Spirituality in the Wild

BY CAROL K. COBURN

M y companion said it out loud first: “Carol, we’re in trouble.” She was right. Early that morning we had set off for the last leg of a five-day backpacking trek through the beautiful but challenging Weminuche Wilderness in southern Colorado. We had survived fierce sun, raging creek crossings, snowy glaciers on the Continental Divide, avalanche crossings, a hail storm and climbs of over 11,000 feet. Now we stood on a seemingly endless ridge that dropped 50 feet to a mountain river ripping down the gorge on its way from a glacier lake to a reservoir, where a campground and our car awaited. The trail had simply vanished into endless overgrown forest, steep angles and craggy rock ledges. As the more experienced backpacker, I had to figure a way down with our 50-pound packs. No trail was in sight, and I knew the path of the river was the only road map to the car.

After much thinking and silent praying, I decided we would go down the ridge on our bellies with our backpacks off, sliding them one at a time as we descended, using strategically positioned handholds and footholds. It was slow, painful and frightening but successful—so far so good!

Leap of Faith
We regrouped on the edge of the river, strapped on our packs and hoped simply to walk alongside it until we could pick up the trail on the other side. This worked until we reached a point where the edge of the cold, crashing river met the wall of the gorge and there was nowhere to go but into the freezing water to continue our descent. I do not know how long I stood and looked into the river before finding the courage to take that first step. Just below the clear, deep and fast-moving water I could see a very large root submerged but jutting out from the side of the gorge. I put weight on it tentatively; it felt strong and stable. How it would respond to our weight with our heavy packs, I had no idea. I have used the phrase “leap of faith” cavalierly in the past, but this was the real thing. No matter how long I looked at that root, I would not know until I leapt whether I had made a wise decision. Then I stepped. It held me and my companion. Although it took us that evening and part of the next day, we worked our way down the river and found the trail, as we had hoped. In soggy boots and clothes we trudged quietly and painfully to the campground and our car.

Wilderness as Leveler
The wilderness areas are still wild, untamed and exist on their own terms. As yet they are untouched by human ideas of civilization. That is the attraction. Backpacking in the wilderness is an experience that never fails to put me in my place, not as a master of the natural world but merely a player, a small piece of the cosmic puzzle.

The wilderness is a leveler for humans who base self-perception on education, age, race, gender, socioeconomic class or the like. The wilderness does not care who you are or what you have done; it will reward or punish you just the same. Money allows you to shield yourself through the use of gadgets, high-tech clothing and equipment, but these give a false sense of security. Such misplaced confidence makes you less watchful and less mindful; and these “crutches” can be negated by unexpected circumstances or when they simply do not work. Ironically, scientific research on the human brain
shows that we have far more natural survival strategies than we realize or use. Underused skills rust in the urban confines of the 21st century; we have forgotten them. We have been lulled into a sedentary complacency of body and mind. We spend our brainpower figuring out ways to outsmart and "tame" the wilderness, with little time for understanding, appreciating and coexisting with it. It has been made into the enemy, something to conquer and control—an adversarial relationship that has made our time in the natural world all about winning or losing. In actuality that is not only a foolish paradigm but a false one, socially constructed and meaningless within the context of the natural world.

I love the life of the mind and my academic life, but I never want to fail to appreciate the life of the body and spirit. My physical experiences have brought me into closer touch with my spirituality than almost any other aspect of my existence. I am more apt to find God in nature than in a building full of people. Backpacking in the wilderness focuses my attention, forcing me to be mindful of the present, not obsessing about the past or future. I have to find and stay on the trail using only a topographic map, compass and my powers of observation. I have to avoid the dangers around me and respect the fact that I am a visitor in a world of other living things. I have to be mindful of the weather and where to camp, obtain water, prepare food and sleep safely at night. My clever brain identifies the basic elements. Ultimately, it does not matter how technologically savvy I am, how many degrees I have or the amount of money in my bank account. The focus is here and now, and I must be ready to negotiate my survival for the next few days.

Jesus' Wilderness Experience
I am not a biblical scholar or a trained theologian, but the story of Jesus in the wilderness makes complete sense to me. He went there to escape, think and clear his head of the social and political whirlwind. The temptations to bail, take the easier path and avoid the inevitable were there, as they are for all of us. But Jesus needed the wilderness to experience the fear, the uncertainty and the elemental aspects of who he was. I am convinced no other experience could have helped him crystallize who he was and what he needed to do. I am also convinced that the wilderness experience and his acute physical and spiritual survival skills, challenged by severe deprivations and temptations, gave him the courage to fulfill his destiny.

Living as I do in the fast-paced 21st century, with a life full of demands and stress, going into the wilderness helps me understand my own existence. Compared with the life and purpose of Jesus, my life is insignificant, but his example holds powerful truth for me. In a small but significant way, it helps me move forward to whatever and wherever forward is. It gives me perspective and, more important, an understanding of who I am and why I am here. Ultimately, it nourishes my soul and provides balance in the crazy world I return to, helping me remember that life is much more than my daily to-do list. In The Soul's Religion, Thomas Moore wrote, "To be spiritual is to be taken over by a mysterious divine compulsion to manifest some aspect of life's deepest force. We become most who we are when we allow the spirit to dismember us, unsettling our plans and understandings, remaking us from our very foundations... [It is] the invitation of the spirit to become who we are and not who we think we ought to be."

The wilderness connects me to life's deepest force and challenges me to reach beyond the everyday—an invitation to infinite possibilities.

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