

## Chapter 2: Nature

There is not a more scenic spot in the world than the Columbia Gorge, particularly when the sun is shining and the winds are calm. Several rivers and creeks tumble down through the southern cliffs to create little waterfalls that start by meandering through the moss-laden trees at the top of the precipice before falling down to raucously join the Columbia. These seemed to build up in energy as we travelled east from Troutdale until we passed by Multnomah Falls, a much larger spray of cascading water that justifiably attracted a large swathe of tourists. From there we passed through the little towns of Cascade Locks and Hood River on the winding highway that clung precariously to the narrow strip of land between the towering cliffs and the broad river. Across the wide river to the north were the rolling hills that constituted the southern border of Washington State. In contrast to the Oregon side, these were gentle hills that contained farms and even a few vineyards. The hills were green in early June, though I knew from rainy experience they would probably still be green in September.

About half way through the journey along the gorge is the peculiarly named town The Dalles. It was about here that Alan and I seemed to exhaust the topic of Zen for a little while at least, and we continued east through the gorge in a comfortable silence. Gradually the forests and steep cliffs on the Oregon side gave way to more gently rolling hills, though the interstate still followed closely to the course of the river, not quite ready yet for the leap upward into the wheat fields of eastern Oregon. I was reminded, as I always was when reaching this part of the gorge, of the fields and farms in California's Central Valley, which I had driven through innumerable times as a child. I had realized long ago that I much preferred mountains and forests to fields and plains, but there nevertheless is a subtle and nuanced beauty in the grass and wheat, whether encountered in the green Oregon June or the golden California September.

Finally, almost two hundred miles east of Portland, the interstate rises suddenly out of the gorge and turns southeast across the expansive fields and farms, heading straight for the Blue Mountains in the distance. I spotted a Conoco station near Hermiston, and we got off the freeway to gas up the car and get a little snack. We sat for a few moments at the picnic table chained to the

concrete alongside the little store, and soaked up a little sunshine while we ate our doughnuts. Finally Alan spoke.

“You certainly got quiet there for a while. Too much Zen for an early morning car ride?”

“Too much past. When you start wandering around on one path from way back when, it’s hard not to find yourself looking down others.”

“We agreed we’d only talk about stuff that can explain to me your puzzling new career in ministry, so I don’t want to hear about paths that lead to all the girls you chased in your misspent youth.”

“Ah, but there must be something deeply spiritual about chasing girls?”

“Well, in your case it would probably be a pretty short chase. So, c’mon; were you really thinking about girls that whole time?”

“Actually, I was thinking about forests and mountains. All of that stuff involving Zen happened in our home in Los Altos, but we had another home in the mountains where I spent all or part of every summer until I was in my thirties. Since I never practiced Zen, I would have to say that it is in those mountains that I had my first real, tangible experiences with the spiritual world.”

“Cool!” Alan exclaimed. “Let’s hit the road, and you can tell me all about it!”

We climbed back into the car and sped east towards Pendleton. I found myself again on another journey I had taken repeatedly as a child, and I wistfully wondered if there was any other metaphor that could be used for my life, but couldn’t immediately come up with one. *Life on the road, I guess.* It seemed like an appropriate place to start, anyway.

“If you travel up Hwy. 108 for about thirty miles east out of Sonora in California's Gold Country, you'll see a turn off marked for Pinecrest Lake. Drive another mile down this road, and you will suddenly burst upon the shores of a blue-green jewel set in a bowl surrounded by pine

and cedar forests and a backdrop of dramatic Sierra granite. In 1957, when I was 1 1/2 years old, my father rented a cabin on Pinecrest Lake for a two week vacation for himself and his young family. Thus began for me an association with Pinecrest that lasted thirty-two years, and a lifelong relationship with the sacred beauty and power of creation.

“Pinecrest Lake is a misnomer: it’s actually a reservoir, which was constructed in 1914 to provide water for downstream communities and serve as a control dam for the hydroelectric plants located farther along the south fork of the Stanislaus River. Before being dammed, the river ran through a meadow that was used in the summer by the Miwok Indians, and was covered in several feet of snow during the winters. The road into the lake ends at the western shore: a sandy beach area that is the remnant of the glacial moraine, the effluvia left over from the glacier that carved through the surrounding granite to form the valley now filled with pent up water from the spring runoff. Looking out east from the beach you would see most of the small three hundred acre lake, and towering over the far shore the dominant feature of the area: a thousand foot wall of granite, sheared away by those ancient glaciers, looming over the lake. I don't know what this feature is officially called; we referred to it simply as Little Yosemite, and it’s a powerful testament to the primal forces unleashed during earth's formation.

“The Forest Service allowed cabins to be built along the shores of the lake, and eventually a lodge and marina grew up at the end of the road on the western shore. A unique feature of the cabins built on the lake is that nearly all of them were (and still are) inaccessible by road. The only way to reach these cabins was either by boat or by hiking in along the lakeshore trail. The trail wound close to the lake, which was surrounded by forests of mixed conifers and the occasional aspen grove near the water, and interspersed on the steep hillsides with granite outcroppings. Cabins further east along the north and south shores were consequently quite isolated, a condition that was amplified in the winter when boating was not possible on the frozen lake and the lakeshore trail became treacherous. The Stanislaus river entered the lake at the east end, and a dusty trail ran along the south shore of the river, passing through a Boy Scout camp until it dumped out into a granite and scrub valley beneath Little Yosemite called—you guessed it—the Boy Scout valley.

“In 1957 Dad rented a place on the South Shore that was the last one reachable by road, then for the next two summers he rented a different cabin on the North Shore that was not reachable by road, which allowed him the excuse to purchase what he really wanted anyway: a brand new yellow speedboat with a Johnson outboard motor. Finally, in the fall of 1960, Dad purchased our cabin at 204 Lakeshore Trail. The cabin was just a few cabins down from the one owned by Win and Helen Wagener, who had introduced us to Pinecrest at about the same time they were introducing Mom to Zen. Now, instead of spending two week vacations at the lake, the entire summer was spent there. We would pack up and leave our home in Los Altos as soon as school let out in June and drive across California to the lake. These trips across the Central Valley were epic, and I particularly remember the fruit and vegetable stands along the dusty farm roads; but even more notable was the A&W root beer stand in Oakdale where we would always beg Mom and Dad to pleeeeeease stop. We would stay at the lake all summer until Labor Day and the beginning of school. Dad stayed in Los Altos during the week to work, and would drive up and stay with us at the cabin over the weekends.

“It would be a gross understatement to call these summers at Pinecrest idyllic. I spent three months of every year as a child wandering around in a mountain paradise, mostly unsupervised and unrestrained. I frequently had friends come up and stay a week or two and we spent most of our time sailing, swimming, hiking, and reading the paperbacks that Mom always brought along for our ‘down’ times. My Uncle Bill and Aunt Maggie were also frequent guests, along with their three daughters, my cousins. It was a place of family bonding just as if we were a normal middle class family. There was no television, and radio reception was iffy at best, so we spent hours playing Scrabble or Monopoly. The cabin had enough amenities to keep us comfortable—electricity, a phone, running water (usually) and indoor plumbing—but was isolated enough to keep us cut off from the outside world unless we actively sought it out by going over to the lodge.”

“You were a privileged kid!” Alan exclaimed. “Not many people got that kind of experience.”

“Yeah. I was privileged, though I didn’t know it at the time. Most of my attention was focused on goofing off and having fun, yet I was aware even at an early age of a sacred presence

around me. Today I would call Pinecrest a *thin place*, a phrase used in the Celtic tradition to describe those regions where God's presence is palpable. It's a place that exudes mystery and divinity, and I had experiences that underscored that sense every time we went to Pinecrest.

“Along with my brothers and sister, or with a friend, we would often take hikes from our cabin around to the east end of the lake and up into the Boy Scout Valley. The trail in the valley scoots along the south bank of the river, which is dry and dusty, winding between gently sloping granite slabs. Along the north bank of the river, and visible from the trail, lies a green and lush meadow, dotted with aspen groves and teeming with birds, squirrels, and other wildlife. We were always separated from this meadow by the river, so my unrequited desire to walk these green pastures helped to magnify its mystery. I was convinced that it was the Garden of Eden and that God lived there. I have no idea how I even had heard of the Garden of Eden in my Zen/atheist home, but I could sense a sacred presence even if I couldn't really articulate it. Finally, as a teenager, my friend Jim and I managed to cross the river and enter the mysterious meadow. I assumed, as we waded across the depleted river, that I would be disappointed and would discover nothing more than a mountain meadow. But as we climbed the bank and crossed the meadow into one of its aspen groves, I was struck hard by the thought that God really did live here! The previously imagined sacred presence became real and palpable as we quietly listened to the quaking of the aspen leaves and smelled the fecund dampness of the meadow floor. The rotting carcasses of fallen trees provided ample sustenance for the grasses and flowers of the meadow, as well as cover for beavers, squirrels and a myriad of other wildlife. The mixture of sugar pines and aspens provided safe haven for hundreds of birds, who all squawked at the human intruders as we invaded their homes. Being boys, Jim and I eventually proceeded to our goal of ascending the steep hillside that rose out of the meadow, but I left there thoroughly convinced that God is present in God's own creation. And I have always felt blessed that one of my earliest mountaintop experiences came in a meadow, a daily reminder that God's presence is not exceptional: we are wrapped up in it.

“Of course this experience of the sacred was not limited to unusual times and places. At Pinecrest we were literally within nature twenty-four hours a day. Swimming in the cool waters of the lake meant squishing the sand between our fingers, diving deep into the waters of the little

cove in front of our cabin, and letting the fish nibble at our toes as we dangled our feet from the dock. After swimming to the rocks that jutted out from the shore on the other side of the cove, we would climb up, scraping our knees, and let the warm breeze dry our bodies as we basked in the sunshine, splayed out on the rocks like ancient Sirens. Later in the day we might strap on our boots and take a hike up the steep hillside behind the cabin, moving away from the world of humans and into the realm of trees.

“Forests have many occupants, both animal and plant, but they are clearly ruled by the trees. Up the slope behind our cabin grew huge conifers whose boughs controlled access to sunlight, and whose deep roots controlled all the moisture in their kingdom. Walking among these aristocrats you could feel life vibrating all around you. The trees moved, they had particular smells, and their gaze, usually of benign disinterest, followed you wherever you went.

Alan burst into my reverie, "It sounds like you were becoming a Druid!"

"Well, in a way. I wasn't conscious of it, of course, and I didn't know anything about the Druids until I was older. But I think even then I made an important distinction. The Druids believed that the trees were God, whereas I believed that God was in the trees. In other words, the trees had their own essence which participated with God, and God with them, but the trees were not God himself."

"Did you feel the same way about rocks and birds and grass?"

"Oh yes, and about myself too. And although there seems to be an affinity between living things which heightens the sense of God's presence in the forest kingdom, I think there is also an equality of that presence among all components of creation."

"Even bats? Volcanoes?"

"Yeah, even spiders and snakes. There were plenty of those at Pinecrest, and plenty of bats too, though no active volcanoes in the vicinity.

"About a hundred yards up the hill behind our cabin ran a rudimentary trail that provided access to the main water line. I can remember standing up there surrounded by trees, listening to the wind whisper through the boughs. At my feet ferns grew betwixt the rocks where water had seeped out of the old, wooden water line, and granite boulders, half buried in the dirt, patiently hosted families of lichen. On rare occasions a snake would be warming himself on one of these rocks where the sun was able to work through the canopy, and always there would be spider webs slung across the path, where unfortunate flies met their demise. In spots you could see through the trees to the lake far below, and the little dots of people in their boats or swimming seemed like they belonged to another world.

"I would hike down this scraggly little trail, following the water line, until I came upon a rocky spot where the trees had briefly abdicated their shroud in favor of the warm sun, and I would sit there in the quiet warmth and let my mind and body go. I was having a little mountain *zazen*, I guess. I wasn't really thinking about God. To paraphrase Paul, I was a child with childish thoughts, and I suppose later as a teenager I was thinking about girls! But after a while, the noisy mind fades, and you simply experience the warm breeze on your cheek and the scratchy rock on your bottom without commentary. Time passes unnoticed, and the occasional undefined sound that wafts up the hill from the lake passes over you and around you, noticed but not retained. To tell you the truth, Alan, I've always struggled with most indoor forms of meditation. If I'm going to sit and be with God, I'd rather do it on a rock than on a cushion or a chair."

"Man!" Alan said. "Now that's what I'm talking about. No priests, no cathedrals, no rules, no books! Just me and nature." He looked pensive for a moment, then continued, "But you know, people fall off rocks, and they get bitten by snakes. How does that fit into your Druid idealism? How can you be intellectually honest if you romanticize the healing part of nature without regard to the hurting side of nature? Or in the lingo you're adopting, can you really say that God is only in the good things, and the bad things—the rabid bats and the devastating volcanoes—come from somewhere else?"

I smiled, recognizing the familiar and ancient argument. "No, all of creation comes from God, even the bats and volcanoes and spiders. But evil itself springs only out of human intent, the

product of free will. I know I've hit on mostly the positive and no doubt romanticized spiritual moments in the mountains, but Pinecrest was also a great teacher of the dangers of creation. Danger can produce fear in a primal way, but it can also produce great clarity. There is no explicit or implicit promise made by God that the world God has created will be free of danger or fear. We might be killed at any moment by some natural process of creation, like a meteor striking us or a rabid bat flying into the car. But God is not a puppet-master who at the beginning of time placed all actions on a master script that is simply playing out inexorably now. How boring! There is no intent on God's part that a rabid bat fly into our car. In the large view of creation, bats—even rabid ones—serve a purpose in the evolution of all creation towards the peaceable kingdom of God, and it is for that purpose that bats were created. There is no 'plan' for an individual bat to bite you at a specific point in time, but there is a purpose that that bat participates in, just as you and I do.”

Alan shook his head. “This is the clarity you found sitting on a rock in the forest?”

“Not exactly, though I do remember a moment of great clarity while sitting on another, much larger rock. You remember Little Yosemite, the giant rock edifice that towered a thousand feet above the east end of Pinecrest Lake? Well, you can get to the top of that cliff by hiking around to the back side—the north side—where there is a fairly gentle slope that leads to the top. One summer as a teenager Jim and I took the long hike around to the back side and up the slope until we finally made it to the top, where we rested by dangling our feet over the edge of the cliff. It was a fine, sunny day. To the east we could see far back into the high Sierra back country, with its mixture of solid granite and gentle forests. To the west lay the lake, with the little dots of sailboats floating gently across its blue-green waters. Below us was a sheer, thousand foot drop to the floor of the Boy Scout Valley, where we could still see the remains of shattered rock left behind when the glacier had ground through there thousands of years before. The warm breeze helped to cool us off, and after about half an hour, Jim, who sat at my left, got up and moved off to his left. I sat for a few more moments, then turned to my right, preparing to get up. That's when I heard the unmistakable sound of an upset rattlesnake less than a foot away.”

“Ooh boy!”



“Yeah. In retrospect I realize that the cold-blooded rattler had been sunning himself just like I was and was probably too groggy to be of any real danger; but at the time I just froze. For a moment it passed through my mind that my only choices were to jump off a thousand foot cliff or get bitten by a rattle snake. That snake and I stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity, though it was probably only a few seconds, then I leaped backwards away from the cliff and right over the snake while screaming to Jim, ‘Snaaaaaaaake!’ We ran as fast as two terrified thirteen year olds could back down the hill.”

Alan was unsuccessful at suppressing his laughter. “I wish I could have seen that!”

“It *is* a funny story now, but I’m telling you, there can be great clarity in moments like that. Of course, fear can just freeze your mind and shut you down, but sometimes it can make you hyper-aware, super-connected to everything around you. You’re no longer external and analytical; you’re right there in it, a part of it.<sup>1</sup> So when you do survive a scary, life-threatening situation, it connects you more thoroughly to creation, and by extension, God. So that incident didn’t endear me to snakes, but I subsequently climbed up to the top of Little Yosemite many times after that, in part to help feel that clear connection. The only difference is I always checked the spot where I was sitting a little more thoroughly!”

“So, if a rabid bat flies into the car right now, you’ll just appreciate creation more? You’d just be OK with that?”

“No. And I don’t think God expects me to be *OK* with that. But I wouldn’t blame it on God, and if I survived such an event I would have a choice of how to respond. I could either become neurotic from fear, and base all of my future actions on the possibility of another bat flying into my car and thus be controlled by that fear; or I could use the clarity that is the by-product of fear to understand my position in creation better, and yes, perhaps take reasonable precautions against bats, but let my life and faith be strengthened, not weakened, by such an experience.”

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<sup>1</sup> No one has described this sense of super-awareness in fear better than Gerald May in his story of the bear from *The Wisdom of Wilderness* (May 2006).

“You could do that?”

“People do it every day.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

I shook my head. “Not with the snake. But yeah, I’ve done it.”

“Are you going to tell me about it?”

“Later. We’re still at the beginning of the story, and that comes closer to the end.”

With that we settled into a cryptic silence. The wheat fields of eastern Oregon were still going by, interspersed every now and then with grazing cattle and tiny towns that appeared to have three gas stations huddled around the freeway off-ramp, and little else. As the first hints of dusk appeared we began descending into the little valley that held the town of Pendleton. In all the years I had been making this drive, I never got to know any of the local eating establishments, but I knew the location of the Denny’s by heart. We pulled off of the freeway and directly into the parking lot.

As we climbed out of the car, Alan said, “There’s no bats in here, right?”

“Ha-ha. But maybe they have fresh rattlesnake on the menu.”

Waitresses in these little towns always look tired, and their friendliness always seems to be begging you to take them away to somewhere, anywhere else. “Becky: Service with a Smile!” showed us to our table, and although I scoured the menu intently, I couldn’t find any offering that included rattlesnake.