uniquely theirs, unfiltered by anyone else's, and, frankly, so that they can't fill their time with the “doing” of reading. Our goal is to *be*, which requires that we don't *do*. I have preselected their solo sites to be secluded enough that seeing other people is difficult and large enough—about the size of a basketball court—that they can find their own best campsites and have room to move around when they feel the need.

“When was the last time you were given the assignment to be quiet and do nothing?” I ask. None has ever received such an assignment.

“We are such a *doing* society that most of you—probably all of you—will have difficulty at some point in the next twenty-four hours when you run out of things to *do* and just have to *be*. But that's the whole point of this, isn't it? It's what we've been practicing. When we confront our boredom and step into it, and we sit down and begin to let our butts sink roots into the ground, and we become one with our environment, and our minds stop



doing the spin cycle that they're so good at ... *that's* when the really green and juicy stuff happens. *That's* when the truest apophatic moments can, and often do, occur. Type A's, like some of you have admitted to being, have the hardest time with this—and being one, I know—because they think it's wasting time. But I would ask you to reframe that this way: you're wasting time with God, and that's not such a bad thing."

With one more suggestion—that they try not to control the experience, because then they'll almost guarantee that nothing will happen—we offer a prayer for our next twenty-four hours, and then in silence I begin to ferry them to their solo sites. Jen has a beatific look on her face, as does Don, who hasn't said "I just don't think in those terms" for a while.

That night, as the orange moon clears the trees and unfurls its wash of light on the dark, moving waters, two packs of wolves on opposite sides of the lake begin call-and-response howling. It is so primal, so unnerving in such an unexplainably good way, that I shiver with delight mixed with a tinge of *wow*. Every hair on my body stands straight up. We *are* in God's theater, surrounded by God's creatures, and we are the interlopers. It's good to be reminded of these things, even when I'm feeling so very connected.

Early the next morning, long before I really want to wake up, just as it's light enough to see that mist is covering the lake and it's gorgeous and mysterious, I'm awakened by a "chuffing" from the lake that I've never heard before, but I can't see the source through the fog.

Then, just for a moment the mist separates and I see six or seven small dark heads in the water, just off my campsite. They're freshwater otter, and they've seen me too, and they begin an agitated chirping and chuffing chorus that says I'm probably in one of their favorite spots; then, with one last expletive, they silently disappear beneath the surface. Again I'm reminded that there are simply no moments like this in the city, and I am very much at peace at every level, very connected to life.

I spend the next couple of hours preparing a brunch "banquet" for the returning solo fasters, and then I paddle out to regather the group. As we began this time in silence yesterday, we also return in silence today, because experiences like these—though they may have been exquisitely joyful—require silence to complete them.

Words will come later, but not until we are reassembled, once again a community.

The Return

No one has spoken yet, even as we sit in a circle looking into each others' eyes trying to divine others' experiences through telepathy. Their faces seem to radiate a peace and equanimity, which, when I break the silence, I mention. "You all look so mellow, so peaceful. Was it a good experience?"

After a moment, Peter, one of the ministers, smiles gently and speaks softly, "Dear God, that was amazing. I'm one of the Type A's, and I did have a hard time after about four hours of being quiet and doing nothing. My greatest fear is having nothing to occupy my mind ... so I journaled for a long time, which I never make time for at home. It was wonderful. Then, when I ran out of that, I walked around my camp area four or five times, looking for something to do, but there wasn't anything, and I was getting frustrated. So finally I said, 'Peter, there's nothing to do, so do nothing,' and a light went on! I sat down and sank my butt into the earth, like you suggested, and began looking closely at what was on the ground and just watched all the tiny life around me that I never would have known was there if I hadn't stopped and paid attention. It was stunning! The longer I watched, the less my mind twirled—and at some point I slipped into that prayer-without-words state that you were talking about."

Peter stops talking for a moment, gathering his thoughts, and then looks at me, so I raise my eyebrows as if to say "And?"

"And ... well ... I've never felt so complete or so connected to ... everything! God, me, the world ... all of you. And the sense of peace ... the sense that there was nowhere else on earth I would rather be at that moment ..." His voice trails off, the sentence unfinished, but unfinished so eloquently.

To varying degrees the other people say much the same. Not everyone had apophatic moments, and everyone had trouble with the solitude until they crossed the threshold of acceptance of it; but everyone had moments that touched their souls in new, often unexpected ways.

Then Jen, inhaling deeply to show off, and crooking her arms up, palms up, smiles and says: "God and I are back in touch." As she raises her face to the sky, we



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applaud and hoot and woof. “I thought you’d want to know,” she says, and there is none of the pinch in her face that was there five days ago. “Between the canoeing and camping and the simplicity and our amazing talks and this *place* ... then the solitude of the past twenty-four hours and the wolves last night—wasn’t that fantastic?!—and a group of otters this morning that were off my island ... I mean, I haven’t heard God’s voice as a voice, but I *feel* God’s presence so intensely! And I feel that we’re friends again.” We are, as a group, profoundly happy for her.

Then Don, last again, who has been enthusiastic for the others but silent otherwise, solemnly looks at each of us, smiles a Cheshire cat smile, and says simply: “I get it!”

There is a moment’s delay as we replay in our minds what Don has said. We’re supposed to be quiet in the wilderness, and stately, for the wilderness at rest is both, but this is not the time, and we scare off all the animals within a mile.

“I get it,” Don repeats. “I don’t know exactly *what* I get, and I can’t explain it—which is a real dilemma for an engineer—but I understand.” Then his face takes on a serious posture, and he back-pedals a bit and says quickly,

“Now, this doesn’t mean I’ve become religious or anything, you understand!”

Reflecting on his comment two months earlier over the back fence, I say with tongue-in-cheek, “It’s a good thing you didn’t come on this trip for spiritual direction, Don; you’d have been so disappointed!”

Don smiles and looks reflectively at the ground. “Boy, that brings up another thing, doesn’t it? What do I call myself now? What do I tell my family and friends? I’ve been so proud of being an atheist!”

Spiritual direction happens in many ways. My own very gifted spiritual director, Dan Prechtel, has walked with me through periods of spiritual desert and has been a well-spring of wisdom and perspective when my own was lacking. We meet in the sunroom of his home; he rings Tibetan temple bells, lights a candle, and for the hour we’re there his sunroom is a holy place. I don’t always feel God’s direct presence, but I never leave untouched, because I know God has been there. That’s just one of the many oxymorons we learn to live with in spiritual pursuits.

The place I choose to *be* a spiritual director is decid-



edly different than most. But for me—and for many who choose these wild places to be in spiritual direction—it’s extraordinarily effective and it’s wonderfully predictable. It gets us out of our comfort zones, out of our rational left brains and more into our hearts, bodies, and souls. It brings our minds more into balance with our hearts. It gets us out of the past and future and into the present, where God is, reaching the transcendent through the physical. And it’s twenty-four hours a day.

When was the last time you had an intense experience of God’s presence while watching television or sitting at your desk? Unless you meditate, the answer may be *never*. It’s not that it can’t happen—I’ve had it happen in ordinary circumstances—but it seems pretty rare. Most often, I’ve learned, we need to be at an edge, a place of transition or unfamiliarity, to be most vulnerable, most open, to God’s quiet insistence. Being in wild places, searching for God’s direction, is so effective because the guidance comes from so many sources simultaneously: from the place itself, from our companions, from ourselves, from the facilitator, from the experience, and certainly from God; and we find ourselves inexplicably, softly, opened to the *wow* and *aha*.²

The bottom line is this: If we want to be with the God who created us, rather than with the God we create, we need to be in a place from time to time that reminds us of who God is, of who we are (and also of who we are not), and how much we need each other. For some, that place of encounter, spiritual direction, and transformation is the wilderness.

We Return to Our Ordinary Lives

After any extraordinary experience, most of us return to our normal lives with the sincere self-promise that we’ll really, honestly carry what we’ve learned back into the world. Then, inevitably, the normal day-to-day begins to dilute our experience and we get a bit fuzzy about what moved us so deeply, and at some point even a profound spiritual experience can retreat to the shelf.

To combat this, during the trip I recommend that people take (and then share) pictures to create photo albums as visual “handrails” back to their time in the wilderness. Having a handrail is also one of the prime reasons that we journal. On longer trips we have a group journal that passes to a different person each day so that everyone has

a piece of the collective memory. At about mid-trip, I ask them to begin thinking about what’s working for them so that they can take those practices or ways of observing back into civilization so that they don’t lose the power of their experiences. Doing that, along with making frequent visits to their photos, journals, and the group journal, helps keep their wilderness experiences vital and alive. And, of course, I suggest they make time to return to nature with the sole intent of reconnecting to their experience and reconnecting to God. ■

Postlude

As of this writing, Peter continues to journal but has contracted arthritis in his shoulders and can no longer paddle. He keeps a picture of our trip above his desk as a reminder—for when the world crowds back in—of the connections that are possible. Jen is still breathing deeply and connected to God. She’s about to make another trip, this time bringing friends. Don has now taken three trips to the wilderness to deepen his spiritual connections. His face, as he talks about his experiences, is like a flower opening. He still says he’s not “religious,” but he acknowledges, and quickly, that he is deeply changed.

Notes

1. For example, “What causes you to give thanks to God, and what does that thanks look like?” and “What do you want from God, specifically for you; and what does God want, specifically from you?”
2. As much as I truly love wild places, I try very hard not to anthropomorphize them. The wilderness *does not love me back*. It doesn’t reward unpreparedness, inattention, carelessness, or naiveté, and any of those ingredients can injure or kill the person who does not respect the wild environment. That said, I also believe that a well-planned, conservatively run venture into the wilderness is still safer than driving your car on most highways. So if you’re interested in being with God in a wild place, please do some basic research on wilderness fundamentals. A good place to begin is at the *Backpacker Magazine* Web site (www.backpacking.net/beginner.html). Better yet, go with people who know wilderness protocols, can teach them, and who share your desire for spiritual direction in God’s cathedral.