



Faith and the Land: Conversations about Spirituality and Wilderness

January 13, 2009
Members and friends of the
Church of Jesus Christ of
Latter-day Saints

Introduction

On January 13, 2009, two dozen members and friends of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints gathered together to share their perspectives about why Utah's wild places are important to them spiritually, and to talk about how the teachings and traditions of the LDS Church call on us to care take the natural world.

The evening of dialogue was part of an exciting new effort sponsored by the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA) to create an interfaith statement about the importance of wilderness preservation to Utahns of all faith traditions. As a first step in that process, SUWA is convening conversations between members of different faith communities. Later, SUWA will bring people together across faith traditions to craft a compelling statement that weaves together the reflections, perspectives and ideas captured in these conversations.

The "Faith and the Land" initiative is based on the belief that Utahns from all religious traditions, as well as Utahns from no particular faith tradition, value Utah's wild lands as places of spiritual inspiration, connection, renewal and solace. It is also based on the belief that coming together to share what is important to us individually and collectively will reveal collective wisdom that can help guide the wild lands we love.



Below are highlights of the conversation.

How are Utah's wild places important to you spiritually?

> There is something about the scale of big wild places that gives us perspective about our place in the world and about the meaning of our lives on this earth. In this way, wilderness provides an opportunity for transcendence. After spending time in wilderness, I feel more grounded about what is my role in the universe. I feel more humble.

> One day I was looking at the awesome beauty of the mountains around me and thinking about how God had created them. And then I realized that the same God that created the mountains had also created me. It actually gave me a sense of self worth – to be created by the same God that created the utter majesty around me!

> The beauty of nature has a big impact on me. I am saddened and upset when I see it destroyed. For me, it's an opportunity to come closer to God and know Him through his creations.

> Wilderness allows me quiet time, time alone, time to be internal. This gives me access to a sense of spirituality. A sense of connection between me and the universe.

> I grew up on a huge tract of land – farmland, forest, a lake. I was deeply connected to it; it was part of my being. It was home. Now, there is a part of me that must be outside. When I look at this magnificent earth I feel awestruck. I can't leave the Temple without being struck by how explicitly it is stated that creation should be protected.

> I didn't realize how much the mountains meant to me until I moved away for a while. In the East I became aware of the beauty of the ocean. But moving back to Utah made me really appreciate the beauty of Utah. I worry now as I watch the valley fill up. The more it fills up the more I realize how precious Nature is. This world is His creation. When we make it ugly it offends him.

> When I am in nature I feel more than human. I feel I am earth and water and air.

> My love of wild places began in childhood. There was a ravine across the street between two houses where we used to play hide and seek. It was a deep, wild place, full of mystery. Our town also backed up to the South Mountain Indian Reservation. Some of my happiest memories are going up to the reservation and walking between the trees, drinking water out of the creek and hunting for pollywogs. I worry that people in the city don't have access to wild places like this. In Utah, we are incredibly lucky because we have the mountains all around us, the creeks running through our neighborhoods, the desert within a few hours drive. I worry sometimes that we take it all too much for granted.

> I grew up in Virginia where I had the beauty of the trees, but not of sun rises or sunsets. So I remember the first time I saw a real sunrise. No one else was around. It was just me and sky at 5 am in the morning. I was filled with awe. It spoke to my soul.



> When I was 17 I had a job in construction which required me to drive from Salt Lake City to Grand Junction. At first, when I crossed the landscape from Price to the Utah border I would think: What a terrible place this is! It needs some grass! It needs to be irrigated! But by the end of the summer I fell in love with the landscape -- the complexity of it. My spirituality is tied to curiosity and wild landscapes capture my curiosity.

> All my life I have spent time in wilderness. I go to into the wild to recreate, to challenge myself. But there is always that moment when I reach a summit, or take in a view after a long hike, where something else happens. Wild places open up my awareness. I think my spirituality is tied up with being in places big and empty enough that they inspire awe in me.

> When I am in the wilderness, life becomes more simple. Water, food, shelter – these are the basic necessities I think about. And there is something about getting back to these basic life-

supporting elements that evokes a heightened awareness within me, and allows me to focus on the meaning of my life.

> Spiritually is a connection to something so much larger and greater and bigger than yourself. I experience that in wilderness.

> I love getting out into wild places because I can see the night sky. It is impossible to fully conceptualize the cosmos. In terms of feeling part of something larger than myself, the night sky really does it.

> There is something about being in wilderness that allows people to drop constructed façades or identities. You don't have to have a persona. After three days out, I always feel very different. I feel closer to my true self.

> Going to the desert is going to my spiritual temple. I think that is because the desert can be such a harsh environment. There are elements that I do not have control over. In my day-to-day life, I am always trying to control things – like simply cleaning my house. But when I get out in to the desert I am surrounded by elements that I can't control. Just think of a river, the volume of water is so powerful! Or there may be a flash flood after a simply rainstorm. Not having control over these things is humbling. It opens my awareness to my place in the universe.

> The grand scale wild places presents to us is very humbling. And when we are humbled we are much more open to having a spiritual experience. Wilderness is like the great cathedrals of Europe, except more spectacular.

> When do we feel the love of God? How does it make us feel? I've felt God's love more often in the desert than anywhere else. I experience a deep gratitude -- a sense of joy and peace. I remember one time when we went to the desert and arrived late and set up camp in the dark. In the morning, I woke to a great expanse of wild flowers. One connection we all have is love of nature. It brings us together. The problems that we face seem to melt away.

> I can't conceive of a kind of spirituality that does not involve a relationship to nature. If you take nature out of the equation, the equation doesn't work. Love of God is what one feels in nature.

> It seems that being in nature almost universally offers a spiritual experience to people. Protecting wilderness means preserving opportunities for those spiritual experiences.

> I feel close to God in the Temple, and when I step outside into nature I feel comfort and reassurance. We need large empty expanses of land to scream, to weep and wail.



> I believe that love of God is what people feel when spending time in nature and in the wilderness. And if wilderness is a source for that kind of love then it is vital to preserve our wild lands.

> As a species, our first Gods were nature and natural phenomena. In a fundamental sense, that is still with us. Wild nature is a source of our visceral experience of God. Wilderness offers us the experience of true transcendence. The abstracted transcendence we often find in religious institutions can be a diminished transcendence.

> To drink out of a stream is to become connected to the cycle of life, to feel connected to every element in the universe. When I go in to the woods I am reminded that we are all here together, that we are all part of the same earth. I see the animals there – the ants and bugs crawling on the ground – and I hear all the birds and peepers around me. In our insulated houses with their heating and cooling systems, we forget these things. We forget how we are interconnected. And we need to be reminded of that. We need places where we can walk barefoot on the earth.

> 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.

> I moved back to Utah with four young children. I get emotional when I see them playing outside – it's wonderful that my children have the opportunity to be in nature and experience their sweet, tender observations. I feel strongly toward the concept of wilderness, even though I've had limited time to experience it.



> I don't like to think of my grandchildren not being able to walk into an environment that isn't created by man.

> Being able to get out into wild places where there are no other people, – where I can scream without consequence – ultimately allows me to connect more deeply with people. I think this is because it allows me to reach across time, across

geography. I get to a place where I experience on a deep level what we have in common as human beings, rather than the differences and conflicts that confound us day to day.

> I read something recently about how the Aboriginals in Australia sing the land as they travel across the landscape. It made me realize we don't just think *about* landscape. We think *with* landscape. I believe that to the extent nature is part of our lives, we are "big." To the extent nature is not part of our lives, we are "small."

> Wilderness is a necessary counter part to the fullness of the human landscape. It is a place where the human component is largely absent. It is the yin to the yang of the human imprinted

landscape. And when we go into that emptiness – when you empty yourself – something new can come into you. We find a richness we may not have know before.

> Our work-a-day world is filled with distractions. They are all part of the diminishment of self.

> You can read to children about what it is like to be in a boat. But when you are actually in a boat, it is a very different experience. That is what it is like to be in wilderness. The experience changes you. You find yourself breathing differently. You see things differently. It feeds your soul.

How do the teachings and traditions of the LDS Church call on us to care take the natural world, including our wild land heritage?

> To begin answering that question, let me read a quote from LDS President Gordon Hinckley that appears in the book “New Genesis: a Mormon reader on land and community:”



“Here is declared the Creator of all that is good and beautiful. I have looked at majestic mountains rising against a blue sky and thought of Jesus, the Creator of heaven and earth. I have stood on a spit of sand in the Pacific and watched the dawn rise like thunder – a ball of gold surrounded by clouds of pink and white and purple – and thought of Jesus, the Word by whom all things were made What then shall you do with Jesus that is called Christ? The earth is his creation. When we make it ugly, we offend him.”

> The LDS notion of “Zion” -- a guiding and unifying principle in early LDS communities -- is very relevant to this question of how LDS teachings call on us to care take the natural world. Creating Zion means building a community that is fit to welcome God into its presence. And doing that in a very practical, here and now kind of way. It means pulling together to solve common problems, and in a way where there is no distinction between what is spiritual and what is not. Everything is seen as spiritual! In other words, creating Zion means thinking about where food comes from, where waste goes, how one treats the earth in a way that recognizes deeply the sanctity of all life.

> The LDS notion of Zion is a central idea for Mormons with real practical implications. The pioneers came to Utah to build a new world. The overriding concern was building a community that is worthy of God’s presence. The environment was part of their consideration. Beauty was important to them. Brigham Young planted orchards. Every one of the early buildings was a masterpiece. The Mormon experience was fundamentally at odds with the American experience of the frontier. Most frontier communities didn’t stick. Almost every town the Mormons founded is still here.

> The notion of Zion defines a way of relating to each other and the planet.

> LDS teachings encourage us to think of ourselves and all things as holy. If we understand life that way, we become aware of the interconnectedness of all things and are more respectful and responsible residents on this earth.

> The LDS Church teaches that animals have spirit, the very earth has spirit, and that we need to respect God's creation. When we damage the earth's creation, we damage God. Nature brings us to God and allows us to know him.

> In LDS teachings, there is a clear understanding that earth has an awareness. I think of that line: "The earth groaned." This perspective implies a higher sense of responsibility toward the earth.

> The LDS teachings called the Word of Wisdom stress principles about how we eat and how we consume that make sense ecologically today. For example, they encourage people to eat food that is in season (which greatly reduces the amount of energy consumed by transportation) and to eat meat sparingly (which reduces environmental impacts). As a Mormon, how I eat and how I consume is thus spiritual labor. The teachings compel us to think about how we live every day – not just one day a week.

> There is that line from scriptures: "The earth is full and there is enough so spare." It reflects my reading on environmental problems. There is the problem of population, and we need to consider how our decisions about the size of our families affects the health of the planet. But more important than the issue of "how many" is question of what life style we choose. When we look at the law of consecration, we hear a call to reduce consumption on all levels. There is the fact that if everyone on the earth lived like Americans, we would need four earths.

> Scripture says "Be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the earth." Some people skip over the "replenish" part.

> As a member of the LDS Church, I believe I will continue to exist as a being after this life, and I will have to account for how I lived this life. I believe I will be "perfectly judged" in every thought and action. I will be held accountable for how I thought, how I related to other things, if I failed to appreciate what God created with gratitude and amazement. In real terms this means that I am accountable for flicking a piece of trash out the window even if no one else sees me do it.

> The thought that we will be judged for every thought and action motivates one towards stewardship.



> Mormons believe literally that we are children of God, and given that we are the children of God we have all the potential of God within us. We can create worlds without end ourselves. But if we don't bother to learn how God creates and manifests, and only focus on the human side of things, we will have a lot of unpleasant accounting when our lives end on this earth.

> Believing that we will live future lives means we have a responsibility to learn things that we can use in our future lives. We have a responsibility to learn how to care for God's creation.

> If we believe in eternal progression and we are supposed to be learning a lot that we can use from our mortal live it is our responsibility to learn, not God's job to come and save us.

> The LDS doctrine of repentance allows me hope that we can repair the damage we have done to the earth. We believe that part of God's plan is renewal of the earth. But that does not mean we can sit back and not worry about our environmental problems. Rather, we need to be repentant first, and then God will provide a way to repair the damage that has been done. This is important to me because sometimes our environmental problems appear so over-



whelming that effective action seems almost inconceivable. So the idea that I can trust in God's power is empowering.

> God didn't create a world that can't be repaired – we will repair what we've done. His plan is the renewal of the earth.

> I sometimes imagine that people are going to be handed toothbrushes and asked to clean the silt out of Glen Canyon.

> LDS theology is something the environmentalists would die for, but most of them don't know it.

A word or phrase that reflects what you are taking away from this evening

Repentance.

Attonement.

I'm not sure we heal the earth as much as the earth heals us.

Appreciation.

Reverence for life.

Heaven is earth and earth is heaven.

Common and true principles.

A desire to familiarize myself better with Mormon teachings that relate to environmental stewardship and to not be afraid to apply them my life.

The earth is our school house. Are we studying for the final exam?

A sense of shared commitment.
The power of diversity and commitment.
Equality.
I like the new community I feel part of tonight.

Autumn rain.
Four hearts draw together.
In the small tea room.

Mormons have a theology that environmentalists would die for but don't know it.

A new sense of spirituality.
Optimism.
Freedom.
Movement.

Groundswell – these are the ways and places that a groundswell begins!

