

Enticing the Sacred with Words

John Bennion

Intimations of Immortality

Sometime after midnight on a bitter January night when I was sixteen, I drove up to Greenjacket, the ranch that has been in the Bennion family for four generations, to join my cousin and his friend in an abandoned shack on the property. When we stayed there in the winter, we swept out the mouse droppings and stoked the fire in the cooking stove, adding wood until the central room was as warm as a sauna. In the oven, we baked a cake pan full of apples, cinnamon, walnuts, butter, and brown sugar and ate the mess, crouched around that common pot.

That cold, still night, I was last in, having driven up to the ranch after a date in Tooele. I had probably kissed the girl, the love of my high school life, but I must have saved that memory in a different site in my brain, because I don't remember anything about the evening, just that I felt happy. The snow was too deep to drive all the way to the shack, so I had to walk the last half mile. The dew had settled and frozen on every twig of brush, weed, and strand of the barbed-wire fence. The full moon reflected in spikes of light from each crystal.

At the cabin, I rustled the two of them out of their sleeping bags. The snow was nearly knee deep, and without making a decision we automatically sloughed off all our clothing, ran across the field, and rolled in the powder. Our blood flowed with so much adrenaline that we didn't feel cold. Then we each climbed one of the old windmill towers and howled at the moon.

Magical.

In memory, I was ravished, as the metaphysical poets liked to say, by the beauty of God's creation, my soul connected to that shining landscape, prompting awe and jubilation. As I think about how the physical experience of four and a half decades ago relates to the way it feels as I write it now, I realize that I have told this story many times, reshaping each telling. Sometimes I've used the story to connect to others in the Bennion clan who also think of Greenjacket as a sacred place and to students to discompose their ideas of what is proper. When I tell the story to either group, they laugh at the image of three boys rolling naked in the snow. Laughter is the proper response to our howling at the moon, but that doesn't mean the experience was not also joyful, powerful, and sacred, which is the way I remember it when I write the paragraphs here.

What the story means to me may not be what it means to a reader. Evoking the sacred is like trying to breathe joy as if it is air or to catch the wind in a butterfly net. For one thing, the Spirit is unpredictable, blossoming at unexpected times and often inspiring one person in a group while leaving others cold, especially with stories about rolling naked in the snow. As the Apostle John writes, "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). If the sacred is a luminous relationship between us and a place, another person, an experience, or the divine, then what we're after when we submit ourselves to the sacred is inside us, a benevolent virus. Even when we've caught a sacred moment, we can only hope others will sense the germ and infect themselves. That my metaphors fall short—whether of breathing, hunting, or falling into disease—only shows that the sacred can't be controlled by words.

This elusive Spirit, with the feeling of a sacred connection it creates in our souls, is even more difficult to evoke when we move from speech, which is immediately responsive, to writing, which is memory set in cement. Moroni complains that his weakness concerning "the placing of [his] words" made it difficult for the Spirit to use his writing as a vehicle: "Lord, the Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing; for Lord thou hast made us mighty in word by faith, but thou hast not made us mighty in writing." He admits that the brother of Jared did have the ability to use writing to invite the sacred, "for thou madest him that the things which he wrote were mighty even as thou art, unto the overpowering of man to read them" (Ether 12:23–24). That is a worthy goal for any Christian author, but writing that feels sacred to author and reader is not easily packaged or delimited in a sermonic message.

Ironically, writing that preaches may not work as well as expressive or exploratory essaying. In this kind of writing, wildness and uncertainty are involved, which many of us Mormons have decided is antithetical to the sacred. For most of us, the sacred implies pious reverence, not dancing, howling, and running, whether naked or not. We also want to orchestrate, planning for our readers to experience an infusion of the sacred at predictable points. Of course that might happen, or someone might feel mainly emotion, a social experience that could prepare us for a divine one.

Still, I believe that even if we do everything right in our hunt for the sacred, an actual sighting by us or our readers will be rare. It's like seeing a cougar, almost impossible even for people who have lived all their lives in the same terrain as that slippery creature. Moments of apprehending the sacred, unlike viewing animals in a zoo, can't be scheduled or demanded. When Elijah complained that he had done what the Lord commanded and that all their efforts had failed anyway, he required the Lord's answer. It came, but not in the way Elijah expected. He experienced first a great wind, then an earthquake, and finally a fire, but he didn't perceive the Lord in any of them. Then came the still small voice, and when he heard it, "he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave" (1 Kings 19:13). Elijah at first demanded, but then he was trained again to watch and wait and finally rediscovered his wonder at God's plan for him. I have had that kind of experience, but I have also been surprised by the sacred when I have wandered with my feet or brain, when my sensibility is vulnerable, ready for the unexpected.

The personal or meditative essay is a form that is well suited to this kind of elusive experience. Writing the essay is opening perception to possibility, because the writer's injunction is to test, to try, to wander on a subject. A five-paragraph theme is to a personal essay as the straight lines of an Italianate garden are to the unpredictable tangle of a wild hillside or as a Google-mapped trip is to jumping in the car and saying "Let's head west." The Oxford English Dictionary says that to essay is "to put to the proof, try (a person or thing); to test the nature, excellence, fitness, etc. of. . . . Also to practise (an art, etc.) by way of trial."¹ Essaying toward the sacred requires writers to shut their eyes to the conventional, having faith in the unknown. As the Apostle Paul says, in this life "we see through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12). Stumbling toward spiritual insight is the most essential kind of creation, because it involves remaking the

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, www.oed.com, s.v. "essay."

self, redesigning our own souls bit by bit, drafting and redrafting. The sacred is not a place we can drive or even walk to, but a way of seeing, a luminous connection between self and Other that enlightens the eyes and quickens the understanding.

For almost twenty-five years, I've tried to teach students how to use words to entice the sacred, something like showing them how to set snares for unicorns. We do this by leaving the familiar and conventional, observing the natural, following other writers who act as guides, and opening the private self to exposure but doing so in a safe community of other fledgling essayists. In all of this, we follow the process illuminated by William Wordsworth in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," which is the source from which I adapted my subheadings. Like Wordsworth, we go truant from our conventional lives, wander in the natural world, remember innocence, hope to earn wisdom through facing suffering and through reading, and participate with other creatures in the dance of creation.

Escaping the Prison House

In order to urge myself and students toward a fresh, creative, and previously unknown experience, we first must get out of the classroom, go walking and hiking. The classroom is full of boxes inside boxes, conventions laid upon conventions, heavily constricted. Inside that space a certain kind of learner feels claustrophobic. As we hike, backpack, camp, ski, or kayak, my students and I find ourselves moving away from the mundane world of tasks, duties, and familiar objects that swaddle us in memory and habit. Virginia Woolf says in her essay "Street Haunting" that when she leaves her flat for an evening walk, "the shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye."² As she wanders from her normal haunts, the streets of London in their infinite variety stimulate her imagination.

Walking through a meadow, forest, or desert sparks divergent thinking because of the change in surroundings from familiar to unfamiliar, from simple to complex, from orderly to chaotic. Wilderness embodies the unexpected in the form of a flock of mountain goats, a curious rock,

2. Virginia Woolf, "Street Haunting" in *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, ed. Phillip Lopate (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 257.

moss growing on a rotting log, a horned toad or rattlesnake, a pronghorn or badger. Who knows what we will see when rambling? Many British and American essayists, from Dickens to Thoreau, have written about the connection between perambulation and thinking freely. For Dickens, walking opens the mind to fancy and mental wandering, and he often walked twenty miles a day. He once said, “If I could not walk far and fast, I think I should just explode and perish.”³ For Thoreau, walking in the wild enables us to leave the world of order and industry and enter the Holy Land, where the sun will “perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light.”⁴ In “An Apology for Idlers,” Robert Louis Stevenson writes that it isn’t busyness that we will remember when we are old, but “a faculty for idleness.”⁵ The first is a “symptom of deficient vitality”; the second “implies a catholic appetite and a strong sense of personal identity.” He writes, “There is a sort of dead-alive, hackneyed people about, who are scarcely conscious of living except in the exercise of some conventional occupation. Bring these fellows into the country, or set them aboard ship, and you will see how they pine for their desk or their study. They have no curiosity; they cannot give themselves over to random provocations; they do not take pleasure in the exercise of their faculties for its own sake; and unless Necessity lays about them with a stick, they will even stand still.”⁶ He ends his essay talking about those who trade their “priceless youth” for “chimerical or hurtful” ends. He writes that “the glory and riches they expect may never come, or may find them indifferent; and they and the world they inhabit are so inconsiderable that the mind freezes at the thought.”⁷ The act of temporarily wandering away from one’s ordered life can open the mind to caprice and lay bait for the sacred.

Even though our stated purpose in the outdoor classes I teach is to hunt the sacred inside each of us, our trips and their essays are sometimes so focused on an itinerary that we lose sight of our purpose. Despite these impediments, my students and I have often discovered spiritual insight, uncovered our core identities and beliefs, and felt awe in the face of the creation through writing about our outdoor experiences.

3. Quoted in Merrell Noden, “Frisky as the Dickens,” *Sports Illustrated*, <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1067056/>.

4. Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” in Lopate, *Art of the Personal Essay*, 504.

5. Robert Louis Stevenson, “An Apology for Idlers,” in Lopate, *Art of the Personal Essay*, 225.

6. Stevenson, “Apology for Idlers,” 225.

7. Stevenson, “Apology for Idlers,” 225, 228.

Also, patience is required. Sometimes it takes considerable time to turn our attention to what is before us, to shed our former modes of seeing. One early spring, Katy Street had visited cathedrals for six weeks in England, observing stained glass, thirteenth-century tile, and gothic towers, but had remained relatively unmoved. After walking through a sodden forest to discover Milton Abbey rising before her in a green valley, she felt transformed. She wrote that “standing in [Milton Abbey], wet and cold and dirty on a Thursday afternoon, I felt the weight of God more forcibly than I had in any other place. The other distractions were finally gone.”⁸ Her experience came because of the contrast between the muddy woods and the impossibly tall and elegant abbey, and because she had left her familiar world behind.

I believe that our minds consume experience, but that it often doesn’t transform us—unless something stark and unusual displaces familiar interpretations. When my son Christopher was three, he was obsessed with dinosaurs, so we took a family trip to the Dinosaur National Monument, which is located at the bend of an ancient river. For centuries and millennia, animal carcasses fell into the stream and accumulated at the bend, where the bones petrified. A massive earthquake turned the strata on its end, so digging across the bed scientists went backward in time. The scientists left the last layer uncovered—a massive boneyard of half-exposed femurs, skulls, and hipbones. A dinosaur in a museum, assembled out of plaster and a few natural bones, seems contrived, a probable fiction. But those massive petrified bones were foreign, nearly incomprehensible, and I was impressed with how huge the universe is, how unbounded God is, how massive and changeable his creation. Christopher was more impressed with the lifelike models back in town, but these bones shook me awake.

Splendour in the Grass, Glory in the Flower

Another story: I’ve always loved rain, but when we moved to Houston for my PhD program, I was unprepared for Texas rain. Behind our house we discovered a huge cement canal. The Provo River in Utah in full stream would not have overflowed the banks of that man-made bayou. The first rain after our move, Karla and the children and I ran outside and let the warm drops drench us. It was nothing like the cold rain of

8. Katy Street, “Milton Abbey,” essay written for English 419R: Creative Writing Projects, Fall 2003.

Utah. Rain falling in that buzzing, humid, verdant, oppressively green city was enlivening. When I walked out back a couple of hours later, the huge bayou was brimming with water. I felt an edge of fear at a place so wet that it could create that massive flood in such a short amount of time. I knew that only a little more rain would cause the water to overflow the banks and flood our house. Writing, I feel it again, as if for the first time—awe at the power of the unruly, gray water.

When we essayists get outside, we're not merely leaving our conventional lives behind. We could do this by changing living spaces, jobs, or habits. Focusing on the natural world helps us leave the familiar, but it also fosters dynamic reverence. Mormons recognize the long Hebraic and Christian tradition of going to the wilderness for spiritual insight. Getting outside the classroom and then writing about the experience exhilarates me and my students—whether we're walking the dramatic cliffs of Cornwall on the Irish Sea or rolling in a pile of leaves on campus. When we observe the natural world, turn our attentions toward it, something extraordinary happens. This matches what modern natural history writers, the British Romantics, and the American Transcendentalists promote—when we read ourselves against nature, a reverence occurs that facilitates the written sacred.

On a class trip to the Uinta Mountains in March 2008, Rose Card, one of my students, stepped outside the yurt. She began scooping snow into her water bottle. The others were inside laughing and telling stories, but where she crouched the sound was dampened, the night still. The moon was full and made the snow glow as if it was its own source of light. Looking at the rolling, piney hills, she was impressed with the expanse of the world. She writes, “The trees had ceased to be trees, but had merged together into infinite. I had heard people talk about feeling tiny in huge expanses of creations. But I had seldom had the feeling myself. . . . I had stepped into a world that was much bigger than I was.”⁹ She thought of mountains and valleys stretching into continents, all encompassed by ocean. “And the Earth in all its hugeness, still just a tiny pebble in the pocket of the universe. Which is just another creation amongst the many creations bumping together in the pocket of God. I inhaled slowly, as if to suck it all in. It was too big for my senses. So beautiful it hurt somehow, yet I smiled drunkenly and tried to breathe in more.” She connects her feeling to the sublime, as comprehended by the Romantic poets.

9. Rose Card, “Tangibles and Abstracts,” essay written for Honors 303R: Wilderness Writing, Winter 2008.

First came her act of pausing outside, which was memorable; second came the thrilling, trilling lift of her soul; and third came wisdom, as she articulated what happened. Three acts of creation. Meditation through writing created the sacred out of her feeling of instinctual awe.

On a trip to England with students, when we hiked across the moors in Brontë country, I found the whole horizon bound by heather, colorless because it had not yet bloomed. It seemed we would traverse that sameness forever, never reaching a different, greener country. The wind seemed a blind, incessant force. Thinking we were lost, one student had a panic attack, and that bleak landscape is forever in her memory, reminding her of the expanse and power of the earth. Later on that same trip, we climbed Helvellyn in the Lake District. The weather seemed all right when we started up, but I had never been on top before and wasn't sure where to come down. By the time we reached the top of the long ridge, the weather had turned cold, wet, and misty. At the lower elevation we had chatted as we walked; now the wind and the mountain had our full attention. It was as if we had crossed into a different universe full of wonder and danger. I could hardly see the back of the group from my position in the front. We had a map, but in the howling wind, with sleet blowing horizontally, it was hard to read. We followed a trail, and it led us to a place where a pathway went down to our left. Down is where we longed to go, out of the wind and wet. I looked at the map, prayed, and was overcome by clear faith. I knew that instead of following the obvious path, we should hike in the opposite direction and cross the trackless crown of the ridge to our right. On the other side of the massive ridge, we ran into the correct path, and that took us into the valley. Later I discovered that the left-hand path led to Striding Edge, a yard-wide bridge to the deeper mountains. It's probable that in that blinding wet with such a large group someone would have slipped. On the correct path, we descended, still wet and cold but relieved and grateful. Clouds still cloaked the top of the ridge, but we walked through a pine forest, lit by the unveiled sun. Writing this, I feel it again, the awe and fear at the power of the wind, the relief and gratitude of escaping it.

Standing on Ben Lomond in Scotland, on Dutch Peak or Mount Nebo in Utah; hiking across a hillside saturated with mint and wild garlic in Hardy Country; swimming in the bitter water at Tintagel in Cornwall; walking toward Hole-in-the-Rock in Utah under the persistent, omnipotent sun; or being bitten by swarms of horseflies on the San Rafael River, I have felt similar awe at natural power. The raw world makes me feel small, stretches my confidence in my own identity, and

strengthens me spiritually, especially when I wrestle to interpret the experience later. As I write, I can translate the picturesque and miserable to a more profound awe.

Guides to the Immortal Sea

Often the context for reinterpreting natural experience is literary: students and other writers can discover the sacred when a great author has already hacked out a rational pathway. In 2009, Rick Duerden and I took our classes to climb Scafel Pike but found it too rainy and windy. We needed to get our group over the mountain somehow, so we chose a lower route, Styhead Pass. We should have hired taxis to take us around the mountain. Before we had climbed for an hour, the rain was blowing horizontally. One of the students, a thin woman with no natural insulation, started shivering. The fog socked in, and we could hardly see twenty yards around us. I'd been over that pass twice, but the lack of visibility made it completely unfamiliar. The student leader of the day was Tiffany, a shy but competent woman who fought fires in Utah over the summer. She took control like a boot camp sergeant, keeping the students together. After climbing for several hours, unable to see anything but the path, I became convinced that we should have crossed the pass already and started our descent. I panicked and decided we had left the correct trail and had joined a side trail, one that led to a peak. Tiffany went ahead and returned, convincing me that we should stay on the broad and visible trail. We huddled together and kept going, soon coming to the summit of the pass and descending into the sun. Pushed to their limits, many students knew after that climb that they could deal with extreme weather and arduous physical exertion. The experience frightened and humbled them, showing them their smallness but ironically also giving them confidence in their ability. But something else happened that helped us see the experience as manageable.

On the top, in the middle of the worst blast of freezing rain, Rick Duerden rose up in his poncho and quoted King Lear, “Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! Blow! You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout!” He raised his fist against the storm. Some students laughed then, more did later, but those words—used by a tragic and heroic character as he recognizes and defies the force of nature—transformed how we saw the experience. It helped us reprocess a miserable and dangerous trek into a sublime event.

William Wordsworth, Annie Dillard, Wendell Berry, and others have taught me and my students ways to meditate on experience. They give

us modes of questioning existence, processes for closely observing the world, and patterns for seeing the sublime in experience. Student Kelli Towers thought she could arrange to have the literary tourist experience on Tennyson Downs in England by reading Lord Tennyson's poetry where he walked when he mentally composed it. She climbed the Downs in the rain, but while she was struck by the beauty of the place—the endless striation of whitecaps, the shadows of clouds sweeping across the Channel, the nearly invisible line between sky and sea—the reading did nothing to move her soul. She writes, "Poetry doesn't often speak to me, and my mind wandered to my notebook which was getting soaked and to my umbrella which wasn't functioning at all."¹⁰ So instead of forcing herself to read the poems, she put away her books and played ultimate Frisbee with the other students. The next day, reading Tennyson's poem "Break, Break, Break," she had new insight. She wrote in her journal, "This time, as Tennyson said 'O well for the fisherman's boy, that he shouts with his sister at play! O well for the sailor lad, that he sings in his boat on the bay!' I wanted to add, 'O well for the BYU students who play Ultimate Frisbee.'" Her lines don't have the grace and lilt of Tennyson's, but she realized something important by writing her own: "Suddenly his sadness at the vanished hand was so much more real. My own joy had shared a location with his despair. But I hadn't desecrated that shrine on the hill under the shadow of a Celtic cross [the Tennyson Monument]. If anything, my experience made it more holy." Three fabrics of influence overlap—the residue of Tennyson's emotion in the poem, the shouts of pleasure the other students gave while playing Frisbee, and Kelli's own responding feelings. The act of writing weaves them all together, creating a new and organic way of seeing. "It's strange that my own opposing emotion would give me more sympathy than all my efforts to feel his sadness. However, my own emotion, because I felt it, made me human." Her sought-after lift of spiritual and personal connection to Tennyson couldn't be forced, but it came freely when she perceived the poem and author differently after her physical experience with the other students on that bluff above the ocean.

In Darkness Lost, the Darkness of the Grave

Apprehending the sacred is often accompanied by an edge of fear, which makes me and others focus on the experience and eventually view

10. Kelli Towers, final essay written for the England and Literature study abroad program, 2003.

ourselves in a different manner. Once two of my sons and I hiked all day in the rain in the Uinta Mountains. At evening we were drenched. I had little hope that we could build a fire, but we needed one. More than needed. Casting about, we found a pitchy pine log about a foot in diameter and poured some of our cooking fuel on kindling to get a fire started on the end of the log. My sleeping bag was wet, and we dried our gear as well as we could before dumping everything into our leaky tent. In the night, I began shaking and severe cramps gripped each leg. In the sleeping bag, I couldn't get them straightened out, so I swore with pain and fear, waking my two sons, who were together in a doubled sleeping bag. I knew I had the beginning stage of hypothermia, but I couldn't focus on what to do about it. I thought, "When I die here, my sons will not be able to carry me out." Even now, as I put those words to paper, I am possessed again by fear. My oldest son got me into the bag with him and his brother, and soon I was warm enough to be out of danger. Facing my mortality and later speaking and writing about what happened, I find myself thinking of that experience and place as sacred, a locus of awe for the power and hazard of the earth. The next morning we discovered that the pitchy log had burned completely, except for the bark, which was still intact, a hollow shell in the form of a log.

When we take students into the outdoors, no matter what safety precautions we have in place, some students become frightened. As Joseph Vasicek faced a rappel from the top of Corona Arch near Moab, Utah, he grew more and more unsettled. While most of the class got into harnesses, he wondered whether he should or even could make himself rappel. He sat at the foot of the arch and wrote in his journal, "As lame as it seems, this is my limit. I can read, analyze, and write dense, academic articles on political science; I can travel halfway around the world to the Middle East and feel right at home living there; I can put my most cherished beliefs on the table and argue for them in the face of the most polemic opponent; but I don't think I can do this rappel."¹¹ Then he wondered whether he was "condemned to be a Terrestrial outdoorsman." He talked with Stacy Taniguchi, the outdoor teacher, who told him that he could have a meaningful experience without doing the rappel. "He [told] me that everyone's got their limits, and that a smart man knows his limit and doesn't push himself past it just to prove himself." He trusted Stacy, so instead of interpreting the advice as just

11. Joseph Vasicek, "Under the Shadow of Corona Arch," essay written for Honors 303R: Wilderness Writing, Fall 2009.

teacher-talk, he took it seriously. “Meaningful experience, [Stacy] says, helps us to come closer to an understanding of our sublime nature—the part of ourselves that lies beyond description.” Joseph finished his journal entry, which eventually became an essay, by saying he believed he had found his own divine or sublime nature sitting in the shadow of an arch he couldn’t make himself climb.

Later in a classroom presentation, Joseph quoted Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* as support for why he could have a sublime experience in this natural setting when he decided not to do the rappel. Kant writes, “It is rather in its chaos, or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation, provided it gives signs of magnitude and power, that nature chiefly excites the ideas of the sublime.”¹² Joseph cited part of Kant’s reasoning, that natural objects “raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace.” Observers discover within them “a power of resistance, . . . which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.”¹³ This courage, when accompanied by careful thinking and the use of imagination, enables the observer to accept more than mere discomfort, disassociation, substitution for the familiar (thinking a wilderness is like a park), or terror when facing the grand complexity of the outdoors. Using Stacy and later Immanuel Kant as guides, he discovered how to reformulate his apparent weakness into strength.

Joseph’s discovery depended on him being free to choose whether to rappel or not; he also had to be able to diverge from the group in thought and action, which wouldn’t have happened if the experience had been organized according to authoritarian principles, as occurs with some survival camps for troubled youth and with some reenacted pioneer treks. Even when not in a hypercontrolled group, we can sometimes be authoritarian with ourselves, fearing failure and so limiting our choices. I fear failure if I’m not the first one to the top of the peak, if I don’t act calm when facing uncertainty or danger, or if I become disoriented. We all swaddle ourselves with certainties when we could open ourselves to uncertainty.

12. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement: Part I: Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, section 23, <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/k/kant/immanuel/k16j/>.

13. Kant, *Critique of Judgement: Part I*, section 28.

We in Thought Will Join Your Throng

Ironically, one essential cause of Joseph's, Kelli's, and other students' solitary sense of sacredness came through identification with other members of the group. Joseph was guided by Stacy the outdoor teacher, Kelli by the Frisbee players. We often think that being alone in the depth of the natural world will produce sacred feelings, but when we travel with a community of spiritual explorers, we feel braver and can risk exposure. In an open and well-bonded group, we feel that we can essay in more experimental ways. Also, we have spiritual, sacred experiences in solitude, but we learn to interpret them in communities.

I am depressive, and when I make mistakes, my tradition is to suffer in solitude, beating up on myself. On one trek to England, we had a student, Claire, who bought a cheap ticket, one with half a dozen legs of her journey. Of course her luggage was lost. It was almost two weeks of both frigid and sweaty hiking before her other clothing caught up to her. We bought her a towel and a few necessities, but mostly she wore one outfit the whole time. However, she never complained. When I asked her about her good cheer, she said that she was not going to let her loss ruin the trip she had earned. Despite her clear pleasure when her luggage finally arrived, she bore her discomfort without despair. Later, when we stayed at the Preston temple lodgings, I drove early with a few students to buy food for breakfast. On the way back from the grocery store, I stopped at a petrol station to fill up. As I finished and hung up the nozzle, I realized that I had filled the tank of our diesel vehicle with gasoline. My entire being started to sink at this tragedy. I could have berated myself, could have added to my own misery, but because of Claire's example, I decided simply to deal with the problem. I called the rental company, called a roadside emergency company for a tow, and found a garage that would pump out the petrol and replace it with diesel. All the while I was repeating the mantra, "If Claire could bear her trouble without tearing of hair and gnashing of teeth, so can I." It was painful and expensive, but for once I didn't add to the trouble with self-denigrating mental patter. That night I told the students the story-within-the-story. The next morning we went to the temple. Among the group was a woman who for the previous eight years had done about every self-destructive thing she could imagine. She came on the trip with us to find her way back to herself. Waiting for her turn to be baptized, she started to feel guilty. "What am I doing here?" she asked herself. "I don't deserve to be sitting in this place with all these righteous people." But the thought followed, "If John can

bear up under the trouble caused by his mistake and Claire can endure without complaint, then I'm not going to let myself be sucked into this kind of thinking." Hiking with students through England and Utah, suffering inclement weather and incompetence in myself and others, I have learned the value of community to a writer. An open community gives us the courage to break patterns, take greater emotional risks, write more significant essays.

A similar group helped Jessie Scoville, who, as she started on her tour of England with the other students, sought healing from depression and the feeling that she was subject to the wrath of God. She thought relief would come through escape, through turning off her feelings. Instead, she had to use writing and conversation with others to face her demons. She writes, "I had to look at my testimony, at my relationships with people, at all of my questions. As I came to terms with the fact that I couldn't hide from people or God anymore, I began to find answers."¹⁴ While the others were performing a fireside for the ward in Bath, Jessie sat in the back, writing in her journal. One of the speakers, a fellow student, said something that opened her to influence from God. Jessie writes, "I was struck with the sudden understanding that the atonement is not to prevent sin—but to wipe the tears of those it affects." She realized that Christ didn't come to remove pain, but God sent his Son to comfort us *in* our pain. She realized that it "wasn't God's fault anymore that I and the people I loved suffered; instead, He became merciful in my eyes again. Merciful because He allows us responsibility and agency but also provides us with comfort when agency or sin or the natural rhythms of life hurt us." She was struck by the beauty of God's plan, "that we can have both responsibility for our actions and the mercy of a loving God." Jessie needed isolation from her former environment, space to face her problems, and the embrace of the group as a safety net for her experiment with putting herself together again. What she wrote in that context is honest, clear, and deep, writing that can give readers hope and the feeling that they are sacred beings.

I identified strongly with Jessie's piece and other similar declarations, and eventually I wrote my own, entitled "Like the Lilies of the Field," in which I described how I learned to feel God's love and forgiveness through learning that other people, his children, loved and forgave me. Because fallible people forgave my mistakes, they taught me of God's

14. Jessie Scoville, final synthesis essay written for the England and Literature study abroad program, 2003.

goodness. We all leapfrog toward heaven, taking turns supporting each other as we jump forward.

As an aid to this process, we focused on introspection, but the specific subject and form of expression were open. All these students and I were encouraged—but not required—to reach toward spiritual insight as we crafted and recrafted our essays. We can lead our souls to the spring of the sacred, but we can't force ourselves or others to drink. Through the years I've known Brooke Larson, she has ardently rejected any arranged epiphany. At the end of her time at the Jerusalem Center, everyone gathered for a testimony meeting and farewell, but Brooke felt that she "could not be bothered" and stayed in her room. Finally, almost against her will, she joined the others, but this just intensified her feeling that the meeting produced only "prosaic and trite" testimony, the "tearful, quavering words," which she saw as a "choked-up liturgy on leaving [their] hearts in Jerusalem yaddah yaddah."¹⁵ At the same time, she knew her "relentless criticism" was spiritually crippling. She writes, "I wanted to feel the communion and love I knew those around me were experiencing, each expressing her affection and awe, yet I couldn't stop throwing darts. . . . [It] occurred to me that my bosom would not burn were it even in hell."¹⁶ And then after she had waited a few minutes in a state near torture, fireworks started blooming above Jerusalem, and she could see them through the window. For some reason, as she watched "platinum slate rain down from the sky,"¹⁷ she was moved to remember "times where God had pressed in from creative angles to penetrate [her] hard heart."¹⁸ She felt love for the other people in the center, whom she had previously criticized. She writes that this was "love I did not own, did not know, that was distinctly on loan to me." Whether it was a loan or a gift of love, she writes that it was not earned but came spontaneously. "Never had I worked to cultivate and individuate a love and understanding of these people."

Why did the fireworks prompt Brooke's feeling of the sacred when the testimonies of others didn't? Why did ultimate Frisbee evoke in Kelli emotions that Tennyson's poems couldn't? Why did *not* rappelling

15. Brooke Larson, "Holy and Land," in *The Restored Gospel and Applied Christianity: Student Essays in Honor of President David O. McKay* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 2009), 148.

16. Larson, "Holy and Land," 148–49.

17. Larson, "Holy and Land," 150.

18. Larson, "Holy and Land," 151.

rather than rappelling reveal to Joseph new aspects of his divine nature? The answer to these questions is complex, but Brooke's essay demonstrates one cause—the futility of trying to guarantee a spiritual experience, of forcing the sacred. But we can still prepare the ground for such an experience by helping ourselves and other writers focus on the process of introspection, stepping outside our common shell of experience, urging ourselves to see truly the natural universe, reading other meditative writers, occasionally braving emotional or physical danger, giving ourselves an antiauthoritarian environment, and insuring that we feel safe to experiment inside the circle of a group of like-minded Christian pilgrims.

A native of the Utah desert, John Bennion (who can be reached via email at byustudies@byu.edu) writes personal and historical essays and fiction about people struggling with that forbidding landscape. His collection of short fiction, *Breeding Leah and Other Stories* (1991), and a novel, *Falling toward Heaven* (2000), were both published by Signature Books. He has published short stories and essays in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, *Best of the West II*, *Journal of Mormon History*, *High Country News*, *English Journal*, *Southwestern Review*, and others. He is an associate professor in the English Department at Brigham Young University, where he teaches the writing of fiction and creative nonfiction. He has twenty-three years' experience leading outdoor writing programs that use personal essay to promote student growth.