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The Sacred Power of the World

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The world we manipulate with our creative, grasping hands is far more interconnected and mysterious than we can fathom. We understand bits of it with our analytical powers, but only our intuitive and imaginative capacities can truly absorb the vastness, complexity, and interconnectedness of all that science reveals. Truly, the breadth and mystery of the universe is mind-boggling. We can feel, understand, and express the whole through song and story, poem and dance, art and imagination, in nature and in music, and through religion. It is by these that we gain wisdom to guide the work of hands; that we acquire the ability to listen, to discern, and to be in touch with the mysteries that lie beyond our scientific puzzles; that we learn how to sense what the Oglala Sioux holy man Black Elk called "the way the sacred Power of the World lives and moves."

It is this way that has guided me, through means largely beyond my comprehension, to leave my longtime work as an environmental advocate and become a priest. I had spent my whole working life trying to help the Earth's places and the people who depend upon them. My first real job was spraying insecticides from airplanes to kill spruce budworms, an insect that in the early 1980s was devouring the balsam fir forests of northern Maine. Along with being an agent of death for the budworms, when flying in the vintage DC-4 airplanes I fell in love with the woods, lakes, and rivers of that remote and wild land, and with the people whose families had lived and worked the land for generations. I ate apple pie with loggers at remote camps, watched paper mills shred and digest trees and refashion them into newsprint, walked in the woods with foresters to see big trees falling and little ones rising, listened to the heartbreak of landowners whose trees were being killed by native insects and of ecologists who saw fecund streams devastated by airborne poison.

After two years, my older, wiser colleagues told me to leave the woods and go learn, in a bookish sort of way, what the hell I was doing. I became both forester and ecologist and spent the next twenty-five years working with many of those same good people who had befriended me. While the

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paper industry that used to be the economic mainstay of the region collapsed, and millions of acres of land were sold to the highest bidder or stripped for short-term profit, my goals were to keep the people thriving and the woods the woods—ends that are too often viewed as mutually exclusive.

It was good work, building unlikely alliances to protect the land and to renew the communities of the vast region we now call the Northern Forest—that great band lying crossways over northern Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, and New York. I became a lobbyist, a coalition-builder, a fundraiser, an entrepreneur, and a CEO. I worked to protect rivers, lakes, mountains, forests, and wildernesses, and to create playgrounds and urban parks at the local, state, and national levels. I worked on community-building and economic development, with loggers, teachers, mill owners, landowners, policymakers, wilderness lovers, and businessmen.

We had some great successes, but they weren't enough. We were winning battles while losing the war, and the fight was killing me. I felt the growing weight of a changing climate and of great suffering to come, of extinction of untold numbers of plant and animal species around the world, of toxic chemicals, of genocide, war, poverty, greed, hatred, and other human evils. I knew there had to be another way.

What follows is a story of seeking another way, and of finding it in a vision—a vision that I did not expect, that I do not fully understand, and that is taking me places I couldn't imagine and have actively resisted. But it is more powerful than I, and having received it, my task is to live it out as best I can.

Voice in the Desert

In August 2005, in need of respite and new insight, I accepted my friend Roger's invitation to go on a vision quest—to spend four days, alone, without food in the Inyo Mountains on the edge of the Mojave Desert of southern California. With a sleeping bag, a tarp for shade, and four gallons of water, I set out seeking a new direction.

On the fourth day, I crawled up Andrews Peak, weak from fasting, short of breath at ten thousand feet above sea level, the blazing desert sun beating down on my weary self. I'd eaten nothing, surviving just on a gallon of water a day. Emptiness and solitude were working their mystical transformation upon me. Our guides, Roger and Gigi, had instructed us to spend the final night of the quest awake, on a vigil. As I neared the summit, I wondered what ceremony I would perform during my vigil and where I would find my guidance.

Atop the mountain, reveling in the glory of the clear, thin air, I gazed east toward Death Valley and west toward Mount Whitney—the lowest and highest points in the lower forty-eight states. Suddenly it came to me, and I knew the way: that night, after having climbed this mountain each day and explored the landscape in the four cardinal directions, I would have to walk around the entire mountain, in the dark (eighteen miles, I estimated), not having eaten in four days, in a wilderness I do not know, without trail, map, or light.

I knew full well that the plan was insane. But I also knew that I had to do it. A cranial lightning cleaved my brain in two, each side speaking in turn. My rational mind, which guides me through everyday life, told me that this is how people die in the wilderness. But a deeper, more primitive part of my mind heard and acknowledged the rational mind, yet said I had to go do it anyway.

My rational mind took charge of the walk: I spent the afternoon preparing; scanning the landscape and charting a course; and leaving a note at the safety spot, telling my companions what I was doing, when to expect me back, and what to do if I didn't make it. I cached my gear, save for the few things I would take with me: the last two quarts of water, a sleeping bag, and a jacket.

My primitive mind guided my ritual preparation. I swept the traces of my presence from the landscape with a juniper branch and fastened a bundle of pinyon twigs to my backpack as a token for my family and friends, on whose behalf I was undertaking this journey. I said a prayer to the spirits of the land, asking their permission and blessing for the quest. Stripped naked, I used a cup of precious water to cleanse myself for the journey. I put on my boots, sat on a rock overlooking the long slope I was about to descend, and waited.

As the sun fell behind the Sierras, I took off, pushed by adrenaline and gravity, moving swiftly down the mountain as darkness set in. Reaching the bottom of the north slope, I turned eastward, onto the sagebrush flat. I navigated effortlessly, as if by another form of sight—until I nearly catapulted down into the twenty-foot-deep, invisible arroyo. I slipped and stumbled to the dry bottom, and scrambled up the other side. On the far side of the flat, I entered the sparse pinyon-juniper woodland and started ascending the slope of the eastern ridge. My pace slowed sharply from the weakness and exhaustion of the past four days as I climbed up the pitch-black hillside.

At the top, I was unsure of my way: Was this where I was supposed to turn south? Or further east? I heard the first whispers of fear. I paused

and looked upward, seeking guidance, asking for a sign. Instantly, as in reply, above in the brilliant desert sky, a shooting star blazed toward the southwestern horizon. *The way has been shown.* I continued along the ridge, feeling dim forms of prickly pine brushing my scalp.

Soon my feet sensed a downward slope, long before my rational mind's scouting suggested one should be there. I tripped, slid, and plunged into a black gully, seeing nothing. Blind, I ran into a wall of sheer rock rising above me. I had, literally, hit the wall. Near panic, lost, and deep in the desert wilderness in the blackest night, I grasped at shreds of self-control—a matter of life and death, as one panicked move in the desert could be my doom.

A small song came to me, offering itself as a lifeline. I seized it and sang, ever so faintly, again and again. I knew that I could not go back from where I had come, and had only one option: to go farther down the gully. I picked my way, finding the boulders with my legs and feet, my left hand brushing the rock wall still rising above me, my right outstretched for balance.

Finally, emerging back on the sagebrush plain, I saw a track in the brush, and I followed it back northward until I spied a tree, a pinyon pine, silhouetted against the night sky. O Blessed Tree! I had seen it before and knew where I was—I was saved. The next morning, we gathered to break our fast and swim in the river, the Owens-*cum*-Jordan.

Bones of Your Mother

In April 2007, more than eighteen months after my trek in the Mojave, I was surfacing from many long months of interior darkness. My mother had died unexpectedly from a lurking cancer not long after I returned from the desert, adding to the load of psychic and physical exhaustion and to an upheaval that left me questioning everything. I felt dull, stupid, incompetent, and terminally worn.

And yet, as spring brought new light and warmth into the world, I felt something taking shape in the universe, something with meaning specifically for me. I sensed packets of energy swirling around me, bits of potential whizzing, but not alighting, not settling. They were messengers without words, both palpable and ethereal.

On the first anniversary of my mother's death, I lit a few candles and sat down by the warm wood stove for morning meditation. I knew a message was coming that day and I had pen and paper ready. As soon as I sat, the words arrived: *The meaning of your journey round the mountain is: You must turn around and go the other way. You must follow the same path going in*

the other direction. This path is a spiritual path. And then, as if with a flourish: *Ignore this at your peril!*

The voice was crystal clear, but without sound, a voice I could hear only with other ears, with my heart. I had never had an experience like this, but I knew the voice was speaking truth. I don't know how I knew this—I just did, like I knew on top of the mountain what I had to do. In a burst of clarity, I was given instructions and direction. I marveled at the mystery of such a voice but spent no time wondering what it was, where it came from, or whether to pay attention. I simply accepted it.

For all that certainty, though, the meaning of the message was not clear. I did understand that "following the same path" meant continuing to work for the Earth and the people who depend upon it, that that would remain my vocation. But what did it mean to turn around and go in the other direction? Where would I go and how would I know? I had no spiritual or religious tradition to guide me, having never been to church or adhered to any tradition. A spiritual path? What spiritual path?

A week later, I was scheduled to give a talk near Dartmouth College. On the surface, it was an ordinary occasion, a familiar venue and topic: the future of the forests of northern New England. I welcomed the chance to share my love and work with an informed audience, having spent my entire adult life and much of my youth messing about in these woods.

As I organized the talk, I found it impossible to avoid thinking about climate change—about how the altered physical and chemical environment will dramatically affect the future of our forests and of so many things that depend on them, from birds and animals to people, jobs, and culture—about how we are walking into a darkness of our own making, into a massive unknown. The refrain from a Greek myth dimly remembered appeared in my mind: *Throw the bones of your mother over your shoulder.* Over and over, the refrain repeated itself, but I didn't recall the story and didn't know what it meant or why it was coming to my mind at that moment.

From my bookshelf, I retrieved *Bulfinch's Mythology*, a gift from my mother. I read of the crime, war, and despoliation that came after Prometheus gave humanity the gift of fire. I read of how that decay enraged Zeus and drove him to destroy the world in a terrible flood. The only survivors were Deucalion and Pyrrha, husband and wife. They were good people, and came to rest atop Mt. Parnassus, which alone stood above the waters. Fortunately, there was a temple nearby. Deucalion and Pyrrha entered it and approached the altar where no fire burned; they prostrated themselves, and prayed to the goddess to ask her guidance. The oracle replied, "cast behind you the bones of your mother." Mystified, they left

the temple, but upon reflection, Deucalion concluded (in Bulfinch's telling), "The earth is the great parent of all; the stones are her bones; these we may cast behind us." And so they did, and the stones cast by Deucalion became men while those cast by Pyrrha became women, and thus was the world remade.

As I read about the myth, two thoughts ran through my mind: first, how remarkable that this bit of story, remembered from more than forty years earlier, would resurface now; and second, the decay that so angered Zeus seems in many ways an apt description of the situation we find ourselves in today. But why did the Greeks have such a story? What does it have to say to us now? And why had it returned to me at that moment? It was unclear how the story teaches us, in our time, to face the prospect of destruction of the Earth—as we use in greed, violence, and anger so many of the gifts we have received. Nor was it clear to me what it would mean, now, for two people to survive atop the mountain and to enter the temple, or what it might look like for us to throw the bones of our mother over our shoulder and thereby to remake the world.

It was clear, at least, that the forest that I knew and loved would change drastically. It will, in fact, eventually disappear. The sugar maples, American beech, and yellow birch are moving north toward what has been the province of red spruce and balsam fir, which in turn will creep northward in search of cold enough climate. The creatures farthest to the north—polar bears and the like—will have nowhere to go. Here and across the world, species will shift, change, die, and go extinct. People who depend on these forms of life—for food, shelter, warmth, clothing, income, and identity—will suffer, grieve, and perhaps also die. Diseases at home in the tropics will move northward. Familiar patterns of rain, heat, and cold will change, upsetting the stability of today's ecosystems.

Of course, from the vantage point of the long history of all life on Earth, this will be but one more shift among billions of years of such shifts. From the vantage of human beings, however—and especially the poorest and least powerful—these climatic and ecological changes will bring much loss and destruction.

Our mastery of energy and of technology is both a blessing and a curse. We have much to be grateful for—including the ease and prosperity and health they have made possible. But we must also live with the vices and temptations and addictions they make possible, with the existential terror of modern weaponry, with the brute fact of the machines that enable us utterly to destroy forests, with the perilous increase in carbon in the atmosphere and the sea. The dangers we face cannot be turned back

with only those tools with which we have created the danger in the first place. We must remember the lesson of Deucalion and Pyrrha: we too must seek the mountaintop, enter the temple, ask for guidance, listen for a divine voice, and cast the bones of our mother over our shoulders.

An Absurd Calling

In September 2007, my jet was about to land in Dublin. I was on my way home from a week-long workshop in the Belgian countryside, a high point in five months of wrestling with what it means to turn around, to go the other way, to follow the same path, to follow a spiritual path. It was a tumultuous week of exploring how to be an "authentic leader"—to lead in a way that is true to one's deepest self. In the process, I came to understand that it was time for me to resign as CEO of the Northern Forest Center, the organization I had founded and built. This was no longer my path, and I needed to create space for something else to take shape—but just what, I didn't yet know.

Looking out the airplane window as the ground rose up to meet us, I saw a church tower near the runway. Instantly, the words flash into my mind: *Priest. You are to be a priest.* Priest? I'd never even been to church! Yet, once more, I didn't doubt it, not even for an instant, because I knew the voice was speaking truth. That night, in response to my wife's inquiry about the week, I told her of my decision—with no explanation to offer except to tell her about the voice. To my astonishment and perhaps my dismay, she replied, "That makes sense." To me, it made no sense at all, except that I knew it was true.

To become a Christian, of course, was out of the question. I was not ready to become part of a mean-spirited, narrow-minded, anti-science, anti-environment, preachy, hypocritical, antiquated, hierarchical, judgmental, rule-bound mess, and to worship some old white guy with a beard sitting on a throne in the clouds. But for all that, I still knew the voice spoke the truth, and such knowing leaves no room for doubt. It isn't a polite question, like, "Have you ever considered a vocation in ministry?" Rather, it is a statement of fact: "You are to be a priest." I wondered where such knowledge comes from and how it happens. But I also realized that speculation about this doesn't get one very far, and that instead of idle speculation I needed to act. Still, becoming a priest seemed absurd.

Within weeks, I told the board of directors of my organization that the time had come for me to leave. Within a couple of months, my successor was miraculously in place and I was free—for what I didn't know yet. On

some level, I "got" that I was to be a priest. But then I'd have to go back to school, and I didn't want to go back to school. I'd have to be a Christian, and there were way too many bad associations with that. I'd even have to be baptized and I wasn't ready for that. And, maybe hardest of all, I'd have to go to church, which I didn't want to do. Ever since I was little, when the Catholic kids next door had to go to church on Sundays, I had said I'd rather be outside.

Out of work, without the income and identity associated with work, I didn't know what to tell my friends and family. I felt vulnerable, stuck, scared, and empty. For months, like Jacob, I wrestled with God. Dreams, visions, and voices continued, mercilessly hounding me. In the end, the voice won. After all of this, I wasn't willing to spend the rest of my life wondering *what if.*

Nine months after the word *priest* was planted in my resistant soul, I realized I did have to go to church. I didn't dare go on a Sunday, because people would see me and I'd have to explain what I was doing there. I wasn't ready for that. So I went late on a Tuesday morning, when I knew the church would be empty. The front door was locked, which I almost used as an excuse, a sign that I wasn't meant to be there; but I decided that would be giving up too quickly. I went around to the church office, and a nice person showed me the back way in. I sat down in the empty church, in a pew near the front, on the left side. In the stillness, I knew that I was in the right place. Finally, I surrendered. Within a few months, I was baptized, I had applied to seminary, and I began my training to become a priest in the Episcopal Church.

In hindsight, I understand Black Elk's words: "I think I have told you, but if I have not, you must have understood, that a man who has a vision is not able to use the power of it until after he has performed the vision on earth for the people to see.... It is from understanding that power comes; and the power in the ceremony was in understanding what it meant; for nothing can live well except in a manner that is suited to the way the sacred Power of the World lives and moves."

The Wilderness and the Prophet

In mid-2009, a year after first walking into St. Paul's Episcopal Church, I arrived at Yale Divinity School. I wanted to know how being a Christian environmentalist differs from being a secular one. What does it mean, having been baptized and converted, to turn around walking the path in the other direction? What must I bring back from my journeys to share

with those who work to save the Earth and all its creatures? I wanted to know what is in the Bible and in Christian practice, theology, spirituality, ethics, institutions, and traditions to help lead people toward the shift of consciousness, the transformation of heart, mind, and action, that is essential to avoid destroying the Earth. When I first began attending St. Paul's, I heard the scriptures being read, I listened to the sermons, took Communion, and felt myself in the presence of untold millions, past, present, and future, who shared these experiences. All this was good. But I wanted to know, if I am to follow Jesus, what else I must do.

Part of the answer was given to me in the form of lessons delivered by the priest, Bruce, who took me in, initially with deep skepticism, and began to teach me. Pray, he said, starting with the Psalms. Read them morning and evening, every day. And so I did. And as I set off to Yale, he offered his final teaching: "Remember," he said, "the most important thing you will do at seminary is pray." At Yale, I took Bruce's advice to heart from the beginning. On my very first day, before classes had even begun, I formed a pattern of morning sitting meditation and afternoon walking or running meditation, usually in East Rock Park, a marvelous six-hundred-acre, hilly, rugged chunk of land at the north end of New Haven, just blocks from my monk's cell of an apartment. Between these meditations, plus one or two sessions of chapel each day, I immersed myself in a life of Christian prayer.

I studied, too, of course. The learning curve at seminary was steep. Compared to the very bright twentysomethings surrounding me, many of whom had been religion majors, attended Bible college, or at the very least been listening to weekly readings and sermons all of their lives—and whose minds also were much younger, with more retentive memories—I was ignorant. I had never read the Bible, I knew nothing about theology, I didn't know the songs, I didn't know the names of the garments, I didn't know the stories, and I didn't speak the language. But I learned.

One of the things I learned—the first revelation—was something no one intended to teach. When I began reading the Gospels, one little fact jumped off the page: Whenever Jesus is portrayed as praying, the writers take pains to say that He went into the desert, or into the wilderness, or to a lonely place, that He climbed the mountain or was by the lake. It began immediately upon His baptism. In the version told by Mark, the earliest of the Gospels, upon being baptized in the river, "the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness" (1:12). Jesus' life of prayer—his direct connection to his Abba—was outdoors, alone, in the wild places. Jesus went to the temple to teach and to overturn, but never to pray. That, according to the Gospel accounts, was outdoors, in the lonely places.

So I wondered, if a life of prayer, of contemplation, of direct experience of the Divine in nature, was so central to Jesus, and if Christians are called to be imitators of Him, how did this come to be so peripheral to Christian teachings? The answers to this seem relatively obvious: for better and for worse, the Church has shepherded people indoors, where they can be properly taught, guided, sheltered, and ministered to. But if the Church has moved indoors, is it any wonder it has been so absent from recognizing and acting on concerns about nature and the Earth?

A second revelation came from the book of Jeremiah, in the spring of my first year. I had first encountered Jeremiah long ago, as a college student studying abroad, when I visited the ancient abbey at Moissac in the south of France. Captivated there by Jeremiah's penetrating eyes in a sinuous carving of stone, I had brought him home in the form of a poster purchased from the abbey gift shop. Though I wasn't a churchgoer and had no idea who Jeremiah was, somehow he spoke to me. I had carried that poster with me, wrinkled and crumpled by age, for over thirty years. In all that time, he remained silent, like the stone he was carved from—until, in my first biblical studies class, I finally read the book of Jeremiah and knew why I had been carrying him with me all this time. Jeremiah speaks to me as he has spoken to so many over the centuries, about human greed and foolishness, about failure to help the poor, about laying waste to the land, and about orienting our lives toward the wrong things. In my worries about our world, and especially about the coming disaster of climate change, I hear Jeremiah speak as profoundly today as he did in his day.

Jeremiah was not a popular man, and the message he carried to ancient Israel was not popular either. He prophesied that destruction was coming, in the form of the great army of Babylon, because Israel no longer obeyed the commandment to love God. As the Book of Jeremiah says, "But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart.... they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan... and they do not defend the rights of the needy" (5:23–28). Telling of the destruction to come, Jeremiah gives voice to his grief: "My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent.... Disaster overtakes disaster, the whole land is laid waste.... I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void.... I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert" (4:19–26).

My own heart pounds in resonance as I read this. Jeremiah is speaking of an entirely different culture and time and yet is speaking a profound

truth for our own times. We, too, in our quest to be fat and sleek, have caused a great scourge to sweep down. As in Jeremiah's time, it is easier to ignore the threat, to go about our lives pretending it doesn't exist, than to recognize it and accept the consequences. Certainly this is what has happened in most current political and economic debates. But Jeremiah voices the cost of such willful ignorance—anguish, woe, destruction—and the only possible response: repent!

Yes, we must repent and reorient our lives toward creation, love, and hope, and away from self-interest and violence. This, in the end, is what Jeremiah tells us—that even as we do stupid things, even as through our greed and short-sightedness we harm others and ourselves and cause destruction to the Earth, there is hope, in God, by whatever name, form, and faith, and within the human heart. This is the transformation, I gradually come to understand, that the Christian tradition calls *metanoia*, the Greek for *repent*: a turning around of heart and mind and behavior, a going in the other direction.

Dominion, Wisdom, and Hope

Throughout this journey, the question in my mind has been, "Why have I had to become a Christian, go to seminary, and be ordained as a priest in order to return to my work for the Earth?" Part of the answer is that the environmental movement has largely forgotten or lost the sacredness that imbued its early years. It has become increasingly technocratic, placing its trust solely in science, technology, politics, and economics—the gods of our culture.

The environmental movement, at least in the United States where I know it, has done great things in the past fifty years. Rivers and lakes are much cleaner, pollution of the air has been reduced, many areas of land have been conserved. Yet bigger problems have emerged: a changing climate, acidifying oceans, spreading toxic chemicals, and extinction of innumerable species around the world. These problems are incredibly complex and global in scale, problems of a higher order than we are able to respond to with only our customary technocratic tools.

Some critics, like the historian Lynn White, Jr., have taken the Judeo-Christian tradition to task for asserting that human beings are the rulers of creation, with dominion over every living thing. But whether or not we *should* have the kind of dominion described in Genesis, it is clear that we now in fact *do*. We have the knowledge and technical ability to modify, create, and destroy life on a vast scale.

So the central problem remains: We have the power to create and destroy, but we still lack the consistent wisdom to use our power rightly—for the benefit of all and in particular for the benefit of the least rather than the mighty. The Judeo-Christian tradition calls us to love our neighbors, especially the least of these, the poor and vulnerable. In our ecological age, however, we must understand that our neighbors encompass many more than we had previously imagined, so much so that we must expand this conception to include all the Earth and its creatures. To do this, and to respond to the great ecological and social disruptions of our day, we need a radical turn away from our assumption that we, all-powerful, are the center, and that others exist merely to support us.

We need a different way that can only be found in the world's great religious traditions. They alone provide a narrative large enough to include all humanity, all of the Earth, all of the universe, God, birth and death, destruction and despair, hope and renewal—a narrative of even greater breadth and depth than the problems we are creating. And this way of religion, for all its risks, is carried in the stories, practices, wisdom, teachings, and insight of its various traditions. In the tradition that has called me, the way is shown in the person of Jesus, who went alone into the wilderness, returned to the temple to teach and to overturn, went to the community to heal, and showed that love conquers death.

I hold no hope that, alone, simply more and better science, technology, politics, and economics will fix the problems we have created with their aid. The fundamental problem lies not outside of us but within us. The problems we face are as old as those of Adam and Eve: we have greater knowledge than we have wisdom. Unless we turn our attention to the age-old problem of how to be good human beings, to love God and our neighbors—all of our neighbors—as ourselves, there is no way out.