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Coming to Peace in the Presence of Wild Things:
A Personal Exploration of the Intersections of the Environment and Faith

By: Hampton Randall

Power of Place

*“When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”*
-Wendell Berry *The Peace of Wild Things*

From a young age, I have felt the power that certain places have over me. Some made me feel an overwhelming sense of awe, some freedom, and some made me feel depths of peace unknown like Wendell Berry describes in the poem above. Considering my natural restlessness, a disposition that has been there since birth, the fact these places invoke a feeling of peace that washes over me speaks volumes to their power.

It wasn't until college that I truly recognized this power of place, but since learning that fact I have sought its connection. A professor of mine gave me the language to describe this power that place has on me—he called these places “thin spaces.” These thin spaces, he told me, were where ancient Celts believed the boundary between the physical world we inhabit, and the spirit(ual) world is thin—. In some of these thin spaces, I believe the line is blurred, or non-existent altogether. It is as if the place inhabits both realms giving us a genuine look into what the world beyond our own is like.

This project will be an introduction to and exploration of these thin spaces that I have encountered in my time on Earth. I hope that in my story, these places' power will come through the pages and blur that line between worlds.

Peace

Peace, or the feeling of peace, is at the core of these explorations and stories. More specifically, the peace found in encountering wild places. The peace Wendell Berry describes in his poem *The Peace of Wild Things*. This peace: a liberating peace; a peace that frees us from the onus burden of forethought; a peace that does not separate us but that snares us and implicates in the great tapestry that is this world. I struggle to believe that this peace is simply just an emotion.

It can't be.

I believe that this peace can come only from a power much greater than us. It is the presence of the Divine. I believe it to not be a coincidence that, in my faith tradition, the Divine is crowned "The Prince of Peace" and that throughout the texts, his kingdom is described as a place without suffering or pain. This feeling of peace, this connection to the divine, is at the core of each of these memories. In them, the word peace will be synonymous with the name of the divine. In some of these memories, peace's presence was undeniable, and it was overwhelming. For others, I didn't know the presence was there until I left. Regardless of when or where I felt peace's presence, the feeling is best described by the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Bishop Michael Curry. In his book *The Way of Love* he describes it as, "Those times when your jaw drops and words can't rise to the occasion." It's almost as if you transcend the bounds of the physical world we inhabit.

This experience is not one confined by time and has been described across cultures and places. However, I find myself returning to the ancient Celts' explanation. They gave the places where encounters such as these take place a name: thin spaces. They believed that in these places, the line between the physical world we inhabit, and the spirit world was thin, allowing for passage between the realms.

This phenomenon has met me, more times than not, when I enter wilderness or wild places. It is these places, where the feeling of the everyday gives way to a comfort much greater, I call Thin Places.

Beaver Creek off Calvary Church Road: The farm

My family has had a tract of land that dates back generations. Despite our research, its origins aren't fully known to us, but growing up I was told that it has been in my family since my maternal great-great-grandparents immigrated from Germany in the late 1800s. It is now split into two tracts, divided by a county road that is slowly crumbling and sinking back into the sandy soil. Although it hasn't cultivated anything more than trees and the occasional food plot that never breaches ankle height, we call it the farm.

The smaller parcel on the right side of the road is cleared of most tree cover. A lone pecan tree stretches its gangly limbs up, its arthritic joints carry the weight of its years. The house my great grandfather, Grandad Jack, was born in once stood beside the pecan tree. Where its base once rested, a crop of grass that grows taller and brighter than the rest now sways in the humid air. In my mind, I can still see the house's stained-glass door, its raw-timber side planks, and its rusted tin roof that draped the sagging porch timbers vividly. When I was a kid and found out it was going to be torn down, I promised myself I would never forget that house.

I never stepped foot in the house, but I sat outside as my dad and brother explored the newspaper-covered floorboards. I didn't want to disturb the peace that lingered in its dank hallways and rooms.

The field my great and great-greats once cultivated for sustenance now lays overgrown. A few longleaf pines have sprouted from the scrub grass and sweetgum.

On the other side of the road, lay the rest of the farm. It's not much, but to me, it holds more value per grain of sand than gold does per ounce. A small dirt road snakes downhill, away from the crumbling blacktop, down the side of the land. It passes the two farm ponds my great-grandfather put in and stops at the lower pond's earthen dam. A small field sits up near the

entrance, but apart from those few acres and the ponds, the rest is dense woodland of pines and oaks.

It is in these woods and on those ponds that I came to love nature, and it has been the brook that replenishes me when I am tired. It is here that I have felt the divine walking, just as in the creation stories of my youth.

The majority of my time spent here each year is during the fall months. As the leaves turn and the temperature drops, my dad, brother, and I watch the world wake up and go to bed from the discomfort of tree stands. As any deer hunter knows, it's more sitting in silence than anything else. This practice is something we have done for as long as I can remember, and it is something that I have grown to appreciate more each year. As a youngn' I thirsted for the honor of my first deer. Everyone I knew had killed one. The problem was, I hated the silent wait on an uncomfortable bucket or unpadded tree stand that the hunt required. However, now that I am older, this time of quiet contemplation is the thing I crave. It's not even about hunting anymore. I have been guilty of "forgetting" bullets at the house, just so that I could enjoy the peace without the pressure on my shoulders— my dad and brother say that I should just bring a camera rather than a gun or bow. I think they may be on to something.

This past October, I found myself in my favorite stand. It sits on the far corner of the farm back behind the lower pond's dam. It's nestled in a young oak tree on the downstream side of the lower farm pond. This stand looks out on the creek bottom, with its bamboo and fern underbrush, and has a ridge of mixed oak and pine running alongside the left side of it.

I had been sitting in this stand for a few hours— I could tell because my legs begin to fall asleep around hour 2 each time I go hunting. At this point of the hunt, they had been asleep for a little while. Nevertheless, the sun was beginning its descent over my right shoulder, and I heard a

cricket start its familiar noise down in the creek bed. The chirping harmonized with the rush of the water leaving the lower pond and was a nice soundtrack to my sit. It was a good night in the stand. I had seen critters great and small and had been able to peer into their lives, just as a fly on a wall. Soon after, more and more crickets joined in, and their symphony grew. Their chirping became almost deafening. It washed over me just as the pond washed over the spillway and sent goosebumps to every corner of my body. This sonorous choir scratched an itch in me that I was unaware of, and I quickly understood that I was in the presence of the Divine. It didn't manifest in a thunderous boom, nor a great wind that shook my stand nor the trees surrounding me, but it came in the harmony of small crickets, whose anthem overcame.

Erosion as a way of Building Thin Spaces

Growing up my father taught my brother and me how to notice small disturbances in the forest floor. A leaf slightly off-kilter, a broken twig, or a brush showing the soft underbelly of their leaves rather than the traditional waxy top would pique our interest. It would make us slow down and start to scan and center our focus on other nearly invisible anomalies in the landscape. Whitetail deer, as stealthy as they are, still leave a trace when they walk.

In some places, it's clear that the trail left was a from one-time journey. These paths leave only the slightest disturbance. Others, it's as if we came across a divided highway within the forest. The consistent travel has broken down the leafy forest floor, exposing the sandy soil of the farm. These paths are ones heavily traveled and known by many. The consistent usage makes me think those that walk along it are comfortable when their journey takes them along these paths. These paths, as comfortable and known as they are, didn't start this way. They started as just a one-time path that eventually became a safe haven for travel.

As I write this, I am in a safe haven of my own. I have a barstool in the window of my favorite coffee shop that I go to whenever I need to write. It is away from the vents of air conditioning, so it always stays slightly warm— even on cold mornings like today. It faces away from the baristas and the business of the coffee shop, so I don't get distracted by the droll consistent among coffee shops. It looks out onto the street and a massive oak tree so that when I need to look up from my work, I have somewhere for my eye to go. A bonus is whenever I am not feeling particularly inspired or motivated to work, I can just sit and watch cars go by or dogs drag their owners down the street chasing after one of the many squirrels that call that oak tree home.

This chair has not always been special to me. It's from the countless hours that I have sat in this chair that a truth about the nature of thin spaces was revealed. Thin spaces present themselves in two distinct ways: either they knock you on your ass immediately, or they slowly expose themselves, built on an intimacy of consistent interaction and care.

This phenomenon of intimate knowledge leading to divine revelation is nearly inexplicable, but despite its slippery nature, it has proven itself to me time and time again. Take the farm for an example. To me and my family, it is undoubtedly an extension of heaven or a glimpse into a world beyond our own. To someone driving down the road, it's a stand of pine trees and a low fence that is in view for a couple of seconds before it disappears. Even if they stopped the car and walked around, it still just be a stand of timber. They don't have the seat time I do. A passerby wouldn't know what hilltop gave the best vantage to watch the sun slowly slip beneath the western horizon. They don't know the way the creek sings as it dips beneath the root system of *that* oak. They don't know the smell that bellows from the wetlands at the slightest disturbance. These secrets have only been revealed to a select few— some of whom I will never meet but feel a connection to nonetheless. This tract of mixed oak and pine, with its blackwater ponds and seeping springs has revealed more truths to me than anywhere else.

This habit of building spaces is not limited to our species, for I have seen it with my own eyes in another being— my mom's dog Max. The little white-haired Jack Russel has always been a weird little guy since we took him in—a story in and of itself. But, since the get-go of his time with us, he latched onto my mother and became her personal apparition tip-tapping a few steps behind her at nearly all times. The times he wasn't, you'd find Max at the glass-paned back door, laying in the sun's rays. His posture was one eerily similar to images of the Buddha— eyes half-open, body relaxed but still upright, and a slight smile. Nearly every day he would do this. Now,

I have not a single clue what is going on in his head. But seeing Max in that place, I see him radiate a peace inexplicable by words. I feel comfortable in saying he was in a thin space of his own.

Turning to contemplative practices, achieving the peace that is synonymous with these traditions is not a simple task— it takes effort. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and advocate for contemplative practice says it this way, “I must pray every day until I get a yes... I must pray until myself into a connection to that which is greater than oneself.” Or, looking at the Buddhist religious tradition, many monks spend upwards of 70% of their day in meditation. These individuals erode the barrier between worlds daily.

Just as moving water slowly chips away at the earth, digging deeper and deeper as it flows. The line separating our world and the spirit world is slowly eroded until the space between them is wholly thin allowing for holiness to flow.

10th Street E, Folly Beach

“Picture a wave in the ocean. You can see it, measure it, its height, the way the sunlight refracts when it passes through. And it's there. And you can see it, you know what it is. It's a wave. And then it crashes into the shore and it's gone. But the water is still there. The wave was just a different way for the water to be, for a little while. You know it's one conception of death for Buddhists: the wave returns to the ocean, where it came from and where it's supposed to be.”

-Chidi Anagonye, The Good Place

I sit on my surfboard, a 9'6" longboard purchased second-hand from a local surf shop. The Folly Beach pier is down the beach a little way away. The tall work cranes perched on their pilings are still tinted grey in the early morning light.

It's a rather chill day. The wind is out of the southwest blowing a couple of knots max. It's a mid-tide and rising. The swell is a foot and a half at around 9 seconds. I am alone at this section of beach. Down a couple blocks on either side of me there are a couple people who, like me, wanted to get out regardless of if the waves were spectacular.

I sit on my surfboard, the breeze laps small waves that play a quiet drumbeat. Eyeing the horizon waiting for the next set to roll through, I sit, patiently enjoying the way the warm water swirls through my leg hair. Mornings like this are my favorite. I don't feel the pressure I typically do when the waves are big and the lineup is crowded. If I catch one, it will be a slow ride down the beach with no audience to appease.

This time is mine.

As I sit, slowly circling my legs to the left, correcting the phantom current that breezed past my fin and spun me slowly, I feel the energy of the water. Its push and pull, a response to the call of celestial bodies, grabs onto me as I rise and fall with the breath of this body of water.

Knock-you-on-your-ass Thin Spaces

On the opposite end of the thin-space-spectrum, exist a type of thin space whose effect is felt nearly universally— these are what I call knock-you-on-your-ass thin spaces. Many of these spaces have a nearly otherworldly grandeur. Think the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, Denali, The Grand Tetons, Cenotes, and the Andes. You get the picture. These places are inherently magnificent, and their magnificence is felt by all those who experience them.

I believe. The grandeur of these places is at the heart of what makes these spaces thin spaces. Take the Grand Tetons for example.

A caveat before I continue. I grew up in the southeast where the mellow, seasoned, peaks of the Appalachians lowered themselves to be gentle red-clay hills. This was my playground. Until I was first introduced to the Rockies, I thought a 5,000 feet mountain was a tall mountain. This changed in August 2011.

For my mom's fortieth birthday, we went west to Wyoming. My 11-year-old mind didn't understand this choice. To me, the west, and Wyoming especially, was just cornfields and uninteresting prairie land. My view of the whole area was shaped by Little House on the Prairie, and so I questioned why we would go there. And so, disappointed and disgruntled I boarded the plane.

We landed in Salt Lake and started our drive northward. As we carved through the canyon roads, I was astounded by the beauty of the landscape. The West was not what I expected. When we arrived, I saw these mountains that erupt thousands of feet into the sky, out of a low valley of sagebrush prairie land. I was so transfixed as a child that when an opportunity arose to see these mountains again, I jumped on it.

The trip was the summer after I graduated high school, and at the time I was in a time of deep questioning. I was questioning the church in all its brokenness; I was questioning their teachings of “Christian Practice”; I was even questioning if God was what they said or if God was something completely different. I hadn’t felt any sort of divine presence in a while.

The four days we spent in the park mountain biking, fishing, hiking, riding horses, and hiking some more all as the 12 and 13,000-foot-tall mountains loomed in the background. In lulls between activities, or lulls during activities, I invariably would find my attention being drawn to the spearheads of granite. Each time I did, I would feel my back erupt in goosebumps, the ripples of which would wash down my arms and legs until I was covered in peaks of my own. As the peaks subsided, a lingering sense of peace would remain. This peace undeniably comes from a source outside of my own form.

I have come to believe that these places where transcendent experience is felt by almost everyone in attendance are thin spaces. The accessibility and universality of their experience coming not from a slow erosion of the barrier, but from their grandeur taking a knife to the veil between the worlds, splitting it open, and giving all who enter a chance to connect.

Meditation on Breath

I have a proclivity for cynicism. I'll be honest in saying that. I don't know where I picked this proclivity up either. It doesn't plague me continuously, but sometimes it makes its way into the forefront of my mind and brings about its antics.

When it's around, my immediate reaction toward any sort of new stimulus is uncertainty, and sometimes when it's really hanging around, I am flat-out distrustful.

I hate this fact about me.

For a little while, I wandered away from the earthly manifestation of the tradition I was raised in. I never stopped believing in the God of my childhood and adolescence, but I sure had difficulty in trusting that the Church was *the* way to connect with the Creator. The Church had way too much baggage. It had caused so much harm to so many people and so many places. So many had weaponized the book that I grew up knowing as "The greatest love story ever told." They bend it. They made people feel hated by their maker.

So, I walked away.

Not completely, though. I found refuge in a community that let me be me, let me be hurt, and let me be righteously angry at the Church. Thank God for them.

However, outside of this group, I was on my own in a world of possibility. I dove into studies of the major religions of the world and found Buddhism to resonate with me very strongly. I began to meditate daily, counting my breaths as I inhaled and exhaled, listening to my body, focusing on an idea or a place. I meditated on the teaching of the inherent sacredness in every sentient being—to me they were the fingerprints left in the wet clay of a creating God.

As I focused on my breath, my cynicism would melt away. The clouds of distrust and thoughts of *Prove it* washed away too. Damn if it wasn't liberating.

In the tradition I was raised in, the tradition I hold fast to, man was scooped from the crust of the earth and filled with the breath of the divine. The thing that separated us from the creatures of the ground, birds of the sky, and fish of the sea, was this divine spirit that fills us. Each time we breathe, we inhale this spirit into our lungs, and as we do it fills every fiber of our being.

In the Hebrew Bible, the sound of our breath, the action of filling ourselves with the divine, is the name for God— YHWH. Each time we breathe, it is a prayer. It is a thanksgiving for our lives and the things that fill us.

Most of the time we go about our days forgetting our breath. We don't even hear the gentle breeze we generate every few seconds. Forgetting this breath severs a tie to the divine. Honing in on breath reminds us that the divine is ever present. It reminds us we are incessantly filled by its presence. There is a reason many meditations open with focusing on our breath. It invites us to be connected to the thing that fills our bodies and gives us life.

Wild Things and Wilderness

As a part of my studies, many class periods centered around the discussions of “wild” and “wilderness.” We investigated the different legal protections granted to wilderness, discussed if things such as bicycles should be allowed, and talked about what wilderness meant to us and how we pictured it. When asked for my view of wilderness, my mind drifted to images from the underrated Disney movie, *Brother Bear*. I figured wilderness areas were a refuge for wild things and so entering into the “wilderness” wild things would be gathering, coming out of the dark corners where they hide in areas not designated as “wilderness.”

This past year, I spent a long weekend backpacking in the mountains of Western North Carolina with two of my closest friends. About ten miles of the trail went through Shining Rock Wilderness Area. This area has been protected as *wilderness* for as long as such designation existed, being included in the bill that created America’s “wilderness” areas in 1964.

We spent our second night about a mile outside of the demarcated line on which one side resided wilderness. Knowing that it was supposed to get cold that night we wanted a fire—something you’re not allowed to do in *wilderness*.

After a fitful night of no sleep, we packed up and numbly scurried off the bald that was our home for the night. Making quick work of the mile between us and the demarcated, we stood in front of a sign that said "Now entering Shining Rock Wilderness" before the sun was able to burn off the morning mist. We lingered for a minute. As we took pictures of the sun as it peaked over the blue ridge of the mountains and shook the remaining ice from our packs, we mentally prepared ourselves to cross the hallowed threshold into wilderness.

The funny thing was, aside from the lack of trailblazes, it felt no different. It continued to feel that way as we passed by old campsites with piles of wood charred black in the center of

them. I couldn't help but ask myself, isn't this supposed to be wilderness? Where is the wilderness?

This past week, a black bear was found in a churchyard tree in the middle of downtown Spartanburg, South Carolina. While this can be spun as an ironic commentary on the wild nature of church politics these past few years, and while the church was able to capitalize on this bear visiting their church advertising that *all* God's creatures were welcome at their parish, I believe that this bear's visit to a downtown Spartanburg church speaks to a deeper truth. The placing of wilderness in a box by mankind, designating it to *specific* geographic locations, is utter horseshit. Doesn't this act, allowing people to point to a "wilderness" area and say "*THERE* is wilderness! It's right there!" take away its wildness?

This is not me advocating for the dissolution of our Nation's wilderness areas. I fully agree that we need places, and we need even more places, where human activity is severely limited. But, naming these places wilderness is inherently untrue. I want to push back on the divorce of mankind from *wild* and *wilderness*.

In my faith tradition, and many faith traditions across the world, man was made from natural material. For my faith, it was dirt; for Mayan cultures it was corn. And out of these natural, wild, substances, man was made. But regardless of the venue of mythic creation, it is undeniable that man has its roots deep in the animal kingdom. Countless decades of research have shown our evolution from animals we now consider "wild." Where along this line of evolution did "wildness" die? When was it that human "sensitivity" filled this gap? The feral head of human wildness rears its head more than we like to admit.

So then what is wild? What is wilderness?

Wild is all around us. Wild is deeply rooted within us. We are no less a part of the wild than our appendix is a part of our body. Yeah, it doesn't make sense sometimes, and sometimes it causes problems, but denying it's there can cause more harm than good. We need to be reminded of its existence within us. We need to be reminded that we all share these evolutionary volitions. We continually need to go, connect with the broader tapestry of divine wild, and remember how truly small we are.

Wilderness is wherever we realize we are just a speck in the long arch of history, both natural, theological, and human, It is where we feel ourselves float in the hands of a loving being much larger than our own. Wilderness strips us of the illusion of control. It throws our feeble existence into our faces. No matter how big we are, no matter how smart we might think we are, wilderness will be bigger. Wilderness will be smarter. It is in this place of cosmological ephemerality where we realize that although we might be small, we are part of a "long arching universe that is bent to justice."¹

Wilderness is not a place on the map, although a place on the map can introduce us to wilderness. Wilderness is wherever we realize that control is outside of our fingers. This realization can happen in the whipping whitewater of a mountain river, in the shadows of an old-growth forest, in the stillness of a saltmarsh, in the churchyard of downtown churches, or within the walls of a famous 24-hour diner famous for their waffles. Wilderness and wild things are all around.

¹ A quote from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, adapted.

Killarney National Park, County Kerry, Ireland

“Heavens Reflex”

Goose bumps are a peculiar thing to me. Seemingly out of nowhere, these tiny pin-prick bumps erupt across my arms, neck, and legs, and wake the hairs from their typical stupor. Sometimes it's a cool breeze that causes them. Sometimes it's a song. Sometimes it's a bite of food. Sometimes it's by seeing something awe-inspiring. But, regardless of the source, the reaction has always perplexed me.

In January of 2022, my roommate and I spent the month traveling around Ireland. We took full advantage of our "Jan-term" and proposed this trip to spend twenty-two days in country researching the effect of the Celtic Tiger Boom of the 1990s. My half of the research centered around the impact that the boom had on environmental policy. In these twenty-two days, we completed a loop around the southern half of the island, and about two-thirds of the way through the trip, we made our way to Killarney: the home of Ireland's first National Park. With my research focus, I wanted to see if the boom brought about investment into the park system, and I figured what better way than to experience the park firsthand.

We found a bike shop on the edge of the park and rented two bikes for the day. We figured it would be easier to see most of the park offered with the limited time we had with the aid of our bikes.

The park was stunning. A blue wall of mountain peaks loomed over centuries-old forests, rolling glades, and deep dark lakes. It was undoubtedly a sacred space, and people knew it too. The ruins Franciscan abbey that dated back to the mid-15th century are nestled beneath the shadow of the looming mountains.

Our morning was spent exploring the hot spots: the monastery, the traditional farm, and the historic 18th-century mansion. Over lunch at the dining facility, we discussed the apparent beauty of the place and how much we loved it, but our desire to see something less groomed was clear. So, we quickly finished our tea and saddled back up onto our mechanical steeds, and made our way out, around one of the lakes, towards the blue-hazed mountains.

After a few miles of riding, Bennett, my roommate, noticed a path off towards the right. He stopped, gestured towards it, and shrugged. I understood his message. *Heck, let's see what's down this path.* So, we ditched our bikes behind a bush and wandered down the muddy side trail. After a few hundred yards of wandering, the understory began to clear and the trail quickly became covered with thick moss. Yew trees that lived through two world wars, the industrial revolution, and possibly European colonization stood sentinel. Their branches weighed heavy by their wizening years and thick foliage. Looking around, I half expected the White Stag to be bedded down resting in the stillness of this place, or to see a hobbit pop its head over the ridge.

I was transfixed by the beauty and wandered through the knotted trees eventually coming across a clear river moving rapidly and a stone bridge covered in moss. Excited to discover more, we crossed it.

On the opposite side we passed through an open metal gate and ducked a couple of spiny branches, the rough bark grabbed at our jackets. I now know that the place was telling us to slow down. It was telling us to prepare for what we were about to see. As I looked up, I found myself on the edge of a glade, the edges of which I could not see, but the mountains that loomed over us and the park that morning were now just on the other side of this sea of golden grass.

My body erupted in goosebumps. It was almost as if every fiber of my being and every hair on my back, arms, and legs, had to stand at attention. They had to pay respect to the place

we just entered. We walked towards the base of the mountains, the base of which never seemed to get any closer. Only the tree line which we came from got farther away.

It was here, surrounded by this sea of golden grass that reached up to my knees, that thin spaces became something real. Not something that I talked about in a classroom, but something that I lived in. Something that I swam through.

A few days later, as Bennett and I were making our way down the narrow streets of a town just outside of Cork we came across a shop. In the window of this shop hung a poster of a beautifully painted mountain behind a lake, with a thick band of tree cover separating the two. At the top of this poster read “Killarney National Park: Heavens Reflex.” I have never bought something quicker.

At first, I didn't think about it much. The park was “heavens reflex.” That was what the text was saying. However, as I meditated on the events of that day and the reaction that I had when I walked into that glade, the idea of “heavens reflex” took on a new meaning.

Folly Creek, Folly Beach, South Carolina

My grandmother called a hammock island nestled behind Folly Beach home for my entire childhood. That island is now home to my brother, and it is my home during my summer breaks. I grew up paddling fingers of saltwater that stretch up into the grass-lined mud that surround this island. Their detritus-clouded waters, rippling with life, sparked a long-held love for the water that still burns inside my chest today.

I have filled my summers with time on these waterways, guiding tourists through the maze of aged fingers of water in kayaks. Much of my day is spent pointing out dolphins, the occasional bald eagle, and teaching people that oysters, grass, and mud are the most important things in this ecosystem. However, the things that I get fired up about are the spot-tailed red drum, or reds as they're colloquially called. It's a rarity to see them on tour.

To see reds, you typically have to be on what's called a flats boat. These boats are designed to have the smallest draft possible—“skinny” if you ask a fisherman. But you want to be as shallow as possible so that using a long pole, they can push up into the short grass flats during the highest of high tides. From an elevated platform above the engine, the pusher-man has a view of the water that is unmatched. They look for "pushes" or large "V" wakes left by the bullish heads of Red Drum as they move, and sometimes, they will get to see one of the most breathtaking sights in the marsh— a tailing red.

As these reds eat crabs on the bottom, their tails protrude from the water, exposing their black spot. I will never be able to do it justice trying to describe this sight with words, and each time I see one while fishing words fail me. I am left slack-jawed and bumbling, only able to string together a mix of one-syllable words and profanity. I can't help it.

This past summer, I was giving a tour to a group of about seven or eight people. Some were experienced kayakers, others it was their first time. It was a low tide that day, and having requested to see dolphins, I led them to a popular spot for dolphin activity. As we rounded the bend into a massive mud flat that stretched over a hundred acres or so, I began to see the distinctive wake left by a red as it hurriedly swims away. The crazy thing was this wake started just a few feet from my paddle. I had completely missed the fish and the fish didn't clock me till I nearly touched it with my paddle. We continued slowly making our way through the flat and wakes continued to dart away from our plastic kayaks. There must have been hundreds of these reds tucked back here in this flat. My jaw dropped, and I sat marveling at the sight of this school.

John Muir argued that rather than hike through his beloved Sierras or nature in general, they should saunter basking in the reverent glory of nature that surrounds them. To saunter means to walk without effort or hurry. To not inflict your egotistic self on the surrounding but become a part of it. To move with it.

Sauntering invites us into conversation with our surroundings. It allows us to see it for what it is. It allows our surroundings to see us. It allows us to develop relationship with the dirt, water, wood, mud, flesh, and feathers. It allows the place we are to teach us about ourselves, exposing the truth that only the natural world can.

Had I been in a boat that day, even the skinniest and smallest of flats boats, it would have been near impossible for me to get that close. I would not have been able to hear the water swirl behind their tails.

I go back to that spot often. I slowly float down its oyster-lined banks. I look for the pushes and listen for the rip of water as it forms a tornado, marking where a fish once was. I try to saunter and listen to the fish, the wind, and the water.

Chapel of the Transfiguration: St. John's Episcopal
Jackson, WY

Nestled in a field of sagebrush and wildflowers, sits the Chapel of the Transfiguration. Its timber sides, low roof, and small cross are not much to behold from the outside. It looks like the simple rectangle houses my brother and I made from Lincoln Logs growing up. However, when you walk in, the low roof raises to a surprisingly high vaulted ceiling and wood planks line every square inch of the interior. In the back, behind the small altar, is a window. Although it isn't large, it fills the back wall of the recessed nook. A small cross, similar to the one above the entrance sits in a stand on the windowsill. Situated perfectly behind the glass, the peaks of the Tetons rise out of the valley. Everyone in the chapel has an unobscured view of the Grand Teton's 13,775-foot peak and the peaks of neighboring Middle Teton and Mount Owen as they pour through the opening. I have been lucky enough to have visited some of the most beautiful chapels in the world, but in my mind, none can compare to this.

Rather than having light shine through colored glass curated in a manner to depict an image, the window invites creation into the worship space— wild and un-curated as it might be.

In *Church of the Wild*, Victoria Looz introduced me to a revolutionary new idea of wilderness that stems from biblical Hebrew. The Hebrew word most often translated as wilderness, *midbar*, has an alternate meaning: mouth, the organ of speech. How this changes relationship with wilderness. Wilderness isn't just something *out there*. It has purpose.

There are innumerable accounts of wilderness being a place of enlightenment across many faith traditions. In the Hebrew Bible, the Israelite people spent forty years in it before entering the promised land. Moses was on a mountain when he witnessed the burning bush. He went to the top of Mount Saini to receive the 10 commandments. In the New Testament, John the

Baptist was described as living in the wilderness. Jesus went to the wilderness after his baptism and continually returned to the refuge of nature and wilderness during his years of ministry. In the Buddhist tradition, Buddha reached enlightenment at the base of a bodhi tree. In Taoism, the way of the natural world exposes the truth of the Tao, something that humans have lost.

When I walked into this chapel, I was at the peak of my questioning that I talked about earlier. So, walking into this chapel and seeing the mountains that had captivated me for so long as the backdrop of any activity held within the walls of this chapel, I had to take a seat. I sat for a while, relishing in the beauty of this chapel; in the beauty of the creation just behind it. At that time, I thought it was just cool that the mountains were visible from this chapel. I thought that they could be a neat distraction from any drudgery of a worship service. I pictured myself getting lost staring at them during a Sunday service.

But now, as I think back to this chapel and as I meditate on my newfound understanding of wilderness in Hebrew, I am deeply moved by the mountains and the decision to frame them so predominately in this chapel. As wilderness is the mouthpiece of speech, how pertinent is it that it be included in a worship space. For so many, the message of the divine coming from the pulpit can be lost on deaf ears. I find my mind wanders frequently. I find myself staring at stained glass, flower arrangements, or some of the various religious iconography. But here, rather than placing artistic depiction of the divine, it places divine creation at the forefront. It allows the divine to speak to the congregation regardless of if the words from the pulpit ring in their ears or not.

The divorce of the wild from the Church is something that needs to be mended. The idea of the sacred being something only accessible in the walls of a sanctuary and the defacto distrust

of religious encounters outside of those walls needs to be dissolved. Creation was deemed good by the Divine, and it was placed here just as we were. Creation is not some trap placed here to trick us. It is not a web of tests designed to ensnare us and rip us away from the divine. It was placed here so that it, and we, could work together to form some sort of mutually beneficial relationship to allow for our, and its continuation. Its importance is echoed near-universally across religions. Wilderness, nature, and wild things being the mouthpiece of the Divine must be returned to our minds. It's the only way we will be able to build a society that isn't actively signing its own death warrant.

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“Sit finis libri, non finis quaerendi.” -Thomas Merton

I am truly humbled and incredibly honored to have been given this opportunity. The chance to explore ideas such as these is a privilege that I do not take lightly.

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I will be continuing my studies in the fall at Vanderbilt Divinity School pursuing a Master of Divinity concentrating in religion and the arts. I am looking forward to continue exploring these ideas, and cannot wait to be introduced to new ones.

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