

# MINDING THE LIGHT

Our Collective Journal

CHAPTER 3: HOW HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED GOD'S PRESENCE IN NATURE?

*I have often felt a motion of love to leave some hints in writing of my experience of the Goodness of God.*

John Woolman

## Wonder

The first time I remember feeling and knowing there was a God, something with a felt consciousness that was in all, occurred when I was 3 years old sitting and leaning on our old garage as the sun set over the fields in Oklahoma. The completeness of being alone and the "presence" of the evening was all encompassing. I felt whole and at peace in my 3-year-old self. I remember later trying to tell Mom what I experienced. She listened quietly, smiled, and said simply, "Yes."

This same complete experience also occurred later when at 37

years old after ending a marriage, I moved from Kentucky with my 3-year-old daughter to Portland, Oregon to go to naturopathic medical school. My first year in medical school included a Gross Anatomy Lab which was a dissection of the human body. I remember feeling simultaneously repelled and excited. As we stood around the body of someone who had donated their body for our sacred learning, we felt nervous and grateful. Our lab assistant suggested we say a prayer of gratitude to the person for giving us this gift of their body, a perfect manifestation of God in Nature. Due to drawing the shortest straw, I had the "honor" of making the first cut. After feeling the overwhelming primitive repulsion, I used my scalpel to make a cut up the left side of the abdomen, across the top under the ribs and down the right side. Gently and respect-

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fully laying back this "flap" of skin, I exposed the abdomen. I remember tears coming to my eyes. I could see, even at first glance, the presence of God.

I could see the miraculous intelligence of the design. Each organ was shaped to exactly fit the curves and shapes of the neighboring organs. These neighboring organs were intricately connected through function, blood supply, and design to be exactly where they needed to be. My mind exponentially grew and out of my mouth came the words "Oh My God! What a Fancy Container." Even through our protective masks with filter cartridges came nods and sacred sounds of awe and appreciation. — Patricia Timberlake

MINDING THE LIGHT is a bimonthly collection of stories from the lives of members and attenders of West Hills Friends, a Quaker meeting in Portland, Oregon. Among Quakers, "minding the Light" means noticing, listening for and paying heed to the voice of our Teacher.


Early Quakers kept journals about their relationship with God to share with the community. A well-known example is John Woolman's journal, which has been continually in print for more than 200 years. Quakers believe that the Light of Christ is in everyone and that God speaks to everyone, giving us all stories to tell. We hope to carry on the tradition of sharing stories about minding the Light by publishing them for our community and making them available to others on the web.

Each issue is organized around a query about minding the Light. Our writers speak from their own experience, not going beyond the measure of Light they've been given. We hope these stories will transform our way of seeing God and each other and that they will bring comfort to those who seek news of God's presence in the world.

### Therefore Keep Watch

In June of 2007 I saw a crow in the neighbor's swimming pool (down the hill from us) that looked like it was trying to get out and couldn't. Other crows were flying about. I ran down, put my hand under it, it sat on my hand, and I lifted it out. It was small and somewhat fuzzy so I think it was young. I lifted it by the "tummy" up to the pool-equipment roof. A small crow ruckus followed.

In 2009 I started working with images. In my image world, I found an island to visit, where Jesus shows me things and sits with me. One night in July, lying in bed, I was too mad to go to the island. I was stuck next to a rock in the water nearby. A Raven swooped down and picked me up in her beak. She flew to the island and set me down in a quiet spot. Her black eyes sparkled and I could see iridescent rainbows in her black feathers.

This morning I put some pieces of stale bread on the deck railing. Tonight a crow landed on the deck and picked up a piece of bread. My wife Cynthia said, "One of your friends is here." 


— Charles T.

[See photo at [www.mindingthelight.org](http://www.mindingthelight.org)]

### Elizabeth's day lilies

In February of 2002 my wife Elizabeth passed away unexpectedly. Fortunately we had talked about each other's wishes for after death, although I had not thought I would be following those wishes so early in our life. As she requested, Elizabeth was cremated and

when spring came I brought her ashes to my parents' property in the Adirondack Mountains of New York to be spread amongst the day lilies that have been growing in a patch behind my parents' house for as long as I can remember.

Elizabeth was a great lover of flowers and in fact the last words she had spoken to me were "When you get home tonight check out the snow pansies. They are blooming". After saying my goodbyes and spreading her ashes I spent the weekend visiting with my parents and then drove the four hours to our home in Rochester. Time passed and being somewhat lost in my grief I did not speak to my parents until August. When we did talk they told me that the day lilies that year had never been as thick or as colorful before. I found great comfort then and still find great comfort today in knowing that from Elizabeth's death new life sprang and thrived. 

— Kevin M.

### Hallowed Be Thy Name

For many years I returned to an island in Maine for a few weeks in June. It was a quiet time, still between seasons, no longer spring but not yet full summer. The ferry ride to the island was an hour long ritual of shedding my winter skin, my city skin and settling into a different rhythm. The blue wind and wide sky, the sea scattered with bright lobster buoys rolling between the islands, the harsh white gulls, the pungent, salty smell tinged with old fish – these things would

work their magic on me and I would open to this small three-by-five mile island universe. My weeks-long song of praise would begin. My tattered and aching parts would mend. My relationship with the Holy would redefine itself once again as my senses woke up one more time in the ways particular to this place.

Hallowed be thy name


The stones, the shells,  
the sticks, the air, the sea,  
the ways we name thee.

Coming back to where I first  
learned what is holy,  
returning to where it is easiest  
to see,  
I arrive stunned by longing  
that fills my sleep with wrecked  
boats,  
dead-end roads and pathless  
mountains.

I collect this place day by day:  
the white and golden bits of  
shell,  
chips of pastel sea glass, dried  
buttercups and  
fern fronds pressed in books,  
mica crusted stones,  
small strange sticks whose  
omens I can't read.

Hallowed be thy name.  
I hold you in the stones.  
I bring you back each year  
as though I am alone.

Every year on this island, parts of me that needed healing would realign themselves like broken bones being reset. I was a true pilgrim returning every year for the healing waters, and the quiet places where I could hear the comforting voice of God in the shifting wind.

I haven't been back to the island for three years. The bowl of stones and chips of mica by my front door, the jar of sea glass on my kitchen window sill, the pressed flowers that fall out of my old journals, the small grey stone circled with a vein of white that I keep in my jacket pocket, the bundle of gull feathers tied with dried grass – these are my island sacraments. These are the elements of my communion with this particular presence of God and they remind me of God's grace every day. 

– Peg Edera

### Richardson Grove

Standing among the Redwood trees in California's Richardson Grove State Park, I feel the presence of God so powerfully that I think everyone must feel it. After all, it's where God lives (or at the very least a favorite vacation spot). The majesty, power, serenity and beauty of those towering giants all reflect and magnify God's light as it streams earthward through the canopy on its way to the forest floor. Not even the densest morning fog can block it out. Nor can the automobile exhaust stop its life-giving force or overwhelm the aroma of the duff, the greenery, and the clean air that feeds all living things. Sight, smell, and sound – as the birds and animals sing their praises to the day the Creator has given – all combine to make the Redwoods the perfect place – Heaven on earth (except for the bugs).

There's a pane on the quilt in the Community Building that expresses how that special place and its Spirit has touched me.

My single awkwardly constructed block of fabric shows the road winding through those very same trees, lined on both sides by a split rail fence that must surely be the work of a master Carpenter. That stretch of road can't be more than a quarter of a mile long, but God has etched that image into my brain so that I would have a special place to go when this world gets out of hand and too much to tolerate, as often seems to happen lately. One of God's greatest gifts surely must be peace. And surely, there is no better place on the planet to find it than bathing in His smile in the Redwood trees of Richardson's Grove.

Plip. Plip. Plip. Plip.

The tent leaks!

My first vacation in four years and it's raining heavy enough to float an ark.

The forest is dark and I can't see the drops

falling from the canvas roof,

But I can hear them,

and I can feel them.

Each one is colder than the next; each one moistening my already uncomfortably damp bedding a little more.

By morning I'll feel like my waterbed burst

and I'm going under for the third time.

The afternoon sky had held the grey promise of rain.

But, oh, what precautions I took that my evening would not be so soggy!

I selected the site with the care of a new mother –

just the right place to avoid the runoff from the hills.

With my hatchet I leveled a spot

and covered it with soft green pine needles,  
Then chipped out little furrows that the water might not invade my temporary home.  
How ironic that the source of my saturation is from above and not from the earth which I had groomed so attentively.

The dawn brings little prospect of a drier night to come.

A little sun would do the trick, but the overcast and the dense trees conspire against me.


The downpour has swollen and muddied the Eel so that even fishing is impossible.

Why don't I just give in, pick up my gear, climb into my car and head home?

Home to the city and the pollution and the noise.

There can be only one reward of remaining here: pneumonia.

And perhaps a little solitude.

I smile as I slither back into my sippy sleeping bag. 

– Randy Hack

[See photos at [www.mindingthelight.org](http://www.mindingthelight.org)]


### No Doubt Now

I don't remember a time when I didn't feel God's presence in nature, but I do remember when I couldn't put a name to the amazing wonder, beauty, and peace I felt whenever I was immersed in it. I've always felt that presence flowing around and through me, filling my senses, mind, and heart with love, but it wasn't until I was 17 that I knew it was God.

Up until then, I questioned the existence of God. What I felt and knew didn't fit at all with what others seemed to say was "God". God never spoke to me.

One summer, when I was 17, I went with a group from my university to help with a project in the interior of Mexico to bring a clinic, water, and electricity to a tiny village high in the central mountains. On Sunday we didn't work, so I decided to go for a walk in the woods by myself. There were no roads up there... only trails, and I followed one through the pine trees high above a creek for quite a distance. At one point, I stopped and sat on a boulder in the dappled sunlight. It was quiet and peaceful, and I prayed to ask God to let me know if He/She really existed.

The air around me suddenly felt full of what I can best describe as golden sparkles! It was in me and around me and in everything, filling everything with energy, love and beauty. I knew then, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God exists. I said a prayer of grateful thanksgiving for opening my heart and mind. I knew.

When I hear God described as the Great I AM, I feel what that means. On hikes with breathtaking vistas, or when I have tea outside in the garden and see the rising morning sun turning the oak leaves golden from underneath, I feel God. I see God in the details of a butterfly's wings or in the love in the eyes of my dog. It's everywhere and in everything. Doubt has vanished.   
 – Anne A.

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**The Perfect Stillness**

Almost exactly three years ago, Beth and I were celebrating our honeymoon in southern Oregon. We had rented a cabin located deep into the Cascade Mountains. On August 9th, I entered this into my journal:

*Beth and I went exploring today. We made our way through paths of pine trees, and impressive cedars. The smell of juniper and pinesap blew with the air, so sharp and intense. I was searching for a sugar pine cone, a massive, nearly fourteen-inch long cone which dwarfs its small brothers and sisters that rest on the forest floor around it. It's obvious then that these giants aren't too hard to find when exploring the forest. I picked one up and marveled at its symmetry.*


*We then made our way to the shell of a tipi I constructed nearly two years ago. Its long poles have cracked and bent under the stresses of snow and wind. Yet its shape is commanding against the backdrop of the mountains. It rests on what feels like sacred ground. It is an open clearing surrounded by the tree-covered mountains, patches of twisted oak trees here and there,*

*and massive, now dead pine trees covered in fluorescent green patches of moss. An all too familiar inner voice visits me, "Mark, what are you doing? Shouldn't you be doing something?" I respond, "Why do we always need to be doing something? There is nothing wrong with doing nothing." So I leaned against a long, sturdy branch that I found while walking. As Beth gathered petrified wood and small rocks, I just stood and did nothing but feel the warm sun. I danced around my makeshift walking stick to take it all in. There was nothing to do. How beautiful.*

I closed this entry with this observation:

*I stand like a tree. I look around and feel my body. I notice my breath...My listening is sharp and my seeing acute...My being lives and wisdom comes.*

I am so intrigued by these moments of stillness, but I've experienced stillness like this only a few times. When I try to reach that place of stillness by sitting quietly in prayer or meditation, I find myself haunted by the past or caught up in concerns of the future.

When perfect stillness comes to me, it is usually by surprise, when I'm actively engaged in doing something that I love. When I am rooted in the beauty and joy of the present moment, I am open to the voice of God.   
 – Mark Pratt-Russum

[See photos and slide show at [www.mindingthelight.org](http://www.mindingthelight.org)]

### Boulders in the Desert


Allan Hunter was on his knees right beside me stretching out over the pond to see the polly-wogs. "Look! That one has hind legs now. How'd that happen, Patty Lou?" I remember trying to answer his impossibly huge questions. Trips to the park with Allan, our minister, began very early in my life and were so special! He actually asked everyone about these things because life for him was a miraculous adventure. Other times he was quiet, deeply focused on a person or a situation, talking about it and then praying for more love to be there or for guidance.

When I was eight, Allan decided my whole Sunday School class needed to be in the desert. "It is a magnificent place! We need to just be there." Our parents quickly agreed among themselves that there were too many kids, meals to fix, and, mostly, that it was too far to trust Allan's driving--he was known for exuberant distractions even while driving. Finally, all seven from my Sunday School class together with Allan and two mothers, went to a big cabin in the desert east of LA, apparently miles away from anywhere.

The next morning Allan talked with us about the desert--about the silence but also how, if we listened very quietly, we might hear the wind, the scamper of a horny toad, or maybe something else. We also talked about rattlesnakes--we needed to be aware and careful. Then we went outside and he told us to

look at the big boulders here and there around us. Each of us was to choose a boulder: we had to have our own and not be too close to anyone else. And then we were to just sit there as quietly as we could: quiet in our body and our mind, waiting to see what happens. Later he would call us back together and then we would talk.

I remember choosing my boulder and figuring out how to climb up on top. I remember looking all around for snakes, lizards, spiders; I looked for anything that moved. Soon each of us, and Allan too, was on a rock. Someone stood up and silently made some goofy motions and silly faces. I giggled and heard some laughter but it soon ended and then we were just there -- being quiet together -- each on a huge rock -- in the immense and silent expanse of the desert -- alone -- and yet together.

I believe we sat there a long time, but of course I don't really know. I also have no memory of what was shared in the discussion, being on my boulder again, or anything else that happened. I do remember each friend who was there and know that trip was unlike any other. And I remember the listening, not what I heard, but how it felt on the inside as I tried to make my inner self as silent as the desert. What I know today is this: it was on that trip and on that boulder that I began learning about meditation. Many of us there that weekend later became Quakers. That gift from Allan to us at age eight was without measure.   
 – Pat Matthews

### A Walk in the Garden

I awoke one fall morning to discover a dense, dripping fog. I dressed extra warmly and headed over to the Rhododendron Garden, one of my most reliable places to encounter God. I parked my bike and ambled down the winding path, noting the rich visual texture of the early fall colors wrapped in fog. I mused, "So what does God have in store for me today?"

I walked out onto the low bridge across the lake and saw a beautiful heron about 100 yards away on the far shore. As I gazed at it in appreciation, I detected motion to my right, and realized that a second heron was flying my way. It swooped just a few feet over my head, so I could hear the whooshing of its wings, then it landed in a tree about 50 yards past me. I reflexively uttered the words "Thank you!"


God has a sneaky way of moving one from the third-person "God," "He," or "She" to the second-person "You." Once that happens, one knows that the seeking is over and the encounter is on. I said "Is that what you wanted to show me, or is there more?" and God said "Walk on."

Just a few steps farther I was stunned by the sight of enormous spider webs stretched across expanses of rhododendron branches. The strands of the webs were coated in dripping fog and sagged dramatically under the weight of the droplets. There was just enough sunlight to illuminate the webs and set them off starkly from the dark

rhododendron leaves, appearing as if they were floating on their own. Again, an instinctive "Thank you!" crossed my lips.

I rounded the bend to head back to my bike, praising God for the richness of His creation and for the love He had shown me by sharing it with me. But as I cleared some tall rushes I came across another heron standing in the water no more than 15 feet from me. God said "Stay in the moment - I'm not done yet!" So I stared deep into the eyes of this enormous, elegant creature, and I felt my soul fill up beyond what I thought to be my capacity.

When, at last, I felt it was time to move on, I strode quickly through the tall trees, down past two more herons, and plopped onto a bench to catch my breath. After takeoffs and landings by herons and ducks, the sky grew still, and I leaned back to gaze upwards. I discovered I had seated myself under a canopy of beautiful, small yellow leaves intermingled with pods that looked like fuzzy caterpillars, all silhouetted against the light grey fog in the sky. Yet again I was forced to speak: "You just don't let up, do you?"

And God replied "Remember this morning, and the lesson it brings: listen to my leadings and seek me out, and I will let you find me." 

– Greg Morgan

*i thank You God for most this amazing /day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees /and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything /which is natural which is infinite which is yes  
ee cummings*

### Surrounded by Life


For more than 20 years, I have lived in the same house. Sometimes, I think about what the place would have been like as wilderness, many years ago. It would have been a hillside. Even today, heavy rains will form a creek on the downhill edge of my property.

The ground is clay. Whatever sunlight reaches the soil is filtered by tall trees. It is a place where ferns and blackberries thrive. Most other plants find the ground too unyielding and the sun too far away. Years ago, I planted strawberries. I routinely found the ripe berries scattered across the driveway, already half-eaten beneath the shelter of their green leaves. Now, where ruined berries were left to decompose, oddly diminutive strawberry plants appear each spring. My original strawberry patch is much diminished, but I have gained a ground cover in unexpected places.

One night, I heard something scratching at the ground outside my window. When I went to investigate, I found the pink eyes of an opossum looking back at me. For several years in a row, a mother raccoon would troop her babies across the yard. Squirrels chase each other through the tangled branches of the plum trees overhead, gorging themselves on sour fruit. On my little patch of ground, I've seen deer, and a coyote, and a pair of newts with bright orange bellies. All this is within earshot of Interstate 5, between a retirement home and a Comfort Suites hotel.

For over 20 years, I have taken a proprietary interest in this plot of earth, but I am not the only creature to call it Home. The birds nesting overhead can claim an ancestral tie to this land that takes precedent over mine. The squirrels have nothing but contempt for the concept of property. From time to time, they even come inside the house (through a basement window or down the chimney). Dragonflies, trillium bulbs and garter snakes grow and reproduce, according to their natures. They offer no fealty to the humans who might claim dominion over them.

In many ways, my property is unremarkable. There are places in this world that take my breath away. I have stood in the mist of waterfalls. I have walked alongside alpine lakes. I have seen slender towers of rock in the desert. Routinely, I feel a sense of gratitude and wonder for the beauty of creation. That gratitude within me flows to God, like water running downhill. It is easy for me to find a sense of God's presence in the majesty of creation.

Perhaps more surprisingly, I find a sense of God's presence in the mundanity of creation. In my unremarkable plot of earth, I find myself in the Community of Created Beings. I am one creature among many. There is life all around me. In humility, I am learning to share the land where I live. In this process, I have a sense of God's presence. 

– Mike Huber

### Nature's Lessons

That the sun shines and the rain falls

on good creatures and bad,

That seeds must die that plants may live,

That great trees grow from tiniest of seeds,

That living things give their lives so that others may eat,

That everything around us teaches

about life, death, love, being,

change, and mystery,

---in full color and more than 3-D---

Still I struggle to learn

even the most beautiful of lessons:

All Nature tells God's parables of Love. 

— Carol Bosworth

### Moving Sanctuary

As a teacher, back to school time causes me to reflect on my summer. One of my big questions every year is, "Did I get enough time in the forest, along the seashore, sitting near a river, sitting in my front yard soaking in the peace of the day and the trees that surround me?" To return to school feeling nourished and ready for "people time," this time in nature is essential to my soul.

If I pause and ask myself, "Why?", I realize that this deep love of nature is at my deepest core, and for me that core is my connectedness to God. I often find that when I walk by the sea, I am talking with God about


what is on my mind. It is a moving sanctuary, just as the stillness of the forest becomes a sacred space that helps me gain perspective and gives me a gentle reminder of the quiet power of a Bigger Presence.

In my deep love of nature, I find that stewardship for the earth becomes essential as well. I want to always have this beauty around me, these places to go for renewal. I knew long ago that I wanted to do what I could to ensure that my children, and generations of children to come, would have vast forests and free-flowing rivers to seek out and find waiting for them.

This led me to participate in Oregon Wild's Adopt-A-Wilderness program when my children were young. I became an advocate for the Roaring River Roadless Area. Many friends, including the Friends here at West Hills, joined with me to become the hands and voices working together on behalf of these 27,500 acres in the Mount Hood National Forest. Roaring River was designated as Wilderness twelve years later, and I am grateful for this every day.

When I go to Roaring River and sit on the rocks, watching the sparkling fresh mountain water flow freely by, I sit quietly. Here I find God and whisper prayers.

Just this morning, I was at the beach. As I looked down from the cliff, three coyotes trotted up the shore. When I walked along the shore myself, I stopped to lean in to see the starfish clinging to the rocks. A wave surprised me from behind, soaking my

shoes, cold, and fresh and startling. I watched the pounding waves break over and over with fleeting spray. In all of this, I felt touched to my very core. In all of this, I knew God. And I take it with me wherever I go. 

— Leslie Logan

[See photos and slide show at [www.mindingthelight.org](http://www.mindingthelight.org)]

### The Dance

She feels her heart pound. She rises to the balls of her feet to shift into motion. Gravity pulls on her bones as her weight tumbles forward. The fall and catch of running takes her in a large arc. She controls the momentum for a moment to hang suspended in time and space. Her arms sweep and reach; the sinews taut, muscles balanced. The slick cartilaginous surfaces glide as she transfers the sweep of her arm into a sweep of her leg. She darts and flicks, plucks and punches the space surrounding her. Her final sweep brings her to the floor where at last she yields her weight completely into the ground. She is spent, lungs burning with each pull of air. Her heart pounds. She sighs as she rises from this moment of intoxication. 

— R.M.

### The Book of Nature


When I was 21 I began observing the moon. I was well versed in the natural history and geology of my environment, but was woefully ignorant of how the sun and the moon cycles worked. Maybe I was inspired by the clear skies in Southern Oregon or my continuing interest in nature

based spirituality. Maybe God was tapping me on the shoulder, pointing her finger at something I needed to see. Whatever it was, I faithfully watched the moon for cycle after cycle that year.

What I found amazed me. I was enthralled by the shapes the moon takes, the patterns on its surface and the relationship between the moon and the sun. As I watched the moon change I found myself watching the seasons change too. I saw the sunset move along the crest of the hills and the angle of light rise and fall with the seasons. I felt how the earth seems to wake up, be full, release its energy and then hibernate as the seasons complete their circle. As I watched, the rhythms of day, month, season and year started to feel familiar as my own heart beat and breathing.

I have felt God's presence in nature for much longer than I have ever felt it anywhere else. I knew the liturgy of growing plants long before I knew any church liturgy and heard God's voice in song birds and streams long before I heard it in a meeting for worship. Today, my primary language for accessing God is still the language of the living earth and especially of the natural rhythms of the sun and the moon. I see all life moving in these cycles at all scales from gardens, creative projects, human lives and even civilizations. The compactness of winter, the shooting growth of spring, the full flowering of summer sliding into the slowing comfort of autumn. Leaning into these cycles, living fully in them and allowing them to unfold seems to

me to be the best, highest and closest to God way to live my life.

Our culture seems to be an always on, always up, always growing kind of culture. But do you remember what cells that don't stop growing are called? Cancer. Plants that don't stop growing, like kudzu are choking weeds. I feel deep in my bones that cycles of growth and constriction allow a chance for starting over, for evaluating and for resting. I know God is in all parts of this cycle. I feel her in the pruning and contracting of autumn just as much as in the growth and light of spring. God is even in the hibernation and death of winter. God, my mother, knows and loves me through all parts of the cycle. God, my father, uses the cycle to encourage me to grow and challenge myself. The book of nature and the book of time are, to me, the fullest and most beautiful books God has written to help me navigate my life. And all I have to do is watch.   
 – Alyss Broderick

*But now ask the beasts, and let them teach you;  
 And the birds of the heavens, and let them tell you.  
 Or speak to the earth, and let it teach you;  
 And let the fish of the sea declare to you.  
 Who among all these does not know  
 That the hand of the LORD has done this,  
 In whose hand is the life of every living thing,  
 And the breath of all mankind?  
 Job 12:7-12 (NAS)*

If you missed the deadline, don't miss the Afterglow!

Were you inspired to respond to an earlier query but missed the deadline? If so, please send us your story anyway! When we receive stories that meet all of our guidelines except the deadline, we'll publish them on our website. Eventually we hope to publish a special "Afterglow" chapter of Minding the Light.

**Afterglow.** noun. (1) Soft radiance that remains after the light source has gone. (2) Gentle sense of contentment after a successful event or experience. (3) A special Chapter of Minding the Light that contains new responses to previous Chapter queries.

### Coming Home Again for the First Time

I grew up as a child on my grandfather's almond ranch in the flat, chemically controlled farmland of California's Central Valley. I couldn't wait to get out. The place seemed to have no nature and no culture. Two years of college did not still my restless spirit. It was the Vietnam War era and I took a job as a Conscientious Objector at a home for emotionally disturbed children in the lovely, golden hills of Mendocino County. I shared a small cabin with friends, nestled among oaks and redwoods, where red tail hawks circled and coyotes sang through the night. I didn't use spiritual terms to identify my life. I just knew this was the way I always wanted to live.

A few years later, Claire and I tried to make a living in a similar environment, this time the cool




coastal forests of Sonoma County. But there was no means of income and eventually, defeated, we returned to what was left of the family ranch in the chemical flatlands. I got a job at a wastewater plant and we started raising a family.

For a few years I was deeply depressed, a failure at all my hopes and dreams. But then two things happened. First, looking for a way to educate our children in accordance with our core values, we started studying the teachings of Rudolph Steiner, founder of Waldorf Education. And for my job I started taking biology courses at the local community college.

Steiner's philosophy of the spirituality of the natural world fused with what I learned through the biology courses about the dazzling complexity of life. I awakened to a great sense of wonder at the rich web in my own back yard, not just those verdant faraway hills of my dreams.

One day a friend took us in her boat across the Sacramento River to a little cabin where she lived with her husband without electricity or running water, and where she had given birth to her child. I had never realized there was such wildness so near my home. The California Delta fans out into 1000 miles of waterways, defining large agricultural islands, but also forming, in the interstices, little pockets of uncontrolled fecundity. Back in the 70's refugees from the prevailing culture escaped to these islands and lived off the grid for a number of years. The idea so

fascinated me I decided to write a novel of one man's spiritual initiation into this strange and wondrous phenomenon.

The novel was called *The Spider's Tale*. Twenty years later I have returned to it, and rewritten it, bringing into it a deeper understanding of its subject matter, honed by my ongoing journey through the wilderness of spirit and nature. I don't know what this means to anyone else, but it has been profoundly enlightening for me.   
—James Nail

Contributions to Minding the Light for printing and mailing costs are much appreciated. Your tax-deductible donation may be sent to:

West Hills Friends  
P.O. Box 19173  
Portland, Oregon, 97219

Checks should indicate the donation is for Minding the Light.

### Above the Treeline

There often exists a fine line between adventurous zeal and myopic irresponsibility. My husband and I have erased it several times in several places. In one quite memorable case, God protected us, strengthened us and blew our socks off.

It was nearing the end of summer 1994. Our plates were typically full and overflowing, so inserting a family vacation into the agenda was more of a desperate attempt at escape than a wise well-planned excursion. Backpacking into the Northern Cascades fit our budget, desire for the wild places (us more than

the kids) and need to regroup as a family unit before school began. Sahali's Arm, a pristine glacier, beckoned with promise, proximity, and high recommendations from a seasoned backpacking friend.

A six-hour drive took my husband, me and three of four daughters to the trailhead outside of Marblemount, WA. Upon registration, the folks at the ranger station mentioned that children do not normally ascend the Arm. We were undaunted. The first day consisted of an easy six miles up a series of switchbacks on a well worn forested trail culminating in a wooded streamside campsite shared by man-eating deerflies. They seemed to revel in our arrival.


By day two we anticipated a glorious departure from flies, woods, and life as we knew it. A couple more miles of steady movement upward and onward took us beyond the tree line to more of an open boulder strewn surface peppered by glacial tarns and boggy crossings. Under a cloudless sky our party of five trekked up into the unknown. What we hadn't planned for or anticipated was the final half mile of scree, a narrowing trail and steepened pitch demanding we use both hands and feet half of the time. Intense focus and motivation inspired by raw fear and stubbornness impelled us forward and up. A quarter mile down to the right sat a glistening teal lake. Were any of us to slip there was nothing to catch a fall...no room for mistakes. I hadn't thought to bring ropes. A growing panic restrained me from looking back as the weight

# MINDING THE LIGHT

## CHAPTER 3: HOW HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED GOD'S PRESENCE IN NATURE?

of our precarious situation doubled gravity's internal pull.

Our emerging adolescent at the time spoke of reporting us to CSD. The other two offered surly glares between pantings.

Too breathless to talk we crawled...and prayed... By early evening we had reached the summit, a flattened expanse of ice with six rock outcroppings each just large enough to accommodate a tent. Potable water ran clear from under its edges. Surrounded by a 360 degree view of snow-covered mountain peaks we made camp, ate, then gathered to snuggle up in down parkas/ sleeping bags and watch the sunset while temperatures plummeted. We could hear distant glaciers thunderously calving. An ineffable mystical Presence blanketed our weary and relieved group of hikers with grace, supplanting earlier fears with gratitude, filling hearts and minds with the peace which surpasses all understanding. We sat in silence and drank it in.  - A.W.

### Invitation

Will you share your story, photo, art, music video, or other response to a query with our readers?

We would love to include your original contribution in an upcoming issue. We're particularly interested in submissions from children, shut-ins, and people who don't feel they can effectively communicate their "God stories".

If you have a story but don't feel able to communicate it, let us know and we'll send a Story Catcher to work with you.

We see your responses to our queries as worship sharing offerings, and we publish them "as told" to the extent that they fit within our guidelines (see Publication Guidelines box).

The query for our next issue (Chapter 4) is, "*When have you encountered God's presence through a stranger?*" (deadline 11/6/11)

The query for our midwinter issue (Chapter 5) is: "*When did God make you laugh?*" (deadline will be third week in January)

Please see Guidelines box for information on how to submit your sharing.

If you have a query for a future issue, please share that idea with us!

Call 503.246-7654 or email [mindingthelight@gmail.com](mailto:mindingthelight@gmail.com)

### Publication Guidelines

Stories: must be original, 500 words or less, and written in the first person by a member or attender of West Hills Friends. Stories should be submitted in text format in the body of an email addressed to: [mindingthelight@gmail.com](mailto:mindingthelight@gmail.com).

Be sure to include the query you are addressing with your submission.

If your story needs to be edited to conform to our guidelines, one of our editors will contact you.

Art, photos, music, other:

Original paintings, photos, and other art can be submitted on paper or emailed in JPG format. Original music and videos should be submitted as links to safe websites such YouTube or Vimeo.

Please include a title and byline with your submission. We will withhold your name at your request, or use initials, etc.

We regret that we cannot always publish everything we receive.



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