

SPIRITUAL VALUES IN WILDERNESS

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It's a real pleasure to be here before you today. When I came to Outward Bound in 1967, the only thing I could lay my hand to was to figure out what the objective of Outward Bound was. With my professional background in philosophy, analyzing and drawing these distinctions were my life's blood. First, we hammered out the four objectives of Outward Bound, each one complete with the appropriate program element. To briefly review these: Self-Concept (man, it's a pleasure not to have to talk about that here today) - taught with the high rappel; compassion - taught on the wall and beam and nowhere else; social service - teaching a sense of social service is clearly limited to the duty watch at Hurricane Island Outward Bound School; and finally there was the really tough one, the one that we agonized over - "to see man in a cosmic perspective" - and we programmed that with a solo. It's my humble opinion that we always kind of short-changed that fourth one, and that's what I'm here to rectify today. I'd like to enlarge on seeing man in a cosmic perspective.

The definition of "spiritual" in my title, "Spiritual Values in Wilderness," I think requires a word. I'm using it in a religious sense. Religion is a touch one, a slippery one to nail down and there are volumes written on it. Wasn't it Albert Einstein who defined religion as "what a man does with his solitude"? I always kind of liked that one. But for my purposes today the definition I'll choose is Paul Tillich's, the famous Protestant theologian. He defined religion as "Man's ultimate concern," which is kind of weasley, but when you see it functionally, it sings. It's whatever concerns you most, and that lays open the possibility that money could become a religion, or sex. The difficulty in applying the definition is that it is very hard to arrive at what concerns you most. I think that's the importance of the definition because it is the anchor - the anchor that secures us to life, that keeps us going that makes sense when nothing else does. We hit those stages plenty of times. So what do you turn to? What do you do which you could turn to? What do you hope someday to be able to turn to when the bottom has fallen out? Well, whatever that is, it's religion. It fits things together. I like the phrase, "It gives meaning where none was before."

To set the stage for the three points of my talk, I have to just spend a moment discussing the nature of man; and from there I'll go to the nature of the wilderness experience; and then I'll finish up somewhere that isn't too clear at the present moment, because I've never gone that far before. I'm going to condense a whole lot; I'm going to condense about twenty-five million years, from the origins of the first primates, and just zonk primitive man into the religious scene and ask you to consider for a moment what his position was. The point that I'm working on is that primitive man was at home in the universe. I think it is significant for the flow of what I have to say that primitive man was at home in this big, blooming, buzzing confusion. He didn't know that the leaves he was chewing were made up of atoms and molecules. He didn't know that the green in the grass was chlorophyll. He hardly

knew anything at all and things just took place happenstance. He gradually got it together and started fitting the pieces into a framework. He arrived at a "feel" about the world, and you can study it in Fraser's Golden Bough and all the introductions to primitive religion - an idea of the sacred which infused all that was with an aura of meaning. Of course the reductionaries would say, "Yeah, Man, he just pasted it on." I am not really interested in the analysis of it. I am interested in the "feeling" tone it gave him. Perhaps our closest awareness of this is with the American Indians and how much at home they felt on earth wherever they were. If you dropped one of them down at random, he would shortly see his brother Coyote duck off into the brush. His brother! And that was an attitude which had real content and security for the primitive dweller on the face of the earth.

Now we come up to modern man where I intend to spend a little longer, and mainly what we end up with here is an alienated individual. I take most of this from Theodore Roszak's book, Where the Waste Land Ends. He does a great job. Modern man is alienated - alienated from himself; alienated from his body. One of Roszak's great paragraphs runs something like this: "When you ask a screen writer to produce the ultimate horror, make it a science-fiction horror, no holds barred, what does it come out?" He points out, "It comes out mindless, sloppy, slobbering, liquescent, slimy, putrescent, zuivery, oozy, bloody." In other words, all the qualities of life. That's the ultimate horror, and it's always opposed by the razor-sharp, honed intellect of the scientist surrounded by machines, scalpel, and ultimately the laser - defined, decisive, clear-cut, and dead. Another example of this same attitude toward life is the kind of language little kids indulge in - little kids when they are alone, when their mothers aren't there to reprove them. What really turns them on, and what is our reaction to it? The kind of vocabulary that you pick up, at least I remember when I mastered it, had to do with "piss" and "shit" and "snot" and "pus" and all those secretions that characterize the body - our body that we were forbidden to discuss because "that's nasty." We are alienated from our bodies and alienated from each other.

We are alienated from each other in a fairly serious manner, and, finally, we are alienated from nature. This is where I want to take off from - the serious social consequences of our alienation from nature. One of the most impressive suggestions advanced by Roszak is that the world is a seamless robe - you can't take hold of any part of the fabric without shaking the whole business. He says that the way we treat things reflects the way we treat people. That was a new idea to me. How we treat things affects how we treat people. I am glad he suggested that because it explains a whole lot of things I have been worried about. We get so in the habit of treating things like things; we treat the earth like dirt, and we eventually get around to treating our fellow man like a thing, like dirt. It starts with your kids. You practice on them and work up your nerve until finally you can put it on your wife, and from then on it's all downhill and it's no sweat at all. When you get to Viet Nam you are already an expert at reifying people - turning them into things and treating them accordingly.

Okay, you see how this dovetails now - the contrast between the modern man's position in the world and the primitive man? For the primitive man, things were alive or infused with life, were viewed religiously as of some ultimate worth. With modern man we've lost this, this religious view of nature.

What I like to press on with is an analysis of the wilderness experience in religious terms, and I didn't invent any of this jazz. This came to me from Rudolph Otto. If you want to get the original, Rudolph Otto wrote a small classic called, The Idea of the Holy. Otto's attempt was to analyze the sacred or the holy. He analyzed it into qualities so that you see it in its little pieces instead of just falling flat before you. He came up with a three-part analysis. It's a very simple formula. He coined a new word - the idea of the "numinous." It's a dimension of human experience. The numinous dimension of reality consists of a mysterium, tremendum, et fascinosan.

Mysterium is the sense of mystery. There has never been a sacred anything that lacked mystery. The mysteriousness of it is the sense of something more, of a hiddenness beyond which you can't go. Alan Watts really goes to town on this in his analysis of Christianity and its attempt to do away with hiddenness.\* He says that if we could only rise to the level of God everything would be clear. That's obvious to a Christian, because God is omniscient. That means He knows everything. What about Himself? Absolutely. He is transparent; He is Himself. What are you trying to do, hide something inside God from God? Well, that's contrary to our culture, to our ideal, which is total transparency, where it's all right there, up front. God doesn't have any subconscious; well, I don't think so. I've never seen it in any of the theologies. That is, until you turn to Oriental philosophies and there you are asking God, "What is Life?" You get the inscrutable smile. The core of reality is mystery, the Tao. Ask the Tao to give an account of itself in twenty-five words or less. Omnipotent? Omniscient? Omnipresent? No, it doesn't fit. It just flows; it just is; but it doesn't explain. It isn't analyzable, and there is power about this mystery.

When you step into the wilderness, and here is where I make the transition, there is a mystery in nature which I think is one of its great attractions for us. There's the hiddenness of organic growth, of how a seed decides to be an oak tree. No matter how much reference we have to the genetic coding of RNA, DNA, somehow it doesn't come out totally explained. There is a mystery there in which we are engulfed. I am, of course, greatly impressed with the mystery of mountaineering. The very mundane question, "Will it go?" Well, will it? I don't know. "What are you doing here if you don't know?" But that's the fascination. I've got to find out. So you go a little farther and you never know until finally you reach the summit and then you know. Except, how about getting down? So there is a continual mystery that I see as directly correlative to the mystery of the sacred.

\*Nature, Man, and Woman

The second quality of the numinous that Otto analyzes is tremendum, and by this he means power - raw power. The sacred has never been anything else. I mean, don't mess with it. We have a ringing tradition in our Old Testament concerning the Ark of the Covenant which was the most sacred object possessed by the nomadic Hebrew tribes. They carried the Ark with them into battle and celebrated their victories by dancing around it. One of the dancers hit the Ark with his elbow, just touched it in celebrating the great victory Yahweh had brought them, and zap! he was dead. You don't mess with the sacred. Allied with this power is a certain fear. We used to talk about the fear of God, remember? Well, some of you do - some of my generation will remember. How many of our youth today fear God, fear anything? Perhaps social disapproval, but that's not the kind of fear I'm talking about. I mean the kind of existential fear, the fear of radical dissolution, of being nullified by the overpoweringness of the sacred. That's sort of gone out. In my youth I was just starting climbing and, boy, you know you're face to face with it - just the power of the mountains, the sense of their overwhelmingness.

There are people who don't respond kindly to the Himalaya, but for others that's the essence of the fascination, which is the third characteristic of the sacred. There is an attraction about it all, an attraction in the mystery, an attraction in the power. The sacred has always drawn man toward it, whatever it is; you are almost fatally attracted. You want to be near it and reach out and almost touch it. You don't touch it, of course, because of the taboos. But there's a fascination about the beauty and the solitude. There is a feeling of "at oneness" where it's no longer you against the mountain or you against the wilderness, but you at home in the wilderness. The cornices and the ice walls and the steep snow and the frozen surfaces and the rock buttresses and the sweep of the ridge; this is home and you are not there out of a masochistic desire to grind yourself to the core, but because that's where you come alive. You live and move and have your being there. It's an enormous fascination and at the very apex of this line of experience is the vision of unity.

I have been experimenting with efforts in getting clear on what a vision of unity is like. What's its nature? The one aspect, as I see it, of this developing sense of unity is a loss of a sense of self. This seems to be critical in all the literature. You know, at first the gentle breeze on your face is nice - it caresses your skin and fingers your whiskers. Then it blows a little harder and eventually you're hanging on and you are ducking your head and four hours later you are saying to yourself, "This is a drag, isn't it, this stupid wind!" So many climbs have failed just because of the wind. Beautiful blue sky, clear day, but the wind won't let you move and you fight it. Now at that point, while you are hanging on, I suggest this experiment. While your head is ducked, open your mouth. Fascinating! It comes by here - right across the orifice. We've got a long ways to go, please don't interrupt. Now turn your heads upwind. Have you ever had your uvula flap? The next step, if you are right into the eye of the storm, Pow! ruptured epiglottis - burgeoning foul area - snapping, cracking intestines! - and as you're there with

it in you and on you and of you you say, "Bye, bye bones," whoosh! off down the current! Flesh-s-s-s-sh - pretty soon, you know, you disappear, nothing but a disembodied Cheshire cat which went Blip! I'd like reports on that experiment. It's all strictly mental so far. I happen also to be speaking from personal experience, not this particular experiment, but there are variations that you can play. What comes next is a sense of totality. A sense of all.

The final characteristic is a sense of joy, and I think that can be explained. It's just great, I mean it's really great! Deep down at the very core, beyond question, beyond analysis, beyond words, it's pure joy!

Another question that has fascinated me is, "Where are you placing your bets?" Are you laying your chips on nature? Is the world of nature where it's at? Because it seems like it, that's where I've tried to take you. Or, are you laying your chips on Man? What's your ultimate value locus? Imagine yourself God. You're reared back to produce a miracle. You're going to create, but you've got two ideas in mind. You're going to create either an earth with water and plant life and animals, or you're going to produce an earth with water and soil and flowers and mountains and animals and men, you know; and you can choose either one you want. Earth without man or earth with man. Let's have a show of hands. How many would create earth without man? How many, earth with man? I've agonized over this, but I come out very clearly on the side of man. I'm man-centered when it comes to value; it's probably because I was born one. Therefore, it provides you with a final test. Why don't you stay in the wilderness? Because that isn't where it's at; it's back in the city, back in downtown St. Louis, back in Los Angeles. The final test is whether your experience of the sacred in nature enables you to cope more effectively with the problems of man. If it does not enable you to cope more effectively with the problems - and sometimes it doesn't, sometimes it just sucks you right out into the wilderness and you stay there the rest of your life - then when that happens, by my scale of value it's failed. You go to nature for an experience of the sacred; and I point out to you that it is not the only place that one can go, but in Outward Bound and in my own experience it's the one that tends to be emphasized. You go there to re-establish your contact with the core of things, where it's really at, in order to enable you to come back into the world of man and operate more effectively. So I finish with the principle: Seek ye first the kingdom of nature that the kingdom of man might be realized.

Thank you.