

FAITH AND THE LAND

A Call for Wilderness Stewardship

Over the last year, members of ten different faith traditions in Utah held dialogues within their communities to think and talk together in response to two questions:

- ♦ How are Utah's wild places important to you spiritually?
- ♦ How does your faith tradition call on you to caretake the natural world, including wild lands?

In spring 2009, members of these faith communities gathered together to compare notes and to craft an interfaith statement that reflects their common findings and concerns. The following statement is a call to action to the citizens and leaders of our community to protect the wild lands that inspire and sustain us spiritually. It is also an invitation to other faith communities to join the conversation about spirituality and wilderness.

Despite differences in the beliefs and practices that define our traditions, we share a common experience and conviction that wilderness is a place of profound spiritual inspiration, renewal, connection and nourishment. The astounding beauty, utter vastness, and enveloping silence of wild places awaken our sense of awe and connect us to something larger than ourselves—God, Allah, the Divine, spirit, the un-nameable mystery of life. In addition, wilderness:

- ♦ is a vital counterbalance to the busyness, clamor and distractions that many of us experience in our day-to-day lives. The stillness, silence and simplicity of life we encounter in wilderness slow us down, shift our thinking, open us spiritually
- ♦ is a place of worship and spiritual reflection
- ♦ reminds us what is important in our lives, puts things in perspective, reveals our place in the scheme of things
- ♦ teaches us what it means to be human, and makes us aware of our humanity
- ♦ offers spiritual solace, refuge and healing
- ♦ deepens family bonds and brings us joy together
- ♦ was a place of revelation and enlightenment for many of the great teachers of our spiritual traditions



The diverse—but overlapping—beliefs, doctrines, teachings and practices of all our faith traditions call on us to caretake the natural world, including wild lands. We share a common conviction that we need to preserve and provide protective stewardship of Utah's wild lands not only for our own spiritual well-being and that of people to come, but also out of respect for the sanctity of all things.

We call on the leaders of our community to join us in recognizing the spiritual importance of Utah's wild landscapes and to act now to help ensure their protection.



This statement was distilled from dialogues held with members of the following spiritual communities: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Chavurah B'Yachad, Congregation Kol Ami, and Temple Har Shalom; Holladay United Church of Christ; St. Mark's Episcopal Congregation; Salt Lake Quakers; Utah Catholic Diocese Peace and Justice Commission; Community of Grace Presbyterian Church; Christ United Methodist Church; Islamic and Turkish members of the Multicultural Arch Foundation; and First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City.

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Major Themes and Quotes

Below are the major themes that emerged from the “Faith and the Land” dialogues, supported by quotes drawn from the various faith communities that participated.

Wilderness is a place of profound spiritual inspiration, renewal, connection and nourishment. The astounding beauty, utter vastness, and intense silence of wild places awaken our sense of awe and connect us to something larger than ourselves—God, Allah, the Divine, spirit, the un-nameable mystery of life.

Wilderness renews my faith. (Latter-day Saint)

Wilderness keeps me in awe of God’s greatness. (Presbyterian)

Your soul is filled when lying under the stars. How can your soul not be filled? (Catholic)

Sometimes people look for miracles that provide evidence that God exists. They look for some extraordinary thing in nature and say God did it—like the name of Allah written on a tree or rock. But we believe that even a flower by itself is a miracle. If you study a flower deeply, you will know this. Nature—wilderness—is a place where we can see and know Allah. (Muslim)

When I go out in wilderness it is almost as if I am looking at the face of God. (Quaker)

Wilderness is a vital counterbalance to the busyness, clamor and distractions many of us experience in our day-to-day lives. The stillness, silence and simplicity of life we encounter in wilderness slow us down, shift our thinking, open us spiritually.

I think of the Psalm: “Be still and know that I am God.” The world is so busy. Until we enter the silent vast places that wilderness offers, we are often not still enough to listen. (Catholic)

I love it when I go camping in wilderness. I don’t have a fridge or a stove. I wash dishes in the same pot I cooked my dinner in. I let go of all the busyness and live in simplicity. There’s something about that experience of simplicity that makes God so much closer. (Episcopalian)

Wilderness “uncomplicates” your thinking process and opens up your spirituality in ways that being busy inhibits. When I become too busy, when I need to deal with loss, I go to the mountains and sit quietly. (Methodist)

I feel myself open up in wilderness. My orientation is basically scientific, but in wild places that drops away. I hesitate to use the word, but it feels “transcendent” to how I usually live my life. For me, this is a spiritual experience. (Jewish)

Wilderness gives us time alone, time to think without distractions, time to contemplate the circle of life. I look up at the stars and know that I am part of something much larger. (Unitarian Universalist)

Wilderness is a place of worship and spiritual reflection.

I had a nephew who climbed K2. And he would say “God is on that mountain.” He never went to church. I judged him for it for some time. And then I thought: there’s a spirituality I can’t deny. (Catholic)

For some people, the relationship to the Divine comes not from a building or a person standing up in front of a group, but someplace else. Wilderness is one of those places for me. (Quaker)

Some people say that nature, or the desert, is the best place to make tefekur—that is, to reflect, or think deeply. (Muslim)

Wilderness reminds us what is important in our lives. It puts things in perspective. We experience our place in the scheme of things.

Wild spaces remind us that our time on earth is a blink of an eye. They remind us of what is really important in our daily lives. (United Church of Christ)



Wilderness acts as a reminder that there are forces that are bigger than all of us. When you are surrounded by a concrete jungle, it is hard to notice some of those spiritual things. Nature reminds me of the order of things. (Methodist)

A huge part of spirituality is surrendering one's self to a higher power. Wilderness opens us to that experience. It reminds us that we are not in control, that we are at the mercy of nature and of God. It is a place where we let go and relinquish control to God. (Presbyterian)

In wild places, we are made aware of how we are both insignificant and significant. (Episcopalian)

Nature teaches us about the power and beauty of Allah. A river may seem small and gentle. But it is actually a big power; it carves big canyons. (Muslim)



Wilderness teaches us what it means to be human, and reminds us of our humanity.

Wilderness is a place where we can be our best selves. (Latter-day Saint)

I take people with disabilities on river trips, and they are overwhelmed by the beauty around them. They say to me: “When I’m out here, I don’t feel like I have a disability.” (United Church of Christ)

I find that in wilderness, I lose my usual sense of identity. I am free to discover attributes about myself that are more important. Or to just rest in the knowledge that I am part of all this—part of God’s creation. (Presbyterian)

In wilderness, I get lost in myself and feel part of something so much larger. I shed the shields of society and know who I am. I see where the blue sky meets the horizon and it brings a smile from my heart to my lips. (Unitarian Universalist)

Wild places bring us face to face with our vulnerability. And that experience teaches us who we are as human beings in the world. (United Church of Christ)

Wilderness offers spiritual solace, refuge, and healing.

Wilderness is a place of healing and wholeness. When I’m in the wilderness, it fixes things that have been broken in my heart. It is a deeply spiritual place to be. (Methodist)

I have a child who was in a wilderness-based residential treatment program. I remember going out with him down a bumpy dirt road and out a distance I hadn’t ever been before. It allowed me to strip away all that I usually do—being analytical, asking “what do we need to do next?”—and to simply be with my son under a tarp, on the ground, in the rain, with the bugs. A transformation began to occur in his life as well as mine. It began there where there was nothing else to worry about. I just appreciated that wilderness existed. (Jewish)

Out there in the enormity and expanse of the desert where there are no roads or power lines in my field of vision, it is easier to connect to my spirituality. I find solace and spiritual rejuvenation. (Unitarian Universalist)

Wilderness deepens family bonds and brings us joy together.

I think the reason my kids have such good relationships with each other is because of the time they spent backpacking together in southern Utah without video games, TV, and other distractions. They had to rely on each other for extended periods of time. It gave a depth and foundation to their relationships that is really beautiful. (Quaker)

Spending time in nature is so valuable to our families, especially in times of crises. A feeling of unity often emerges that transcends all the differences we may be struggling with. We connect to something larger. (Latter-day Saint)

Wilderness provides lessons in gratitude. I take my boys out backpacking where we carry just the basics on our backs. It makes all of us appreciate what we have, and to realize what we really need. (Presbyterian)

Wilderness was a place of revelation and enlightenment for many of the great teachers of our spiritual traditions.

To me this is a no brainer. Jesus, Muhammed, Buddha—they all went out into the wilderness. None of the spiritual leaders ever said about their inspiration, “Oh, I got it in the building.” They were always wandering off somewhere into the wilderness. (Quaker)

Faith communities that participated in the Faith and the Land dialogue project reported diverse—but overlapping—beliefs, doctrines, teachings and practices from their faith traditions that called on them to safeguard nature, including wild places. These include:

- ♦ a belief in the sanctity of life, or the spiritual nature of all things
- ♦ a conviction that all of creation is a manifestation of, and exists in praise of, God, Allah, the Divine
- ♦ a belief that the biblical commandments, “Love God and love your neighbor,” call on us to preserve and respect the natural world
- ♦ a commitment to inclusiveness
- ♦ a sense of responsibility towards future generations
- ♦ a commitment to taking care of those in need
- ♦ a conviction against greed or wastefulness
- ♦ a belief that we will be held accountable or “perfectly judged” after death for our actions during this life
- ♦ a belief that humans have a stewardship obligation toward nature
- ♦ a commitment to live one’s faith through action



Mormon doctrines hold that all life has spirit—animals, plants, even the earth. This calls on us to treat creation with reverence. If we corrupt our bodies or the natural world, we are not honoring God. (Latter-day Saint)

The essential piece for me as a Jew is “Tikkun olam”—the repair and caretaking of the natural world. Why? Judaism is centered in the world. It is wilderness oriented. Eden. The garden. This is all we have. (Jewish)

Our faith tradition focuses less on the after-life or “getting somewhere” and more on today. It is a call to be present, to work on issues we can change, to look at the world and act. Caretaking the earth and its wild places is part of that call to action. (United Church of Christ)

Openness and inclusiveness have always been hallmarks of the Episcopal tradition. Our history has been to become increasingly inclusive and accept diversity more and more. This includes consciously embracing and giving respect to the non-human as well as the human. (Episcopalian)

Catholics are called to love God and their neighbor. Traditionally, that may be thought of as going to church, working on poverty. But loving God and neighbor also means caretaking the earth. Living a life of grace means living more gracefully on the earth. (Catholic)

What is important to Quakers is the direct experience of community. We share a realization that we are all the same; we are not separate. That is why many of us may not speak of “the natural world.” We are that world. And we are responsible for that world. (Quaker)

Presbyterians believe that the earth and all that is in it is the Lord’s. . . . Creation comes from God so to love God one must care for creation. (Presbyterian)

Nature—everything—keeps praising Allah all the time. There is a saying from Muhammad: “Allah is beautiful and He loves beauty.” This is the reality and entirety of creation. As keepers of that creation, humans have an utter responsibility to protect nature in the best way possible. (Muslim)

The Methodist tradition is one of inclusiveness. This inclusiveness translates to all things, not just humans. So in the same way that I give respect and love to all the people in this room, I give respect and love to all parts of the natural world. As every person I meet is a gift of grace, so every desert landscape I see, every mountain I climb, every sunset I marvel at, is a gift of grace. (Methodist)

Unitarians believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but we really extend this attitude toward all. Our 7th principle is respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. We see caretaking wilderness as part of a sacred responsibility. (Unitarian Universalist)



The dialogues from which this statement was distilled were conducted in cooperation with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, an organization dedicated to preserving Utah’s wildland heritage. For more information, go to: www.suwa.org/faithandtheland.