

A way in the wilderness

Men and the environment

David Douglas

*What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.*
‘Inversnaid’, Gerard Manley Hopkins

SIXTY MEN GATHERED AT A CONFERENCE centre in the southwestern United States. As representatives of a national men’s Christian organization, they wrestled with the problems of declining male involvement in church life and recounted anecdotes of disengagement and spiritual homelessness.

The men had often held their semi-annual meetings at airport hotels, in windowless, air-conditioned rooms. This conference centre, however, rested in the rolling hill country of Texas, in one of the state’s loveliest settings. The men had been meeting for nearly two days oblivious to the surroundings, and would have done so to the end but for a staff member who pointed out what lay beyond the closed doors. He spoke of spring grass, warm temperatures and streams running through limestone cliffs. With the promise of wild flowers and empty trails, he prodded the men to spend the afternoon’s waning hours in the countryside.

His words fell like cleansing rain and adjournment soon followed, in time for the men to experience what most would remember better than any exchange around the conference table. With coats and ties shed, they wandered alone or in small groups, walking in silence and prayer down to the river, along winding white cliffs by paths of clear water.

Men and the faith-kindling environment

The purpose of this article is twofold: first to explore why wilderness offers an unsurpassed setting for prayer and spiritual retreat. For men who find themselves on the outskirts of a devotional life, the spiritual values of wilderness offer wellsprings to replenish faith.

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The mountain and desert remain God-given houses of prayer that complement sanctuaries of concrete and brick.

Secondly, I want to suggest why the open air provides a setting not only for retreat but for one response men can make to their faith. With the environment reeling from damage, certain portions of creation face unprecedented injury. Jesus' call to respond to hunger, thirst and illness increasingly requires an ecological mindfulness. For both spiritual and practical reasons, the environment should fall within the mission field of Christian men in the twenty-first century.

Viewed through windows of the institutional Church, wild country often appears remote from faith. Pastors tend to invoke 'wilderness' only as a metaphor for confusion or despair. Yet the mountain, desert and forest remain places for the recovery of awe, a landscape that can deepen men's dependence on God and clarify their response to others.

Wilderness and prayer

What the wilderness offers is its emptiness and barrenness and silence . . . No votes to cast, women to seduce, money to accumulate, celebrity to acquire. All the habitual pursuits of the ego and appetites are suspended . . . I love the wilderness because when all these pursuits of mind and body have been shed, what remains – insofar as this is attainable in our mortal condition – is an unencumbered soul, with no other concern than to look for God.¹

An opening disclaimer. I speak as a Protestant layman, out of my own experience with all its limitations. I have taken part in gatherings solely of men – small discussion groups, national men's organizations, prison Bible studies – but I make suggestions as to what other men need only with hesitation.

The wilderness where I and others have found sustenance will hold little appeal to some men. But I have heard in those gatherings enough expressions of spiritual thirst to sense that for many others the desert and mountain provide wellsprings for both prayer and retreat.

Wilderness offers men precisely those spiritual values most absent from their daily life: for those steeped in materialism and routine, a sense of forgotten awe in creation; for those lives cluttered with engagements and meetings, a chance for solitude; for days besieged by noise, a moment of silence.

Most importantly, these intangible qualities of wilderness can kindle that experience many men do much to postpone – a sense of shuddering dependence on God.

The deserts of Sinai and Judaea

Within the Judaeo-Christian tradition the wilderness has long been the stage for instilling reliance on God. The desert, as Andrew Louth writes in *The wilderness of God*, 'is a place of beginning, a place where the human is refined and God revealed'.² Clergy and laity often associate the Sinai wandering only with disorientation and muttering rebellion. Often forgotten is Sinai's role of reconciliation. Rarely again would Israel so deeply acknowledge its dependence on God. For the Hebrews in the Sinai for forty years, reminders of the reliance on God were a matter of daily bread; the manna which graced the ground could not be stored, save over the Sabbath. As Jeremiah recalled the time:

I remember the devotion of your youth,
 your love as a bride,
 how you followed me into the wilderness,
 into a land not sown.

(Jeremiah 2:2)

Similarly, Hosea longed for the nation to be led out again to the wilderness, to recover the contours of intimacy and attentiveness:

Therefore, behold, I will allure her,
 and bring her to the wilderness,
 and speak tenderly to her . . .
 And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth,
 as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

(Hosea 2:14–15)

For Jesus the wilderness provided more than merely the stage for the temptation. As the gospel writers make clear, Jesus returned to mountain and desert throughout his ministry for the explicit purpose of prayer.³ Down the centuries – from Desert Fathers to monastic communities to contemporary pilgrims – the wilderness has proved less a place of bewilderment than a setting to get one's spiritual bearings.

Spiritual values of wilderness

The intangible gifts of desert and mountain can be gleaned by any traveller who visits.

Awe

'The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork' (Ps 19:1). Like the open sky, untrammelled terrain has long been the catalyst for the birth of awe. From storms of granite peaks to blue pools of gentian-light, the scale of landscape humbles. A visitor can journey beyond mere aesthetic appreciation into a region of 'numinous awe',⁴ bringing a shuddering recognition of God's handiwork. As Pascal confessed, 'The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me'.⁵

One night at a state penitentiary, I stood in the prison courtyard after a men's Bible study, talking with an inmate. I mentioned the constellations I had seen on my drive out. He smiled ruefully and pointed to towering light fixtures that lit up the prison courtyard like a hospital's operating room. The glare washed out the night sky. 'I haven't seen stars in years,' he said. 'That's part of the sentence as well.'

Men do not have to be incarcerated to be deprived of landscapes of awe. Poverty of pocket or imagination can keep heads bent low. Awe by itself does not tell the scriptural story – as Pascal added, 'It is a remarkable thing that no canonical author ever used nature to prove the existence of God'⁶ – but it provides a compass that orients us toward God as creator.

Silence

'Silence is not valued for itself, as some sort of magic tool,' writes Norvene West. 'Rather, silence creates an environment in which God can be heard and welcomed.'⁷

A friend long active in men's groups has always resisted taking even a day's retreat at a Benedictine monastery in northern New Mexico. He is wary not only of its isolated locale, but of its steep-walled canyon of silence, travelled each day by the Benedictine Rule. 'I don't think I can be quiet that long,' he admits.

The silence that wilderness entails – with its wind, water and wildlife – is not the absence of sound, but the absence of distraction. We briefly distance ourselves from the 'clamour of earthly activity',⁸ and in the stillness enter the landscape of listening.

Solitude

Thomas Merton suggested, 'As soon as you are really alone you are with God'.⁹ The solitude that can engender clarity and attentiveness is often rare in our lives. Ironically, one of the hallmarks of the contemporary men's movement has been the absence of solitude: conferences with every hour scheduled and stadium gatherings of thousands. In the community of brethren, many men report a stirring of spirit and a strengthening of the fibres of faith.

Yet at the same time, the mass gatherings can exclude men who thirst for solitude and speechlessness. For some, the jostle, amplified addresses and communal prayers tend to eclipse divinity with fraternity. Fellowship becomes the Holy Grail.

Long after stadium lights dim and gates lock, the arena of sand and stone remains open. George A. Maloney counselled in *Alone with the Alone*, 'We must draw upon the vast richness of solitude that the physical world has to offer'.

Dependence on God

These spiritual values combine to create a sense of dependence on God. On the edge of physical safety, untethered from accustomed support, visitors come to the brink of praying without ceasing. 'The mountain, like the desert, is a place of abandonment,' Belden Lane notes. 'There one is stripped of all egocentric concerns, carried by the fierce landscape itself into an emptiness which only God can fill.'¹⁰ Along the way, we come face to face with our intent to have postponed that day of reckoning.

And if you will here stop and ask yourself why you are not as pious as the primitive Christians were, your own hearts will tell you that it is neither through ignorance nor inability, but purely because you never thoroughly intended it.¹¹

This is a different part of the forest from that travelled by Robert Bly in *Iron John* and other authors who view wilderness less as a place that humbles than an arena that girds men's psyches as they brush against wildness that is 'a relative, perhaps an uncle, of Pan'.¹²

Where can men with days hemmed in by work, family and entertainment actually encounter the wilderness? Carlo Carretto, one of the Little Brothers of Jesus, once wrote, 'I have come into the desert

to pray, to learn to pray. It has been the Sahara's great gift to me . . .'¹³ Few of us will travel like Carretto to North Africa, but we find landscape closer to home that provides the same kindling of prayer. It may be in visiting forest or seacoast in periodic retreat, either alone or in small groups with time for solitude; it may be by seeking out the edges of wild country in park or garden in the quiet corners of the day; or for those unable to travel first-hand, it may be by preserving such spiritual topography for future generations.

Three temptations

All of that said, wilderness remains as well a place of temptation for men, with three pitfalls in particular.

Self-exaltation

Mountain and desert can become not humbling ground but proving ground to flex pride. The temptation rears up, familiar as the day's headlines of 'Man against the Elements'. Its icons are pictures of climbers, shivering and exhausted, labelled 'conquerors of Everest'. Nature becomes an arena for self-mastery and domination where men lack nothing and need no one. Rather than heeding Gerard Manley Hopkins' warning in 'Ribblesdale' – that man is 'To his own selfbent so bound' – we take on William Ernest Henley's bravado of 'Invictus': 'I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul'.

Exaltation of nature

The second temptation, as old as time, shifts adoration from God to creation, leaving us, as St Paul warned, having 'worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator' (Rom 1:25). The awe summoned up limits our worship to what we can see. Turning from any otherworldly hope, we are asked to pay 'Loyalty to the earth, the earth which bore us and sustains us, the only home we shall ever know'.¹⁴ Reverence for nature can cloud our eyes like cataracts, eclipsing our vision of God.

Self-redemption

The third temptation substitutes the personal wilderness experience for Scripture and sacrament. In a folly of individualist zeal, with no community of accountability, we kick off the dust of the institutional Church and take to high country like men crossing a glacier of crevasses unroped. The clever rationale one man gives to explain his disavowal of church, 'I'd rather be out fishing thinking

about God than in church thinking about fishing', often leads to being out fishing thinking only about fish. The stones of wilderness do not supplant ecclesiastical architecture but rather buttress it.

Turning toward home

'Those who work with men note the disconnection between contemporary men and spirituality,' writes David James.¹⁵ Many men give no time to an interior prayer life; they practise no discipline of spiritual reading or fasting. Days pass empty of prayer, except perhaps a hastily muttered 'Our Father' on the edge of sleep. In the company of friends with whom no other subject is avoided, we circumvent the spiritual life like quicksand.

Yet at the same time, we ache with longing, admitting with Augustine that 'our hearts are restless until they rest in thee'.¹⁶ Wilderness offers a setting that can bring us to our senses. Andrew Louth notes, 'The way of the desert is not so much flight from society and community, as finding a way to an oasis where one can be aware again of the ultimate reality of God'.¹⁷ In the stillness of wild country, men can recover the silence and solitude that turns them towards prayer and to those in need.

Call and response to God

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell; the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

(*'God's Grandeur'*, Gerard Manley Hopkins)

The deepening sense of dependence on God prompts a return *from* the wilderness. The Hebrews did not remain in the Sinai, nor Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration. 'The desert is not the final stopping place,' wrote Carlo Carretto from the Sahara. 'It is a stage on the journey. Our vocation is contemplation in the streets . . . Certainly it would be easier and more pleasant to stay here in the desert. But God doesn't seem to want that.'¹⁸ On their return from wilderness, men may find instilled a habit of attentiveness and prayer. For some, this may linger no longer than the scent of woodsmoke in their clothes. For others, however, a contemplative pattern will ground their coming days, with morning prayer as orienting as a compass checked at dawn.

The irony of time spent alone in the wilderness is that it can bring men closer to those they have left behind. Like the paradox of any retreat, by withdrawing temporarily from others we are drawn closer to them. Distance lessens distractions, shrinks resentment, and illumines how we should respond on our return. In far corners of wilderness, we come to know that 'our life and our death are with our neighbour'.¹⁹

Among the responses open to us, it is in the environmental arena itself, broader than just its wilder reaches, that men in particular can attend to those facing unprecedented need amid a creation 'groaning in travail' (Rom 8:22).

In the parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus directs his disciples' attention to the hungry, thirsty and sick.²⁰ This charge increasingly implies an environmental response. Churches which once distributed food, water or medicine now peer beyond symptoms to underlying ecological insufficiency. Hunger can trace back to degraded soils, sickness to contaminated water, drought to depleted aquifers and deforestation.

Religious denominations which have tried to bind wounds of a damaged creation often find their funding minimal, staffing paper-thin, and parishioners inattentive. Within most local congregations, the 'environment' still lies outside the scope of concern, as though distinct from 'needs of people'.

Four areas in particular demand greater attention:

- contaminated drinking water each day takes 30,000 lives around the globe; the World Health Organization estimates that water-related diseases trigger 75 per cent of all the world's sickness;
- soil degradation since the end of World War II has rendered infertile an area of the world equal to China and India combined;
- the pace of deforestation hews down fifteen million hectares of tropical forests each year (an area larger than England), exacerbating drought and the soil's ability to retain water;
- the relentless shrinkage of wilderness areas drains ecological reservoirs and wildlife habitats valuable in and of themselves as part of God's creation.

As Sallie McFague writes in *Super, natural Christians*,

We alone cannot save nature, but we might be able to stop contributing, as we have done for centuries, to its objectification and

degradation and begin to see it as God's beloved – as we claim people are – as having intrinsic worth in God's eyes and in ours.²¹

Men's response: hearing creation 'groaning in travail'

No passage can be chiselled from gospel or epistle that commissions men more than women to respond to these needs. As Maude Royden noted: 'It is part of the amazing originality of Christ that there is to be found in his teaching no word whatever which suggests a difference in the spiritual ideals, the spheres, or the potentialities of men and women'.²²

Yet if men lack a unique charge, they at times may neglect the call addressed to them as well as to women. For example, I come from a denomination where women's organizations have been in the forefront of raising funds and dispatching workers on behalf of health and education. It is not unusual to hear men contrast their own response, conceding that many men's groups operate as little more than social clubs – 'the kind of men's clubs', notes James B. Nelson, 'that showed last year's World Series films and put on an annual pancake breakfast'.²³

In recent years reporters have chronicled the 'repentant stance' that characterizes such gatherings of men as Promise Keepers, as participants openly regret their acts or omissions as husbands, fathers, brothers and sons.²⁴ At times, however, a failure to respond to environmental damage mirrors omissions on the home front. An ecological house on fire should prompt men to face questions many have long avoided: Have we ourselves exploited the earth? Neglected to replenish it? Lived a lifestyle that exacerbated harm?

When explaining what motivated his design for the new Coventry Cathedral after World War II, the architect Basil Spence called his effort an 'act of Faith'.²⁵ What are needed now are 'acts of Faith' on behalf of the environment. For men to respond through prayer, first-hand labour, financial contributions, and, not least, a reckoning of lifestyle. (The Vancouver-based ecologist William Rees points out that to support the world's present population at North American consumption levels 'would require the equivalent of two more planet Earths'.²⁶)

The environment ripples out, with fields white for harvest. A response now by men, individually or collectively, on a local or national level, would take place at a time of unprecedented need.

The earth, water and air that 'wears man's smudge', beckons as the landscape for acts of faith.

Practical considerations: gathering the talents of men

Men are particularly well-positioned to respond, prompted not only by spiritual omissions but practical skills. Most notably, they are more likely than women to possess the training to design, construct and restore. When it comes to receiving engineering degrees in the US, for example, men still outnumber women by a six to one ratio. Observers become so used to decrying the imbalance that they fail to ask whether men currently have a higher burden to respond as water and sanitation engineers, foresters and soil scientists.

Since 1988 I have helped run a small, non-profit organization that provides clean water to villages in developing countries, in part by matching the overseas communities with US churches. Over the years, interest within congregations has been evenly divided between men and women in terms of fund-raising and concern. But when it came to providing technical advice and to working abroad, those who have volunteered have been men. With few exceptions, they have been the ones to design new water systems, dig trenches, and work for days in rural corners.

As studies of Christian men suggest,²⁷ the strongest men's groups revolve around well-defined purposes, at times involving a clear-cut physical task. Male spirituality is often characterized as more comfortable with a hammer on the church roof than a prayer book in the pews.

Men's instinct to respond practically is often mocked as a 'fix-it' mentality that runs roughshod over relationships. As Phil Culbertson warns in *The new Adam*, "The insistence that to "do" something is categorically more manly than to "be" something, or simply "to be", is a common male temptation".²⁸ Yet this linear approach can target technical skill to reduce suffering, easing very real needs when carried out with sensitivity to the people involved.

Moreover, men may find it easier than women to travel in regions of extreme environmental despoliation. The issue is not one of courage but prudence in remote areas, a not inconsiderable point when places of the world grow less hospitable to local residents and visitors alike.

The exceptions to this are many. Time and time again it is women who have articulated needs and risked sickness and danger

to spearhead ecological work. The very water projects noted above were initiated by women who lived in (not merely visited) the remote communities. Organizations such as World Women in Defense of the Environment chronicle the global extent of female leadership and courage in ecological fields.

But the point is that men have often overlooked their capacity to witness environmentally. There is no shortage of opportunity here on the edge of the twenty-first century. Efforts could entail restoring polluted rivers or protecting wild lands, shifting individual consumption patterns or planting trees. The specific undertakings will come only with time, and they begin in prayer.

Conclusion

This is an urgent call. People struggling with infertile land and fouled waters exist not under threat of ecological catastrophe but engulfed by one. The degraded environment ends lives prematurely and disfigures hope.

Men do not possess an exclusive call; the fissures of a ravaged earth cut across gender. 'The list is long', as Sallie McFague notes of environmental threats, 'and there is work for everyone to do.'²⁹ But with talents all too often untapped, Christian men can redress an ecological toll many have long ignored.

When Gerard Manley Hopkins made his plea for wilderness at Inversnaid in the Scottish Highlands, he invoked the restorative clarity of God's creation. As men seek to revivify their response within churches, the wilderness offers terrain to gather their bearings. Under the open sky, encompassed by silence and awe, they can discern needs of nature and neighbour as they reorient themselves toward God. For men of faith, the environment remains the setting for both prayer and work.

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NOTES

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- 3 Lk 6:16, Mt 14:23, Mk 1:35.
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- 5 Pascal, *Pensées*, trans Martin Turnell (London: Harvill Press, 1962), no 392.
- 6 *Ibid.*, no 19.
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- 18 Carlo Carretto, *Letters from the desert*, pp 74–75.
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- 23 'Talking with James B. Nelson about ministry with men', *Alban Institute, Action Information* vol 13, no 4 (July/Aug 1987).
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- 26 See William Rees and Mathis Wackernagel, *Our ecological footprint* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1996).
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- 28 Phil Culbertson, *The new Adam: the future of male spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p 117.
- 29 Sallie McFague, *Super, natural Christians*, p 6.