



Wilderness Spirituality

Crossing the Threshold from Descent to Delight

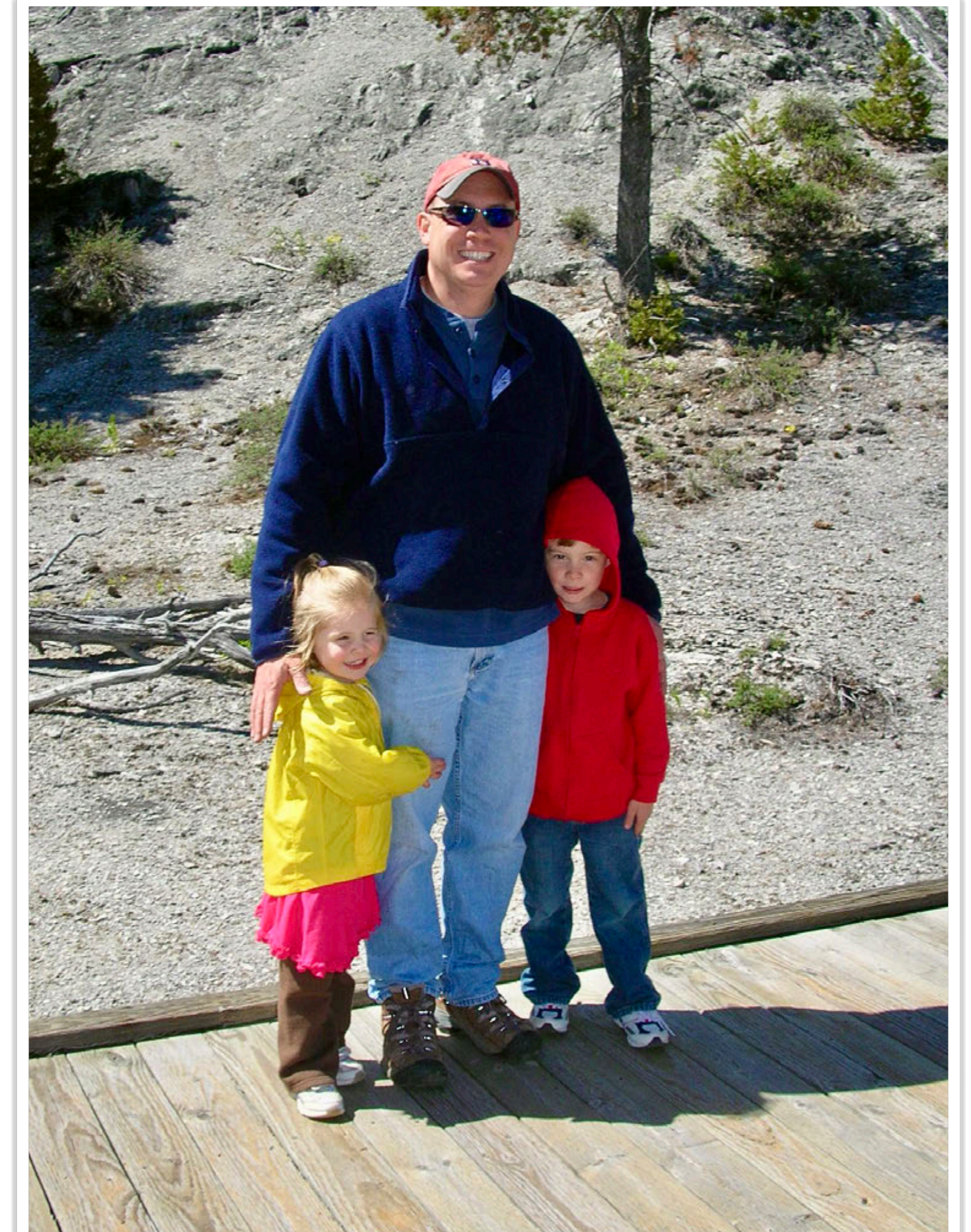
Saint Mark's Cathedral Wisdom School—The Rt. Rev. Phil LaBelle

Why “Wilderness Spirituality”?

Getting Outside and into the Wilderness

Since 2010

- Rocky Mountain National Park & Yellowstone
- Acadia National Park camping trip most summers
- 2017 Sabbatical — Vancouver, BC area, 5 week camping trip to 9 National Parks, Kilimanjaro, Boundary Waters Canoe Area
- Hiking & backpacking in the White Mountains of NH
- Pariah Canyon Backpacking Trip
- 2 Caminos — Frances (2022) and Portuguese (2024)
- Beginning to explore Olympic NP and Cascades





Levi's Story

What About You?

Speed Introduction

- 2 minutes only!
 - Name
 - Just a Headline:
Why did you sign up for a class titled “Wilderness Spirituality”?



How Christians Came to Seek Out the Wilderness

Constantine, Empire, and the Church

When Church and State Joined

- 303 Diocletian Persecution—the last persecution by Roman Empire
- Oct. 28, 312—Battle of Melvin Bridge & the Cross at Midday.
- 313 Edict of Milan “It is proper that the Christians and all others should have the liberty to follow that mode of religion which to each of them appeared best.”
- 325 First Council of Nicea—Nicene Creed
- “[Constantine’s] conversion to and support of Christianity produced fewer innovations than one might have expected; indeed they served an entirely conservative end, *the preservation and continuation of the Empire.*”
Hans Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine*

Movement to the Desert

Leaving a life of comfort for spiritual growth

- St. Anthony of Egypt heard a sermon to sell everything, give it to the poor, and follow Jesus. He did this and moved into the desert of Egypt around 270.
- Others began flocking out to the desert following the end of persecution and martyrdom, because being a disciple was no longer risky.
- Embraced asceticism and simplicity, focused on prayer and spiritual disciplines.
- Fierce landscape was important. The land had something to teach them.
- Gave rise to monasticism.



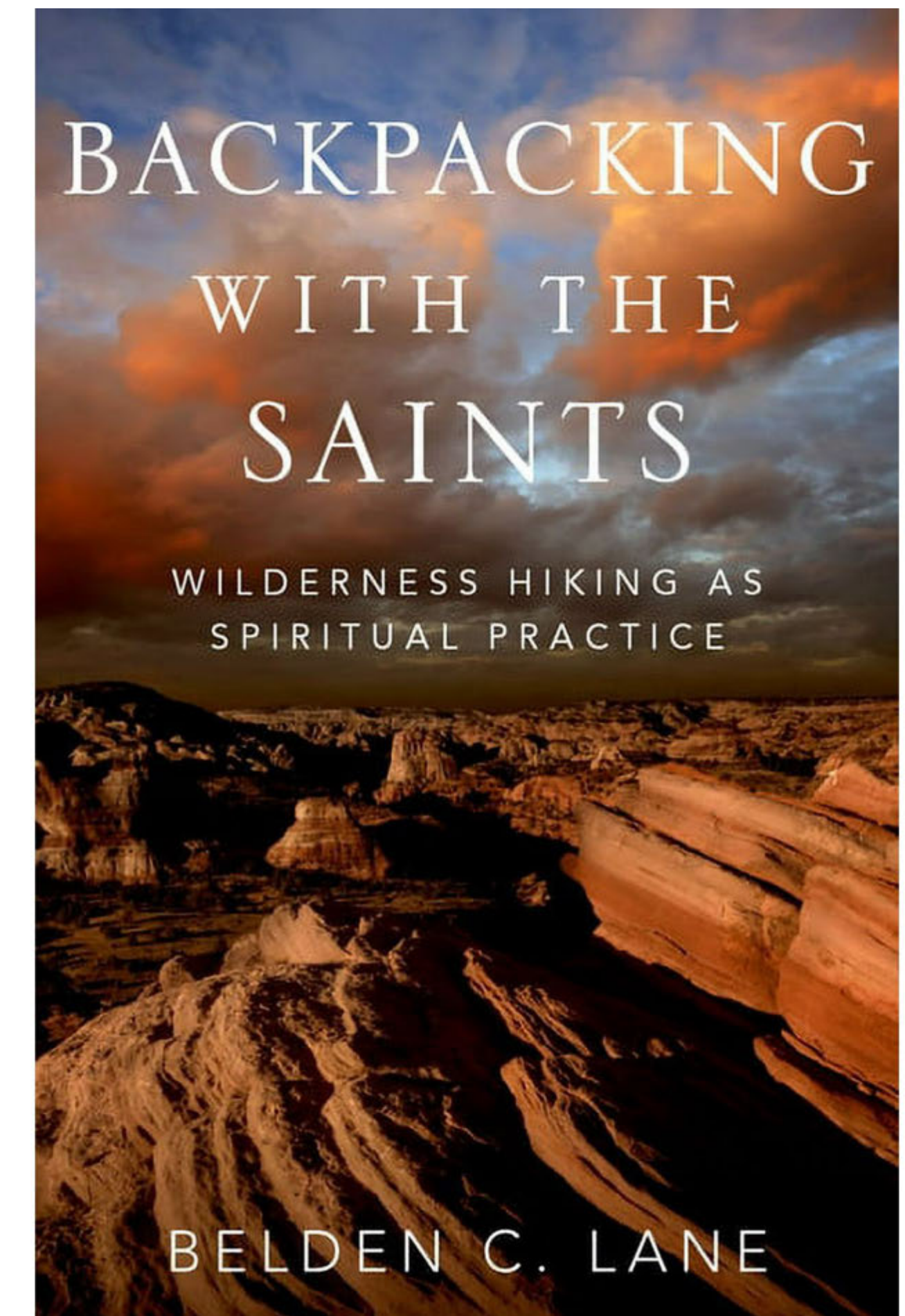
Wilderness Spirituality of Early Desert Christians

7 Essential Convictions (h/t Belden Lane)

- There are no easy routes to self-realization; it begins, ironically, with self-abandonment.
- The spiritual life thrives on the margins of society, in a solitude framed by community.
- Desire and relinquishment are a recurring pattern in wilderness experience.
- Failure and making mistakes don't hinder spiritual growth, they occasion it.
- The body, when disciplined, becomes an important teacher of spiritual insight.
- Wilderness breeds a lifestyle of resistance, cultural critique, and cantankerous honesty.
- A wider community of exchange becomes more apparent out in the wilds.

“You don’t have to hike into backcountry (or plunge into the desert) to embrace a life lived on the edge. It means confronting whatever ‘wilderness’ you happen to be facing in your life right now, whatever growth is imperative but also threatening in your experience. Sitting in the waiting room of Radiation Oncology, attending Twelve-Step meetings, working the desk at a homeless shelter—all these force you into wilder terrain than anything found at the end of a dirt road. They all involve risk... all require a discipline. Wilderness takes a different shape for everyone.”

Belden Lane



First Movement: Departure

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. ¹¹ And a voice came from the heavens, “You are my Son, the Beloved; ¹² with you I am well pleased.”

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.

Mark 1:9-13

Setting Out

Beginning the Journey

- Excitement over the possibilities.
- Perhaps a little anxiousness over what's ahead.
- Making sure you have everything you might need.
- Desire for change?
- “Exposure to the harsh realities and fierce beauties of the world not aimed at my comfort cut through the self-absorption of my life.”

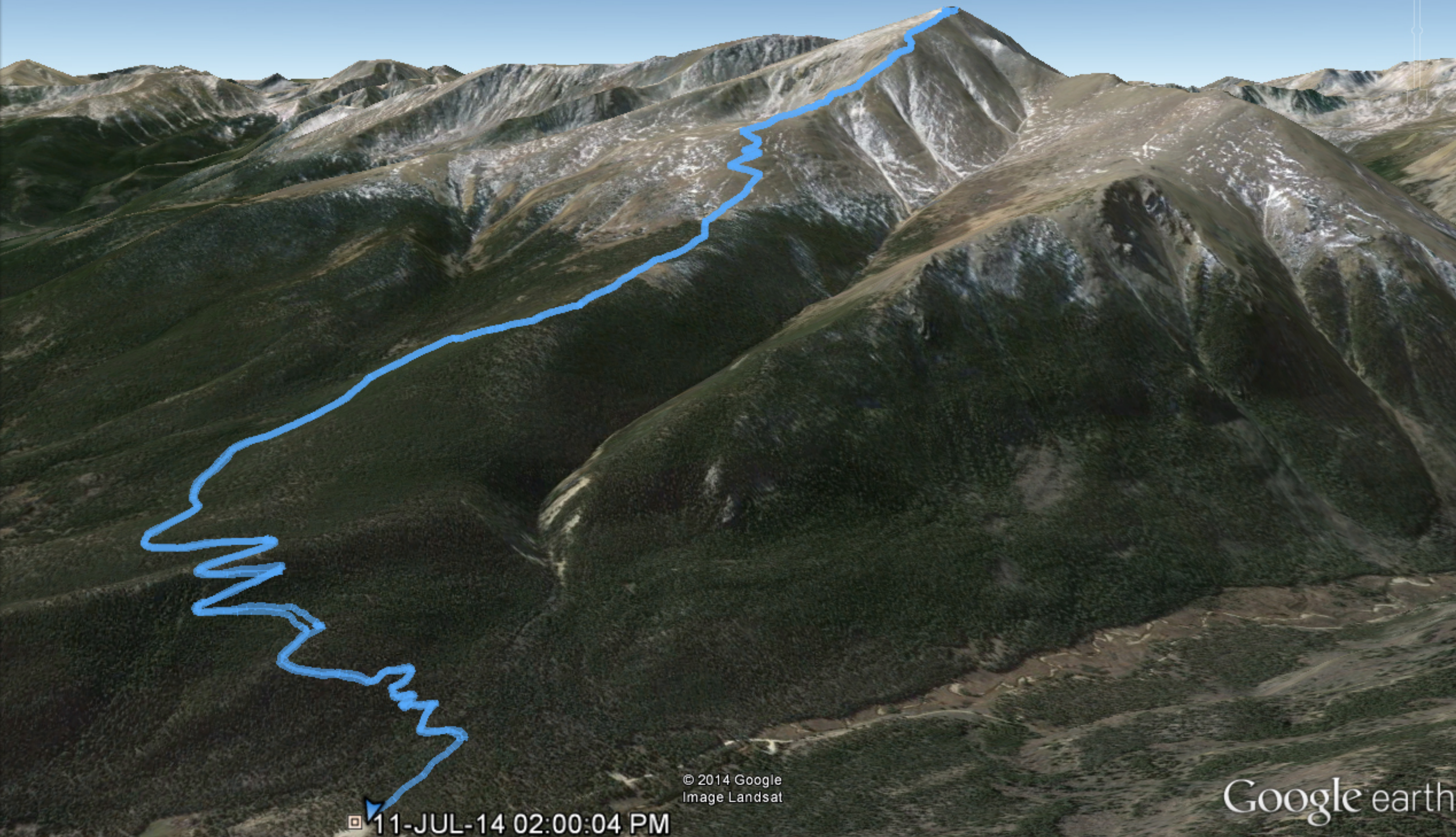


Any new beginning in one's life involves a dissatisfaction with the past and a call to something new. It can be as unsettling as it is exciting. The Desert Christians learned that wilderness had a way of abruptly putting them in their place. It awakened them to a mystery that had no regard for their self-importance, yet welcomed them with an astounding love. Their entry into a life shaped by the desert required a stout readiness to commit, a weathering of disappointment, and a birth of an irresistible desire.

Part of the grandeur of wilderness is that it cares so little about the things that absorb us so much.

Following 'the flight of the wild goose' in search of God, we have no guarantees of returning the same person as we were.

First Fourteener — Mt. Elbert



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Image Landsat

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Google earth



“I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.”

John Muir

In pairs for 10 minutes:

Describe a time when you set out into the wilderness (however you define that)?

What was your motivation?

Did you “go in” as Muir describes it?

Second Movement: Discipline

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed by demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons, and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

Mark 1:9-13

To Walk Far, Carry Less

Advice for Pilgrims

- Camino de Santiago Packing Book *To Walk Far Carry Less* by Jean Christie Ashmore
- Aim for 10% of your body weight or no more than 15-18lbs.
- “We carry our fears in our backpack.”
- Camera?

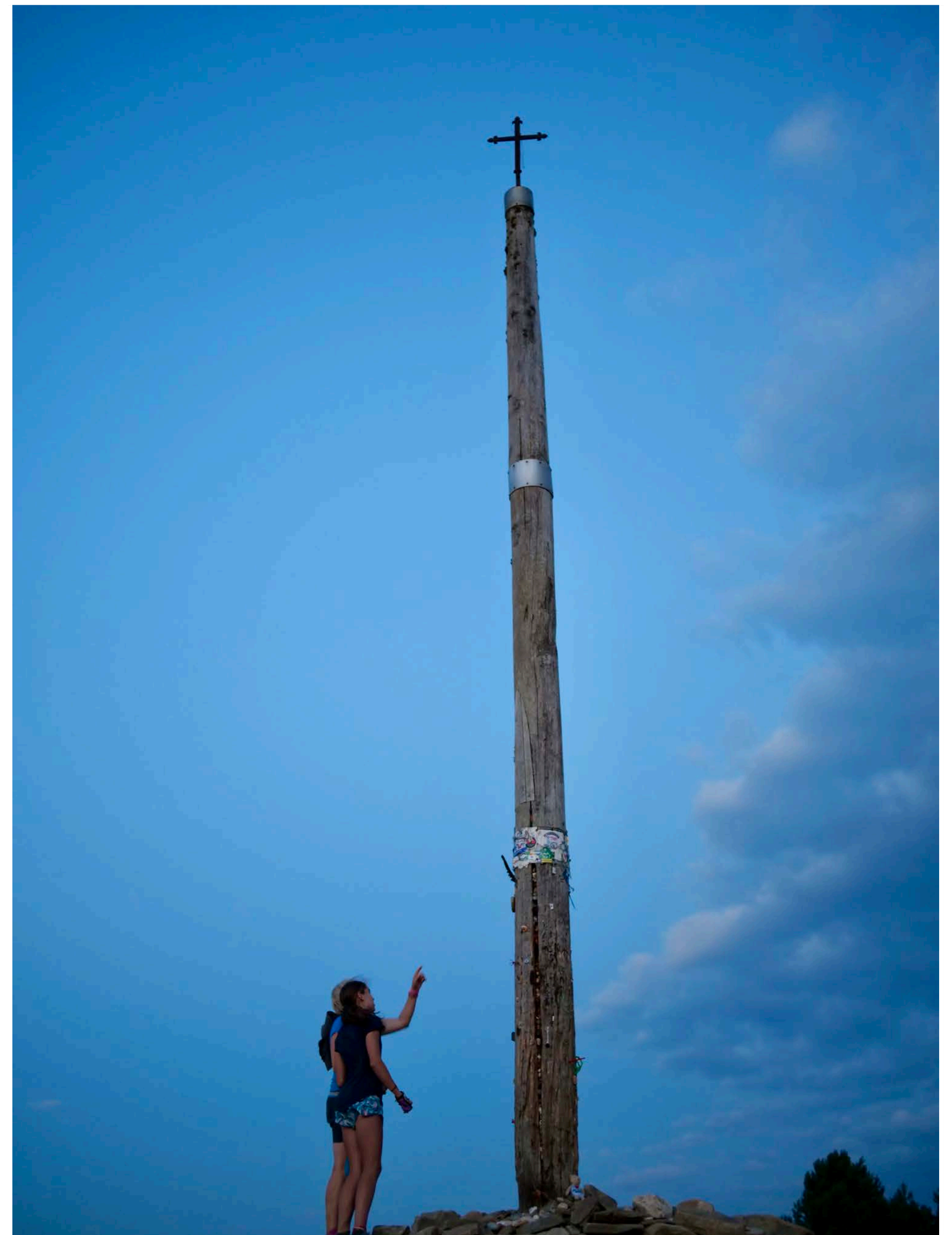


Traveling Light

- It's not just the exterior baggage of what might go into your backpack.
- We carry past experiences, accomplishments, spiritual attainment, and all that we've acquired.
- Also hurts, fears, insecurities, anxieties, and all that we long for.
- “To be free is to be able to stand up and leave *everything* behind without looking back, to say ‘Yes’ to whatever comes.” Dag Hammerskjöld *Markings*

Cruz de Farro

Highest Point Camino Frances



**“The desert journey is only an inch long
and many miles deep. Inward is the only
direction you travel.”**

Desert Mother Amma Syncletica

Alone for 10 minutes:

**What do you carry in your life that
you might need to put down?**

How might you travel lighter?

10 Minute Break

Third Movement: Descent

Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” But Jesus did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that moment.

Matthew 15:22-28

The Gift of Imperfection

- “We grow spiritually much more by doing it wrong than by doing it right.” Richard Rohr *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*
- 3 Rules of Mountaineering: It’s always farther than it looks. It’s always taller than it looks. And it’s always harder than it looks.
- Kili training day after immunizations
- “To our amazement we find that the place we screw up the most is the place where God loves us the most. *Nothing* is closer to the heart of the gospel than this.” Belden Lane



Society's Insidious Push for Perfectionism

- Harvard School of Ed. study by Jennifer Wallace in Feb. 2020 about perfectionism in adolescents. Goal was 1000 parents. 6500 responded in days.
- 73% agreed that parents in their community believed getting into a selective college is one of the most important ingredients to later life success. 83% agreed that their children's academic success is a reflection of their parenting. 87% wished that childhood was less stressful for their kids. (Led to *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic—and What We Can Do About It*)
- “Perfectionism is associated with depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and early death. Basically, it's the secret ingredient for a miserable life.” Dr. Smith Han

3 Days from the End



“The most important ‘mountain’ in one’s life offers no pride of accomplishment, only the unwelcome gifts of inadequacy and incompleteness. Whether you face a physical inability to make it to the end of the trail, a failure in meeting the expectations of others, or a realization that you’ve betrayed someone you love, whatever it is... you learn over time that it isn’t the end.

Every failure is an invitation to growth. Mistakes are occasions for grace, opportunities to choose a different path. They make forgiveness possible. Only in the absence of success can you know yourself to be loved without cause.”

Belden Lane

Alone for 10 minutes:

Lane writes, “To our amazement we find that the place we screw up the most is the place where God loves us the most. *Nothing* is closer to the heart of the gospel than this.”

What do you make of this in relation to your own spiritual life?

Fourth Movement: Delight

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ... As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight.

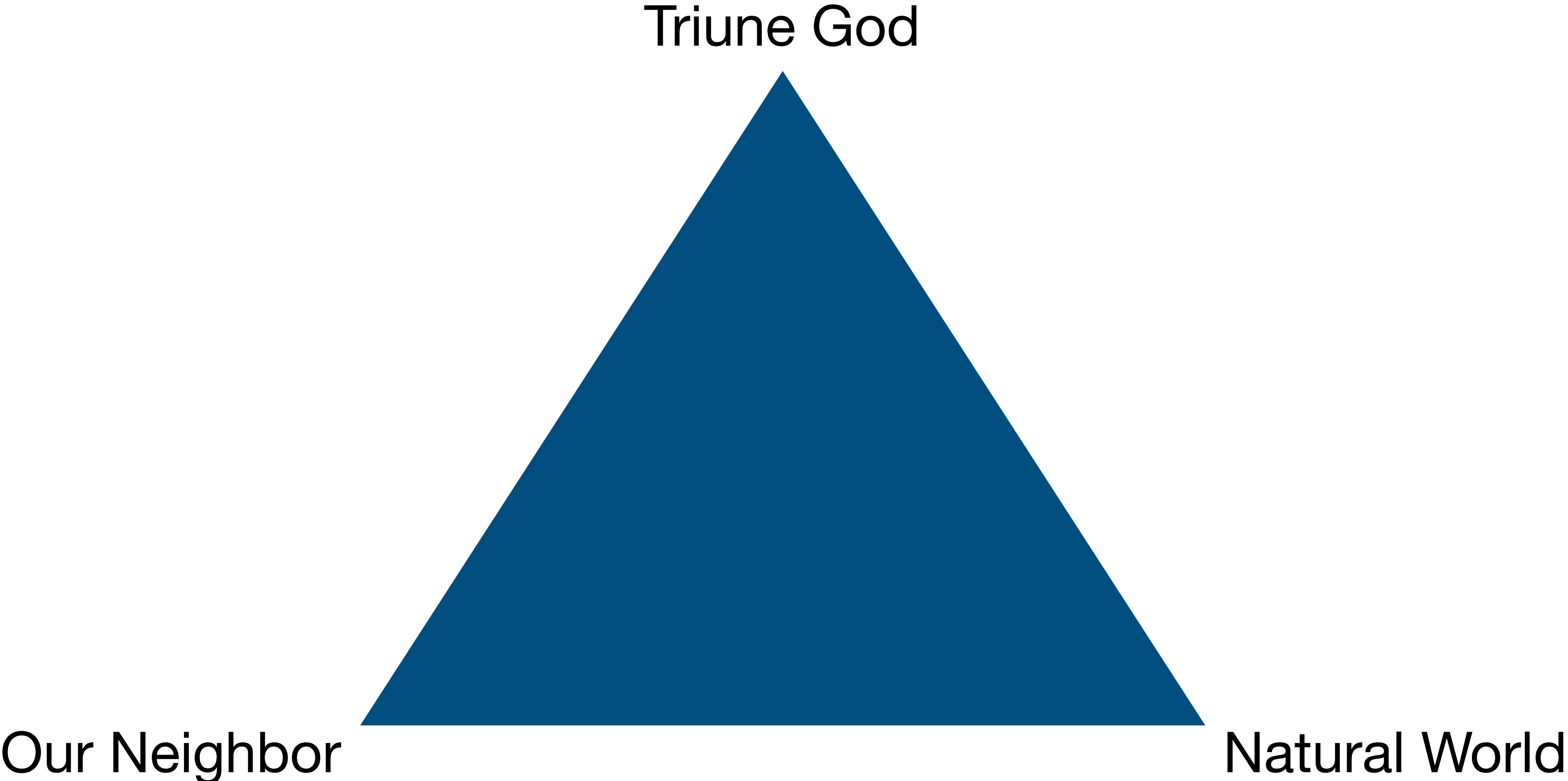
Luke 24:13-16, 28-31

Finding Community

- Concept of *Ubuntu* from Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “*I am because we are.*”
- “One is never a human being in isolation. My connection to others defines my very existence: I am what we are together. No one is an island.”
Lane



Diocesan Mission Centered on Relationships



Ultimately everything in creation reaches beyond itself to another. Such is the impulse of evolution. Survival demands teamwork. 'Driven by forces of love,' said the French scholar [Teilhard de Chardin] 'the fragments of the world seek each other so that the world may come into being.' When that happens, community is born, responsibilities shared, and absolute wonder arises out of the traversing of frontiers we'd once thought impassable. We join together as fragments of a greater whole, standing in awe at the immense and holy company that constitutes our common life.

Beldon Lane

In Pairs for 10 minutes:

**How have you found delight after
coming through a time in the
wilderness?**

**How was community born,
responsibilities shared, or absolute
wonder experienced?**

Final Thoughts

No Mud, No Lotus

Thich Nhat Hanh

When I lived in Vietnam during the war, it was difficult to see our way through that dark and heavy mud. It seemed like the destruction would just go on and on forever. Every day people would ask me if I thought the war would end soon. It was very difficult to answer, because there was no end in sight. But I knew if I said, “I don't know,” that would only water their seeds of despair. So when people asked me that question, I replied, “Everything is impermanent, even war. It will end some day.” Knowing that, we could continue to work for peace.

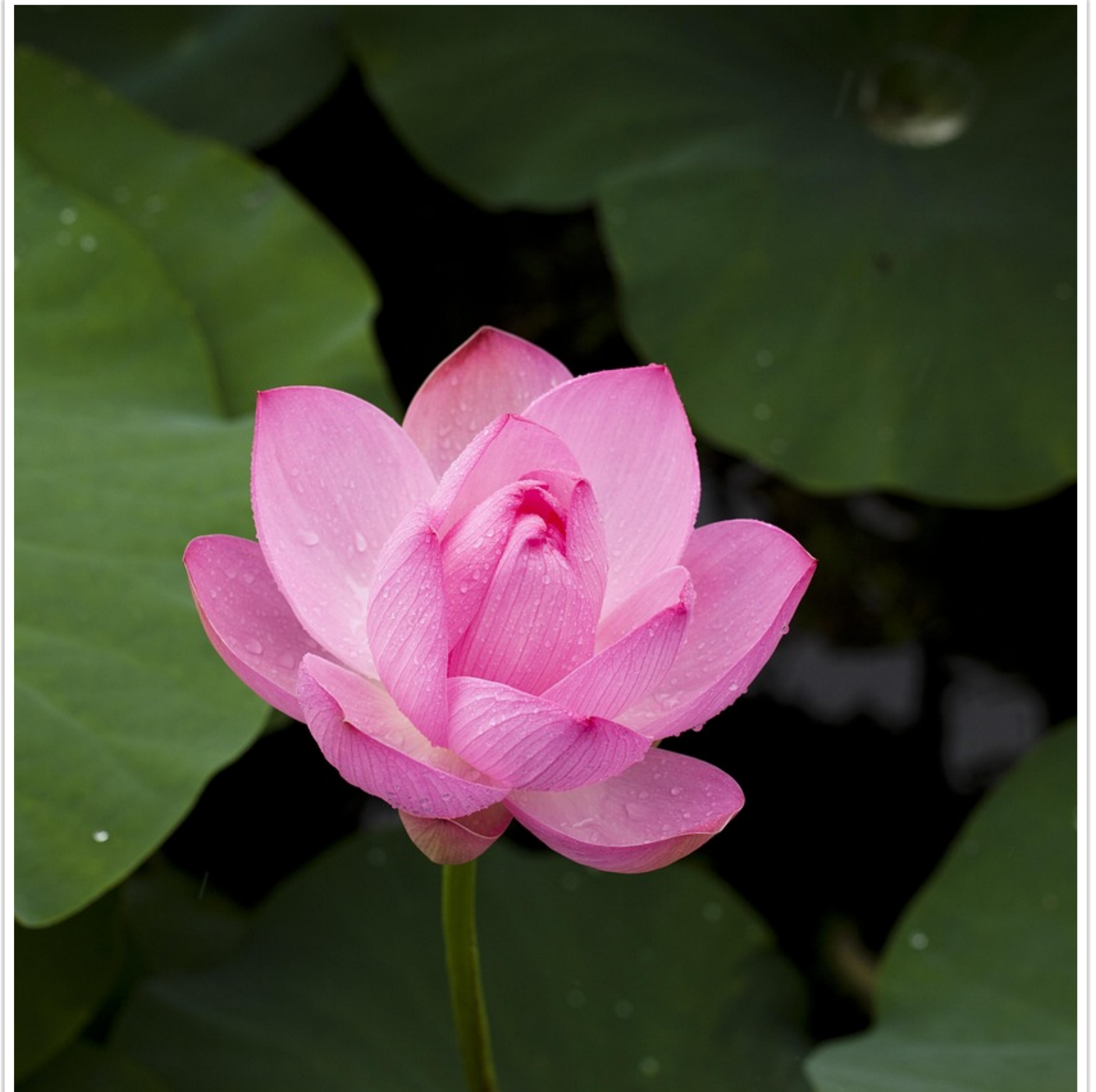


Image by andrew kim from Pixabay.

Crossing the Threshold

The Need for Intentionality

- Wilderness times come to us whether intentional—heading out into the natural world—or unintentional—a hard diagnosis, the work given to us, addiction, events in our world.
- God does not cause violence. God redeems it.
- The Spirit can, however, call us to cross the threshold into the wilderness as an opportunity for our growth.
- When those times come, it takes intentionality to enter that terrain.
- When we do, we can come to find God there and be changed.

It is during wilderness times when we “may discover our greatest joy in having survived the night, in finding resources we did not know we had, falling back on a strength that was more than ours.”

Beldon Lane

God, give us eyes to see and hearts that believe you never lead us into the desert to desert us. Remind us, here in the valley, in the wild, in the wilderness that stretches on, that you're a God who comes close, stays beside, and walks with. Help us want the Miracle Worker more than the miracle itself, and also, Lord, please, would you please make a way? We know you can; we ask that you will. You're the God of Through, Emmanuel God-with-us, and the God who sustains, and so we'll trust you're good no matter where you lead — desert sand or Promised Land. One day, one step, one breath at a time, grant us strength for today and hope for tomorrow. We will dare to believe that while our story might include time in the wilderness, that's never where our story ends. You will be faithful to be faithful. You're going to bring us all the way Home. Amen.

Adapted from Kaitlyn Bouchillon

Thank you.

