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Reading nature religiously: Lectio Divina, environmental ethics, and the literary nonfiction of Terry Tempest Williams

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READING NATURE RELIGIOUSLY: *LECTIO DIVINA*, ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS, AND THE LITERARY NONFICTION OF TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS

by

Nancy Lee Menning

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation describes a method for constructing a religious environmental ethic modeled on the spiritual practice of *lectio divina*, or devotional reading. *Lectio divina* is an explicitly religious way of reading, distinguished from other modes of reading not by what is read—even sacred scriptures can be read for mastery of content, for entertainment, etc.—but by how it is read. In *lectio divina*, the reader engages the text with a willingness to be transformed by an encounter with the sacred, mediated somehow by the text. This vulnerability is inherent in a religious reading, as is the intimacy implicit in the repeated engagement with the text that is central to the practice of *lectio divina*. The emphasis on vulnerability and intimacy marks this religious approach to environmental ethics as a form of virtue ethics.

Consistent with the traditional insight conveyed by the two-books metaphor, whereby Christians believed God was revealed both in the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature, I map the classic stages of *lectio divina* onto a reading not of scripture but of the natural world. *Paying attention* requires careful observation, the naming and description of relevant details, and awareness and articulation of emotional responses as one repeatedly visits natural settings. *Pondering* requires a willingness to enter deeply into the religious, scientific, and other sources that help us understand the natural world and our place within it, as well as a willingness to reflect critically upon those sources. *Responding* calls upon readers of nature to take definite actions that flow out of the previous stages of paying attention and pondering, utilizing knowledge born of familiarity to address environmental challenges while also protecting natural settings in which the unnamable sacred can be encountered. *Surrendering* involves acknowledging human limits of understanding, will, and action, and nonetheless finding rest and restoration by trusting in some force beyond the merely human. I illustrate this argument with interpretations of literary works by Terry Tempest Williams, thereby asserting the

relevance of religiosity to human transformation and to efforts to imaginatively embody human-land relationships that further human and ecological flourishing.

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Graduate College
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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CHAPTER ONE

FRAMING THE QUESTION

Overview

This dissertation describes a method for constructing a religious environmental ethic modeled on the spiritual practice of *lectio divina*, or devotional reading. *Lectio divina* is an explicitly religious way of reading, distinguished from other modes of reading not by what is read—even sacred scriptures can be read for mastery of content, for entertainment, etc.—but by how it is read. In *lectio divina*, the reader engages the text with a willingness to be transformed by an encounter with the sacred, mediated somehow by the text. This vulnerability is inherent in a religious reading, as is the intimacy implicit in the repeated engagement with the text that is central to the practice of *lectio divina*. The emphasis on vulnerability and intimacy marks this religious approach to environmental ethics as a form of virtue ethics.

Consistent with the traditional insight conveyed by the two-books metaphor, whereby Christians believed God was revealed both in the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature, I map the classic stages of *lectio divina* onto a reading not of scripture but of the natural world. *Paying attention* requires careful observation, the naming and description of relevant details, and awareness and articulation of emotional responses as one repeatedly visits natural settings. *Pondering* requires a willingness to enter deeply into the religious, scientific, and other sources that help us understand the natural world and our place within it, as well as a willingness to reflect critically upon those sources. *Responding* calls upon readers of nature to take definite actions that flow out of the previous stages of paying attention and pondering, utilizing knowledge born of familiarity to address environmental challenges while also protecting natural settings in which the unnamable sacred can be encountered. *Surrendering* involves acknowledging

human limits of understanding, will, and action, and nonetheless finding rest and restoration by trusting in some force beyond the merely human.

I illustrate this argument with interpretations of literary works by Terry Tempest Williams. Her books and essays are part of a larger literary conversation that responds to Wallace Stegner's (1969:38) call "to create a society to match [the] scenery." Stegner's challenge and the literary efforts inspired by it seek to foster human transformation, individually and collectively, in response to the places we inhabit. Thereby, we might better envision, create, and sustain vital human-land relationships. Literary authors are often reticent to articulate religious sensibilities, though such concepts and intuitions find more frequent expression in literary writings than in environmental rhetoric framed solely by scientific, political, and/or economic commitments. By proposing a method for reading nature religiously, I am asserting the relevance of religiosity, broadly construed, to human transformation and to efforts to imaginatively embody human-land relationships that further human and ecological flourishing.

The rhetoric of religious sensibility

In April 2009, Robert Adams, a photographer whose work documents the human presence in landscapes of the western United States, was awarded the Hasselblad Foundation's International Award in Photography. In the press release announcing the award, the Hasselblad Foundation (2009) described Adams as

> …one of the most important and influential photographers of the last forty years. During that time he has worked almost exclusively in the American West…. Precise and undramatic, Adams' accumulative vision of the West now stands as a formidable document, reflecting broader, global concerns about the environment, while consistently recognizing signs of human aspiration and elements of hope across a particular changing landscape.… Adams' world is not one created by the camera, it is a place that we can recognise and that we all to some degree inhabit—with all its faults, its problems, its incredible complexity and its brief moments of sublime transcendence.…

Adams is primarily a photographer of the modern West. His subjects include tract houses, strip malls, cheap motels, abused land, ruined forests, "and the adult and child citizens of the new West as he finds them, often enough, marooned in bleak trailer parks or graceless rooms" (Rubenfien 2002:110). Adams is also an author with a love of language and literature.[1] Brief essays often accompany Adams's photographic works. These essays, like his photos, convey signs of human aspiration, elements of hope, incredible complexity, and sublime transcendence.

A touchstone of my scholarly work in religious and environmental studies is a line from the essay that opens *Los Angeles Spring* (1986), a series of photos depicting ruined landscapes of developed and developing southern California, including many views of abandoned citrus groves and eucalyptus windbreaks. The essay connected to these photos, suggesting what has been lost in the post-World War II development of Los Angeles, contains this indictment: "All that is clear is the perfection of what we were given, the unworthiness of our response, and the certainty, in view of our current deprivation, that we are judged" (Adams 1986:5).[2] This is more than a straightforward, descriptive narrative of anthropogenic environmental degradation; it is a narrative of gift, defilement, and judgment (experienced as deprivation) that is also religious in character, and is interpretable in terms of diverse religious traditions. The narrative is that of Eden, a story shared in broad outline (if not in specific detail and interpretation) by the western monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. If one reads *judgment* as

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[1] In 1965, Adams completed a PhD in English at the University of Southern California, but took up photography after becoming "disillusioned by the academic life" (Rubenfien 2002:110).

[2] The essay is not a direct interpretation of the series of photographs to which it is connected. The writing accompanies but is not fully integrated with the visual record. As photographer Leo Rubinfien (2002:111) notes, "[d]edicated viewers and readers of Adams's work … often find their understanding of his pictures somewhat informed by his writing, but … the photographs contain a crystallized ambiguity that the writing never fully explains or captures."

karmic consequence, the language might convey a narrative line compatible with the religious traditions (Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism) that arose more than two millennia ago on the Indian subcontinent.

The essay in which this focal sentence appears is brief and merits quoting in its entirety:

> Southern California was, by the reports of those who lived there at the turn of the [twentieth] century, beautiful; there were live oaks on the hills, orchards across the valleys, and ornamental cypress, palms, and eucalyptus lining the roads. Even now we can almost extrapolate an Eden from what has lasted—from the architecture of old eucalyptus trunks, for example, and from the astringent perfume of the trees' flowers as it blends with the sweetness of orange blossoms.
>
> What citrus remains today, however, are mostly abandoned, scheduled for removal, and large eucalyptus have often been vandalized, like the hundreds west of Fontana that have been struck head high with shotgun fire.
>
> Whether those trees that stand are reassuring is a question for a lifetime. All that is clear is the perfection of what we were given, the unworthiness of our response, and the certainty, in view of our current deprivation, that we are judged.
>
> We cherish intimations of mercy. I found once, in the smog, in a depression on an otherwise scraped plain beside a freeway, three kumquat bushes; they had been some farm woman's treasure, next to a house now splintered under earthmoving machinery, and they stood that afternoon more alien than could have been the first such plants from China. Any thought that they might survive was unreasonable. It was difficult to think at all, in fact, against the noise of the traffic. They would not survive. And yet each had, untended by us, gone on to cover itself with golden fruit, as if by the most romantic script. They were implausible but real.

Adams's brief essay helps to contextualize the sentence singled out above. It also contributes additional religious imagery: explicit reference to Eden, the movement from judgment to mercy, and the "implausible but real" fruitfulness of the doomed kumquat bushes. Religious language frequently appears in Adams's writing, perhaps reflecting his early training to be a Methodist minister, "before he turned away from the metaphysical and toward the artist's world of tangible things…. He speaks of humility, of redemption,

of our worthiness as people and as Americans, and he writes of 'the order in art that mirrors the order in the Creation itself.' Once in a while, without any embarrassment, he speaks of God" (Rubenfien 2002:115; embedded quotation from Adams 1981:24).

The rhetorical force of Adams's essay derives in part from its more-than-literal meaning, from its incorporation of religious symbols and its evocation of religious narratives. My scholarly and practical interest lies in the incorporation of religious sensibilities into environmental ethics, by which I mean sustained reflection on human-land relationships, manifested—ultimately—in deliberate action.[3] This dissertation, then, is a work of religious environmental ethics, which has its source in this essay by Adams.

Religious perspectives in ethical reflection

Some people resist the incorporation of religious sensibilities into environmental reflection. Environmental ethics, when constructed from academic locations within philosophy or the physical, biological, or social sciences, often neglects the religious dimensions of experience, reflection, and action that help structure, interpret, and guide human-land relationships. At times, this attitude toward religion goes beyond neglect to disparagement. For example, environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott (2005:365,

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[3] This definition is intentionally broad. Writing of environmental ethics as a branch of philosophy, Elizabeth Willott and David Schmidtz (2002:xii) describe the breadth of the field as follows:

> Environmental ethics asks what we owe each other, and to ourselves, given our ecological context. It also asks what, if anything, we owe to nonhuman animals, to plants, to fragile geological wonders, to species, and even to ecosystems themselves. It asks what kind of life we should aspire to live, and what kind of world we should aspire to live in. It is the study of the value of human life, and the value of life in general.

While I intend an equally encompassing definition of environmental ethics, the kind of reflection on human-land relationships that is of primary interest in this dissertation is that which deepens awareness of the profound interconnectedness of human and ecological flourishing and which calls forth the individual and collective human transformation necessary to sustain that mutual flourishing.

382) has described the Abrahamic religious traditions as "popular, pre-scientific worldviews," the followers of which he characterizes as "primitive, patently irrational, and militantly ignorant." According to Callicott, the stories told by Judeo-Christian adherents are a whistling in the fearful darkness of our pre-Darwinian ignorance; "and what we whistle," he writes, "is the biblical creation story about being created in the image of God, being given dominion over the rest of creation, and being commanded to subdue it" (2005:380).

Setting aside Callicott's failure in this rhetoric to acknowledge the complexity of biblical interpretation and the diverse possibilities for conceiving the relationship between religion and science, his statements would seem to exclude from consideration the fullness of human ethical reflection on the natural world. Many people, when reflecting on human-land relationships, incorporate images, concepts, values, and other elements derived more or less directly from religious sources. A particular landscape may be described as Edenic; a particular group may be reproached for failing to exercise wise stewardship. An environmental ethics capable of capturing the richness of human reflection on the natural world and our relationships to it must encompass, not excise, religious perspectives, while also encouraging critical reflection on these perspectives (cognizant that critical reflection is part of religious practice itself and also arises from more secular locations). Key elements of ethical reflection—our perception of reality, the values we ascribe to the natural world, and our understanding of our place and role within this natural world—may be more or less influenced by our cultural heritage of religious texts, symbols, histories, narratives, and practices, as well as our own personal religious experiences.[4]

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[4] It does not matter if one is particularly religious (as that term is often used); the cultural tropes remain, shaping perception, response, and action.

Elements that are arguably religious are common, if often cautiously articulated, in literary reflections on human-land relationships. Consider this example. In his introduction to the anthology, *The Best American Spiritual Writing 2005*, Barry Lopez (2005) writes of traveling in the interior of Antarctica.[5] One day, late in the trip, Lopez and another member of the expedition sat back silently against sun-warmed boulders until their sense of the present time "broke, in the manner of mercury dispersing. Each of us felt he was being given what he had deliberately sought here—an unbounded moment when immaculate light filled an immense space, a moment devoid of history, empty of language, without meaning" (2005:xviii). Reflecting on this experience of the collapse of measured time, Lopez (2005:xviii-xix) writes:

> I have experienced this emotion before, the sense of a sudden immersion in the profound mystery of life, a mystery that seems to originate in arrangements of time and space that precede the advent of biology. It is a sensation known to many people, often characterized as an awareness of unity with the divine, or as a release from the routine coordinates of life, as a greatly expanded sense of the present, or as a religious experience without the symbols of religion.

Lopez had had similar experiences before, each releasing in him "a floodtide of hope" (2005:xix).[6]

Lopez pondered this particular Antarctic experience for months, asking himself what could have allowed or enabled this arguably religious experience, and ultimately thinking, "It could be reverence" (Lopez 2005:xix). Lopez articulates his understanding of reverence by reference to the work of classicist Paul Woodruff (2001). The precise details of Woodruff's book, which Lopez (2005:xx) describes as lyrical and "beautifully

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[5] Thanks to Willis Jenkins for bringing this essay to my attention.

[6] Lopez is clear that such experiences can and do arise in places much more commonplace and accessible than the Antarctic wilderness. "The essential ingredient in these experiences is humanity, not wilderness" (2005:xxiii).

human," are less important here than the insights Lopez gains by reflection upon them in light of his experience. First, it is important to both Lopez and Woodruff that reverence is a virtue that appears to be common to all humans, regardless of their particular cultures and religions.[7] Second, a key aspect of reverence is the acknowledgment of and response to a reality that does not conform to human desires. Finally, like all virtues, reverence must be practiced if it is to become part of one's character.

One venue for such practice, Lopez notes, is individual and collective ceremony, by means of which the virtue of reverence and its associated feelings are evoked, celebrated, and reinforced. In retrospect, having read Woodruff's book and having had these experiences in the Antarctic and elsewhere, Lopez realizes that he has intentionally cultivated his capacity for the feelings associated with reverence via "a consciously willed effort to be vulnerable to the world, in order to be intimate with it" (2005:xx); this practice of vulnerability and intimacy produced in Lopez a sense of being embedded within the natural settings, not merely an observer of them.

The practice of vulnerability and intimacy, perhaps through acts of individual and collective ceremony, can cultivate a capacity for the feelings associated with reverence, but it does not make inevitable the kinds of experiences Lopez has had in natural settings. Lopez's reflections here turn attention back to the object of reverence: the reality that does not conform to human desires. What he receives from that reality, as Lopez understands it, is a gift. "It's true, as Woodruff writes, that the capacity for such feelings must be cultivated—the gift always has to be acted upon—if these feelings are to go deep

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[7] The Greek historian Thucydides treated reverence as a cardinal virtue, which Woodruff (2001:222) defines as "[a] virtue of such importance to satisfactory human life that it is honored in many cultures and is essential to a complete virtue ethics." Woodruff identifies *pietas* as the analogous Roman virtue; see Garrison (1992).

and sustain us; but the opportunity to enhance a sense of reverence—or of justice, for that matter—is sometimes upon us, overwhelmingly, when we least expect it" (2005:xx-xxi).

Moreover, Lopez writes, that gift feels like absolution, or forgiveness—a feeling of being set free from guilt and responsibility for one's offenses (2005:xxi):

> To feel, suddenly and intensely, reverent toward the world can seem like a reprieve. It releases a person, at least for a few moments, I think, from the modern burden most of us feel over our complicity in the world's waywardness: injustice, religious contempt, ethical cowardice, rampant intellectualizing—the conditions against which the cardinal virtues are arrayed. As such, the unanticipated moment of elevation feels like an absolution.

Whether such experiences are religious or not depends on how one bounds the subject-matter of religion. Lopez characterizes this absolving release as an experience of the numinous, but he asserts this experience stands outside religion (2005:xxi). Similarly, the essay from Adams's *Los Angeles Spring* conveys an Edenic narrative; nonetheless, some might deny that there is anything particularly religious about his articulation. Lopez writes of his Antarctic experience as being "devoid of history, empty of language, without meaning" (2005:xviii). When he writes about the experience, however, he is embedded in history and language and meaning and religion.

The religious traditions, for all their obtuse evil and persistent, all-too-human failures, are the cultural carriers, in large measure, of sustained reflection on the virtues, as well as their cultivation in ritual and ceremony, preparation of the ground for numinous experience, and the impetus for continued human transformation toward some more or less clearly glimpsed ideal. Philosophy can articulate the virtues; it is less gifted with ceremonial cultivation, and it seldom brings a sense of absolution. This dissertation explores the generative (and regenerative) possibilities of sustained religious engagement with the challenge of conceiving and sustaining flourishing human-land relationships, without advocating for a particular historic manifestation of human religiosity.

Lynn White and the rise of ecotheology

For several decades now, scholars, practitioners, and activists have sought actively to connect environmental and religious interests. Books and articles on the connections between religion and ecology are virtually innumerable. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (e.g., Grim 2001; Hessel and Ruether 2000; Tucker and William 1997) have edited a nine-volume series titled *Religions of the World and Ecology*.[8] Bron Taylor (2005b) has edited a two-volume *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*.[9] Roger Gottlieb (2006b) has edited the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*. Norman Habel (e.g., 2000) has edited a five-volume *Earth Bible* series. Brill publishes the journal, *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*. Equinox publishes the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*, continuing the predecessor publication, *Ecotheology*. Conferences have explored intersections between science, religion, and the natural world (e.g., Kellert and Farnham 2002). The National Religious Partnership for the Environment[10] has coordinated the activities of the Environmental Justice Program of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops,[11] the Eco-Justice Program of the National Council of Churches of Christ,[12] the Coalition on Environment and Jewish Life,[13] and the Evangelical Environmental Network.[14] The Interfaith Power and Light campaign of

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[8] See: http://www.hds.harvard.edu/cswr/about/history/ecology.html [accessed 27 May 2009].

[9] See: http://www.religionandnature.com/ [accessed 27 May 2009].

[10] See: http://www.nrpe.org/ [accessed 27 May 2009].

[11] See: http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/ [accessed 27 May 2009].

[12] See: http://www.nccecojustice.org/ [accessed 27 May 2009].

[13] See: http://www.coejl.org/ [accessed 27 May 2009].

[14] See: http://www.creationcare.org/ [accessed 27 May 2009].

the Regeneration Project seeks to mobilize a national religious response to global warming.[15] The Sierra Club actively partners with faith communities, including a joint media buy with the National Council of Churches to air television ads opposing drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (Gottlieb 2006a:500-501).[16] The Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance has an initiative that brings together people from diverse religious traditions to advocate for the protection of wild places in Utah.[17] HarperCollins, working with the Eco-Justice Program of the National Council of Churches of Christ, the Humane Society of the United States, and the Sierra Club, has published *The Green Bible*, a New Revised Standard Version translation of the Bible with ecologically themed passages highlighted in green ink (National Council of Churches of Christ 2008). These citations are a modest sampling of the substantial thought and effort focused on drawing connections between religious and environmental interests.

This body of scholarship, practice, and action arose from a late twentieth century response to environmental crisis and, especially with respect to the academic scholarship, to an inadequately nuanced understanding of Christian thought and practice regarding the natural world.[18] Increasingly urgent concerns about anthropogenic threats to the natural environment also motivated the development of philosophical environmental ethics, albeit without serious consideration of the religious dimensions of the problem and its possible solution. Sustained scholarly reflection on the religious dimensions of human-

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[15] See: http://www.theregenerationproject.org/ [accessed 23 May 2009].

[16] Also see: http://www.sierraclub.org/partnerships/faith/ [accessed 23 May 2009] and http://www.sierraclub.org/partnerships/faith/report2008/report2008.pdf [accessed 23 May 2009].

[17] See: http://www.suwa.org/site/PageServer?pagename=FaithandtheLand [accessed 9 June 2009].

[18] H. Paul Santmire (2003) makes this two-factor argument for ecotheology; the argument applies as well to other academic locations of reflection on religion-ecology linkages.

land relationships took its initial impetus from the 1967 publication of Lynn White's classic essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." Extended, substantive responses to White's essay are numerous (cf. Livingstone 1994; Minteer and Manning 2005; Whitney 1993), and scholars have argued White's argument is flawed in multiple, significant ways. Nonetheless, White's argument asserting Christianity's central role in producing the contemporary environmental crisis has been the touchstone of much scholarship in religious environmental ethics.[19]

White may thus be credited with spurring the development of diverse fields of academic scholarship denominated variously as ecotheology, religion and ecology, religion and nature, etc. Nonetheless, White's argument may have oriented the religious environmental dialogue in unhelpful ways. Willis Jenkins (2008:10ff.), for example, notes it has spawned a persistent fascination with the perils of anthropocentrism, distracting scholars from more productive lines of inquiry.[20] Others assert it has provoked extensive reflection on Christianity to the relative neglect of other religious traditions or religion more generally.[21] Finally, as is also true of the development of philosophical environmental ethics, religious environmental ethicists responding to White

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[19] The influence of White's essay reaches well beyond religious environmental ethics; Barrett and Mabry (2002:284), for example, identify White's essay as a "benchmark publication" that has significantly "influenced scientific thought and career training [in biology] over the past century."

[20] Also see Jenkins (2009). Minteer and Manning (2005:166) review research in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities in order to critically revise White's anthropocentric charges and three other themes in White's classic essay: "White's characterization of the inherently destructive nature of human activity within what he depicted as a largely static ecological order[,] his linkage between agriculture and the human estrangement from the natural world, and his unmistakable doubts about the ability of democratic societies to curb their natural tendency to exploit and degrade the environment."

[21] Much ecotheology is pervasively Christian in character. This is reflected in H. Paul Santmire's (2003) entry on "ecotheology" in the *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, which cites only Christian theologians. Peter Scott's (1998) fourfold typology of ecotheology is also exclusively Christian in scope.

have operated in a context of crisis, perhaps missing more mundane connections between religion and human-land relationships.[22] It is these mundane connections—the unspectacular background of thought and experience and practice and memory—that ground our quotidian lives as well as any possible response we may have to the more dramatic challenges of environmental crisis.

Religion as worldview plus ethos

Those who were already predisposed to dismiss religion—especially in the realm of public discourse and decision making—were also quick to embrace White's critique of Christianity. Not forgetting the problematic nature of the details of White's explication and analysis, his core argument may be summarized as follows: While humans, like all life forms, modify their environments, the late 19th-century linkage of science and technology, underlain by biblically grounded medieval Christian assumptions about human-nature relations, increased the scale of anthropogenic transformation to such an extent as to change its very essence. Thus, the Christian attitudes toward nature that informed (and continue to inform) modern science and technology were, according to White, the "historical roots of our ecologic crisis." That being said, a call for the wholesale rejection of Christianity, much less religion, was not White's conclusion. In contrast, in a lecture delivered at the December 1966 meetings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, he said: "Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that

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[22] One example of scholarship on religious interpretations of human-land relationships that is not framed by the context of crisis is Norman Habel's (1995) analysis of six ideologies tied to the symbol of the land in the Hebrew Bible.

or not" (1967:1207). To that end, he lifted up the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, proposing him "as a patron saint of ecologists" (1967:1207).[23]

In other words, while religiously framed assumptions about human-nature relations lay at the root of the environmental crises of the last half of the twentieth century, White argued that the solution to those ecological problems would be found not by jettisoning religion but by choosing alternative—more sustainable—religious assumptions about human-land relationships. For many people, religion provides the ground out of which we live our daily lives, fashioning a sense of the world around us, our relationship to that world, and a story line that articulates our existence in that world. These religious assumptions about human-land relationships encompass both metaphysical and ethical dimensions, for religions can be understood as integrating a *worldview*—defined by Clifford Geertz (1973:126, 127) as a "picture of the way things in sheer actuality are" or an expression of "the fundamental nature of reality"—and an *ethos*—"a way of life" or the "requirements of human action."

Geertz's anthropological understanding of religion as worldview plus ethos is prominent in the field of religion and ecology. Thus, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (2001:xvi), introducing their nine-volume series *Religions of the World and Ecology*, write:

> [R]eligions help to shape our attitudes toward nature in both conscious and unconscious ways. Religions provide basic interpretive stories of who we are, what nature is, where we have come from, and where we are going. This comprises a worldview of a society. Religions also suggest how we should treat other humans and how we should relate to nature. These values make up the ethical orientation of a society. Religions thus generate

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[23] In 1979, Pope John Paul II named Francis the patron saint of those who promote environmental concern. See Delio et al. (2008:17, note 1).

> worldviews and ethics which underlie fundamental attitudes and values of different cultures and societies.[24]

Richard Foltz (2003) offers an essentially equivalent definition in the introduction to his anthology, *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment*. Noting his preference for the term *worldviews* rather than *religions* while simultaneously reassuring his colleagues in the field of religion and ecology that they are, nonetheless, "all basically talking about the same thing" (2003:xiv), Foltz provides a definition of worldview that encompasses within it—by reference to assumptions about values—an ethical orientation:

> How one sees (or how one's group sees) the world and one's place in it constitutes one's worldview. A worldview includes assumptions about what matters and what does not, about what is more and what is less important. Although worldviews are most often deeply informed by what we in the Western tradition call religions, some of the assumptions that serve as a foundation for contemporary worldviews also reflect cosmologies and value systems that are not commonly thought of as religious (2003:2).

Note that these definitions point to cosmologies and value systems (or worldviews and ethical orientations) that religions either inform or generate but they do not specify how we might distinguish worldviews and ethical orientations that are generated by religions from cosmologies and value systems that, in Foltz's language, "are not commonly thought of as religious." I take up that question, briefly, in the next section. For now, note how closely religion—understood as worldview plus ethos—bears on environmental ethics. Environmental ethics is sustained reflection on human-land relationships, not merely in their scientific description, but also in normative terms. What shall we do? How shall we balance conflicting and mutually exclusive values? What kind of people shall we be? What does it mean to live well? What will best sustain both human and ecological flourishing? Religions—as defined by scholars like Tucker, Grim, and Foltz—offer frameworks for thinking through these questions. Religions help define what

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[24] The Series Foreword was printed, without modification, in each volume of the series. Publication year and pagination of the Series Foreword varies from one volume to another.

it means to be human, what the world is that encompasses and includes us, and how humans should relate to other human and non-human entities within that world.

Defining religion

One does not need religion to have a framework for thinking through questions of what it means to be human, what the world is, and how we ought to interact with other people and with the more-than-human world. As Foltz noted, assumptions underlying our reflections on human-land relationships—while often deeply informed by religions—may also arise from cosmologies and value systems not commonly thought of as religious. At issue here—unresolved by mere appeal to a dictionary—is how one marks out the realm of the religious and of religion.

These terms are notoriously ambiguous; the subject matter of religious studies is difficult to circumscribe. In a literal sense, one may say that there is no such *thing* as religion, meaning that there is no objective thing in the world to which possible definitions of religion might be compared so as to judge their correspondence to any objective truth. Instead, the concept religion is a construct of the western academic mind.[25] To say that there is no such thing as religion, apart from the choice to organize

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[25] The classic articulation of this within the religious studies discipline is from Jonathan Z. Smith (1982:xi):

> If we have understood the archeological and textual record correctly, man has had his entire history in which to imagine deities and modes of interaction with them. But man, more precisely western man, has had only the last few centuries in which to imagine religion.… That is to say, while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another by one criterion or another, as religious—there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.

To similar effect, Smith concludes his chapter on "Religion, Religions, Religious" in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (1998:281-282): "'Religion' is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such

and analyze the data of human cultures in a particular way, is not to deny the validity of any particular religious claim—e.g., the divinity of Jesus Christ as understood by the Christian tradition—or the efficacy of any particular religious practice—e.g., the exchange of youth for wisdom during the girls' puberty rite in Mescalero Apache tradition. Rather, it is to recognize the inherent challenges of *both* identifying a subject-matter that is profitably characterized as religion or the religious *and* defining religion broadly enough to include a sufficiently broad range of cosmological-ethical ideas and practices as part of one's subject-matter. This dissertation is not, after all, a work of specifically Christian environmental ethics or Mescalero Apache environmental ethics; it is a work of *religious* environmental ethics. The meaning of that term—*religious*—as used herein, must be clearly articulated.

Ordinary language definitions are generally unreflective and frequently carry ethnocentric biases. Because the academic study of religion, as developed and practiced in the West, has been profoundly influenced by the western monotheistic traditions, it is useful to consider understandings of religion that venture distinctly beyond those lines.[26] Working definitions of religion offered in textbooks that cover religions of the world or the diverse religions that are practiced in the United States generally highlight three

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as 'language' plays in linguistics or 'culture' plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon."

[26] That religiosity is not dependent on a particular understanding of religion is suggested by Native American religious traditions. It is commonly noted that Native American languages have no word that corresponds directly to the term religion and yet profound religiosity is evident in Native American cultures:

> The subject of religion pervades all Native North American studies, although in the multitudinous Native languages there is no word for 'religion'…. It can be said that for Native peoples the natural was inseparable from the supernatural. Myth was a way of understanding reality. Spirituality played a prominent role in the interpretation of the universe and in the adaptation of human activity to the patterns of nature (Waldman 2009:81).

central elements, the first two of which are often articulated explicitly. First, these definitions reference something analogous to Paul Tillich's ultimate concern: a "perceived ultimacy" (Young 2005:4), a "pivotal value" (Neusner 2003:328), something "take[n] to be holy, sacred, or of the highest value" (Corbett 1997:7), "whatever powers we believe govern our destiny" (Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis 2006:6, 2008:8), or "a sense of power beyond the human" (Oxtoby and Segal 2007:559). Second, these definitions refer to the need to orient or transform human life in relation to this power or ultimate value. "Religion is human transformation in response to perceived ultimacy" (Young 2005:4). Religion is "the seeking and the responding to what a person and/or community believes to be holy" (Neusner 2003:328). "Religion is the pursuit of transformation under the impact of a sacred worldview" (Saint-Laurent 2000:22). Religion is "the way or ways that people orient themselves in the world with reference to both ordinary and extraordinary powers, meanings, and values" (Albanese 1990:6).

A third element—that religion is "shaped by institutionalized traditions" (Fisher 2008:30)—is sometimes implicit in these definitions. Some definitions (e.g., Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis 2006, 2008) refer to historic transmission through myth and ritual. Others define religion as "an integrated system of belief, lifestyle, ritual activities, and institutions" (Corbett 1997:7) or as "a system of symbols (creed, code, cultus)" (Albanese 1981:9). Of import here is that religion is culturally constituted; it is historically transmitted as a tradition, which itself is subject to change and transformation.[27] This is

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[27] While I am focusing here on definitions of religion given in world religions textbooks, a similar definition of religion is offered by David Klemm and William Schweiker in their book, *Religion and the Human Future* (2008). Klemm and Schweiker begin by saying "that what makes a myth, ritual, practice, community, or set of beliefs 'religious' is that it provides ways for human beings to orient existence in relation to what is deemed to have unsurpassable importance and reality amid intractable problems of life" (2008:12). Later, they write: "Religion is the human longing for and awareness of the divine (what is taken to be unsurpassable in importance and reality) experienced and expressed within the concrete cultural life of particular historical traditions" (2008:152). Finally, they make clear that such traditions must be open to critical interpretation (2008:160-161).

abundantly true for organized religious traditions such as Roman Catholicism or Tibetan Buddhism. Moreover, a particular individual's religiosity will often exceed the boundaries of formalized religious institutions, drawing on sources both within and beyond any particular organized religious tradition. Understanding religious belief and practice thus entails understanding how an individual constructs worlds of meaning by drawing on these diverse sources.[28]

Religion as used herein

Religion, broadly defined, will include (a) some concept of an ultimate power or value along with (b) active orientation or transformation in response to that power, all embedded within (c) some cultural context out of which an individual constructs a meaningful world of belief and practice. Though abstract or even vague, the merit of such broad definitions is their inclusiveness. One needs some definition in order to identify what it is one is studying, but a certain vagueness can be useful if one wants to be sure to include wide-ranging expressions of the subject at hand. "Vagueness is certainly a virtue when studying nature-related religion, partly because there are so many forms of it" (Taylor 2005a:ix).[29]

Bron Taylor's intention in calling for a properly vague definition of religion is to retain the widest possible scope for scholarly and practical reflection in the field of

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[28] Formalized religious traditions are often termed ecclesial religion or institutional religion; the more personalized religious beliefs and practices are termed popular religion. See Lippy (1994).

[29] The vagueness in definition can be justified both by consideration of the varying historic meanings of the term religion (and the Latin word *religio*) and the ambiguity of the etymological roots of the term; see Feil (2000). As a result, analytical studies of the etymology of the term cannot "clarify the best way to understand religion or resolve its boundaries. Nevertheless, such ambiguity plays a salutary role in creating an open field for the creative and plural construction of and contention regarding the term religion" (Taylor 2007a:12).

religion and ecology without making the scope so broad that it includes everything.[30] For specific projects, however, even Taylor would employ more precise definitions of religion, "grounded in practical judgments as to their scholarly utility in different cases" (Taylor 2007a:11). What counts as religion must be defined with respect to the purposes and interests of the specific research project, in dialogue with the present and historic community of scholars whose scholarship has defined the discipline of religious studies.[31] In the field of religion and ecology, the prevailing definitions of religion, as discussed above, emphasize worldview and ethical orientation.[32] These are inclusive

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[30] The language of "scholarly and practical" is used to match the structure of the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (Taylor 2005b:xxix), which includes scholarly entries as well as practitioner entries.

[31] Many scholars have highlighted the pragmatic import of scholarly definitions of religion. In *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*, Thomas A. Tweed defines constitutive disciplinary terms as "those that constitute or mark the boundaries of a field of study," such as "*art* for art history, *music* for musicology, *literature* for literary studies, *culture* for anthropology, *space* for geography, and *language* for linguistics" (2006:30, emphasis in original). *Religion*, then, is a constitutive disciplinary term for the field of religious studies. Tweed continues (2006:39-40): "No constitutive disciplinary term is elastic enough to perform all the work that scholars demand of it. But that means we should continually refine and revise our understanding of the term for different purposes and contexts, not abandon it." Benson Saler (1993:68) also affirms pragmatic approaches to definitional issues, writing: "The power of religion as an analytical category … depends on its instrumental value in facilitating the formulation of interesting statements about human beings."

[32] These prevailing definitions are not uncontested. Bron Taylor (2007a:9), for example, has raised the concern that definitions emphasizing the term *worldviews* may be too belief-oriented:

> The term ['worldview'] inevitably places the premium for understanding religion on apprehending *beliefs*, especially religious/metaphysical and ethical ones.… [T]he 'worldviews' approach has typically paid insufficient attention to the important roles religion plays in public spheres and how systems of meaning and religious identities are 'enacted.'

In this quote, Bron Taylor is calling scholars in religion and ecology to think more broadly about what constitutes religion. Religion includes not only beliefs (emphasized by the typical focus on worldviews in the field of religion and ecology) but also the other dimensions of religious life linked to these beliefs, including "experiential, organizational, artistic, ritual, and political expressions" (Taylor 2007a:9). Bron Taylor is referring here to the dimensions of religion identified by Ninian Smart (1996, 2000). A similar point about the multidimensionality of religion is made by Mark C. Taylor (2007c:20-21), who argues that any adequate theory of

definitions, meant to capture the breadth of religiosity with respect to the natural environment, but they do not provide sufficient guidance for reflection within specific scholarly and practical projects.

For the purposes of this dissertation—a project exploring what it might mean to do environmental ethics *religiously* or to construct a *religious* environmental ethic—defining religion as worldview plus ethical orientation is insufficient. Reflections on religion in this project will include careful attention to the articulation of an ultimate power or value, clear explication of the means of orienting or transforming human lives in response to that power or value, and rich description of the process of constructing meaning by drawing on—and critically interpreting—diverse cultural resources, religious and otherwise. And all of this done within the framework of the substantive focus of environmental ethics: human-land relationships.

Doing environmental ethics religiously

What might it mean to do environmental ethics religiously? Stated in another way, perhaps not equivalently, how might one incorporate religious reflection into an environmental ethic? The preceding reflections on the terms religion and religious suggest the complexity of this question. The definitional elements highlighted for this project—orientation or transformation in response to a perceived ultimate power or value, construction of meaning via a process of critically interpreting cultural resources, all culminating in some active response in pursuit of simultaneous human and ecological flourishing—gesture toward the nature of the answer.

Barry Lopez's language, quoted earlier, of "a consciously willed effort to be vulnerable to the world, in order to be intimate with it" (2005:xx) suggests what is

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religion must include thinking (cognition), acting (volition), and feeling (affection), as well as their complex and dynamic interrelations.

missing in many efforts to incorporate religious sensibilities into environmental ethics. Doing environmental ethics religiously will mean more here than cataloging the beneficent and maleficent beliefs and practices of particular religious traditions as measured by some external scale of ecological sustainability. Such work can provide needed resources for religious reflection, but is not in itself religious reflection. Religious reflection, for the purposes of this project, must also manifest the vulnerability and intimacy suggested by Lopez, leaving oneself open to transformative experiences in the encounter with the natural world.

When done *religiously*, environmental ethics will be a critically reflective practice of responding seriously—with the whole of one's being—to some transcendent force or power that is present within or mediated through the natural world and which is anything but indifferent. It will appropriate knowledge—both scientific and other forms of knowledge—critically, in ways that create and sustain a meaningful existence. As a religious practice, it will be grounded in intimate relationships with particular landscapes or natural settings, to which one belongs and in relation to which one is vulnerable. Having thus framed the question, I turn in the next chapter to framing the response.

CHAPTER TWO

FRAMING THE RESPONSE

The practice of responsiveness

Just as ethics can be done without reference to any religious content or sensibility, environmental ethics *need* not engage human religiosity, but it *may*. Environmental ethics done religiously acknowledges the pervasiveness of religious elements (language, images, concepts, values, etc.) in our culture. It recognizes that religious traditions have been the primary cultural carriers of sustained reflection on the virtues and their cultivation in ritual and ceremony. Religious traditions prepare the ground for numinous experience and provide an impetus for continued human transformation toward some more or less clearly glimpsed ideal.[33] Only by drawing on these traditions, by encompassing rather than excising religious dimensions, can scholars and practitioners of environmental ethics respond adequately to Lynn White's (1967) challenge to reframe religious assumptions about human-land relationships—including both metaphysical and ethical elements—thereby fashioning a worldview and ethos that is ecologically sustainable. For those with a religious imagination, religious environmental ethics offers persuasive and compelling practices for constructing meaning and for orienting and transforming human-land relationships.

Much of the scholarly literature that can be cataloged under the subject headings of *religion and ecology* or *religion and nature* is not *religious* in the sense intended here.

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[33] Religious traditions, as they develop, come to be characterized by great internal diversity. Within any particular tradition, the ideals toward which human transformation are directed may be complex—perhaps multiple and mutually incoherent. Thus, within a single tradition, adherents and practitioners may be variously oriented to differing ideals, the expression of which varies in specificity, coherence, and content. This seeming confusion is part of the richness and diversity of religious traditions, and may facilitate internal critique, ongoing reformation, and necessary adaptation to changing contexts.

These primarily descriptive works are "important first steps" (Ruether 2005:79). However, they lack something essential. While providing useful resources that adherents may incorporate into religious practices, or even presenting more-or-less compelling religious arguments for environmental concern or for particular environmental actions, many of these works do not describe the transformative process itself. They do not articulate a practice of vulnerable responsiveness to a more-than-merely-human force. In contrast, this dissertation emphasizes process or practice. I invite readers to think of environmental ethics as a process of personal and social transformation that may, for many people, have a religious dimension. I then elaborate one way of doing environmental ethics religiously. I adapt *lectio divina*, a spiritual practice that structures the religious reading of scripture, to structure a way of reading nature religiously in the ongoing effort to orient oneself to ultimate values, while seeking to embody morally commendable human-land relationships.

Virtue ethics

Three major approaches are generally recognized in twentieth-century normative ethics—deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethics—with the difference being largely a matter of emphasis.[34] "'Virtue ethics' is a term of art, initially introduced to distinguish an approach in normative ethics which emphasizes the virtues, or moral character, in contrast to an approach which emphasizes duties or rules (deontology) or one which emphasizes the consequences of actions (utilitarianism)" (Hursthouse

[34] In philosophy, distinctions are conventionally made between metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. Metaethics explores the origin and meaning of ethical concepts. Normative ethics, following the strategies of virtue theories, duty theories, or consequentialist theories, seeks to derive moral standards (principles or character traits) by which one can evaluate right or wrong conduct. The various fields of applied ethics (e.g., sexual ethics, environmental ethics, or medical ethics) address specific subsets of moral issues (Fieser 2006).

1999:1).[35] Thoroughgoing reflection on any particular ethical question that is realistically complex will likely involve consideration of duties, consequences, and character, but depending on one's primary ethical approach, the starting question for reflection will differ.[36] In *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990:23-25), Martha Nussbaum identifies possible starting questions for ethical reflection that demarcate these dominant tendencies in ethical thought. "How should a human being live?" is the originating question for an Aristotelian (or virtue ethics) conception of ethical reasoning. In contrast, a Kantian (or deontological) conception might take "What is my moral duty?" as a starting point, and a Utilitarian (or consequentialist) conception might begin by asking, "How can one maximize utility?"[37]

Ethics is concerned partly with the rightness or wrongness of individual actions and the goodness or badness of the ensuing consequences. Virtue ethics evaluates these matters in terms of human flourishing, i.e., in light of the goodness of the lives of the persons committing the actions and of others involved in the situations. In environmental virtue ethics, ethical reflection is oriented to some account of human and ecological

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[35] Deontological and consequentialist approaches are often said to be act-centered in ways that virtue ethics—said to be more agent-centered—is not, but see Chapter 1 in Hursthouse (1999:25-42) for necessary qualifications of this potentially misleading distinction.

[36] Other aspects of the ethical approach will differ as well, including one's rule for action.

[37] I insert here the parenthetical terms; Nussbaum would not. Nussbaum (1999) questions the tripartite characterization of modern approaches to ethics; in particular, she recommends doing away with the category of virtue ethics. Kant, she argues, has a theory of virtue, as do the British Utilitarians. The various thinkers typically classified as virtue ethicists do share common ground: a focus on the agent as well as choice and action; a concern with moral character and settled dispositions; and a focus "on the whole course of the agent's life" (Nussbaum 1999:170). "But this area of agreement, though philosophically significant, is thin. It does not demarcate a distinctive approach that can usefully be contrasted with Kantian and Utilitarian ethics" (Nussbaum 1999:168). Rather than referring to misleading and imprecise categories, Nussbaum (1999:201) suggests ethicists "get on with the serious work of characterizing the substantive views of each thinker about virtue, reason, desire, and emotion—and deciding what we ourselves want to say."

flourishing. *How should a human being live?* can thus be rephrased, *How shall we live as both social and ecological beings?* The perspective on environmental ethics taken in this dissertation, as a work of environmental virtue ethics, is broader than the question of what should be done about particular environmental problems: *What should we do (in light of particular obligations or anticipated consequences)?* Rather, environmental virtue ethics asks about what it means to live well over the whole course of one's life, including one's "patterns of commitment, conduct, and also passion" (Nussbaum 1999:170), and in light of one's ecological context: *What character traits and actions contribute to human and ecological flourishing?*[38]

Flourishing is one possible translation of *eudaimonia*, as used in Aristotle's writings. The common meaning of the term in Aristotle's culture was "the good life" (Bostock 2000:12). Aristotle used it to refer to the highest human good, that which is our ultimate goal or aim. To flourish, one must be virtuous. In other words, virtues are not a means to the ends of human flourishing; they are constitutive of flourishing itself. Specifying the ends that contribute to flourishing—what it comes to in practice—is a matter of debate. In ecological terms it likely includes preservation of biodiversity, sustaining the wholeness and integrity of ecological communities, and allowing for the adaptation and development of inherently dynamic ecosystems. More precise specification of ecological flourishing is not necessary for our purposes here. The inclusion of ecological flourishing at all does merit further comment. Associating the life of virtue solely with *human* flourishing fails to recognize *ecological* flourishing as an end for its own sake. Thomistic virtue ethics recognizes that the good of the universe as a

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[38] Historically, public lands management in the United States has been predominantly utilitarian (i.e., consequentialist). While an extensive literature exists developing a deontological approach to environmental ethics (e.g., the rights of nature), this theoretical discourse has had limited practical application.

whole, and of all creatures within it, is an end of a well-ordered creation (Porter 1990:49-51), but the anthropocentrism remains. "[I]t is unrealistic and dangerous to assume that the universe is ordered such that human flourishing will always harmoniously benefit the rest of creation" (van Wensveen 2000:29). A more inclusive view of flourishing is offered by Thomas Berry whereby human flourishing is integrated "within the context of the well-being of the natural world" (Berry 1987:9). "[O]ur individual being apart from the wider community of being is emptiness. Our individual self finds its most complete realization within our family self, our community self, our species self, our earthly self, and eventually our universe self" (Swimme and Berry 1992:268). The end, then, is flourishing as individuals-in-communities, understanding these communities to be simultaneously social and ecological (and planetary and cosmic). The final challenge to anthropocentrism is given by our current ecological situation. In the context of widespread environmental challenges, human self-sacrifice may be called for. Berry suggests we must be "willing to see the human diminish so that other lifeforms might flourish" (1988:212).[39]

Returning as a major approach in contemporary ethics following the publication of Elizabeth Anscombe's (1958) influential essay, "Modern Moral Philosophy," virtue ethics is a millennia-old ethical theory. According to Julia Annas (2006:528), the crucial feature of classical virtue ethics "is the central role of the agent's practical reasoning."[40]

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[39] See Chapter 4 of Louke van Wensveen (2000:62-83) for a description of Thomas Berry's environmental virtue ethic.

[40] By "classical," Annas means a fully structured version of virtue ethics (as opposed to certain contemporary reduced versions). Scholars she acknowledges as providing fully structured versions of contemporary virtue ethics include Lawrence Becker (1998), Philippa Foot (1978, 2001, 2002), and Rosalind Hursthouse (1999). In her article, Annas (2006) enumerates three other features of classical virtue ethics. First, virtues are not merely egoistic means to some independently defined end ("flourishing"); rather, they are constituents of that flourishing. "Classical virtue theories reject the idea that flourishing can be specified right at the start, in a way that is both substantive and makes no reference to the virtues.… Rather, virtue ethics tells us that a life lived in accordance with the virtues is the *best specification* of what flourishing is"

Practical reasoning is central to all ethical approaches. What Annas is pointing to in virtue ethics is that mere performance of right action, even determined as a result of practical reasoning, is not sufficient for virtue. The reasoning itself is part of the exercise of virtue. Virtue is not merely a disposition to act in a particular way; it is a disposition to act in that way *for reasons*, which are clarified and made one's own via ethical reflection. "I am not virtuous unless I have thought through and understood for myself the reasons on which I act, even if I have originally picked them up from teachers and parents" (Annas 2006:528).

Some (e.g., Driver 2001) have criticized virtue ethics for being elitist or intellectualist because of this emphasis on the central role of practical reasoning. Annas (2006:516) replies that "the reasoning in question is just what everyone does," so the charge of elitism would seem overstated. "Different virtue theories offer us differing ways of making our reflections more theoretically sophisticated, but virtue ethics tries to improve the reasoning we all share, rather than replacing it by a different kind" (Annas 2006:516). Martha Nussbaum makes an equivalent claim, arguing that an Aristotelian conception, as opposed to Kantian or Utilitarian conceptions, more adequately "capture[s] what we actually do when we ask ourselves the most pressing ethical questions" (1990:24); it describes "a real practical activity" (1990:24). While this is the kind of reasoning everyone already does, it can and ought to be improved. "Ethics, in [the classical virtue ethics] tradition, emerges from our reflections on how to live, and, when

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(Annas 2006:521, emphasis in original). Second, the virtues have some unified rationale with respect to the final end, taken over the agent's whole life. Practicing the virtues is "part of aspiration to an ideal of living a better life as a whole" (Annas 2006:531). Finally, virtues are *both* socially embedded *and* ideal-aspirational. Some modern criticisms of virtue ethics overstress the conservative implications of the social embeddedness of the virtues, without adequately acknowledging the concomitant aspiration to some ideal of a better life.

developed in a theoretically rigorous way, guides us in how to live better" (Annas 2006:526).

That this is a commonly shared kind of reasoning perhaps explains the prevalence of virtue (and vice) terms in environmental writing. In Louke van Wensveen's (2000:5) exploration of the emergence of ecological virtue ethics, she writes: "I have yet to come across a piece of ecologically sensitive philosophy, theology, or ethics that does not in some way incorporate virtue language." In the writings of those responding to the environmental crisis,

> … we are encouraged to care for our bioregions, to respect trees, to show compassion for the suffering of animals, to be humble and wise in the use of technology, to be frugal and creative in the use of limited resources, and to have hope in the face of impending global disaster. Conversely, we are warned to avoid the arrogance of anthropocentrism, to stop being cruel in our treatment of animals, to admit that we habitually project our fears onto nature, and to put a halt on our greed and the resulting manipulative exploitation of natural resources (van Wensveen 2000:3).

While scholars have developed virtue ethics extensively over the past half century, developments in environmental virtue ethics are just beginning to emerge (see especially Cafaro 2004; Sandler and Cafaro 2005; Sandler 2007). Such an ethic is needed. The central ethical question—How should one live?—calls for an account of right action, but also an account of the sort of person one should be. "[A]n adequate environmental ethic … requires not only an ethic of action … but also an ethic of character" (Sandler and Cafaro 2005:2). The model of reading nature religiously as part of the work of environmental ethics, which I offer in this dissertation, emphasizes the virtues of vulnerability and intimacy, understood both as knowledge (familiarity) and love.

Religious reading

The practice of religious environmental ethics advocated here is an adaptation of the spiritual practice of *lectio divina*, or devotional reading. This is an explicitly religious mode of reading. My use of *lectio divina* as a structuring metaphor for ethical reflection

and action transmits the common claim that sacred reading (whether of scripture or of the natural world) is distinct from other sorts of reading. A sacred or devotional reading—a religious reading in the sense proposed in this dissertation—entails a vulnerability to transformation as the reader orients her life in response to some ultimate power or value.[41]

Consider any written text. One might read it for entertainment. One might read it for mastery of content. One might read it for diverse professional purposes. Imagine one is reading the natural world rather than a written text. Reading for entertainment might involve recreation. Reading for mastery of content might involve scientific inquiry. And reading for diverse professional purposes would include all the ways we approach nature through our various modes of employment as park managers, land developers, silviculturalists, economists, environmental ethicists, etc. None of these are, in themselves, religious readings; they *could* be religious, but are not necessarily or commonly so.

In his book, *Religious Reading*, Paul Griffiths (1999:40) enumerates several modes of reading: "You may read for a wide variety of reasons: for religious learning, for academic prestige, for the acquisition of knowledge, to relieve boredom, to excite your emotions, or to demonstrate a skill." The primary distinction Griffiths draws is between religious reading and consumerist reading.[42] He writes (Griffiths 1999:ix):

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[41] For some this ultimate power or value will be God. For those who do not believe in a god, some other ultimate power or value will function equivalently with respect to orientation and transformation (cf. Goodenough 1998). Consistent with the earlier discussion of flourishing, one can assume that an individual's conception of the ultimate power or value will be (or at least appear) good—flourishing denotes the highest good—but I leave open the specific content of that good.

[42] What distinguishes a religious reading from a non-religious reading depends in large measure on how one defines religion. As discussed in the preceding chapter, the definition of religion one uses can vary depending on the specific project in which one is engaged. In his book, *Reading Religiously*, Paul Griffiths (1999) has a different project than I do here, thus our

> I was never taught, and have still not properly learned, how to read with careful, slow attentiveness; it is difficult for me to read with the goal of incorporating what I read, of writing it upon the pages of my memory; I find it hard to read as a lover, to caress, lick, smell, and savor the words on the page, and to return to them ever and again. I read, instead, mostly as a consumer, someone who wants to extract what is useful or exciting or entertaining from what is read, preferably with dispatch, and then to move on to something else.

The unhurried nature of this reading practice is clear. Through the language of caressing, licking, smelling, and savoring, Griffiths suggests the sensuous nature of the intimate bodily incorporation of the text in a devotional reading. His description makes explicit another common feature of spiritual reading: returning to the text repeatedly.

More recently, Daniel Coleman (2009) has advocated a renewed practice of spiritual reading modeled on the ancient practice of *lectio divina*.[43] Like Griffiths, Coleman (2009:41) advocates a practice of slow, attentive reading as a countercultural exercise in the midst of the modern frenzy of over-consumption:

> Thoughtful, slow, critical, and appreciative reading is spiritually crucial in times like these. If we are to see beyond the cynicism of commodity culture, if we are to engage in the hard work of expanding democracy and producing citizens instead of consumers, we need to become affirmative and suspicious readers. So it does matter what we read, but it matters even more who we become by reading.

Coleman's emphasis on "who we become by reading" highlights the transformative force of spiritual reading. "[R]eading is important because of what reading does, because of

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definitions of religion and, consequently, what it means to read religiously differ. Different reading techniques are appropriate depending on one's purpose.

[43] Coleman's "spiritual" reading is essentially equivalent to my "religious" reading. Coleman (2009:8-9) distinguishes his use of the term spirituality from more narrowly circumscribed religious impulses and experiences, viewed as distinct from psychology, physical sensibility, social life, and political life. Coleman's spirituality—like my use of religiosity—is a more integrative and expansive concept. For Coleman, spirituality involves both a recognition of our own individuality, constructed out of some combination of genes, family upbringing, and social setting, and "a process by which we try to align that unique individuality, find a meaningful place for it, in the movements of the larger social and created order" (2009:9). In this dissertation, I use the terms religious and spiritual interchangeably.

how it positions us in relation to the world around us, to others—to the Other" (Coleman 2009:26). Whether the text can change us depends on the posture we take toward it. Spiritual readers must approach the text with "a posture of openness and expectation, of anticipating something new from the book, an intention to reach through the technology of print on the page to connect with something larger than and outside of our own sphere of experience" (Coleman 2009:59).

Openness, vulnerability, and intimacy are terms that recur frequently in descriptions of *lectio divina* and the various religious reading practices modeled after it. As long as the text is larger than oneself, such that one can approach it "with a sense of awe and admiration" (Coleman 2009:37), it doesn't matter what that text is. Noting that Augustine saw scripture as the vehicle and not the destination, Coleman notes we can perform religious readings of "the books of God, the books by other people, the book of nature, [or] the continually being-written books of our own lives" (2009:127). It is not surprising, then, that Lyanda Lynn Haupt (2009:153ff.), in her book advocating an environmental activism grounded in direct, personal engagement with one's local landscapes, notes the aptness of *lectio divina* for the kind of nature study that can produce a much-needed intimacy with the places we inhabit; such intimacy, Haupt asserts, is essential if we are to respond adequately to our current ecological crisis.

Lectio divina

Lectio divina is a centuries-old practice of reading scripture that has experienced renewal in Catholic and Catholic-influenced circles in the aftermath of Vatican II.[44] It is

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[44] The contemporary renewal of interest in *lectio divina* can be attributed to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). "Diligent sacred reading" of scripture is explicitly affirmed in article 25 of Vatican II's dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum* (1965). In a 2005 address marking the 40th anniversary of the promulgation of *Dei Verbum*, Pope Benedict XVI promoted the practice of *lectio divina*, defined as "the diligent reading of Sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer [which] brings about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading hears God who is speaking, and in praying, responds to him with trusting openness of heart"

a practice that is often articulated with respect to four stages or moments: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (praying), and *contemplatio* (contemplation). Suitably adapted, *lectio divina* offers a model for ethical reflection and action in environmental ethics, a model for deliberating and choosing well about how to relate as a human being to the natural environment. While the reading material *par excellence* for *lectio divina* is sacred scripture, I reorient *lectio divina* toward a reading of the natural world. As adapted here, *lectio divina* serves as a model for a way of reading nature religiously in the ongoing effort to orient oneself to what is of ultimate value—to that in the universe which is supremely good. In other words, it is a pattern for a way of doing environmental ethics religiously.

Some authors (e.g., Rousse, Sieben, and Boland 1976; Pennington 1998) assert that *lectio divina* has roots in the Jewish tradition. Acts 8:26-40, a passage describing the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, is sometimes cited as scriptural evidence for the practice among readers of the Hebrew scriptures during the time immediately following Christ's death. The practice of spiritual reading is evident in the earliest accounts of Christian monastic practice (dating to the fourth century) (Thornton and Varenne 1998:xii).[45] Of critical import to its establishment as a widespread practice in medieval monastic life was its central role in the Benedictine rule. "The defining characteristic of *The Rule of St. Benedict*," which St. Benedict of Nursia (480-546 C.E.) wrote around 530, "is prayer, both personal and communal, issuing from the reading (*lectio divina*) of Scripture and the Fathers of the Church" (Fry 1998:xxxv). Chapter 48

(http://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/library_article/799/Dei_Verbum_and_Lectio_Divina_Benedict_XVI.html; accessed 20 Dec 2008).

[45] Smalley (1964:, see especially pages 26-36) writes that the founders of western monasticism (e.g., Benedict) incorporated *lectio divina* (or *lectio sacra*) into their rules under the inspiration of John Cassian, himself influenced by the desert fathers, and of Augustine and Jerome.

of Benedict's *Rule* begins: "Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should have specific periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading [*in lectione divina*]" (Fry 1998:47).

Taken as a whole, *lectio divina* is centered on a vulnerable encounter with scripture, culminating in some response. Via the practice of *lectio divina*, the person is informed and transformed, with implications that extend beyond the time of prayer itself. Jean Leclercq (1985:419-420), writing of monastic prayer in the 6th to 11th centuries, distinguishes *lectio divina* from other forms of reading by the way it is practiced; more than merely scientific study and more than merely moral exhortation, "*lectio* taught prayer itself, as well as the involvement of the whole person in the service of God's word in human society." The specific format of that involvement was a matter for individual discernment by the person who had been integrally and permanently formed by the practice of *lectio divina*.

The variety of terms offered today as concluding steps to the practice suggests a modern attention to the broader outcomes of *lectio divina*. In its classic format as a medieval prayer practice, it was perhaps taken for granted that *lectio divina* was transformative of one's entire life; this might be particularly obvious within the monastic context. Today, explicit attention is often brought to the idea that *lectio divina* should have consequences in one's life as a whole, even for lay readers of scripture.[46] Thus, John Thornton and Susan Varenne (1998:xiii), introducing a re-printing of *The Rule of St. Benedict*, give the third stage as resting in God and the fourth stage as transformed ethical action in the world.

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[46] Lyanda Lynn Haupt learned the phrase "living *lectio*" from Benedictine sisters at a priory near her home; living *lectio* is "the practice of bringing this kind of attention into other spheres of daily life" (2009:153-154).

Some authors turn too quickly from character attributes to actions in speaking of the kind of transformation wrought by *lectio divina*. One comes to a text with a posture of openness, with a vulnerable willingness to be transformed by an intimate encounter with the text. The reader's focus is complex and multifaceted. Attentive to the text, yet desiring something beyond the text that may be revealed by the text, the reader intentionally leaves herself vulnerable to transformation, seeking to orient her life with respect to what she takes as unsurpassably important and real, with implications for her character and her actions in the world. This dissertation, with its adaptation of *lectio divina* as a model for ethical reflection on human-land relationships, is concerned with broader impacts, with ethical action in the world. The ends of *lectio divina* are not merely a contemplative resting with God or a divine foretaste of some after-death experience, but ethical action in the world. Nonetheless, the integrity of the practice and experience must be retained. While the primary focus of the reader may be on the source of power, meaning, or goodness in relation to which she stands, this dissertation seeks to describe the overall process whereby this focus is sustained, with consequent effects on character and ethical action.

The book of nature

The idea that one can encounter God or the ultimate source of goodness either through scripture or through the book of nature has deep roots in Christian history, and is of particular relevance to a religious environmental ethic. Nature, read as a kind of book, can be interpreted so as to reveal God. The book of nature is a metaphor, a figure of speech calling for imaginative rather than literal interpretation. Catholic physicist Olaf Pedersen (1992) identifies the book of nature as one of several great metaphors that have

historically expressed fundamental human attitudes toward the world.[47] Our understandings of ourselves and of nature, not to mention the form and usage of books, have changed over the centuries. Thus, not only is nature itself open to interpretation, but so is the metaphor of the book of nature. According to Pedersen (1992:3, 4), such metaphors have an "essential openness" to interpretation; lacking a "fixed significance," their "poetic force" enables them to survive changing times and interpretations.

The book of nature metaphor raises certain questions (Pedersen 1992:4): "If nature is a 'book' we must ask first of all in which language it is written? Can it be decoded? Can we be sure that it contains a meaning or conveys a message? What does it tell us? And by whom was it written?" In the Christian world, the strength of the metaphor was enhanced by the presence of the other great book, Christian scriptures. The relationship between the two books, then, raises additional questions (Pedersen 1992:5): "Were the two books equally authentic and reliable? Did they treat of the same subject matter? Would the reading of the one contribute to a better understanding of the other? What would happen if they were found to contradict one another?" The ongoing relationship of science and Christianity has often taken the form of a discourse concerning the two great books.[48]

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[47] Other medieval metaphors discussed by Pedersen are the Sun as King and the World as Clock.

[48] Vanderjagt and van Berkel write that the book of nature (or, given the juxtaposition with the Bible, the "two-books metaphor" [ix]) is "one of the most persistent metaphors in the history of science" (Vanderjagt and van Berkel 2005:xi). Nature, here, is not a machine, but "a text, a meaningful ordering of signs. Nature is seen as an interrelated system of signs that ultimately refers to and provides insight into the wisdom, providence and omnipotence of God the Creator" (Vanderjagt and van Berkel 2005:ix). Tracking the meaning of the book of nature metaphor in relation to understandings of the book of scripture is one way of thinking about the relation of science to religion throughout history. That project is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Further, the book of nature metaphor can be seen "as a stand-in for natural theology" over the course of almost two millennia (Numbers 2006:274). That overarching context, too, exceeds the scope of this dissertation.

In his treatment of conceptions of the earth and earth-human relationships in western thought from the time of the ancient Greeks to the end of the eighteenth century, Clarence Glacken (1967) elucidates what reading the book of nature meant in medieval Christian context. The two-books metaphor, comparing the book of nature with the Bible as the book of scripture, was widely disseminated by the later Middle Ages.[49] The metaphor emerges from the exegesis of the patristic period, especially from interpretation of Psalm 104 and Romans 1:20.[50]

The two books differed in their accessibility to readers but were expected to convey equivalent meanings. The book of scripture, in patristic and medieval times, was accessible only to the wealthy and literate; the book of nature, in contrast, was accessible to all, even regardless of identification with any particular religious tradition. This interpretation of the relationship between the two books was explicit in the writings of both John Chrysostom (d. 407) and St. Augustine (354-430). In pre-modern times, the two books were generally interpreted with an intention of drawing out their correspondences. When contradictions did arise, the clear preference in patristic and medieval times was to accord more authority to the book of scripture, though Ramon Lull

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[49] Glacken refers to the Bible as the book of revelation rather than as the book of scripture. His usage reflects a common understanding within the western monotheistic traditions that the scriptures are transmitted somehow from God to humans. This is evident in the Jewish understanding of the Torah as revealed to Moses by God. It is even more apparent in Islam, in the sense that Muslims believe the Qur'an was transmitted from God to Muhammad via an angelic intermediary. These scriptures then are said to be *revealed* in the sense that they came to humans by some divine action. There is another sense of *revelation*, however; both the scriptures and nature may themselves reveal something of God and God's will for humans. I use the language of book of scriptures here merely to avoid the misperception that the book of nature is not also revelatory, in this second sense.

[50] Also see Psalm 19:1-4 and Job 12:7-9. The works of Augustine are generally taken to be the *locus classicus* of the metaphor (Vanderjagt and van Berkel 2005). Dieter Groh (2005) asserts the metaphor is wrongly attributed to Augustine, and that it was coined instead by Anthony the Abbot (c. 251-356). Drecoll (2005:35) argues that Augustine, in *Against Faustus* (*c. Faust*. 32:20), was the first to use the actual words *liber naturae* as a phrase.

(1232-1315) and Ramon Sibiude (d. 1436) gave priority to the book of nature.[51] According to Sibiude, "The creation is reliable evidence of God's presence and his handiwork; it is a book not subject to the error of misinterpretation, schism, conflicting doctrine" (Glacken 1967:239, 240).[52]

Of import here is the assumption that the same God authored both books, and thus correspondence in interpreted meaning could largely be assumed. By modern times, when the study of nature (science) had largely left behind the book of nature metaphor as anything other than poetic language (see Vanderjagt and van Berkel 2005:xi), this assumption was no longer immediately tenable. The expected correspondence of meaning between the two books in the pre-modern period rests in part on a concomitant belief in a designed earth. According to this view, the meaningfulness that can be read from the order and beauty of nature is a result of the Creator's design. Further, the Creator of the designed earth and the Author of the book of nature—who is also the Author of the book of scripture—are one and the same.[53] Hence, a correspondence in interpreted meaning could be assumed. However, this is not a necessary understanding of the origin of

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[51] Even when preeminence is granted to the book of scripture, the metaphor of the book of nature could still be used to enhance the social legitimacy of new (scientific) approaches to the study of nature. For example, in the early modern period, empiricist approaches to science had to overcome a rejection of the visual related to Protestant criticisms of Catholic imagery. The book of nature, though held in less esteem than the book of scripture, fared better when compared to books of human origin; in comparison to such books, the book of nature elevated the natural sciences over the then-dominant humanities (Harrison 2006).

[52] Glacken (1967:240) continues: "This is an attitude which comes close to the natural religion of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries."

[53] Neither of these claims is self-evident. According to Benjamins (2005:13), "Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-253) was the first theologian to develop a close analogy between the structure of the biblical text and the structure of creation. On these two themes he had to develop a theory, since both the biblical text and [the] concept of creation were controversial." Origen never referred to the "Book of Nature," but his defense of "both the divinity of Scripture and the goodness of creation" laid important groundwork for that metaphor (Benjamins 2005:14).

scriptural texts; nor, at least since Darwin, is it a necessary understanding of the origin and ongoing evolution of the natural world.[54]

The two-books metaphor relies on belief in a designed earth, but also on three further conditions: First, the two-books metaphor is meaningful only to cultures that have a dominant sacred text, understood to have been written (or at least inspired) by a single dominant deity. Thus, van Ophuijsen (2005), in discussing Aristotle's "proto-book of nature," notes that the Greeks would not have comprehended the metaphor. While the Greeks had a belief in design or purpose—Aristotle explicitly asserted that nature did nothing at random—they lacked a preeminent book authored by a God who was also understood to be the Creator of the natural world.[55] Second, according to Dieter Groh (2005:21), a creation theology—God's revelation in and through nature—"could only develop where nature, and often man as well, were seen in a positive light despite the Fall, which affected human nature as well as eternal nature." Such a positive viewpoint is dependent on the Priestly account of creation (Genesis 1:1—2:4) more than the Yahwist account (Genesis 2:4b—3:24).[56] Third, the book metaphor implies a linear understanding of time. Books, in the traditional sense embedded in the book of nature metaphor, have beginnings, middles, and ends.[57] The natural world itself, then, to be read as a book,

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[54] Although Darwinism, by rejecting the idea of a designed earth, "in principle demolished the presuppositions behind the metaphor," the metaphor remains popular today, not so much in scientific texts but in other intellectual contexts and in popular writing (Vanderjagt and van Berkel 2005:x).

[55] Nauta (2005), commenting on ideas expressed in Hans Blumenberg's (1981) *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*, notes that it is not that the ancient Greeks lacked a book, but that the Platonic Forms detracted from the autonomous freedom of an Author.

[56] A comparable assumption is implicit in this dissertation. The trust and vulnerability with which one encounters the natural world via the process suggested herein does assume a creation that is largely "good"—consistent with the biblical God's proclamation in Genesis 1—despite our inability at times to comprehend its devastating forces.

[57] Hypertext technology subverts the assumption that books present a narrative with a fixed beginning, middle, and end. The changing material form of books affects implicit

must be understood to have a beginning, middle, and end. Such a temporal understanding is perhaps most meaningful in religious traditions, such as the Abrahamic traditions, with a Creator God and a linear sense of time.

According to Glacken, the purpose of reading the book of nature was not, in its early formulations, for the intent of scientific and technological control or manipulation. Rather, the book of nature supplemented the book of scripture as a means of knowing and loving God, in the former case, through God's creation. The series editor for the Groningen Studies in Cultural Change, Martin Gosman, articulates this purpose clearly in his introduction to a two-volume series on historical conceptions of the book of nature:

> From Antiquity down to our own time, theologians, philosophers and scientists have often compared nature to a book, which might, under the right circumstances, be read and interpreted in order to come closer to the "Author" of nature, God. The "reading" of this book was not regarded as mere idle curiosity, but it was seen as leading to a deeper understanding of God's wisdom and power, and it culturally legitimated and promoted a positive attitude towards nature and its study (Vanderjagt and van Berkel 2005:vii).[58]

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assumptions as to what the metaphor means at different points in history, as does increasing literacy and the increasing dependence of western society on written texts (Vanderjagt and van Berkel 2005).

[58] A similar understanding of the purpose of reading the book of nature is provided by Ruth Groh (2005b:49):

> This function in the Bible of referring to the Creator and translating this into nature, thus relating Scripture to creation, forms the basis of the normative content of the metaphor "Book of Nature." As humans we are instructed to read this "book" as we would read the Bible. For God is its author, his word has created all natural things, which in turn are symbols pointing back to their author. God wants to be recognised and acknowledged as the author by his readers. The theoretical description through these symbols of the creation-theological method of interpretation shows the medieval understanding of nature to be hermeneutical and metaphysical. The doctrine of the "Book of Nature" cannot be understood simply by looking at things occurring in nature. A sensory experience requires an interpretation which transcends the possibility of purely intellectual reasoning by surpassing the borders of that which is visible. In other words, in order to read the "Book of Nature" adequately one has to make the jump from "physics" to "metaphysics." For all that is visible refers to the invisible, the beauty of this

In the historical context out of which this metaphor arises, then, one read the book of nature for the same purpose one read the book of scripture: to deepen one's understanding and love of God. Reading the book of nature was a means of coming to relate to God, dependent in a significant sense on an understanding of God as the Creator or Author of the natural world. The Author of nature was assumed to be the Author of scripture as well; therefore, the Author revealed by nature was generally expected to correspond to the Author revealed by scripture.

This tight connection between reading God in the book of scripture and in the book of nature began to break down in the context of the rise of modern science, which has its own religious underpinnings. "Seventeenth-century science was born of the Protestant distaste for Catholic metaphysics. It was empirically based, understanding nature by dissecting it" (Geyer-Kordesch 2006:122). With metaphysical interpretation stripped from scientific observation, the stage was set for the slide into atheism. "Nature without God was not a giant leap away from the Book of Nature, as Charles Darwin proved" (Geyer-Kordesch 2006:123). According to Geyer-Kordesch, some early natural history writers—including John Ray and William Bartram—countered this slide into atheism through their literary work, primarily by presenting nature as a whole and finding in nature a spiritual experience (see also Silver 1978).[59]

Reading nature religiously

"In traditional religious language, the aim of sacred reading is a purification of the heart, a conversion. Immersed in the word, it gradually shapes one's life and permeates

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world refers to the transcendental source of all beauty, its order and usefulness to the kindness, wisdom and omnipotence of the Creator.

[59] See Clingerman (2009) for an argument that nature may still be read as a theological text, even in the aftermath of the transformations effected by modern science.

one's consciousness" (Hamma 2002:28). In the traditional religious context, this would refer to a sacred reading of scripture. Consistent with the two-books metaphor, Robert Hamma suggests that an intellectual, psychological, and spiritual transformation may also result from a sacred reading of nature. Despite advances in modern science that substantially challenge pre-modern assumptions about God and the natural world, *reading nature religiously*, as used in this dissertation, remains continuous with *reading the book of nature*. As Pedersen (1992:3, 4) has noted, the book of nature metaphor has an "essential openness" to interpretation and a "poetic force" enabling it to survive changing times and interpretations.

Whereas in medieval times the two books were thought to share a common Author and were expected to correspond in interpreted meaning, and one read the book of nature, at least initially, in order to deepen one's understanding of God, modern science brought about a shift in these assumptions.[60] Yet only a superficial reading of religion would conclude that the book of nature metaphor no longer bears any meaning. There is a burgeoning tradition of theological reflection on the implications of modern science, including cosmology, for our understandings of God and of the human place in the world. It is in this context, deeply informed by the insights of modern science, that reading nature religiously occurs. Knowing God remains an important goal, understood in the tradition-neutral sense of coming to a deeper understanding of the ultimate power or value to which one orients one's life. Stated more fully, the goal is to seek a divine presence in nature—a manifestation of an ultimate value or power—and to orient oneself to that ultimacy in ways that are personally and socially transformative. This is consistent with long-standing theological reflection on the sacramentality of nature (see Schaefer 2009).

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[60] It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to trace this evolution.

In his book, *Earth's Echo: Sacred Encounters with Nature* (2002), Hamma adapts *lectio divina* to structure sacred encounters with nature, providing resources for opening oneself to an experience of the divine in the natural world following the four-step practice of *lectio divina*. He begins by distinguishing three levels of appreciation for the sacred dimension of nature. First, nature may be seen as a *metaphor* for the spiritual life. At this level, something natural would be seen as like something spiritual. It would remind the observer of something spiritual, but not be spiritual in itself. At the second level, the divide between the human and the natural is broken down. The resulting experience of communion conveys *a sense of participation in nature*. One no longer perceives nature as opposed to humanity—as is linguistically enshrined in distinctions between nature and culture, for example—but instead recognizes the human as within nature, as a part of the natural world. Finally, nature may be seen as *a sacred presence in itself*. Implicit here is a belief that something of the divine or sacred is present within humankind. Then, given the dissolution of the divide between the human and the natural at the second level, the divine or sacred must be present in nature as well. In other words, to the extent that humans participate in the life of God, so does nature participate in the life of God. "[N]ature is not simply the setting in which the presence of God is encountered, it is, in itself, a form of divine presence" (Hamma 2002:12). Hamma's intent is to encourage the spiritual practice of encountering nature at this deepest level.

Among many possible spiritual practices, the pathway Hamma suggests for encountering the sacred dimension of nature is *lectio divina*, which he defines as being rooted in Judaism and having evolved into its classic Christian form in medieval monasticism.[61] He defines the classic four stages of *lectio divina* (reading, meditation,

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[61] Beyond being merely accurate as historical fact, the historical positioning of *lectio divina* as the ground for his contemporary project seems to achieve two purposes for Hamma. First, it grounds his proposed spiritual practice of sacred encounters with nature deeply in Christian tradition. Second, it opens up the ways in which the 'text' might be 'read.' In the

prayer, and contemplation), rephrasing them for his own purposes as paying attention, pondering, responding, and surrendering. The remainder of his book presents short readings, labeled by the four stages of *lectio divina*, that lead the reader toward an experience of the divine in the natural world in the biomes of shore, forest, desert, river, and mountain. Eight sets of *lectio divina* readings are provided for each of the five biomes, leading the reader through eight experiences of nature, which Hamma labels encountering, sensing nature's power, feeling of comfort, standing in awe, recognizing our powerlessness, listening to the call, moving in rhythm, and carrying nature within us.[62] I do not draw on these eight steps in this dissertation, but Hamma's structure reminds us of the repetitive nature of *lectio divina*, leading the practitioner deeper into the experience.

Hamma's first level of appreciation for the sacred dimension of nature is insufficient for our purposes. It is unlikely that merely being reminded of the spiritual by encounters with the natural will ground an environmental ethic. At the second level, however, one experiences a sense of participation in nature; and, at the third level, one experiences nature as a sacred presence in itself. This experience of participation in nature and of the presence of what is sacred allows a re-orientation that can transform human-land relationships. The experience of participation can be understood as the communicative pattern of attentive listening and vulnerable response characteristic of

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patristic and medieval monastic contexts, books were scarce, and were at least as often heard as they were read. In addition, also because of the relative scarcity of books in the medieval period, one might 'read' the text as it was visually represented in pictures. Though Hamma's book provides textual readings *about* nature and not visual images of nature itself, this use of *lectio divina* as a framework for practice opens up the possibility of reading nature more directly as well, utilizing all the senses. It is the actual encounter with the natural world, unmediated by written texts, that is of primary interest in this dissertation.

[62] Hamma uses a passage from Terry Tempest William's *Desert Quartet* (1995) in the eighth step of the desert biome readings.

lectio divina as prayer. The experience of a sacred presence points to the ultimate power or value to which one orients oneself in religious practice, seeking transformation in response (or relation) to something that is taken to be ultimate, "of unsurpassable importance *and* reality" (Klemm and Schweiker 2008:12). Again recalling the repetitive practice of *lectio divina*, Hamma notes that "[t]ransformation is an ongoing process. We are always discovering new things about ourselves, trying to discern what is the right way to live in our world, how to use our gifts and our resources" (2002:29). Hamma's language of discerning the right way to live in our world points to the suitability of *lectio divina* as a model for reflection in environmental ethics.

Lectio as paying attention

In its earliest formulations, *lectio divina* was a spiritual practice of prayerful reading of Scripture (and the commentaries on it written by the Church Fathers) that was not yet enumerated into distinct stages. Guigo II, a twelfth-century Carthusian monk and the ninth prior of the Grande Chartreuse, is credited with articulating the classic stages of *lectio divina* as four rungs on a ladder raising the cloistered monk from earth to heaven:

> Reading [*lectio*] is the careful study of the Scriptures, concentrating all one's powers on it. Meditation [*meditatio*] is the busy application of the mind to seek with the help of one's own reason for knowledge of hidden truth. Prayer [*oratio*] is the heart's devoted turning to God to drive away evil and obtain what is good. Contemplation [*contemplatio*] is when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness…. Reading is an exercise of the outward senses; meditation is concerned with the inward understanding; prayer is concerned with desire; contemplation outstrips every faculty (Guigo II 1978: 82, 93).

Though enumerated as four stages, *lectio divina* remained a single practice, with each of the four stages flowing into one another, with indistinct boundaries between one stage

and the next.[63] As Bernard McGinn (1994:135) writes: "For the medieval monk, *meditatio* was the prolongation of *lectio* and at times was scarcely distinguishable from it." Similarly, Jean Leclercq (1985:419), in his summary of the practice of prayer and contemplation in the Western Christian tradition, writes: "meditation was an extension of reading and a preparation for *oratio*." Moreover, the various stages were understood differently by different figures in different social and historical circumstances. For example, Jean Leclercq distinguishes between what *meditatio* meant to Benedict and what it meant to Cassiodorus, a contemporary of Benedict and author of the *Institutiones* of Cassiodorus, a program of studies for monks. For Benedict, *meditatio* is primarily an exercise in memorization while, for Cassiodorus, "meditation seems to take on a more intellectual tone than it does in St. Benedict; it should be done with 'an attention full of curiosity'" (Leclercq 1982:120, embedded quotation—"curiosa vobis intentione meditandi sunt"—attributed to Cassiodorus).

Keeping in mind these caveats about the practice of *lectio divina* and the varying formulations of each distinct stage, it is nonetheless useful to highlight features of the four classic stages identified by Guigo II, beginning with the first stage, *lectio*. "Reading [*lectio*] is the careful study of the Scriptures, concentrating all one's powers on it…. Reading is an exercise of the outward senses" (Guigo II 1978: 82, 93). As originally practiced, *lectio* was an active, fully embodied experience. As early as 30CE, reading aloud (*clara lectio*) was recommended as a type of physical exercise (like walking or running) (Stock 2006:508). Throughout the ancient and medieval periods, reading was done out loud, "requir[ing] the participation of the whole body and the whole mind"

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[63] Just as *lectio divina*, while articulated in four stages, was "one unified activity," it also composed part of "one contemplative life" (Leclercq 1985:423). In the medieval period, monastics were frequently compared to ruminant animals; through the spiritual practice of *lectio divina*, they incorporated the word of God into their very lives (Leclercq 1985:422).

(Leclercq 1982:15).[64] "[I]n the Middle Ages, as in antiquity, they read usually, not as today, principally with the eyes, but with the lips, pronouncing what they saw, and with the ears, listening to the words pronounced, hearing what is called the 'voices of the pages.' It is a real acoustical reading; *legere* means at the same time *audire*" (Leclercq 1982:15).[65]

Hamma terms this stage "paying attention." In a religious reading of nature, one begins by paying sustained, careful attention, with all one's senses, to the natural world. Simultaneously, one must attend carefully to one's own subjective responses to what one observes in the natural world. Many medieval descriptions of *lectio divina* refer solely to a focus on the text itself at this first stage of *lectio divina*, but the subjective dimension is suggested in modern descriptions, as the practitioner is advised to read the text listening for what words or phrases or images stand out to her.

The need to attend to both objective and subjective dimensions of experience is evident when considering *lectio* / paying attention as part of ethical reflection. Recalling that the practice of *lectio divina* is a single practice, articulated as distinct stages primarily for heuristic purposes, ethical reflection too is of a piece, although I emphasize particular elements that are mapped onto the stages of *lectio divina*. With respect to *lectio* / paying attention, moral discernment in virtue ethics involves attending to the details of moral situations. According to Martha Nussbaum (1990:37-40), Aristotelian ethical

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[64] The analogue of "reading out loud" when reading nature religiously may be an actual encounter with nature, as opposed to reading about nature in a book, or viewing a nature documentary on television.

[65] Even when reading to oneself, silent reading did not become widespread until the end of the Middle Ages (Stock 2005:3); see Paul Saenger's (1997) *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading*. Moreover, while individual study of the scriptures was important, reading was not always done between just the one human reader and the printed text. In medieval monastic contexts, a primary context for spiritual reading was at dinner, one brother reading and the others listening. The use of visible images as an accompaniment to preaching and teaching on ethics did not become common until the later Middle Ages (Stock 2005:17, note 3).

reasoning emphasizes the perception of particulars; skillful discernment is characterized by subtlety. Practical wisdom requires skill in discerning the salient features of situations that may contain new and unanticipated elements that are embedded in intricate contexts, and will likely include persons and relationships that are unique. The contexts in which these concrete details are embedded and the particular relationships involved in the situation may embed and involve the moral agent as well. Especially in such situations, the moral agent must attend not only to the external or objective attributes of the situation but also to her subjective entanglement in the ethical quandary.

In reading nature religiously, the moral agent will attend carefully both to her relatively objective observations of the external world as well as to her own more subjective internal responses. Doing this well will be evidenced by a discerning grasp of these details in all their complexity and specificity. In the illustrations that follow of this phase of reading nature religiously, I elucidate where this perception is done well and point to practices that may facilitate excellence in paying attention.

Meditatio as pondering

Meditatio adds to *lectio* a period of reflective silence (Stock 2006:508). "Meditation [*meditatio*] is the busy application of the mind to seek with the help of one's own reason for knowledge of hidden truth…. [M]editation is concerned with the inward understanding" (Guigo II 1978: 82, 93). As mentioned above, *meditatio* was, for Benedict, primarily about memorization. Even without the more intellectual reflection advocated by Cassiodorus, however, we should not too narrowly construe what such memorization might entail. The internalization of the written or spoken word was not a matter of merely memorizing the passage of text at hand. Both memory and imagination are engaged here; the reader seeks to fully imagine the story at hand, in all its sensory elements. With Benedict, the reader seeks in *meditatio* to memorize a particular passage of scripture. The reader also, through memory, reflects on the passage being read in light

of the scripture as a whole, linking the present passage to other scriptural passages and overarching themes.[66] Thus, *meditatio* is about taking a specific text and interpreting its meaning in the broadest possible context, involving reflection as well as memory and imagination. *Lectio* flows seamlessly into *meditatio*; *meditatio* may return at will to *lectio*. In all cases, both *lectio* and *meditatio* are lacking in haste.

When reading scripture, one asks oneself, How do I interpret and understand this specific passage in light of everything else I understand from the scriptures? One may draw on one's own reading of scripture as well as the commentaries of others. When reading nature religiously, one ponders the immediate experience of the natural world in light of a number of orienting frameworks. One asks, How do I interpret and understand this particular reality and my subjective response to it in light of everything else I know about the natural world? Here the sources of orienting knowledge are even more diverse, including one's own experiences in nature, others' claims about the natural world, the observations and conclusions of the various natural sciences, and the framing narratives of one's religious tradition, if any. Thus, in this second stage of *lectio divina*, pondering, one reflects critically on the diverse sources that structure one's understanding of the natural world.

Pondering these diverse sources and their effects on one's reading of the natural world is part of ethical practice. Moral development results from critical reflection; a backward-looking reflection is an integral part of discernment oriented toward choosing present and future actions. As already noted above, virtue is not merely a disposition to act; it is a disposition to act *for reasons*, which are clarified and made one's own via

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[66] The act of internalization (as memorization) facilitates complex linkage of concepts, irrespective of linear presentation in any particular set of texts. Paul Griffiths (1999:48-53) describes mnemonic techniques of memorization in the pre-modern period and the complex articulations between units of memorized texts that such techniques enable.

ethical reflection. The process of practical reasoning itself is central to virtue ethics, and not merely for its instrumental outcomes (Annas 2006:518); ethical reflection drives the process of moral development, in which the moral agent progresses through "stages of increasing understanding and independent thought" (Annas 2006:532).

The moral development that results from critical reflection involves recognizing the social embeddedness of moral practices as well as the ideal-aspirational quality of ethical reflection. Our moral education starts with learning from others, based on the authority we grant these role models and teachers; then, "the purpose of good moral education is to get the pupil to think for himself about the reasons on which he acts, and so the content of what he has been taught" (Annas 2006:517). This moral education is not merely a matter of internalizing, in a conservative way, one's social context; the human agent continually aspires to reach an ideal of ethical understanding and action that is not yet attained, either by the self or by the culture in which she finds herself.

> All classical virtue ethics assumes, in a way oddly absent from many modern theories, that ethical thought essentially includes an *aspiration* to be better than we are. Classical virtue theories are marked both by realistic recognition of the socially embedded nature of our ethical life, and by insistence that if we are thinking ethically, we are striving to be better, to reach an ideal that is not already attained (Annas 2006:523, emphasis in original).

Practical reasoning itself is a skill that can be learned in rudimentary form from others, but which then must be continually refined by the accomplished agent. "There is a progress[ion] from the mechanical rule- or model-following of the learner to the greater understanding of the expert, whose responses are sensitive to the particularities of situations, as well as expressing learning and general reflection" (Annas 2006:518). In this sense, backward-looking reflection—on facts, values, and narratives received from both religious and secular sources—becomes an integral part of discernment oriented toward choosing present or future actions.

Meditatio, or pondering, the second stage of *lectio divina*, corresponds to this process of reflecting critically on one's reasons for responding and acting in particular

ways. For the moral agent reading nature religiously, this includes reflecting on her social embeddedness and aspirational ideals as well as developing her ability to think for herself on environmental issues. Doing this well requires reconciling or reframing conflicting interpretations that arise from diverse sources, perhaps rejecting interpretations that seem flawed or unwise upon careful reflection. In the illustrations that follow of this phase of reading nature religiously, I highlight the moral agent's engagement with conflicting traditions and her ability to come to her own understanding of how to interpret the natural world and her appropriate place within it.

Oratio as responding

The reflective silence of *meditatio* can return to *lectio*, in a repeated cycle of reading and reflecting, or proceed forward to the third stage of *lectio divina*, *oratio*. "Prayer [*oratio*] is the heart's devoted turning to God to drive away evil and obtain what is good…. [P]rayer is concerned with desire" (Guigo II 1978: 82, 93). *Oratio* flows out of *lectio* and *meditatio*, responding to the text as encountered and internalized. "Reading proceeded from the outside through the sense of hearing into the mind, while meditation proceeded from the inside toward outer expression in prayer, liturgy, or oral reading" (Stock 2006:508). The specific form *oratio* takes depends on the context. For example, according to chapter 20 of *The Rule of St. Benedict*, communal prayer was to be brief; individual prayer could be more sustained (Fry 1998:29). Particularly in the case of individual prayer, *oratio* is meant to respond to the vulnerable and transformative engagement with scripture, and thus the language and the form of the prayer is generally not prescribed in advance.

Note that *oratio*—prayer—is embedded within the practice of *lectio divina* as a whole, which is also generally thought of as prayer. In its broader sense, as *lectio divina*, prayer refers to a communicative relationship between humans and the sacred; it is an ongoing dialogue that follows a pattern of both listening (receptively) and responding

(actively). In its narrower sense, as *oratio*, prayer refers more specifically to the responsive moments in this ongoing dialogue. "To understand the distinction between the praying of *lectio divina* as a whole, and the third step, *oratio*, it is necessary to experience the point where we begin to say a full yes to God's work within us" (Paintner and Wynkoop 2008:45).

As responding, this third stage of reading nature religiously is choosing and, as possible, implementing actions that flow out of the previous stages of paying attention and pondering. Here, the moral agent's focus will not be exclusively on her actions (and their likely consequences), operating independently or in conjunction with others, but on acting in such a way as to become the kind of person she is aspiring to be. As a response flowing from a religious reading, it should represent her best efforts to respond to her sense of ultimate power or value, orienting her life in ways that are personally and collectively transforming of human-land relationships.

Even in virtue ethics, where attention is focused on the character of the moral agent, the end point of practical reasoning is action, or at least the intention to perform a chosen action; in virtue ethics, it is not only the action that matters, but also the agent's affective and intellectual state while performing those actions. Developing virtue means developing dispositions to do "the right thing for the right reason without serious internal opposition, as a matter of character" (Annas 2006:517). In evaluating action, then, as the endpoint of practical reasoning, one must attend not only to the action itself, but also to the moral agent's affective and intellectual state as she performs (or intends) that action. Moreover, *lectio divina* is a pattern for ethical reflection, deliberation, decision making, *and* action in relation to what one regards as the highest. In the illustrations that follow, I consider the actions that mark this third stage of *lectio divina*—responding—with respect to how they flow out of the earlier stages of paying attention and pondering.

Contemplatio as surrendering

"Contemplation [*contemplatio*] is when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness…. [C]ontemplation outstrips every faculty" (Guigo II 1978: 82, 93). *Contemplatio* is traditionally taken as the fourth and final stage of *lectio divina*. In some modern enumerations, either *contemplatio* or *actio* (action) is taken as the fourth and final stage; others take *contemplatio* as the fourth stage and *actio* as a fifth stage (e.g., Brown et al. 2006). Other modern enumerations identify additional stages following *contemplatio*, including *compassio* (compassion) and *operatio* (action) (e.g., Campolo and Darling 2007; Pennington 1998:87-90). In a group practice context, *collatio* (discussion) may follow *contemplatio* and precede *actio*.[67] What is at issue in all this diversity is the conception of the ultimate endpoint of *lectio divina*. Initially, *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *oratio* constituted the single practice of contemplative prayer (Leclercq 1985:423); there were only three stages. By the time Guigo II enumerated the classic four-stage model of *lectio divina*, *contemplatio* was understood as a silent resting in God. Thus, the understanding of *contemplatio* as a highly elevated state of prayer that is rare and exceptional is a later medieval development, appropriate for a monastic context with a deep, sustained practice of *lectio divina*. Modern enumerations of the culminating stage(s) of *lectio divina* often point to the response—both in emotion and in action—that is expected to flow from a religious reading.

Noting the endpoint of *operatio* or *actio*, one might be tempted to think that a religious reading of nature for the purpose of constructing a religious environmental ethic might just as well end with the stage of *oratio*, or responding. Yet even the enumerations of the stages of *lectio divina* that culminate in *operatio* or *actio* tend to include the stage

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[67] E.g., http://www.fisheaters.com/lectiodivina.html; accessed 22 Dec 2008.

of *contemplatio* as well. Interpreting *contemplatio* as surrendering, Hamma's term for this classic fourth stage of *lectio divina*, initially seems unwise in an environmental ethic. Nonetheless, environmental awareness and environmental activism frequently produce emotions of guilt, anguish, denial, and despair. Part of ethical reflection is recognizing the limitations of what one can do effectively. Within that recognition, one must be able to address and resolve emotions such as despair. Surrendering, as a stage of reading nature religiously, responds to these needs. In the illustrations that follow, I will explore practices for acknowledging one's limitations and for assuaging guilt and despair in the practice of religious environmental ethics.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE, NARRATIVE, AND ETHICS

Ecocriticism

Environmental ethics, as defined here, encompasses all reflection on the ethical dimension of human-land relationships, including reflection on what it means to live well in a given place, in the context of day-to-day life, done by the residents of that place, and incorporating sustained exploration of how religious thought and practice influence one's understanding of appropriate relationships with the natural world. This dissertation is a work of religious environmental ethics. Without assuming commitments to any particular historic religious tradition, theistic or otherwise, it seeks to take religion seriously by thinking creatively and responsibly about possibilities for human transformation in light of what persons perceive to be ultimate. I offer a model for environmental-ethical reflection that is structured after the spiritual practice of *lectio divina*—a practice of reading nature religiously in the effort to orient oneself in ways that support both human and ecological flourishing. I illustrate this practice with reference to the literary nonfiction of Terry Tempest Williams, who writes about landscapes in the western United States and elsewhere as a woman influenced by her Mormon heritage. While illustrating the practice of reading nature religiously with respect to Williams, readers may reflect on this example and pursue a similar pattern of reflection on human-nature relationships in their own geographic and religious contexts.

To the extent that I am interpreting cultural productions—works written by Terry Tempest Williams—with a particular interest in how they portray human conceptions of and interactions with the natural world, this dissertation could be categorized as a work of

ecocriticism.[68] Ultimately, however, my project is differently directed. I am interested not only in explicating the realm of the natural in the writings of Williams, but also in illustrating with reference to these writings a promising way of doing environmental ethics. The ecocritical work within this dissertation is encompassed by the larger constructive project, structured by it and subservient to it. The primary focus is not on the literature itself; rather, the literature and its interpretation assist reflection on the process of discernment in environmental ethics, and what might make this discernment and the resulting ethic *religious*.[69]

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[68] Ecocriticism, a field of literary studies, is commonly defined as the study of literature and the environment (Branch et al. 1998; Glotfelty and Fromm 1996; Ingram et al. 2007). Ethical questions are central. As an academic field of scholarship, ecocriticism—like philosophical environmental ethics—arose in response to environmental crises (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996:xvi, xx). While ecocritic Greg Garrard notes that the crisis framing may be questioned, "the moral and political orientation … [is] essential" to the definition of the field (Garrard 2004:4). Michael Branch and his colleagues, in introducing their edited collection of ecocritical literary studies, assert that a new ethic is desired, "new ways of belonging to the world.… Thus, a prime impulse of ecocriticism is to locate, open, and discuss this desire as it is expressed in cultural forms" (Branch et al. 1998:xiv).

[69] Ecocriticism can be vexing to locate in the Academy. As an emerging field of interdisciplinary scholarship, it must emerge from some place, and that disciplinary location is literary studies; in this sense, ecocriticism is environmentally oriented work done by "professors of literature" (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996:xxi). Operating from within their own disciplinary context, literary and cultural scholars turn to the natural and physical sciences to produce "ecologically informed criticism and theory" (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996:xvi). Ecocriticism thus brings the natural world into literary studies. "Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory 'the world' is synonymous with society—the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of the 'the world' to include the entire ecosphere" (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996:xix).

As suggested by the language of 'literary *and cultural* scholars,' ecocriticism often takes as its subject matter not only literature but other cultural forms as well, including performing arts, film, and other cultural artifacts. In this sense, ecocriticism encompasses a wide range of ecologically informed scholarship throughout the humanities, including religious studies. Wallace Stegner himself recommended that the definition of what was encompassed within ecocriticism remain "large and loose and suggestive and open" (28 May 1989 letter to Cheryll Glotfelty, quoted in Glotfelty and Fromm 1996:xxii). The ecocritical work within this dissertation, however, is encompassed by the larger constructive ethical work, making this dissertation more a work of religious studies with an ecocritical element than a work of ecocriticism itself.

Wallace Stegner

The writings of Terry Tempest Williams are part of a larger western regional literature that poses a substantive ethical challenge: envisioning, creating, and sustaining vital human-land relationships in the Intermountain West. In turning to this regional literature one finds a highly accessible public discourse on matters of environmental concern. Important ethical reflection is done within this public discourse, reaching a different audience than that reached by academic discourse.[70]

Over the past century, western landscapes have sustained varying mixes of mining, logging, and ranching activities as well as recreational, military, urban, and environmental uses. The associated social and ecological transformations have given rise to widely used labels—Old West vs. New West—that are markers of more complicated patterns of ongoing transformation.[71] Change is incessant, both in the landscape and in the human communities embedded therein. For decades, western writers have explored these changes in community and place. Expressing a yet-unrealized desire for both human and ecological flourishing, these authors often echo Wallace Stegner's (1969:38) call "to create a society to match [the] scenery."[72]

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[70] Milbank (2005:1) opens his discussion of religious themes in imaginative children's literature with this sentence: "Theologians today exercise almost zero public influence." As for philosophers, Bruner and Oelschlaeger (1994:383) have noted that, while the academic specialty of environmental ethics develops, degradation continues; "ecophilosophy has not to date effected consequential societal changes." Religious studies scholarship is perhaps no more fruitful. That said, the public rhetoric may be equally ineffective at motivating change; one might hope, however, that it will at least reach a wider audience.

[71] Other terms, less commonly used, also suggest the pervasiveness of change and transformation. John Baden and Don Snow (1997) have referred to the "Next West." On February 28, 2007, the House of Representatives' Natural Resources Committee held a full committee oversight hearing on the "Evolving West" (http://resourcescommittee.house.gov/hearings/hearingdetail.aspx?NewsID=23). See Colin Irvine (2006) for an argument about how Wallace Stegner's novels present a singular West, characterized by change, yet continuous.

[72] Stegner's influence extends beyond the literary realm to the news media as well. The stated mission of *High Country News*—a nonprofit, independent media organization—is "to

Although Curt Meine (1997) points to Stegner's continental vision, Stegner is most closely identified with the American West.[73] Environmental historian Dan Flores (1997:110) identifies three principal themes found in Stegner's writing regarding life in the West. First, the West is a unique public lands province. Second, the western wilderness was formative of American character. Finally, people must become native, via self-adaptation, to a West that is arid and, thus, fragile. It is this last theme—with its reference to self-adaptation—that points to the substantive ethical question of interest in this dissertation, one that has more to do with transforming humans, individually and collectively, than with transforming the environment.

Stegner's line about "creat[ing] a society to match its scenery" concludes his introduction to *The Sound of Mountain Water* (1969:38), a collection of essays written over the span of more than two decades.[74] Interpreting this phrase in light of the language used here of human-land relationships, *society* maps onto the human and *scenery* onto the land. Note that the phrase calls for change in the human rather than in the land. In this introductory essay, Stegner writes that all places (the West and elsewhere) change continuously, both physically and socially. Writing specifically about the Intermountain West, Stegner asserts repeatedly the need for human populations to adapt themselves to this distinctive landscape. "So if these essays begin in innocence, with a simple-minded love of western landscapes and western experience, they move

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inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West's land, air, water and inhabitants, and to create what Wallace Stegner called 'a society to match the scenery'" (http://www.hcn.org/).

[73] Stegner himself, in *The Uneasy Chair* (1974:34), wrote about Bernard DeVoto's "continental perspective" and "vision."

[74] A paperback edition of *The Sound of Mountain Water* was published by Dutton in 1980 and reprinted by The University of Nebraska Press in 1985. In 1979, Stegner revised the Introduction for this later edition. Quotations from this introductory essay are drawn from the revised essay in the reprinted edition as published by The University of Nebraska Press.

toward the attempt … to understand what it is one loves, what is special or fragile about it, and how far love will take us" (Stegner 1985:10-11). Overpopulation of a water-limited region is of concern, as is environmentally disastrous resource extraction, but Stegner's deeper concern seems to lie more in our attitudes and our self-understanding. The rugged individual of the American West is a mythic culture hero, but also a stereotype that fails to express reality. "The real people of the West are infrequently cowboys and never myths.… They confront the real problems of real life in a real region and have gone some distance toward understanding the conditions of western life" (Stegner 1985:31). Aridity is one of those conditions; another is the fundamentally interdependent nature of successful living in the Intermountain West. The process of creating a regional culture is ongoing (Stegner 1985:37):

> There is no Western face, despite the myths and stereotypes. The people of the West come from practically everywhere, and it would take more generations than they have yet had, and more isolation than has been vouchsafed them, to stabilize the breed. Likewise it takes more generations than they have yet had for the making of a regional culture.
>
> The West is still nascent, still forming, and that is where much of its excitement comes from. It has a shine on it. Despite its mistakes, it isn't tired.

While it is humanity that must change, that transformation is directed by a desire to "match the scenery." This literary phrase suggests more than a literal meaning; thus, a rich interpretation of "scenery" is essential to understanding Stegner's meaning. Stegner had a grand sense of the West, both in what it was and in what it might draw forth from its inhabitants. Recognizing this goes some distance toward arriving at a proper interpretation of what Stegner intended by scenery. In his 1960 "Wilderness Letter," he wrote of the wildlands of the West as "part of the geography of hope"; if the wilderness were to be destroyed, something would "have gone out of us as a people" (Stegner 1969:153, 146). Flores (1997:113) gives this interpretation of what that phrase about hope alluded to: "a hope that humans could retain that sanity of knowing they are

nature's children. Echoing Thoreau, Stegner believed that the wild held out to Americans our last, best hope of being 'good animals.'" The language of hope extends beyond the wilderness to the West more generally in Stegner's introduction to *The Sound of Mountain Water* (1985:38):

> Angry as one may be at what careless people have done and still do to a noble habitat, it is hard to be pessimistic about the West. This is the native home of hope. When it fully learns that cooperation, not rugged individualism, is the pattern that most characterizes and preserves it, then it will have achieved itself and outlived its origins. Then it has a chance to create a society to match its scenery.

The focus on the human does not exclude attention to the land; the land as the source of one's hope or as that which mediates ultimacy must be protected and preserved. Thus, Stegner was an advocate, however reluctantly, for wilderness preservation.[75] Yet Charles Wilkinson (1997:14) highlights the humanistic focus of Stegner's environmental conservation: "Stegner thought that the natural world should be protected for its own sake, but he wrote and talked more about another dimension. The way we treat the land is a measuring stick for the quality of our society, for the level of morality in our civilization." It is about the land, but it is at least as much about us. Stegner's phrase, "a society to match its scenery," suggests where the needed improvement must lie. For Stegner, the creation was sacred and could not be improved upon. "Human beings, by contrast, can improve and enlarge themselves" (Hepworth 1997:71).

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[75] In a letter to T.H. Watkins, Stegner (quoted in Watkins 1997:156) compared himself to numerous other advocates in the early conservation movement whom he felt were considerably more useful than himself:

> I have not been an effective or even eager activist.… Actually I would like, and would always have liked, nothing better than to stay home and write novels and histories, and when the compulsions of some book get too strong for me, I have a history of backing away from environmental activism. . . . I am a paper tiger, Watkins, typewritten on both sides. Get that in somewhere.

This is not to say Stegner wasn't pessimistic. Wilkinson (1997:15, 16) writes: "Yes, maybe we can 'create a society to match its scenery.' But if you understand Stegner's thinking, you know that he thought the possibilities might be scant, and waning.… Stegner never promised that anything would fundamentally change. He just told us what has happened, what went wrong, and what we might try." Revealing his pessimism, Stegner's stories frequently convey human failures. His characters "are commonly aspiring 'protectors' who finally fail in a host of ways to protect those they love" (Graulich 1997:43). Nonetheless, our intentions may matter more than our ultimate success, or inevitable failure.

> [P]rotection is at the center of a web of Stegner's crisscrossing recurrent concerns: preservation, sanctuary, exposure, self-revelation, vulnerability, wounds, loss, safety, judgment, responsibility. In much of his work he assumes that our sanctuaries, literal or metaphorical, will be threatened, that wounds will occur, that someone must take responsibility to protect, and that someone must make sense of the failure or inability to protect (Graulich 1997:44).

If there is failure, there is also solace in the ongoing struggle to create a better society. "Writing from the protective impulse, Stegner offers a momentary stay against modernist despair" (Graulich 1997:59).[76]

My interest in this dissertation concerns that part of the western regional literature thematically connected to Stegner's concern for human and ecological flourishing and for the human transformation such flourishing requires. What is needed is not yet more manipulations of nature; rather, what is needed is human transformation, individually and collectively. This collective effort toward this transformation has taken Stegner's phrase as a common imaginative and symbolic touchstone, as evidenced by the writings

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[76] The language here is a play on Robert Frost's (1939) line about poetry offering "a momentary stay against confusion" in his essay, "The Figure a Poem Makes."

collected in *A Society to Match the Scenery*, a 1991 publication of the Center of the American West at the University of Colorado at Boulder (Holthaus et al. 1991).

Terry Tempest Williams

This dissertation explores the literary nonfiction of one author who writes within this Stegnerian theme. Terry Tempest Williams, a Utah-based author of Mormon heritage, achieved widespread recognition for her book, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991). Williams's books and essays offer fertile material for this dissertation in two respects. First, she has written extensively (and to widespread acclaim) on issues regarding human relationships to the natural world. Hence, her writings are substantively relevant for environmental ethics. Second, her books and essays are works of literary nonfiction. Literary nonfiction is characterized by (1) attention to particular details of the topic under consideration and (2) the personal reflection of the author as she explores that issue; "it is writing about oneself *in relation to* the subject at hand" (Lott 2000:194, emphasis in original). As literary nonfiction, Williams's writing exhibits in fruitful detail the reflective decision-making processes of a passionate and committed person who attempts to live out responsibly the decisions she is making with respect to her relationships to the life that surrounds her. Because the focus is on herself as well as the natural world, we have the opportunity, in reading her literary nonfiction, to attend to questions of individual and communal transformation.

Williams (née Tempest) was born in Corona, California, on 8 September 1955 to a family with roots multiple-generations deep in Mormon Utah.[77] Her family returned to the Salt Lake Valley when her father's military service concluded; Williams was still

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[77] Biographical information in this paragraph is drawn from http://www.coyoteclan.com/ and from Michael Austin (2006b), Katherine Chandler and Melissa Goldthwaite (2003), Kip Clark and Deb Thornton (1999), Mickey Pearlman (1993), and Brooke Williams (1999).

young, so Utah has always been home. At age 19, on 2 June 1975, she married Brooke Williams, a great-great grandson of Brigham Young. Williams has always been interested in literature and nature. During the summers of 1974, 1975, and 1976, she attended the Teton Science School in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, studying the natural world and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. In 1979, she earned a bachelor's degree in English, with a minor in biology, and was hired as a curator of education at the Utah Museum of Natural History. She taught among the Navajo while earning her master's degree in environmental education (1984, University of Utah). From 1986 to 1996 she was naturalist-in-residence at the Utah Museum of Natural History, devoting most of her time since to writing and citizen activism. In 1998, she and her husband, Brooke, moved from the Salt Lake City area (Emigration Canyon) to Castle Valley, Utah. She received the 2005 Wallace Stegner Award from the Center of the American West at the University of Colorado at Boulder, an award "presented to those who have faithfully and evocatively depicted the spirit of the American West."[78] In September 2006, The Wilderness Society honored Williams with the Robert Marshall Award, their highest honor given to a private citizen. During the 2007-2008 academic year, she was the University of Wyoming's first "Eminent Writer-in-Residence." She subsequently taught as the Annie Clark Tanner Scholar in the Environmental Humanities Graduate Program at the University of Utah. In recent years, she has divided her time between Utah and Wyoming.

Her Mormon heritage is a dominant theme in much of Williams's writing. Scholars have identified various Mormon ideas that influence her understanding of environmental issues, including the embrace of the Salt Lake Valley as a homeland, the spiritual essence of all animate and inanimate nature, the fundamental unity of matter and spirit, the earth as an eternal home for all life, and the importance of stewardship guided

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[78] http://www.centerwest.org/events/stegner/index.php; accessed 23 January 2010.

by a communal vision (Chandler 2003).[79] Williams's relationship with Mormonism is complex, leading Austin (2003:51) to write: "But while the spirituality that pervades *Refuge* runs no risk of being considered orthodox, neither could it ever be deemed anything but Mormon."[80] Part of the complexity here is a dynamic within Mormonism, characterized "as a historical conflict between two different versions of Mormonism: 19th-century Mormonism, which was transgressive, erotic, charismatic, and connected to the land; and 20th-century Mormonism, which has become bureaucratic, conservative, conformist, and hostile to the environment" (Austin 2006b:9).[81] Part of the complexity goes beyond this debate within Mormonism to Williams's evolving understanding of her relationship to the religion. Brooke Williams (1999:30) writes of Terry: "I think she had once assumed that Mormonism was the basis for her intense spirituality, but she was learning that the two forces were separate." In *Leap*, Williams (2000:211-212) characterizes communal, rule-bound religion as a rabbit that will be overtaken by the owl of solitary, rule-free spirituality. Almost a decade later, she will write that she still believes in God, but no longer in religion. "For me, religion is still a mirage in the desert—only now I no longer see it as a shimmering glint of hope on the horizon but as

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[79] Other accounts of Mormon environmental ethics include Foltz (2000; also see Handley and Alexander 2001; Foltz 2001), Gowans and Cafaro (2003), Handley (2001), Hunter and Toney (2005), and Kay and Brown (1985).

[80] In an interview, Williams notes that readers outside Utah view her "as Mormon, whereas inside Utah I am seen as an 'edge walker,' an unorthodox Mormon" (Remy 2006:155).

[81] Austin's characterization here of the two versions of Mormonism is drawn from Williams's portrayals in *Leap*. Austin (2003) also perceives a distinction between early and later Mormonism, characterizing the difference primarily in terms of an ambivalent ideology of the desert. A more positive view of the untamed desert as a place of spiritual regeneration prevailed prior to the exodus to the Salt Lake Valley. After the exodus, led by Brigham Young, the desert was viewed more as a place of conquest, as a landscape in need of redemption. Alexander (1994, 1998) and Ball and Brotherson (1999) present more nuanced accounts of environmental consciousness in the Mormon community in the decades following their arrival in the Salt Lake Valley.

an abstraction of thought that I cannot hold. Neither does it hold me" (Williams 2008b:260). While Williams's relationship to Mormonism has shifted over the decades, she remains substantially formed by her Mormon heritage. Her rejections of particular aspects of Mormon religiosity are not a wholesale rejection of everything she learned from that culture and from her discerning engagement with its religious history.

Beyond the influence of its environmental themes, Mormonism has affected how Williams views the importance of storytelling. "Williams draws on the cultural value that Mormons place on storytelling, both communally and individually, as a means of reinforcing identity and sharing values. In church meetings and in informal social settings Mormons tell stories to build community, express gratitude, and affirm faith" (Clark and Thornton 1999:304). For Williams, stories bind us to both place and people and are essential to political discourse. "As a nationally recognized environmentalist, feminist, and spokesperson for the American West, Williams eschews traditional political rhetoric and relies instead on the power of story to bring about social change" (Clark and Thornton 1999:303-304).

Consistent with the pervasiveness of human frailty and of environmental degradation and with the difficult challenge of creating a society to match the scenery, Williams's stories do not present a facile, uncomplicated view of either humanity or nature. In particular, literary critics and others who write about Williams often refer to the importance of paradox, contradiction, and tension in her work. "Tensions and oppositions abound in her works, as they do in the natural world…. Williams's 'divided heart' is a distinguishing quality of her writing. Among contemporary nature writers, we find few who manifest the intensity of struggle on as many fronts" (Chandler and Goldthwaite 2003:ix, xiii). Karla Armbruster (1995) interprets Williams as presenting a poststructuralist sense of subjectivity, which is appropriate for an engagement with the natural world intent upon ongoing human transformation. Williams incorporates the paradoxes of identity in her writing …

> by representing her subjectivity and her relationship with nature as constantly shifting and changing in relation to forces outside herself rather than as inherent and unchanging. In representing her identity as constructed, shifting, and paradoxical, Williams echoes poststructuralist views that our subjectivities are constructed by (sometimes contradictory) cultural/historical forces outside of ourselves; unlike most poststructuralists, though, Williams sees nonhuman nature as one of the outside forces acting to structure subjectivity. In fact, she sees nature itself as the ultimate symbol of change and paradox rather than as the repository of unchanging, essential facts (Armbruster 1995:212).

Under this view of subjectivity, cultural and natural contexts are understood to shape identity, but individuals retain agency and can use narrative or discourse to reinterpret and reconstruct self and context.[82] "Williams's work reveals her awareness not only that her identity is constructed and changing, but also that she can use narrative as a way to contribute to the cultural forces that shape identity" (Armbruster 1995:212). Through her writing, Williams engages with the natural and cultural forces that shape her, constructing narratives that change both herself and her context.

Literature and ethics

The long-standing and ongoing public discourse about creating a society to match the scenery, instantiated here in the literary nonfiction of Terry Tempest Williams, can be viewed as both reflecting and constituting an individual and collective process of moral reflection on the challenge of envisioning, creating, and sustaining vital human-land relationships in the Intermountain West. Any individual text by Terry Tempest Williams, all of her works taken as a set, or the Stegnerian-themed western regional literature as a whole give expression to an ongoing process of ethical reflection, sensitive to contextual and personal particularities, conscious of social embeddedness, aspiring to a better future, and with attention to both the intellectual and affective aspects of virtuous action. By

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[82] Key feminist theorists on these issues of the constructedness of subjectivity and the role of narrative in redefining identity and refashioning cultural forces include Linda Alcoff (1988) and Teresa de Lauretis (1986). Also see Diana Fuss (1989).

privileging Williams's writing in this dissertation, I seek to use this one individual's extended, passionate reflection on people and ecology in the Intermountain West to help bridge a commonly perceived gap between practice and theory in environmental ethics. Practitioners often find the academic discourse of environmental ethics irrelevant to their experience and goals. For their part, environmental ethicists have bemoaned the lack of impact their intellectual work has borne for the resolution of actual environmental problems.[83] In this dissertation, I interpret Williams's literary nonfiction to highlight aspects of her practical-reasoning process, consistent with an argument that sustained ethical reflection occurs in public discourse as well as in academic discourse.

The public discourse I have in mind—the Stegnerian-themed western regional literature, including the works of Williams—is a literary discourse. In *Love's Knowledge*, Martha Nussbaum (1990:104) argues that "works of literature … have an essential role to play in ethical inquiry." Scholars such as Wayne Booth and Nussbaum tend to focus on fiction—novels in particular—but both Booth and Nussbaum assert that their arguments about the ethical implications of literature extend beyond that particular genre. For example, Booth in his afterword to the second edition of *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983) asserts that much of his treatment of effective rhetorical methods in fiction applies to all narratives, including nonfiction and characteristically human ways of story-telling. In an article on ethical criticism, he asserts that "ethical criticism is relevant to all literature" (Booth 1998:351), including in the category of literature all stories with the temporality characteristic of narrative. For her part, Nussbaum emphasizes novels because they are

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[83] The perceived irrelevancy of much academic work, at least in philosophical environmental ethics, may reflect the tendency of many environmental philosophers to exclude religious symbols and narratives as important elements of ethical reflection. The desire for more effective political action on environmental issues motivates philosopher Max Oelschlaeger's turn to religious narrative in his book, *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis* (1994).

likely to evoke the reader's imaginative embodiment of the characters' lives in ways that can lead to a shift in one's perspective on one's own life. However, she asserts that other works may achieve this same end, especially if they highlight "the effect of circumstances on the emotions and the inner world" and thereby "promote identification and sympathy in the reader" (Nussbaum 1995:5). Again, Nussbaum writes that literary works other than novels will adequately convey the complex reality of ethical contexts "so long as these are written in a style that gives sufficient attention to particularity and emotion, and so long as they involve their readers in relevant activities of searching and feeling, especially feeling concerning their own possibilities as well as those of the characters" (1990:46).[84]

Unlike written forms that offer more impoverished illustrations, literary works such as novels can articulate "a sufficiently rich and inclusive conception of the opening question and of the dialectical procedure that pursues it" (Nussbaum 1990:26), whether that question is about moral duty, maximizing utility, or human flourishing.[85] Further, literary works can reveal what the world looks like to a person that holds a particular ethical conception (Nussbaum 1990:124). The Aristotelian question of how to live well refers to the whole of one's life. Complex literary narratives, as opposed to more circumscribed examples, "display longterm patterns of character, action, and

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[84] On the relationship between literature and ethics, also see Booth (1988), Barbieri (1998), Eskin (2004), Gregory (1995, 1998), and Ward (1990).

[85] Nussbaum notes that novels can portray characters propounding varying ethical conceptions (e.g., Aristotelian, Kantian, or Utilitarian). However, a major thesis of *Love's Knowledge* is that form and content are intimately related; some content cannot be expressed in some forms without contradiction. For example, content that asserts the importance of the emotions but is written in a form that appeals only to the intellect exhibits such a contradiction. According to Nussbaum (see 1990:26), the form of the novel is biased toward an Aristotelian ethical conception. Thus, characters that expound other conceptions generally fare poorly with readers; by consenting to the novel's commitments, readers break ethically with characters embodying other ethical conceptions.

commitment, while investigating the relevant passions with acute perception" (Nussbaum 1999:175). Literary forms of writing offer "views of the world and how one should live in it" that are "more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars" than other forms of writing (Nussbaum 1990:3).

Most importantly, perhaps, Nussbaum argues that works of literature provide an experiential education in practical reasoning. The virtuous moral agent needs to cultivate "perception and responsiveness: the ability to read a situation, singling out what is relevant for thought and action" (1990:44). If one holds an Aristotelian conception of practical reasoning, perception and responsiveness cannot be learned by formulas. They must be learned by experience. Life grants us that experience, but our own experience is limited and parochial. Moreover, we do not often live our lives with the heightened awareness and greater precision we bring to the activity of literary imagining. Literature, then, deepens as well as broadens our experience (Nussbaum 1990:47-48).

With this understanding of the role of literature in ethical inquiry, I interpret the work of Williams so as to draw out aspects of her religious reading of nature that illustrate my argument about *lectio divina* as a model for ethical reflection. My purpose is to enhance the ability of Williams's readers to see these elements in her work. Doing ethics with a religious sensibility and, more specifically, reading nature religiously signifies many things: attending carefully to religious symbols, narratives, and practices as part of the rich cultural heritage that sustains and enlivens creative reflection on human-land relationships; acknowledging the widespread intuition that there is something beyond us, individually and collectively, that calls to us and challenges us, and to which we must respond; being willing—and even desiring—to be transformed by one's vulnerable encounter with the natural world; and, finally, orienting this transformation in relation to what one understands as unsurpassably important and real. In all these senses, Williams reads nature religiously, articulating her process of ethical reflection in her literary nonfiction. Through the interpretations offered here, I encourage

others to learn something from Williams about how they might read nature religiously in their own contexts, operating out of whatever religious traditions and senses of ultimacy they hold.

Storytelling and sense of place

Williams wrote two children's books—*The Secret Language of Snow* (Williams and Major 1984) and *Between Cattails* (Williams 1985)—before reorienting her prose writing to an adult audience.[86] *Pieces of White Shell: A Journey to Navajoland* (Williams 1984) is an exploration of the power of story to bind us to place and people. Framed in the context of her work as a curator (ca. 1983) at the Utah Museum of Natural History, Williams reflects on her experiences while working as an educator with Navajo youth. Objects such as those that might come into a curator's or naturalist's possession structure the text. These objects—sage, rocks, shell, feathers, fur, bones, wool, potshards, etc.—evoke stories rooted in landscape and history. Received stories, such as those prevalent in Navajo culture, educate and form their listeners, but in *Pieces of White Shell* Williams calls on readers to create and find their own stories, rooted in the communities and landscapes that form their own homelands.

Coyote's Canyon (Williams 1989a) moves out of the landscape defined by Navajo culture and into a landscape with which Williams identifies. Eight imaginative essays in this collection define Coyote's country in the canyons of southern Utah and the Coyote Clan that rises to inhabit and protect this place. Coyote is a reference not only to a canid—a biological animal in ecological context—but also to the trickster figure of Southwestern mythology. To the Navajo, Coyote "is profane and sacred, a bumbler and a hero" (Williams 1989a:18). Applying this same changing and unpredictable quality to the

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[86] Williams also authored a limited-edition poetry collection, *Earthly Messengers* (Williams 1989b).

landscape, Coyote's country is "a landscape of imagination, where nothing is as it appears" (Williams 1989a:16). The essays in *Coyote's Canyon* blend reality and imagination, reflecting the fact that Williams sees any boundary between these two realms as thinly drawn at best (Petersen 2006:16). Just as the reality of the landscape can be read in a more imaginative or mythic way, correspondences can be drawn between place and people; elements of the landscape reflect aspects of the human. "This is the bedrock of southern Utah's beauty: its chameleon nature according to light and weather and season encourages us to make peace with our own contradictory nature" (Williams 1989a:18).

In interviews, Williams repeatedly asserts that questions motivate and focus her writing. The question explored in *Pieces of White Shell* is, "What stories do we tell that evoke a sense of place?"; in *Coyote's Canyon*, the question is, "Okay, do I have those stories within my own culture?" (Siporin 2006:70). With their linked questions, *Pieces of White Shell* flows easily into *Coyote's Canyon*. The earlier exploration of traditional Navajo stories inspired Williams to look within her own culture for her own stories (Petersen 2006:19).[87] In these early works, we see the emphasis Williams puts on stories to connect us to place understood both literally and symbolically. Stories about human-land relationships are formative for ethical practice because they convey a complex sense of place and they allow readers to practice becoming responsible agents in an ongoing narrative.

Multiplicity of narratives

Storytelling, as ethical practice, involves a complex interplay of receiving existing cultural and ecological stories and finding or creating one's own stories; reading and

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[87] In a sense, *Coyote's Canyon* provides only a partial bridge to her own culture as it still draws heavily on the indigenous figure of the coyote.

writing are moments within a single overarching process of constructing both self and world. Received stories are the substance of tradition and are of central import in initial moral formation. The stories of Navajo tradition, the narratives of the New Testament, or narratival accounts of the ecological sciences all provide foundational resources for moral education. This is the sense in which Annas (2006) says the virtues are socially embedded.[88]

As an adult, one may continue more or less attentively to engage with these received stories—surrendering in some sense to them—as part of a spiritual practice of ongoing formation. Thus, practicing Christians may turn repeatedly to the gospel stories, seeking to see the world in light of those narratives and to see themselves somehow as actors in the continuing story of God's relationship to God's creation. Often, however, individuals are unaware of the extent to which their perceptions and understandings of the natural and cultural worlds around them are colored by received stories. Engaging imaginatively with others' stories—as when Williams works among the Navajo or when readers experience other cultures through fiction or literary nonfiction—has value in lifting to awareness taken-for-granted ways of viewing self and world.

Realizing that one's own stories and those of others may differ presents interpretive difficulties. The continuing moral cultivation of the mature person is not merely an ever-deeper immersion into the received stories of one's tradition. Nor is it a matter of adhering solely to the stories of one tradition to the exclusion of all others. In large measure, multiple stories coming from different traditions (both religious and secular) already narrate our modern lives. While some people may argue that being

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[88] See also Aristotle's comments on education in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Childhood instruction in moral behavior comes through inculturation, but virtue is attained by the further effort on the part of an adult to employ correct deliberation, and thereby cultivate prudence. See Irwin (1999:324-325).

religious entails subscribing to an overarching narrative that subsumes all others,[89] most people in modern times are conversant in multiple narratives that interpret the general human condition, not all of which can be brought into simple coherence. In medieval times, the book of scripture and the book of nature were expected to correspond in meaning; in the event of a conflict in interpretations, priority was given to one or the other of the sources. In modern times, multiple partial narratives interpret the world and our place within it. Ecological and religious narratives are read alongside economic and political narratives that define our relationships to place and people. One narrative may conflict with another in ways that produce tension, foster compartmentalization, or reward evasive rationalization. Reading and writing stories, as ethical practice, must critically engage the influence of these multiple narratives.

A second interpretive challenge arises from the contradictory and divergent narratives that exist even within a single tradition, such as within the religious tradition of Christianity. While often misread as justifying a wholesale rejection of Christianity, Lynn White's (1967) seminal article actually called for choosing a different narrative line *within* Christianity. Among the subsequent apologetic writings that arose from Christian scholars, Santmire's (1985) *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* clearly articulated two fundamental ways of understanding the natural world that have existed in tension with one another throughout the history of Western Christianity. The specification of these theological motifs and the details of Santmire's argument are less important here than the simple realization that religious traditions themselves are not monolithic in thought or practice. Reading nature and writing stories about human-land relationships must therefore treat not only diverse

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[89] Griffiths (1999:7-13), for example, asserts that a properly religious account must have the attributes of comprehensiveness, unsurpassability, and centrality.

sources of received stories but also the internal tensions and contradictions between multiple narratives arising from within any single authoritative source.

Lectio divina, as a model for reading nature religiously, can structure the interpretive task in ways that facilitate conscious engagement with these challenges. In the first phase, paying attention, one approaches the natural world openly, attentive to external observations and internal responses, but relatively unguarded in one's exposure.[90] In the second stage, pondering, one reflects more critically upon one's experiences and observations, including the way in which both are affected by received stories. One seeks to elucidate the diverse sources of one's experience and the contradictions and tensions between and within these sources. In the third stage, responding, one brings the reflection on experience into a narrative partly of one's own creation that guides ethical action consistent with one's understanding of self and world, which is itself transformed by this engagement and reflection.[91] This transformation manifests the vulnerability inherent in a religious reading. The interpretations I offer of

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[90] The vulnerability in this reading of nature is similar to that described by Booth (1988:272) in the reading of fiction: "Narratives, we have said, both depend on and implant or reinforce patterns of desire. If we do not surrender to these patterns, we cannot really be said to have 'taken in' a given narrative; yet if we do surrender, we find ourselves to some degree shaped into those patterns."

[91] The unguarded vulnerability of the first stage is not unlike a hermeneutics of faith while the probing reflection characteristic of the second stage employs a hermeneutics of suspicion. The interplay of these two stages of *lectio divina* thus bears a resemblance to Paul Ricoeur's two-part hermeneutics. "Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience" (Ricoeur 1970:27). Elsewhere, Ricoeur refers to these poles of textual interpretation as a dialectic between understanding and explanation (Ricoeur 1991b, 1991a) or as dialectical moments of conviction and critique (1998). The movement between conviction and critique in this hermeneutical circle results in a new self-understanding that critically appropriates the meaning of the text for oneself; this is what Ricouer means by appropriation: "that the interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself" (Ricoeur 1991b:118). Within the context of this dissertation, this self-understanding underlies any action that, flowing out of paying attention and pondering, issues in a morally adequate response.

works by Terry Tempest Williams draw out these dimensions of her experience, reflection, and action with respect to environmental matters, thereby illustrating the possibility of a religious reading of nature structured by the model of *lectio divina*.[92]

Literary criticism

My interpretations of the writings of Terry Tempest Williams are works of ethical (or moral-philosophical) criticism.[93] Criticism is the disciplined analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of a work of art. Ethical criticism describes and evaluates the ethical content or ethical effects of such works. For this project structured by the ethics of virtue, my interest is in performing an ethical criticism that attends carefully to character development and human flourishing. Marshall Gregory (2007:59-60) defines ethical criticism as "a persistent inquiry into the influences that help turn us into the people we become" and characterizes a flourishing human life as "a life that is personally enriched, existentially autonomous, socially responsible, intellectually perspicuous, and morally defensible." Similarly, Sylvia Mayer (2006:101) advocates for an environmental ethical criticism, the basic goal of which "can be defined as creating knowledge that promotes an environmental ethical stance that in turn triggers processes of environmentally benign social and cultural transformation." My interpretations of the literature of Terry Tempest Williams attend to the ways her encounters with the natural world help form her character (as revealed in her writings) with implications for broader human and ecological flourishing.

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[92] Williams's reading of nature was not itself self-consciously structured by *lectio divina*. It is my interpretation—my reading of her reading of nature—that imposes the stages of *lectio divina* on her experience, as conveyed in her writing.

[93] Guerin et al. (1999:21-27) describe two types of traditional critical approaches to literature: the moral-philosophical approach and the historical-biographical approach. Nussbaum's (1990, 1995) and Booth's (1983, 1988) works on literature and ethics are works of ethical criticism. See also Booth (1998), Gardner (1978), Gregory (1998), Nussbaum (1998), and Posner (1997).

My interpretations are also informed by reader-response criticism, albeit in a modified form. Reader-response criticism, in its diverse manifestations, has two distinguishing features: the consideration of the effect the literary work has on the reader and the granting of the reader primary importance (over the text or the author) in determining meaning (Guerin et al. 1999:364-365).[94] The meaning of a text is determined by many factors, including the intention of the author, the formal structures of the text itself, and the interaction of the reader with the text.[95] Different approaches to literary criticism emphasize one factor over the others. Declaring the reader of primary importance acknowledges that the interaction between reader and text—the reading process itself—creates meaning.[96] Under this approach to literary criticism, unmodified, I would focus on the interaction between Williams's texts and their readers. My interests, however, modify this typical focus of reader-response criticism. While I am interested in influencing how readers derive meaning from Williams's texts, my more immediate focus here is on the natural world as the text and Williams as its reader.[97] Thus, my

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[94] On reader-response criticism, see Davis and Womack (2002), Fish (1980), Freund (1987), Iser (1978), Jauss (1982), Rosenblatt (1994), and Tompkins (1980). In large measure, reader-response criticism is a reaction against the formalistic approach, or New Criticism, which was primarily concerned with the work of art as an object, irrespective of anything outside the work itself, including its social or political implications. A formalistic approach may be appropriate for art created *for art's sake.* However, Williams's own desire that her writing have "practical value" justifies a reader-response approach here. In *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, Williams (2008a:139) reflects on the objective evidence of a job well done in her family's pipe-laying business, then comments: "As a writer, you never know if your work has standing or has any practical value in the world."

[95] A similar way of conceiving this is to speak of the world behind the text, the world of the text, and the world created by the text (e.g., Carvalho 2009).

[96] Concern for the reader's response explains "the moral-philosophical-psychological-rhetorical emphases in reader-response analysis" (Guerin et al. 1999:364); in this sense, reader-response criticism overlaps substantially with ethical criticism.

[97] In reader-response criticism, one rejects the autonomy of the text as the sole determinant of meaning. The use of reader-response criticism to interpret Williams's reading of nature must make a similar claim: nature alone is not the sole determinant of its meaning. While this claim is contested in environmental ethics, it reflects my belief that humans are part of the

interpretations are informed by reader-response criticism in a modified form, in that they focus on Williams as the reader of the natural world, affected by that text and deriving meaning in interaction with that text, as Williams reveals this reading process to us through her literary nonfiction. Having learned from this interpretation of Williams, we might then be better able to read nature religiously ourselves.

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natural world, inextricably embedded within it. Meaning is not hopelessly subjective and relative; the text constrains possible interpretations. Nonetheless, meaning is produced in interaction; this is a fundamental insight of reader-response criticism that I find relevant for ethical reflection on human-land relationships.

CHAPTER FOUR

PAYING ATTENTION

Refuge

In *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, Terry Tempest Williams (1991) chronicles two simultaneous losses: her mother's death from ovarian cancer and the devastation of Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge as the waters of Great Salt Lake rise to record levels.[98] I interpret this text as an illustration of the first stage of *lectio divina*: *lectio*, or paying attention. Paying attention has an obvious connection to ethical reflection; practical reasoning depends on a perceptive grasp of the relevant details of one's situation. More importantly, paying attention can be seen as an act of accompaniment or witnessing, which Williams presents in *Refuge* as an embodied ritual performance. Attending to the ritualized actions in the text, we begin to see the transformative potential of *lectio* as paying attention. The text as a whole recounts a rite of passage. In addition, particular passages describe ritualized actions having to do with dead or dying birds. The latter rituals foster a personal transformation that enables Williams to stay present in the face of dying and death and to witness to that suffering.

Overview of text

In *Refuge*, Williams writes of her experiences accompanying her mother as she dies from ovarian cancer and witnessing the devastation wrought by floodwaters on a beloved bird refuge. The narratives of family loss and environmental loss are explicitly interwoven. "The losses I encountered at the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge as Great Salt Lake was rising helped me to face the losses within my family. When most people had given up on the Refuge, saying the birds were gone, I was drawn further into its

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[98] Subsequent references to this text are cited parenthetically as *Refuge*.

essence. In the same way that when someone is dying many retreat, I chose to stay" (*Refuge*, 3-4).

Refuge begins with a prologue and ends with an epilogue. In between, the text is broken into thirty-six unnumbered sections, each denominated by a species of bird and a lake level, e.g., Peregrine falcon / lake level: 4205.40′. In the early sections, we are introduced to the bird refuge and informed that the waters of Great Salt Lake are rising. We also learn that Williams's mother, Diane Dixon Tempest, has been diagnosed with ovarian cancer, a recurrence of breast cancer she had fought successfully in 1971; the year is 1983.[99] In the middle sections, Williams accompanies her mother through chemotherapy, radiation, and then, in January 1987, death. Great Salt lake peaks, and peaks again. Williams gives her readers insight into her experiences, emotions, memories, and reflections as she struggles to adjust to her losses. In the later sections, Williams, still reeling with grief from her mother's death, also loses both grandmothers to cancer. As Williams realizes that the birds of Great Salt Lake have relocated elsewhere during the flood and as restoration begins at the bird refuge, she reflects on the patterns of cancer in her family, seeing them reflected in the compromised health of the natural world as well. The text concludes with the oft-anthologized epilogue, "The Clan of One-Breasted Women," in which Williams connects aboveground nuclear testing to the atypical history of cancers in her family and she recounts her arrest with nine others for a 1988 act of civil disobedience: trespassing on military lands at the Nevada Test Site.

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[99] Williams doesn't give the year but, in *Pieces of White Shell* (1984:114-119), she describes talking to two young Navajo boys on a Trailways bus from Salt Lake City to Monticello, Utah, where Williams deboards, with the bus and boys continuing on to Cuba, New Mexico. Out of a silence in the midst of their conversation, the boys abruptly reveal that they are traveling home for Thanksgiving because their grandmother has died. If not in the event itself, certainly in the recounting of it as she wrote this manuscript, the suddenness of loss must have resonated with Williams.

A map of Great Salt Lake and the surrounding landforms precedes the text, as does Mary Oliver's poem, "Wild Geese," from *Dream Work* (1986). Two sections follow the epilogue: the acknowledgements and an appendix listing over two hundred species of birds associated with Great Salt Lake, giving both common and Latin names.

Change and loss

Passing through Missoula, Montana, on my way to Alaska in late May 1990, I attended a nature writing conference ("In the Thoreau Tradition") at the University of Montana. As I remember it, Williams read at the closing luncheon on the final day of the conference. She rose to read as we turned to the dessert course. As she began to read the manuscript that would be published as the epilogue in *Refuge*, the din of dessert forks hitting plates quickly trailed away. All attention was on Williams. We wept as she wept.

"The Clan of One-Breasted Women" is a powerful essay and almost justifies an interpretation that *Refuge* is a book about aboveground nuclear testing and its implications for human health. However, much more is going on in this book. *Refuge* is about devastating personal loss and about staying present to that loss. In describing Stegner's writings in an earlier chapter, I noted his pessimism; despite aspirations to protect what they love, Stegner's characters often fail. "In much of his work he assumes that our sanctuaries, literal or metaphorical, will be threatened, that wounds will occur, that someone must take responsibility to protect, and that someone must make sense of the failure or inability to protect" (Graulich 1997:44). The human-land relationships one reflects upon in environmental ethics are relationships in which we are often deeply embedded. Human and ecological communities are intricately connected. Within both communities, loss is inevitable, as is the human failure to protect. The epilogue aside, *Refuge* is not an extended and focused reflection on nuclear testing. It is about losing what one loves—what has defined you and what continues to define you—and about finding a way to go on.

Williams articulates this theme with the language of finding refuge in change and learning to love even death. In interview after interview, she identifies the question at the heart of this book as: "How do we find refuge in change?" (Williams quoted in Austin 2006b:111). In *Refuge*, she writes of a conversation with her paternal grandmother, Mimi (*Refuge*, 132):

> "I thought the marsh would be here forever," I said to Mimi standing on the edge of the flooded Bird Refuge.
>
> Her eyes scanned Great Salt Lake.
>
> "Things change," she said.

In the midst of ongoing ecological change, Williams recognizes that her desire that things remain the same is indicative of a need for personal growth (*Refuge*, 140):

> A deep sadness washes over me for all that has been lost….
>
> I am not adjusting. I keep dreaming the Refuge back to what I have known: rich, green bulrushes that border the wetlands, herons hidden behind cattails, concentric circles of ducks on ponds. I blow on these images like the last burning embers on a winter's night.

Rather than grasping at the ever-elusive solidity of what must change, Williams realizes that she must find refuge elsewhere. "I am slowly, painfully discovering that my refuge is not found in my mother, my grandmother, or even the birds of Bear River. My refuge exists in my capacity to love. If I can learn to love death then I can begin to find refuge in change" (*Refuge*, 178). By engaging with the events that are chronicled in *Refuge*, Williams learns to "acknowledge and accept the loss of [her] mother and grandmother" (Petersen 2006:18).

The theme of change and loss runs throughout *Refuge* and may characterize western regional literature more broadly. In a 1996 PBS video on the late twentieth-century renaissance in western regional writing, six western authors, including Williams, comment on the genre. Therein, Ivan Doig notes: "Much of the history of the American West is change. Change is all around. That's been one of the great topics for us to write

about. It's in our family trees. Everywhere I look back at my family, for instance, they are trying to cope with something, something that has happened mostly not of their own making" (Walkinshaw 1996). Similarly, in the same video, Williams states: "If there is a renaissance in western writing I think it's because, as a people, we are recognizing what we are losing. And we are losing our land. And, therefore, I think many of us are writing out of a sense of loss, writing out of a sense of love, writing out of a desperate attempt to preserve what remains" (Walkinshaw 1996).

The environmental crises of the late twentieth century—and the environmental ethics that have been developed as a result—are certainly manifestations of loss. Nonetheless, the loss portrayed in *Refuge* is not so starkly technological and political as aboveground nuclear testing. At issue here is what Chappell (1993:143), writing about tropes for loss in the poetry of William Stafford, calls "the slipping-away of connections." Such loss, such slipping away, is characteristic not only of the Stegnerian discourse but also of our everyday lives, whether we live in the Intermountain West or elsewhere.

Thus, the specific thematic focus of this text is the loss of connection to those people, places, and elements of the natural world that are definitive in some way of who we are. It is a loss of self, occasioned by the changing of the world in which we live. As a matter of interest to environmental ethics, this experience of loss calls for a response that sustains connections where one can and finds a way to go on where connections cannot be sustained. While we are all vulnerable to the changes that occur around us, a religious environmental ethic invites us to enter into a deeper form of vulnerability, namely, the possibility of personal transformation in the encounter with an always-slipping-away world.[100]

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[100] The world is also always-arriving. To this also we want to be attentive.

Scientific knowledge and literary imagination

In a blog entry dated 27 April 2005, Tom Fox, who died in captivity in 2006 while serving as a member of a Christian Peacemaker Team in Iraq, wrote of his ministry of presence: "Simply staying with the pain of others doesn't seem to create any healing or transformation. Yet there seems to be no other first step into the realm of compassion than to not step away." In the face of personal loss, whether familial or ecological, it can be difficult to stay present, both to one's own suffering and to that of others. Yet opening oneself vulnerably to loss (as well as joy, beauty, awe, etc.) is part of *paying attention*, as the first step of reading nature religiously.

Paying attention has multiple dimensions, which we can begin to explore by considering what Williams has written about Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring* (1962), in her essay, "One Patriot" (2002). Political discourse after September 11 highlighted the concept of patriotism. This essay, along with the others published by The Orion Society in the same collection, sought to redefine patriotism with an ecological sensibility. In her essay, Williams lifted up Carson as an exemplary patriot. "She is my model for a true patriot, one who not only dared to define democratic principles as ecological ones, but demanded through her grace and fierce intelligence that we hold corporations and our government accountable for the health of our communities, cultured and wild" (Williams 2002:41).

In *Silent Spring*, Carson had referred to the sagebrush landscapes of the West using the metaphor of a book. "[This landscape] is spread before us like the pages of an open book in which we can read why the land is what it is, and why we should preserve its integrity. But the pages lie unread" (Carson 1962:64, cited at Williams 2002:42). After quoting this text, Williams (2002:42) adds: "The pages of abuse on the American landscape still lie unread." In *Silent Spring*, Carson offered a reading of the natural world around her. In Williams's view, the success of this reading—in terms of changes "both in public policy and in the minds of the populace" (Williams 2002:42)—is due primarily to

the fact that *Silent Spring* is "both a scientific treatise and a piece of distinguished literary nonfiction" (Williams 2002:43). Carson gets the facts right about pesticides while also weaving narratives that expose errant conceptions of the human-nature relationship, such as the myth of the control of nature.[101]

The force of Carson's writing comes as well from her gift for entering into her subject with a depth of commitment and emotional vulnerability. "She bore witness … endur[ing] the pain of the story she was telling" (Williams 2002:44-45). Carson put both science and imagination in the service of a passionately held vision. In college, she pursued coursework in both science and literature. Williams quotes Carson's editor, Paul Brooks (1972), as writing: "The merging of these two powerful currents—the imagination and insight of a creative writer with a scientist's passion for fact—goes far to explain the blend of beauty and authority that was to make her books unique." Following this quotation, Williams writes (2002:46): "Rachel Carson's gift to us is seeing the world whole."[102] The wholeness would seem to lie in this combination of elements: scientific knowledge, literary imagination, compelling vision, passionate commitment, and

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[101] The last paragraph in Rachel Carson's (1962:297) *Silent Spring* reads:

> The 'control of nature' is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man. The concepts and practices of applied entomology for the most part date from that Stone Age of science. It is our alarming misfortune that so primitive a science has armed itself with the most modern and terrible weapons, and that in turning them against the insects it has also turned them against the earth.

[102] What Williams describes here with respect to Carson may be largely characteristic of the genre of nature writing as a whole, though different writers manifest varying levels of skill and commitment. Thus, Johanna Geyer-Kordesch (2006:121) begins her essay on natural history writer, William Bartram (1739-1823), with the sentence: "Artistic vision is as important as any scientific fact, perhaps even more so, when exploring our relationship with nature." Nature writing is not pure data collection; the artistic vision "brings to nature observation the quality of involvement" (Geyer-Kordesch 2006:122).

emotional vulnerability.[103] Carson was both a scientist and a writer who responded, when the situation called for it, with a tenacious, self-sacrificing witness.

Witnessing

The scientist (or naturalist) is the one who gets the facts right; the writer is the one who witnesses, engaging imagination and literary skills while bearing the emotional weight of a vulnerable relationship. On one level, then, Williams exhibits attentiveness to the natural world by getting the facts right. In *Refuge*, this is manifest in the references to lake levels and bird species in the title of each section of the book.[104] While the section-heading references are of artistic significance, they refer nonetheless to birds that Williams actually encounters and identifies. Throughout the text, her knowledge of bird species, natural history, and trends in populations is persistently evident. Moreover, the lake levels are actual lake levels measured during the years Williams was occupied with writing *Refuge*. In a September 1999 interview with David Thomas Sumner (2006:113), Williams recounts:

> This is all to say that for me what holds the integrity of a book and of a vision is the structure. And at the very end there has to be something deeper that holds it together. It is not enough to have the birds as the headlines of the chapters, even though they are metaphorical. I was in my office in the museum and had the hydronomy charts. And I realized that the connection was the lake level. And when I charted the lake's levels for all of those months, I realized that, honestly, the lake level corresponded identically

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[103] Elsewhere, Williams lifts up others as also manifesting this commendable wholeness. In the essay, "Mardy Murie: An Intimate Profile," published in *An Unspoken Hunger*, Williams identifies author and conservationist Margaret Murie (wife of wildlife biologist Olaus Murie) as one of her mentors. "She is a woman who has exhibited—through her marriage, her children, her writing, and her activism—that a whole life is possible. Her commitment to relationships, both personal and wild, has fed, fueled, and inspired an entire conservation movement. She is our spiritual grandmother" (Williams 1994e:90-91). Margaret Murie died in October 2003 at the age of 101.

[104] Recall as well the appendix, which presents a list of bird species associated with Great Salt Lake, including both common and Latin names.

> with the emotional levels. I mean, you can't make that up. And that is the faith I have in what it means to live in "place." I absolutely believe in that.

This dimension of paying attention in *Refuge*—this attentiveness to getting the details right, at least in the sense of having the hydronomy charts at hand and possessing the skills to identify bird species—is important. On this foundation is built a richer dimension of paying attention, that of witnessing.

Terry Tempest Williams has repeatedly characterized her writing as a form of witnessing. Deb Clow, who was editor of the literary magazine, *Northern Lights*, formerly published out of Missoula, Montana, once asked various authors to submit essays answering the question "Why do I write?" In her response, Williams (2001:114) wrote, in part, "I write as a witness to what I have seen."[105] As one who loves the land, what Williams has seen, in large measure, is the loss and degradation of what she loves. Thus, in that same response to Deb Clow, Williams (2001:113) wrote, "I write to record what I love in the face of loss."

At times, nature writing, as a genre, would seem to flow placidly from the authors' retreat to the open and nurturing arms of nature. In contrast, David Barnhill (2002) has argued that nature writing is a "literature of engagement"—engagement in ecological, social, and political dimensions—rather than a literature of the solitary contemplative in peaceful withdrawal. Barnhill argues that nature writing, in the dimension of political engagement, articulates the nature and causes of environmental problems—i.e., it offers a critique of the ecological and social situation. Of interest here is Barnhill's description of this critique as starting with witnessing, proceeding to critical analysis, and then culminating in activism. He illustrates his argument with the literary nonfiction of Terry Tempest Williams.

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[105] Originally published in *Northern Lights* 13(3):25, Summer 1998.

Barnhill defines witnessing as involving both perception and re-presentation; in witnessing, one must first perceive what is there and then convey that vision to others. One might witness to beauty, but more often we witness to pain and loss. Or, more accurately, the beauty and the loss and the pain are inseparable in our experience. In the following passage from Williams's book, *An Unspoken Hunger* (1994e:57), we can see the connections between the beauty and loss and pain and suffering that propel the act of writing, or the re-presenting of what has been experienced:

> I have felt the pain that arises from a recognition of beauty, pain we hold when we remember what we are connected to and the delicacy of our relations. It is this tenderness born out of a connection to place that fuels my writing. Writing becomes an act of compassion toward life, the life we so often refuse to see because if we look too closely or feel too deeply, there may be no end to our suffering. But words empower us, move us beyond our suffering, and set us free. This is the sorcery of literature. We are healed by our stories.

That passage makes it sound as though the outcome of writing is personal healing. In part, it is. But Williams also sees her writing as political, in the sense that Barnhill refers to nature writing as a literature of engagement. In a 2003 interview, Tricia Brick asked Williams whether there was a difference—with respect to bearing witness—between her more literary works, such as *Refuge*, and the type of op-ed writing she had been doing in more recent years in outlets such as the *New York Times*. Williams (Brick 2003) replied: "Bearing witness is its own form of advocacy. Writing is about how we see the world. Our words bear the power and capacity of our perceptions. In this sense," Williams continues, "there is no difference between a work like *Refuge*," which she then describes, "and the story I told in the *New York Times*," which she also describes. "Both pieces of writing are about bearing witness. One is a literary exploration. The other is a political exposé."

Williams's comments about her own writing as a form of witnessing resemble Barnhill's characterization of nature writing as a literature of both witnessing and political engagement. Lisa Diedrich has written as well about Williams's witnessing

ethics. Diedrich (2003) draws on the work of feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver (2000, 2001) who draws, in turn, on the psychoanalytic work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992) on Holocaust testimonies. As Diedrich traces this intellectual trajectory, Felman and Laub were concerned with issues surrounding the historical accuracy of testimony, specifically Holocaust testimony. Kelly Oliver, writing about the practice of witnessing, was more interested in the possibility that testimony may say more than the witness knows, somehow revealing and articulating in its performance what is unseen and unspoken. In the words of Diedrich, Oliver holds that:

> the word witnessing has a double meaning: it means both "eyewitness testimony based on first-hand knowledge . . . and bearing witness to something beyond recognition that can't be seen"…. The practice of witnessing, then, requires that we cultivate our "response-ability" to those things that we both see and don't see, that we both hear and don't hear, and that we both know and don't know. For Oliver, "[t]o serve subjectivity, and therefore humanity, we must be vigilant in our attempts to continually open and reopen the possibility of response" (Diedrich 2003:212, with embedded quotations to Oliver 2001:16, 19).

In this theoretical setup, Diedrich has gone beyond Barnhill's conception of witnessing. She points to what Oliver terms a paradox, in that witnessing or testimony—far from being merely perception that is then re-presented—is both necessary and impossible (Diedrich 2003:213). With respect to our interests here, Oliver's understanding of the act of bearing witness complicates the act of perception and the move from perception to re-presentation as presented by Barnhill.

According to Diedrich, Williams performs this paradox of necessity and impossibility in and through her book, *Refuge*. With the scientific knowledge and skills she has as a naturalist, Williams is able to see and describe the changes in the landscape and the changes in her mother's body. What she is unable to account for—what she is unable to perceive—is the devastation of the refuge and her mother's death. While scientific knowledge, called into play by the rising waters of the Great Salt Lake and the spread of cancer in her mother's body, leads to efforts to intervene, control, eradicate, and

conquer, it is what Williams is unable to perceive that challenges her to write as a poet and activist, cultivating response-ability, and—in addition to identifying and describing—both imagining and "imagin[ing] into being" (Diedrich 2003:213). Consider, for example, that metaphors used for cancer typically convey a destructive and alien body within one's body. Williams imaginatively re-conceives cancer, metaphorically, as a creative process rather than a destructive one, comparing cancerous growths to creative ideas more generally that take root in us, grow to fruition, and then are excised and given away (Diedrich 2003:215-217).

Her imagination can only go so far, however. In the end, Williams cannot know what having cancer and dying from it are like for her mother. "[S]he gives evidence of what her mother says about her own experience of cancer, and she reveals as well that there is more to her mother's experience of cancer than she (Williams) can fully know or bear witness to" (Diedrich 2003:218). In an effort to come to some understanding of her mother's dying, Williams applies techniques of witnessing nature to this new context. However, argues Diedrich (2003:223), the passage in which Williams relates her mother's actual death is "somehow forced." Williams constructs a narrative that is consoling for the survivors, including Williams herself, but she fails "to bear witness to the absolute aloneness of the dying" (Diedrich 2003:223). Here, Williams has come up against the impossibility of witnessing. Nonetheless, her literary writing offers us more than merely scientific writing could deliver.

Rites of passage

Neither Barnhill nor Diedrich make explicit a religious dimension of witnessing. For the purposes of this dissertation, *lectio divina* is distinguished from other forms of reading in that it assumes an intentional vulnerability to transformation in the presence of

something held to be of ultimate value or power. That we are vulnerable is a fact.[106] Facing that fact head-on, intentionally, without undue resistance or denial, is, in the sense I am using it here, a *religious* practice.

In *Refuge*, Williams presents her actions—both accompanying her mother and attending to the devastations at Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge—as ritualized actions; she narrates her embrace of vulnerability as a rite of passage. Rituals come in many forms.[107] Rites of passage, specifically, accompany and mark major life-cycle events, such as birth, puberty, or death. As theorized by Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1969), rites of passage follow a three-stage process of separation, liminality, and reincorporation. For illustration, consider a girl's puberty ceremony in an indigenous community such as the Mescalero Apache (Talamantez 2000). An adolescent girl leaves her childhood behind (separation), transitions through a period where she is no longer a girl but is not yet a woman (liminality), and then enters a new social status as a woman in her community (reincorporation). While paradigmatically marking major life-cycle events, rites of passage can be analogously extended to accompany any transition in which an individual or group moves from one condition to another with an intervening period of liminality or transition, which may be momentary or extended in time.

As a whole, *Refuge* narrates a rite of passage, not only for the mother who is dying and the bird refuge that is being devastated by floodwaters, but more importantly for Williams herself as she accompanies her mother and this beloved landscape through

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[106] For a discussion of vulnerability as a foundation for human rights, see Turner (2006).

[107] Catherine Bell categorizes genres of ritual activity in *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997:93-137). In this interpretation, I am primarily interested in rites of passage as a genre of ritual activity. Another genre of ritual activity, calendrical rites, is also evident in *Refuge*, primarily in the form of family gatherings to celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas and to celebrate birthdays and wedding anniversaries (*Refuge*, 61, 78, 123-125, 153, 157, 165, and 207-209). Both rites of passage and calendrical rites serve to focus attention on the passage of time that might otherwise go unmarked.

these transitions. The Latin root of the term liminality, *limen*, means threshold or doorway. As van Gennep (1960:15-25) theorized rites of passage, the basic metaphor was that of crossing an international frontier or physical passage through a doorway. In the Prologue to *Refuge*, written after the events depicted in the rest of the text, Williams evokes this symbol. Specifically, she recounts a dream in which she encounters a doorframe on the shore of Great Salt Lake. "A wooden door frame, freestanding, became an arch I had to walk through" (*Refuge*, 4). The dream continues and, in a subsequent segment, Williams finds herself in a doctor's office. The doctor tells her she has cancer and that she has "nine months to heal [herself]" (*Refuge*, 4). The nine months of focused attention on healing can be read as another allusion to the extended liminal phase of a rite of passage.[108] Another dream, recounted later in *Refuge*, marks the condition Williams is leaving and the condition she is transitioning into in this rite of passage. Williams dreams that her mother is already dead. Waking from this nightmare, Williams recalls that her mother is still alive, then writes: "But the feeling I could not purge from my soul was that without a mother, one no longer has the luxury of being a child. I have never felt so alone" (*Refuge*, 202). Similarly, Williams, sitting with her mother the day before she dies, reflects on: "The child in me, which lives as long as she does…" (*Refuge*, 225). By evoking the symbol of the doorway in the prologue of her text, Williams marks the text as a whole as recounting the liminal phase of a rite of passage; the passages about the mother-child relationship support this interpretation.

Framing this narrative as a rite of passage draws the reader's attention to the work done by ritualization. Life-cycle events such as birth, puberty, and death can be conceived as events that are merely biological. The rites of passage that mark them are

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[108] More aptly, perhaps, the reference to cancer can be read as referring to the creative process of bringing *Refuge* to final form; on pages 43-44 of *Refuge*, Williams redefines cancer as a creative process.

the social or cultural concomitants of these biological events. Ritual affects the human experience of these biological passages in three ways. First, ritualizing a passage marks the life-cycle event, focusing one's attention on the transition. Biological life-cycle events such as puberty and death will come about whether or not one ritualizes them.[109] Marking them with some type of ritual focuses one's attention on the event and, more importantly, on its meaning in the larger social and cultural context.[110] Consider the process of writing the text that became *Refuge*. The voluminous journaling (see *Refuge*, 3, 16, and 88), the persistent reflection, and the painstaking construction of the narrative all function to replay significant events in ways that might be seen as a form of ritualization.

Second, especially with emotionally difficult transitions, such as deaths, ritualizing the passage can help one stay present. In other words, ritual not only draws one's attention to the situation, but it also helps sustain one's presence and attention when one might just as well flee from the situation, whether physically, mentally, or emotionally. Ritual does this in part by providing a structured support system that ensures safe passage through what can be a dangerous (as well as powerful) transitional period.

Third, as already suggested by the reference to a structured support system, ritual often engages larger groups or entire communities. Even biological passages such as puberty and death happen not merely to individuals but also to the families and communities that surround them and in which they are embedded. Death is a good example of this notion. An individual dies and a funeral is held to mark this passage, but funerals are performed, in large measure, at least in western culture, for the survivors. In

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[109] Similarly, calendrical events such as birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays will pass by whether one notices them or not.

[110] Importantly, ritual directs attention to certain aspects of a situation, but also deflects attention from other aspects; see Lukes (1975).

Refuge, the shared nature of illness is reflected in the line: "An individual doesn't get cancer, a family does" (*Refuge*, 214). Rites of passage, then, structure social and biological transformations so as to minimize both personal and social disruption.[111]

Staying present

Ritualization accomplishes two main things in *Refuge*. First, it helps Williams stay present to the losses she is sustaining. Consider the textual evidence of the desire to flee or to deny what is happening. Williams writes, for example, of a recurring desire that the bird refuge become once again the beloved landscape she remembers. "I am not adjusting. I keep dreaming the Refuge back to what I have known…" (*Refuge*, 140). Similarly, at several points in the text, Williams's mother chastises her family for wanting her to get well so they can proceed with their own lives. In response to this, Williams writes of her recurring denial of her mother's cancer and impending death. In one passage, Williams writes that a pathology report following her mother's eleven months of chemotherapy indicated the continued presence of cancerous cells. The family had hoped for a different result, and the mother feels betrayed by their hope. Williams writes: "We had wanted a cure for Mother for ourselves, so we could get on with our lives. What we had forgotten was that she was living hers" (*Refuge*, 68). She continues, revealing the tendency to flee: "I fled for Bear River, for the birds, wishing someone would rescue me" (*Refuge*, 68). Pages later, still within the same chapter, Williams confronts her pattern of denial (*Refuge*, 75-76):

> I have refused to believe that Mother will die. And by
> denying her cancer, even her death, I deny her life. Denial stops us

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[111] While the ritualized actions Williams performs in *Refuge* would seem to involve only herself, her recounting of them in her writing shares them with a larger community of discourse. The body of authors and readers involved with the Stegnerian discourse may be the relevant group or community indicated in this third function of ritualization.

> from listening. I cannot hear what Mother is saying. I can only hear what I want.
>
> But denial lies. It protects us from the potency of a truth we cannot yet bear to accept. It takes our hands and leads us to places of comfort. Denial flourishes in the familiar. It seduces us with our own desires and cleverly constructs walls around us to keep us safe.
>
> I want the walls down. Mother's rage over our inability to face her illness has burned away my defenses. I am left with guilt, guilt I cannot tolerate because it has no courage. I hurt Mother through my own desire to be cured.

In the midst of this desire to flee or deny, attentiveness to the transition helps Williams stay present. The very existence of *Refuge* itself is a testament to this, bearing witness to years of journaling, reflecting on her experiences, and trying to communicate some of the truth of those experiences. A more specific example comes early in the text, as Williams's mother is just beginning her chemotherapy treatments. Williams is at her office at the Utah Museum of Natural History, her thoughts more on her mother than on her work. She pulls a crab claw from a collection of shells gathered in Mexico and notes its symbolic connection to cancer. "It repulses me. This is cancer, my mother's process, not mine" (*Refuge*, 43). This repulsion could have resulted in Williams putting the claw away, removing it from her sight. Instead, she continues: "The disengaged limb holds me, haunts me. I can't let it go. There is something in my resistance that warrants attention" (*Refuge*, 43). Williams then writes of her reflection on cancer and the cultural resonance of the term, eventually rethinking cancer as a creative process, and concluding this reflection with the words: "I pick up the crab claw and put it in my pocket. I can hardly wait to tell Mother" (*Refuge*, 44). Thus, Williams can write in the Prologue to *Refuge*, reflecting back on what has happened to her: "When most people had given up on the

Refuge, saying the birds were gone, I was drawn further into its essence. In the same way that when someone is dying many retreat, I chose to stay" (*Refuge*, 4).[112]

Practicing ethical response

A second thing that ritualization accomplishes is a kind of moral education that can affect subsequent engagements with different situations. The rite of passage Williams goes through, as presented in *Refuge*, is largely synchronous with her mother's death and the parallel flooding of the bird refuge. Within this overarching narrative, Williams accompanies, in actuality or in imagination, several dying birds. These are nested rites of passage that provide multiple opportunities for practicing accompaniment of the dying. The birds that Williams writes about include a barn swallow caught in a barbed-wire fence (*Refuge*, 52-53), a storm-killed whistling swan (*Refuge*, 121-122), a dead curlew found while hiking (*Refuge*, 151-152), a window-stunned junco (*Refuge*, 210), and "[f]our California gulls, three pintails, a blue-winged teal, one Canada goose, two mallards, a western grebe, and an American merganser" (*Refuge*, 251) that had been shot and left dead on the beach. In her encounters with at least some of these birds, Williams practices ethical responses she must enact with her own mother.[113]

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[112] One may choose to stay merely because one does not know how to escape a situation. Williams writes of walking through a colony of nesting gulls. She notes her disorientation in the midst of the shrieking gulls, then she writes, "There were so many nests, I didn't know where to step, much less how to behave. Finally, I just stood in one place and watched" (*Refuge*, 73). There is an ethical lesson to be drawn here as well, one that suggests the need to continue watching even when one cannot do anything to redress a difficult situation. It should also be noted that there is a time to leave a situation, if only so that one can return again refreshed. In *Refuge*, after being with her mother through weeks of unrelenting pain, Williams writes of being exhausted and losing her compassion. She leaves to spend a week on an archaeological dig, during which she writes: "I must also learn to hold a space for myself, to not give everything away" (*Refuge*, 168).

[113] I am focusing only on the most initial of ethical responses—the capacity to stay present to difficult situations. Nonetheless, the ethical upshot of ritual is greater than this. Certainly, the focal ethical outcome in *Refuge* is the activism for nuclear disarmament presented in the epilogue essay (*Refuge*, 281-290; see also 134, 241f.). There are more subtle outcomes as well, including the affirmation of experience as opposed to obedience to external authority

Williams is vulnerable to the loss of her mother to cancer, as well as to the losses associated with devastation of a bird refuge that is of great import to her. As a naturalist, she possesses skills of perception in the natural world. She draws on these skills to come to some understanding of her mother's dying. We see this, in part, in connections Williams draws between her accompaniment of birds as they die and her experience of her mother's death. For example, early in the text, Williams writes of finding a barn swallow whose leg has become caught in the woven strands of a barbed-wire fence. She could not save the swallow, yet she unwrapped it from the wire and stayed with it until it died (*Refuge*, 52-53). About the swallow, she wrote (*Refuge*, 53): "With each breath, it threw back its head, until the breaths grew fainter and fainter. The tiny chest became still. Its eyes were half closed. The barn swallow was dead." Near the end of *Refuge*, when Williams is writing about her mother's actual moment of death, she notes that her mother's head pulled back with each breath, "reminding me of the swallow I beheld at Bear River, moments before it died" (*Refuge*, 230).

Attending to the death of a barn swallow, staying with it as it dies, may be considered an ethical act in itself, but as a ritualized action it also provides a setting for learning how to act and feel in other ethical contexts, where the ability to stay present in the midst of a traumatic loss may be more difficult. Thus, Theodore Jennings, within a larger argument about the bodily knowledge gained via ritual, writes of ritual as practice for choiceworthy "way[s] of being and acting in the world" (Jennings 1996:325). With the swallow, as with other dead and dying birds in the text, Williams is practicing being

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(*Refuge*, 92, 245f., and 285f.) and—in comparison to nuclear disarmament—less political outcomes, such as the choice of her father and brothers to quit hunting after the mother's death, about which Williams writes: "their grief has become their compassion" (*Refuge*, 251). These other ethical outcomes flow from the first step of staying present and paying attention.

present to her mother's dying. In the smaller actions with birds, she practices the cognitive, emotional, and bodily response she'll want to enact with her mother.

Consider a second example in which Williams accompanies a dying bird. (This is an imaginative accompaniment, in that she encounters this bird after it has already died.) While walking the shores of Great Salt Lake one cold, windy day, Williams came upon a dead whistling swan. She untangled the bird, spreading out its neck and wings on the sand. She washed its black bill and feet with her saliva. Having prepared its body, she lay next to it and imagined the swan flying, migrating, encountering a storm above the otherwise inviting waters of Great Salt Lake, and dying (*Refuge*, 120-122). Note in Williams's description of this encounter the attention given to the dead body in all its present physicality, preparing it as if for burial, as well as the act of attention paid, more imaginatively, to its living and the dramatic moments of its dying (*Refuge*, 121-122):

> It was a dead swan. Its body lay contorted on the beach like an abandoned lover. I looked at the bird for a long time. There was no blood on its feathers, no sight of gunshot. Most likely, a late migrant from the north slapped silly by a ravenous Great Salt Lake. The swan may have drowned.
>
> I knelt beside the bird, took off my deerskin gloves, and began smoothing feathers. Its body was still limp—the swan had not been dead long. I lifted both wings out from under its belly and spread them on the sand. Untangling the long neck which was wrapped around itself was more difficult, but finally I was able to straighten it, resting the swan's chin flat against the shore.
>
> The small dark eyes had sunk behind the yellow lores. It was a whistling swan. I looked for two black stones, found them, and placed them over the eyes like coins. They held. And, using my own saliva as my mother and grandmother had done to wash my face, I washed the swan's black bill and feet until they shone like patent leather.
>
> I have no idea of the amount of time that passed in the preparation of the swan. What I remember most is lying next to its body and imagining the great white bird in flight.
>
> I imagined the great heart that propelled the bird forward day after day, night after night. Imagined the deep breaths taken as it lifted from the arctic tundra, the camaraderie within the flock. I imagined the stars seen and recognized on clear autumn nights as they navigated south. Imagined their silhouettes passing in front of

> the full face of the harvest moon. And I imagined the shimmering Great Salt Lake calling the swans down like a mother, the suddenness of the storm, the anguish of its separation.
>
> And I tried to listen to the stillness of its body.
>
> At dusk, I left the swan like a crucifix on the sand. I did not look back.

It is difficult not to read this passage as a ritualized accompaniment—largely in imagination—of the dying bird, with embodied lessons learned about how to accompany her own mother through her death. Note as well Williams's ability to move on from the scene at dusk; here we have an intimation that she will also find some way to move on from the loss of her mother.[114]

Mourning and transformation

The central issue of *Refuge* has to do with loss and change. Wallace Stegner was pessimistic about our ability to create a society to match the scenery; the characters in his literary works persistently fail to protect what they love. Persistent failure, the inevitability of death, and the impossibility of bearing witness would seem to lead to an aporia with respect to practical ethical action to address environmental problems. Nonetheless, ethical action is manifest in *Refuge*, in the accompaniment of both birds and mother. Further, the vulnerability embraced in Williams's desire to "learn to love death [and] find refuge in change" (*Refuge*, 178) invites a transformation with broader ethical consequences, namely a sustained openness to transformation in one's encounter with the natural world.

The hopefulness of personal transformation must not distract us too quickly from the experience of grief—and, in particular, the grieving of our environmental losses.

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[114] Williams's paternal grandmother, Mimi, who lost her own mother when she was only twenty-eight, counsels her granddaughter: "But I tell you, Terry, you do get along. It isn't easy. The void is always with you. But you will get by without your mother just fine and I promise you, you will become stronger and stronger each day" (*Refuge*, 133).

Attending carefully to the grief is also part of paying attention. Douglas Burton-Christie (2007) has suggested that our failure to respond adequately to contemporary environmental challenges may be related to our inability to mourn the losses we have already sustained. Burton-Christie points to scholarship that reveals that the failure of the German people to grapple with their experience of and complicity in the events of World War Two prevented many of them from moving on from those events in the postwar period. He connects the German situation to an essay by Aldo Leopold, in which Leopold argues that we can only grieve what we know. This is not merely a knowing of or a knowing about, but a kind of knowing that engages our emotions and other modes of valuing. To the extent that we remain ignorant, or in denial, or in a posture of active suppression of emotional responses to the ecological losses we have already sustained—and which continue—Burton-Christie argues we will be unable to address wisely the pressing environmental challenges that confront us.

Burton-Christie turns to an ancient spiritual practice—the gift of tears—to suggest the need to properly mourn our losses, if we are to go somehow forward.[115] The gift of tears was a spiritual practice of the ancient Christian monastics in Egypt. Burton-Christie (2007) writes that, while the tears were considered a gift,

> … [y]et one could seek them, open oneself to them. Tears were highly valued by the early Christian monks, for they were believed to express and make possible an honest reckoning with one's life (especially one's fragility); a life-changing transformation; a reorientation to God and to the larger community. There is an undeniable dimension of sadness or grief woven into this experience, for to wake up to one's moral, spiritual fragility (as well as that of others) means facing, directly and without evasion, the harsh ambiguity of existence itself, including all that is broken and in need of repair—in oneself and in the world. Tears signal a willingness to open oneself to this reality, to mourn for what has

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[115] Compare the Lakota people's Wiping the Tears ceremony, a late 20th century ritual process to mourn and move on from the massacre at Wounded Knee a century earlier (Rhine and Moreno 1992).

> been lost or is in danger of being lost, and to open oneself to the possibility of renewal, regeneration.

The image of opening oneself to transformation recurs here. In Williams's letter to Deb Clow, described above, the penultimate sentence reads: "I write because it is dangerous, a bloody risk, like love, to form the words, to say the words, to touch the source, to be touched, to reveal how vulnerable we are, how transient we are" (Williams 2001:114-115). Elsewhere, Williams has written about how cautious she has become with her love: "It is a vulnerable exercise to feel deeply and I may not survive my affections" (Williams 1994e:63). Yet Burton-Christie suggests that opening oneself to this vulnerability, being willing to look honestly and feel deeply in relation to truths that may remain, to some extent, beyond our reach, may be essential to our renewal and regeneration, and thus to our capacity to fashion an adequate political response to the environmental challenges that face us.

Religious reading and ethical practice

As the first step of reading nature religiously, paying attention requires careful observation, the naming and description of relevant details, awareness and articulation of emotional responses, and repeated, vulnerable engagement with difficult situations. In *Refuge*, we see this in Williams's detailed observations of the external world and explorations of her subjective responses to the difficult situations that confront her. As *lectio divina* calls for a repeated, vulnerable engagement with the text, *Refuge* shows Williams repeatedly visiting the flooding Refuge and remaining present to her dying mother. The ritualization of particular encounters, including the repetitive processes of journaling her experiences, revisiting those experiences in memory, and composing the text of *Refuge*, help focus her attention and sustain her courageous engagement with loss. The broader framing of her experience as a rite of passage conveys some of the transformative force of this engagement.

As part of an ethical practice, paying attention calls upon readers of nature to develop and employ skills in both observation and introspection. The scientific skills of the naturalist are essential; nature study is foundational. Reading the natural world also involves reading oneself in relation to that world—and also in relation to that which may reside beyond the world.[116] This is not yet the time for pointed reflection and internalization, but just as the reader of scripture reads a passage repeatedly in *lectio*, attentive with eyes and ears to the words themselves and attentive to her internal responses to those words, the reader of nature must repeatedly approach the natural world, in body or in memory or in imagination, and attend to what is before her and to what arises within her. Readers of the natural world must practice focusing their attention, perhaps through ritualization or meditation or journaling. The richness of this engagement will provide a foundation for the subsequent stage of reading nature religiously: pondering.

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[116] In response to the manuscript that subsequently became *Refuge*, Williams (reported in Austin 2006a:178) received a letter from her editor that read, in part: "Dearest Terry, although Christine Peavitt and I greatly admire what you've attempted to do, we feel it fails on every level." He went on, in a subsequent letter, to elaborate: "You are not present in this manuscript yet."

CHAPTER FIVE

PONDERING

Leap

In *Leap* (2000), Williams reflects on Hieronymus Bosch's (c. 1453-1516) painting, *The Garden of Delights*.[117] I interpret this text as an illustration of the second stage of *lectio divina*: *meditatio*, or pondering. In this stage, one reflects on what one has encountered in light of all of one's other knowledge and experience; one internalizes the read text by drawing on memory and imagination.[118] In *Leap*, Williams portrays this stage of ethical reflection partly as a confrontation with her religious upbringing in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; she characterizes this book as an "interrogation of faith" (*Leap*, 5). In many ways, this interrogation is religious in character. Williams approaches vulnerably both the claims of her religious tradition and the claims that pull her away from that tradition. My interpretation of *Leap* highlights the productive tension between conviction and critique as Williams draws upon her experiences—in the Mormon church and in nature—as well as LDS thought and history more broadly to bring some resolution to the tensions she experiences as a Mormon and as an environmentalist.[119]

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[117] Subsequent references to this text are cited parenthetically as *Leap*.

[118] Memory and imagination may also be employed in paying attention, but the observer's perspective differs. In paying attention, one replays or imagines the encounter with the natural world intending a more immediate experience of perception and emotional response. In this second stage, one reflects more critically on one's objective perception and subjective experience.

[119] In the previous chapter's discussion of the liminal stage of a rite of passage, I noted that the root word, *limen*, indicates a doorframe. Williams uses this same image to characterize the tension in this middle stage of reading nature religiously: "I am caught in the doorway of my religious past" (*Leap*, 91).

Overview of text

Leap is an extended meditation on Hieronymus Bosch's painting, *The Garden of Delights*. As an adult, Williams stumbled upon the triptych in Madrid's Prado Museum. She was familiar with the two outer panels, depicting Paradise and Hell, from her childhood. The center panel, depicting The Garden of Earthly Delights, was new to her. Encountering the whole painting for the first time, she writes (*Leap*, 7):

> I am stunned. The center panel. The Garden of Earthly Delights.
> So little is hidden in the center panel, why was it hidden from me?
>
> The body.
>
> The body of the triptych.
>
> My body.
>
> The bodies of the center panel, this panel of play and discovery, of joyful curiosities cavorting with Eros, is not only a surprise to me, but a great mystery.

Leap recounts her seven-year fascination with this painting, involving repeated trips to the Prado. Williams draws analogies between the body of the painting, her own body, and the body of the earth. Her encounter with the painting thus provokes critical reflection on her passionate commitment to the environment in light of the Mormon church's relative silence on environmental matters, as symbolized by the absence of the center panel from her upbringing.

Williams structures this book in four sections, first exploring the three parts of the triptych—Paradise (the left panel), followed by Hell (the right panel), then Earthly Delights (the center panel)—and concluding with a section titled Restoration, which refers (on the surface) to the professional restoration of the medieval painting. Williams explores the painting's history and imaginatively enters the individual panels of the painting, allowing these experiences to draw forth memories of her personal history and reflection on our contemporary environmental context. Each of the first three sections relates Williams's engagement with the respective panel of the painting. The final section

narrates her experiences and reflections as the painting is removed from the Prado gallery, where it had hung on display, to an interior workshop of the museum to be professionally restored. Following these four main sections, the book includes notes, a bibliography, acknowledgments, and permissions. On a gatefold following the last page of the book, an approximately 8- by 14-inch color reproduction of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Delights* is provided, representing the artistic work when its wings are opened.[120]

Personal transformation via critical reflection

Two images frame *Leap*. The first is a physical residential move from Salt Lake City to Castle Valley, Utah. The deeper resonances of this geographical move are suggested by the descriptions Williams gives of these two places. Salt Lake City is described as "the City of Latter-day Saints," "near the shores of Great Salt Lake with no outlet to the sea," surrounded by mountains of granite in which are stored—hidden—the Mormon genealogies (*Leap*, 5). Castle Valley is located in Grand County, near Moab and Arches National Park; Williams notes that this exposed landscape, termed Paradox Basin, is characterized by collapsing salt domes, shifting sands, flash floods, and winds that create arches through which one can walk (*Leap*, 266). During her seven-year engagement with the Hieronymus Bosch painting, Williams makes this geographical move, with its deeper resonances of safekeeping and exposure, solidity and fluidity, insularity and openness.

The second framing image is psychological. In the opening pages of the first section of the book, Williams recounts picking cherries with family members in a

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[120] When the shutters are closed, the exterior of the closed panels depicts the earth on day three of the biblical creation, as given in Genesis 1. The earth appears as a flat landscape with vegetation, lacking animal and human life, and enclosed in a sphere. Outside the sphere, an image of the Creator God appears in the upper left corner.

Wasatch Front orchard when she was ten years old. Once, while Williams and her cousin perched in the branches of an orchard tree, her great-uncle, standing on a ladder nearby, posed them a question (*Leap*, 8):

> "What principle of the Gospel of Jesus Christ means the most to you?" he asked, filling his bucket.
>
> Mormon children are used to these kinds of questions practiced on them by their elders, who consider this part of their religious training.
>
> "Obedience," my cousin replied, pulling a cherry off its stem.
>
> "Free agency," I answered, eating one.

In the opening pages of the final section of the book, Williams recounts traveling to the Prado with her father, who has not understood why she would "leave [her] home, [her] husband, and [her] work for a painting with wings" (*Leap*, 239). Arriving together at the gallery in the Prado where the painting has hung for all those years, they find it gone. Her father leaves to find someone who can explain. Prior to his return, Williams stands before the empty wall and faces the shadow her body casts (*Leap*, 242):

> My shadow will stand behind me or in front of me, there you are, here I am inside the Prado, my shadow, my shadow as my friend, my shadow as my father, my shadow as my Church. I will hurl my darkest self on to someone else and compensate for what I choose not to see inside my own heart. We live in the company of projected shadows. We are free to blame, to take no action, to create nothing from our own highest selves.

Williams's language here recalls the Jungian archetype of the shadow. The shadow refers to aspects of oneself that have been repressed in the unconscious and are subsequently projected onto others. Following this passage about her shadow on the Prado wall, Williams recalls the interchange in the cherry orchard recounted in the opening pages of the book, thereby reintroducing the tension between obedience and free agency. Obedience, Williams realizes, can be understood as a respectful, unconditional willingness to listen to another—a willingness to trust. She recognizes that she has neglected a part of her self—her own authority—which she associated too strongly with

the General Authorities of the LDS Church.[121] By neglecting this part—by choosing free agency conceived as being in opposition to obedience—her own authority, which she associates with creativity, has effectively been silenced. Desiring wholeness, she writes (*Leap*, 243): "In this dualistic world, I have seen obedience on one hand, free agency on the other. How do I bring these two hands opposed together in a gesture of prayer?" Finally, just before her father returns with a guide, she reflects on the apparent root of the word religion (*religión*) in the Spanish language, giving these English-language translations of *ligar*: "to unite, combine, form an alliance, to make whole" (*Leap*, 243).[122] She quotes from Jungian Robert Johnson's (1993:90) *Owning Your Own Shadow*: "…, the heart of the religious experience, is to bond, repair, draw together, to make whole, to find that which is anterior to the split condition." This second framing image, symbolized by the tension between obedience and free agency in the cherry orchard story, provides insight into the deeper psychological resonances of the geographic move presented in the first framing image, highlighting questions about the relationships between authority, obedience, trust, and free agency.[123]

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[121] In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the General Authorities are those members who serve in the highest administrative ranks of the Church's ecclesiastical hierarchy.

[122] Williams draws here on just one of several possible etymological roots of the word *religion* in modern western languages. See Feil (2000).

[123] The reflection on her shadow and its call for creative, intentional action, while coming late in the text, has been foreshadowed. In these earlier passages, the shadow is often connected to one's status as a tourist or voyeur. While in Madrid, a vendor tries to sell Williams some tulips. She would like to buy them and give them to a woman writer she has just noticed through the window of an apartment building, but Williams lacks the necessary money. "I savor their extravagant beauty without ownership, an interlude of color, simply that. The tulips will move and arrange themselves in someone else's arms, in someone else's vase. I am simply a traveler, a voyeur who casts no shadow" (*Leap*, 19). (Late in the text, Williams buys tulips as a gift for the two women restoring the Bosch painting [*Leap*, 260]). On a later trip, Williams is in the Parque del Retiro in Madrid where a statue of Satan, the *Ángel Caído*, is located, "a black shadow in the midst of green" (*Leap*, 102). She feels some sympathy for this fallen angel, recognizing the figure in herself. "If I believe or don't believe in Satan, he is still the dark stranger inside. We cannot give our darkness away. Satan is alive whenever I cause pain. Satan is alive whenever someone else causes pain. This is what I fear, the shadow cast by our unconscious

The central question of this book, as articulated by Williams (quoted in Sumner 2006:111), is: "How do we breathe life into the orthodoxies that we are a part of?"[124] *Leap* is an "interrogation of faith" (*Leap*, 5) in the sense that Williams, moved by her initial encounter with the Bosch painting, is provoked to reflect critically on her experience of (and love for) the natural world in light of Mormon history generally and her own personal experience as a member of the LDS Church. Her intent is not to play received tradition against her own experience, but to risk questioning both tradition and experience so as to enliven both and achieve a measure of integration.

In the text, her marriage serves as a microcosm for nature. In other words, we can see the pattern of this confrontation with the authority of tradition with respect to the natural world by noting references to her marriage in the text. The vulnerability lies in the risk she takes in dismantling the relationship in order to ultimately restore it. At age 19, Williams was married to her husband, Brooke, in the Salt Lake City Temple. In the context of a Mormon temple wedding, the couple took on the characters of Adam and

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selves" (*Leap*, 103). Back in the Prado, before the panel depicting Hell, Williams writes: "Satan is not one figure in El Bosco's Hell, he is a visitor, like the rest of us. His two-legged hoofprints are the tracks we call ruts, the ones walked in with our eyes closed" (*Leap*, 105). Finally, near the end of the section on Hell, Williams recounts being in the city of Valencia in the midst of the mid-March carnival celebration of fireworks and the consumption by fire of sculptures made of wood and papier-mache, all designed to celebrate the coming of spring. A costumed man turns to her and says, "I was once a spiritual tourist like you, go home" (*Leap*, 121). Williams writes that the people gathered in Valencia for the Fallas celebration are "bear[ing] witness to the transformation of their own communities. They are not voyeurs to change, but participants striking the match" (*Leap*, 123). The language of not being able to give our darkness away, of being a spiritual tourist or voyeur as opposed to a participant engaged in transformation of one's own community indicates clearly that the reconciliation of opposites held in tension must be attempted within Williams's Mormon community, not by leaving it behind and venturing elsewhere. Interpreted more broadly, "home" is where we can participate fully, vulnerably, and creatively to draw back together that which has been rent asunder.

[124] Within *Leap*, Williams articulates this question as follows: "The origin of my religion, any religion, is a true impulse, one I want to keep pure in my blood.… [C]an our institutions be revived? … *How can I open the traditions of religion to my own experience?*" (*Leap*, 148; emphasis in original).

Eve in a ceremony designed to answer three questions: "Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going?" (*Leap*, 37). As a mature adult, pondering Bosch's triptych, especially in light of the center panel that had been hidden from her, Williams reframes this trilogy of questions, asking: "What are we told? What do we fear as a result of what we have been told? And what do we know within our own bodies?" (*Leap*, 39). In an imaginative moment before the panel depicting Paradise, Williams, hungry for knowledge, sees herself as Eve in the garden, taking the hand of her husband, and walking out of Eden into the wilderness. As the first section of the book closes, she writes: "To separate ourselves from the presence of God is to face the illusion of Paradise" (*Leap*, 42).

The next section of the text, the meditation on the panel depicting Hell, can be difficult for the reader to journey through, as Williams describes diverse manifestations of human indifference to environmental challenges, the death of her grandfather, and a general sense of everything breaking apart, including Williams herself. Near the end of this section, Williams narrates a scene where she and Brooke are on the shore of Great Salt Lake, striking wooden matches and igniting their marriage certificate. Williams describes the burning paper as "the burning theology of my childhood" (*Leap*, 117). Turning to Brooke, Williams is frightened by his elation, but then notices a flamingo on the shore nearby, amidst a flock of seagulls; the Latin genus of the flamingo's scientific name, *Phoenicopterus ruber*, refers to the Phoenix, "the firebird rising from the ashes" (*Leap*, 118). Encouraged, she and Brooke complete the ritual dissolution of their marriage; she throws her wedding bands into the lake and Brooke shatters an antique dinner plate saved from their wedding breakfast.

The third section, Earthly Delights, is full of sensuous, erotic imagery and reflections on the alchemical joining together of opposites to produce new life. Williams is learning how to love again with abandon, to say yes in response to the other rather than embodying the no of religious proscription and control; she is imagining a new way to

respond to what is holy in life, in the service of new life. Brooke appears in this section as 600,000 members of the Mormon church gather to commemorate the sesquicentennial of the Mormon migration from Missouri to Utah. Williams writes of standing with Brooke and their extended families in the stadium at Brigham Young University. As Williams portrays it, there is a moment of feeling at home, embedded securely in the story of her people settling themselves in a beloved landscape. Then, both she and Brooke are unsettled by the celebration of the missionary successes of the LDS church. Williams weeps, no longer believing the LDS church is the one true church. Brooke, a descendent of Brigham Young, "is frozen, the only son in his family who chose not to serve a mission. It is something you are never allowed to forget, ever" (*Leap*, 181). Throughout this section of the text, Williams is working toward the fully embodied realization that the creative force of love, in all its paradox and vulnerability, must be allowed to give birth to a new way.

The fourth and final section, Restoration, opens with a quotation from the Book of Mormon referring to the new heaven and earth that will come about when the old has passed away (*Leap*, 237, quoting Ether 13:9). Near the end of this final section of the book, Williams writes of standing in a canyon in the redrock desert of Utah with Brooke, renewing their wedding vows. "Yes, we are here to love. Yes, we are here to experience the body, in both shadow and light, in forgiveness and joy, we return to each other, rejoined. Together we will love this beautiful, broken world of which we are a part" (*Leap*, 261). Brooke describes the redefinition of their marriage as follows:

> We changed it from something precise, with a socially acceptable definition like a fence containing us, to a vehicle for change not only in our own lives but also for change in the world. A vehicle to hold us, a place with dimension, a moving place to ride—and hide in if we need to—as we travel along our own paths toward preserving what we find sacred in the world (Brooke Williams 1999:131).

In their original Temple wedding, their marriage would have been pronounced "not *until death do you part*, but *for time and all eternity*" (Williams 2000:38). Notably absent from

their renewed vows is any indication of an eternal dimension.[125] In December 1998, the couple move to their new residence in the canyonlands of southern Utah. Nine months later, Williams returns to the Prado to find the center panel of the painting fully restored and hanging (without the accompanying wings, which are still being restored) in the museum gallery. "The Garden of Delights hangs suspended in this moment of time, freed from the hinges of a dualistic world, no longer caught between myth and prophesy, it shines as its own sovereign truth" (*Leap*, 263).

This reflection on marriage reveals the thematic focus of *Leap*. In fact, marriage—a deep, sustained, and fully embodied relationship with another—is a particularly useful entry point for reflection on environmental ethics, drawing attention to the relationships, both given and chosen, between any particular person and her encompassing landscape. In some sense, our environment is given; often we do not choose it. Yet we can choose, on a deeper level, to engage it as a partner with whom we wish to share our lives and whose flourishing we wish to promote. Drawing by analogy from Williams's portrayal of the events bearing on the status of her marriage, the challenge presented in *Leap* is to integrate received traditions regarding the natural world—in Williams's case, these are primarily Mormon teachings—with one's own experience of the natural world.[126] In refashioning their marriage vows, for example, Terry and Brooke set aside the eternal dimension of the Mormon conception of marriage,

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[125] Brooke identifies several reasons that might explain his being no longer active in the Mormon church, one of which is: "I think I lack sufficient imagination. For example, I have trouble with the belief that after death, Mormons go to one of three different kingdoms.… I guess I can't imagine anything better or more beautiful than this planet" (Brooke Williams 1999:112).

[126] Integration does not mean wholesale acceptance of the religious tradition. Fully developed religious traditions are complex institutions that encompass divergent beliefs and practices. Integration, thus, may often be a matter of seeking, perhaps unsuccessfully, those aspects of the tradition that cohere with other dimensions of one's knowledge and experience. It may also be finding a way to live with the tensions that remain.

reaffirming the marriage as binding only in this life. Perhaps not so much with marriage as with the natural world, the role of science as an additional authoritative source is also enmeshed in the environmental application. As with religion, the received teachings of science—and the scientific way of constructing the world—must be put into dialogue with our experience, our creativity, and our imagination. The challenge is not to choose between science, religion, and experience, but to somehow resist dualistic articulations opposing science and religion, all in light of experience, and to embrace instead a more integrated vision, in all its tension and remaining paradox.

While perhaps better integrated, this vision will remain unstable, open, and thus productive. We pay attention to the natural world around us, and ponder creatively and imaginatively what we have perceived in light of what we know from other authoritative sources—whether religious or scientific in nature. We are then called to respond transformatively. Our greatest sin, as articulated by Williams in *Leap* (56 and 78), is "the sin of indifference." It is our courageous willingness to be transformed rather than the indifference born of our fear that will bring us back to life, restoring vitality even to our institutions.

Imaginative and integrative reflection

Leap illustrates pondering (*meditatio*), the second stage of *lectio divina*. In *meditatio*, one reflects on a particular passage of scripture, imagining it fully, and letting that imaginative process bring to mind other experiences and images, connecting that particular passage to the scriptures as a whole, and drawing out memories, thoughts, and emotions for continued reflection. Making the transition from scripture to the natural world, the corresponding practice of pondering would similarly manifest an imaginative and integrative process of reflection, attentive to the emotional and cognitive responses elicited by the encounter with the natural world. In *Leap*, Williams is principally encountering a painting, rather than the natural world itself. Nonetheless, Williams enters

so deeply into this painting that it might as well be an entire physical landscape. Thus, I write of her encounter with this painting as if it were an encounter with the natural world itself.

Turning our attention to *Leap*, we see this practice of pondering first in the way Williams repeatedly enters imaginatively into the Bosch painting. In my illustrations regarding her shifting commitments to her partner and to the idea of marriage, I noted how Williams, standing before the panel of the painting depicting Paradise, sees herself as Eve, taking the hand of her husband, and walking out of Eden (*Leap*, 41-42). Her actual entry into the painting is much richer than that summary conveys. Consider the following passage, noting how Williams transitions from observing the painting to finding herself within the life of the painting itself (*Leap*, 15-16):

> On this particular day in the Prado, I begin my observation of the triptych with binoculars. I want to see what birds inhabit the Paradise of Bosch.
>
> The cradle chair in the corner of the gallery is empty. I sit down and begin bird-watching.
>
> A mute swan floats gracefully in the pond behind Eve. It has an orange bill with a black knob. The knob is greatly enlarged in the male in the spring. This bird would have been familiar to Bosch in the Low Countries. This swan is not mute but makes a formidable hissing sound. In its wild state, it frequents remote wetlands. Why not Eden?
>
> Mallards and shovelers float nearby as three white egrets stand in shallow water perfectly still, eyes intent on fish. Their long, sinuous necks and spearlike bills are mirrored in the pool alongside a unicorn bending down to drink. Their feathers form an elegant cloak easily unraveled by the wind.
>
> Close to them is a spoonbill. I walk slowly toward this long-legged bird, a standing grace in the water. It swings its peculiar beak side to side in the white marl for crustaceans. The quivering nerve endings that line the interior of its mouth are feeling for clues and will send messages of what is below. Adam and Eve would do well to pay attention. Life is to be touched. The bill snaps shut, a crayfish struggles. It is decided: the crayfish becomes the spoonbill, who continues walking in Eden, seen or unseen, it does not matter.

Imaginative entries like this are voluminous in the text, indicating that the painting—and nature itself—is not a static representation to be analyzed from an objective distance, but a dynamic landscape into which one can subjectively enter.

We see the imaginative and integrative process of reflection as well in the way Williams allows her experience with the painting to elicit memories, historical details, news items, and other events connected to her understanding of the painting and its effect upon her. For example, she notices one orange in the center panel of the painting, bringing to memory a visit she made to Riverside, California, with her father just before her fortieth birthday (*Leap*, 216-219). The United States Naval Hospital where she had been born had since been converted into a correctional facility. The house in Riverside she had been brought home to still had six orange trees in the backyard, in the branches of which her mother used to swing her. This visit to the San Bernardino Valley and the greater Los Angeles area is bittersweet; Williams notes changes in the landscape and a number of environmental degradations. It is in her meditation on the right panel, depicting Hell, however, that Williams finds herself recounting extended litanies of environmental woes, both those drawn from her awareness of environmental issues in the interior American West (*Leap*, 53-54) and those drawn from various news reports of degraded human-nature relationships (*Leap*, 56-60). In other passages, Williams allows the painting to elicit reflections on her personal experiences in the LDS church and LDS history more broadly, as well as historical details about Hieronymus Bosch, his painting, and its interpretation. Overall, it is meditation on the painting that organizes and facilitates this imaginative and integrative reflection.

Paradise

As the second stage in *lectio divina*, *meditatio* is about internalizing an external text and making it one's own. This internalization is central to the process of identifying and reflecting critically on one's reasons for responding and acting in particular ways. It

includes reflecting on one's social embeddedness and developing one's ability to think for oneself regarding environmental issues. In *Leap*, Williams reflects on her embeddedness in the Mormon tradition and endeavors to think for herself as an adult member of her community.

In *Leap*, Williams struggles with her passionate commitment to people and place in Utah and in the broader Intermountain West, in light of the Mormon church's relative silence on environmental matters. She uses Bosch's triptych to provoke reflections on the two outer panels that she was familiar with from her childhood, in light of the center panel, which had not been shown to her. Eden or Paradise, represented in the left panel, points both to origins and to images of perfection. In the first section of her text, Williams draws connections to her experiences in childhood and as a young adult as well as to the origins of the LDS tradition. The historical origins of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can be said to lie in Joseph Smith's questioning which religion was true, and Williams appropriates this questioning dimension of the tradition to interrogate her faith with respect to the environment.

As Williams ponders Bosch's image of "Paradise," she recalls her baptism and confirmation. Remembering having received the Holy Spirit at the hands of the male priesthood bearers when she was eight years old, Williams characterizes the experience of being "a clean slate," sinless before God, as the "Paradise of childhood" (*Leap*, 10). In recounting the forested origins of the LDS religion—Joseph Smith praying in a grove of trees to know which religion was true—Williams asserts the Mormon tradition's honoring of both questioning and personal experience. Williams then describes her own prayerful questing about the truth of her religious tradition as a young woman; the vision that followed a period of prayer and fasting, when shared with her mother and grandmother, brought reassurances that there was no need to fear seeking truth.

Near the end of this first section, Williams recalls her wedding where she and Brooke took on the characters of Adam and Eve (*Leap*, 37). For Williams as an adult,

influenced by the scientific discipline of biology, the narrative of the first humans had become story rather than Truth (*Leap*, 35):

> Adam and Eve, the Truth, became Adam and Eve, the story, when I fell in love with biology. The study of evolution became my own. To evolve, to evolve from other forms of life—I saw the process of natural selection as an act of biotic faith, an organic definition, an extension, of what I understood the concept of eternal progression to be in Mormon theology, that of *advanced perfectionism*. If we believe that we too can become gods and goddesses, creators of our own worlds, what else is the attainment of godhood if not natural selection, "this gradually unfolding course of advancement and experience, a course that began in a past eternity and will continue in ages future."[127]

Note that this was not a rejection of faith, but a reframing in light of other knowledge and experience. In biology, natural selection is rarely the result of human choice. Yet Williams, influenced by her Mormon tradition, has here connected evolution—"We have been everything before" (*Leap*, 36)—to the Mormon concept of eternal progression.

Hell

Jumping over the center panel, Williams goes from "Paradise" to "Hell." In the orthodox reading both of this Bosch painting and of LDS theology, "Hell" depicts the consequences of the deadly sins engaged in while on earth—sins which, many would argue, are depicted in the center panel. Williams rejects this interpretation, largely on the authority of her own bodily experience. In this section of the text, she describes the manifestations of sin as she perceives them, then draws on the Mormon belief in the impermanence of Hell to assert the need for vulnerable and imaginative action to escape what she perceives as hell on earth, along the way raising disquieting questions about heresy.

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[127] The embedded quote, unattributed by Williams, is from Bruce McConkie's (1966:238) *Mormon Doctrine*.

In the section of the text titled "Hell," Williams gives two extended descriptions of the physical manifestations of sin. Drawing on her extensive awareness of environmental issues in the interior American West, she writes of clearcut forests, dammed rivers, endangered species, and landscapes poisoned by nuclear and other toxic wastes (*Leap*, 53-54). Drawing on news reports, Williams chronicles another litany of deadly sins: children having seizures while watching Japanese cartoons, domesticated monkeys in Thailand rented out to pick coconuts, headless frogs produced by genetic experimentation, human volunteers drinking pesticides for toxicity tests, radioactive mill tailings threatening drinking water supplies, the toxic legacy left behind by NATO airstrikes in the Balkans, and the glowing ears of genetically modified mice (*Leap*, 56-60). Williams writes that the real sin is perhaps our indifference in the face of these images and events in our earthly experiences, the all-too-common refrain that "there is nothing we can do."

For Williams, then, hell is experienced here on earth and demands an active response. In Mormon thought, hell is not permanent. And yet finding our way out of this earthbound hell is fraught with peril. While proclaiming the need for a living theology open to creative interpretation, Williams writes of six LDS scholars excommunicated for holding beliefs contrary to doctrine (*Leap*, 88). One aspect of her own heterodox belief may be her willingness to gamble that there is no heaven or hell, only this one earth (*Leap*, 77). Williams suggests that the way out of the chaos, anxiety, and disorientation of this earthly hell is by committing oneself, heart open and vulnerable, to what one loves. There is a risk here. It is in this context that Williams writes of igniting her marriage certificate and also describes her experiences at the Fallas celebration in Valencia, Spain, in which hundreds of sculptures are ignited in a mid-March celebration of the coming of spring (*Leap*, 116-126). Williams asserts we must be participants rather than voyeurs in hell, striking the match in the night that can transform our community. Nearing the end of this section on "Hell," she writes (*Leap*, 118):

> What happens when our institutions no longer serve us, no longer reflect the truth of our own experience? We sit on pews and feel a soul-stirring disconnect as we are preached sermons spoken from the dead. What we know is not what we hear. We mistake our confusion for guilt. Our hearts close. Our minds wander and then we walk away. Inspiration returns when another voice is heard, one that recognizes that the past and the future are contemporary. How can we learn to speak in a language that is authentic, faithful to our hearts? The ceiling is raised by our imagination. Authentic acts reform.

The primary tension in *Leap* is between bodily experience and the orthodoxy of tradition, between what we know in our bodies and what we are told. According to Williams, authentic, imaginative acts are needed to transcend this duality and recover a responsible, living relationship to one's tradition.

Earthly Delights

Exploring the center panel of the triptych, Williams begins with an image of herself lying on the ground, someone taking her pulse. Referring to "the puritanical instructs of authority threatened by joy and discovery" (*Leap*, 213), she suggests her imagined closeness to death may be attributed to the constraints of the Mormon orthodoxy. She writes (*Leap*, 141): "I desire to live differently." This is the longest section of the text, in which Williams describes at length the joyful, sensuous, open, playful, and imaginative attributes of earthly experience. I focus here on those parts of the text that illuminate the tension between bodily experience and religious tradition. Consistent with Mormon theology in its rejection of dualities between body and spirit, between the physical and the spiritual, and between the temporal and the eternal, in this section of the text on "Earthly Delights," Williams attempts to draw together experience and tradition, seeking to revive the tradition by reference to its alchemical origins.

Williams's positive interpretation of the center panel is not the standard reading, influencing the order in which she presents her interpretations of the three panels. Most interpreters of Bosch's painting read it from left to right, from the perfections of Paradise to a lewd post-Fall decadence and then to the consequences meted out in Hell. In *Leap*,

Williams is intentional in ordering her interpretation differently, seeing earthly existence as the marriage of heaven and hell, a middle way uniting opposing elements, an ethical choice to be faithful to the spiritual imagination without betraying bodily knowledge. While the LDS religion forbids crosses as drawing undue emphasis to the suffering of Christ, Williams finds in the center of the cross an intersection that can unite a dualistic world (*Leap*, 226):

> It is the intersection where the vertical and horizontal points meet that interests me, the heart of the cross, the wound, where we feel the world tremble.…
>
> How do we inhabit this dualistic world that we have inherited without falling prey to either side? Is it possible to maintain a residency within the heart of the cross without denying the paradox of our own souls? Can we embrace both night and day without calling one evil and the other good, but see both as the full range of our vision?

Drawing on her image of LDS founder Joseph Smith as a mystic, an alchemist, and a restorer of the Church of Jesus Christ, Williams asserts a new alchemy is needed, reviving the institution of the church, opening tradition to experience. By evoking Smith, Williams is, in a sense, calling the church back to its origins. Several passages in this section of the text make the call to origins most strongly. For example, when Williams lifts up Joseph Smith's mystical, visionary, religion-making imagination, she contrasts it with the more respectable, hard-working, and pragmatic focus of the LDS Church under Brigham Young's subsequent leadership (*Leap*, 144-145).

In another passage, Williams reveals her own conflicted emotions surrounding her religious tradition and its historical development. She is in the stadium at Brigham Young University at the sesquicentennial celebration of the arrival of the Mormons into Great Salt Lake Valley. "Inside my veins, I feel the pulse of my people, those dead and those standing beside me, a pulse I will always be driven by, a pulse that registers as a murmur in my heart. I cannot escape my history, nor can I ignore the lineage that is mine. Most importantly, I don't want to" (*Leap*, 177). She watches a reenactment of Mormon history.

> Tears stream down my cheeks. I am home. I remember who I am and where I come from. This is my story, a story of a people in search of God who sought a landscape in the desert where they could worship freely.
>
> I believe (*Leap*, 179).

Then, the mood shifts. Songs are played that she doesn't recognize. The football field fills with people of all different cultures, singing a traditional LDS hymn in their native voices. An endless stream of Mormon missionaries circles the stadium. Williams writes (*Leap*, 180-181):

> Attachment. Detachment. I feel myself unhinging from the rest of my clan as they gather closer together. There is a rupture in my heart that nobody sees.…
>
> I weep in the midst of my people. I weep because I recognize I no longer believe as I once did. I weep because I do not believe there is only one true church. I weep because within my own homeland I suddenly feel foreign, so very, very foreign.

The vulnerability of this engagement with tradition is palpable. Though Williams desires to integrate tradition and experience, in order to revive tradition, she must approach it critically in a way that easily leads to alienation.

Restoration

In the final section of her text, "Restoration," Williams returns to the Prado with her father, only to find the painting gone. As discussed above, her confrontation with her own shadow, now manifest on the empty wall, provokes a reflection on obedience, free agency, and authority. To reclaim her own authority, her own creative potential, Williams learns from the model of the professionals who restore art. The Bosch print was removed from its exhibit location in order to be restored, brought back to its original state, returned to vigor and good health. The two sisters tasked with restoring the piece have completed years of academic study and have served as apprentices to elders for whom art restoration was a family tradition. They have a notable gift for interpreting the feeling of a painting. Their restoration of the Bosch triptych is grounded in historical documentation, state-of-the-art scientific analysis, and a constantly developing knowledge base of restoration

techniques and materials. Williams is most fascinated with a clear liquid solution called "Artist's Spirit" that is wiped on the painting with a cotton ball, and the cleaning action of which Williams describes as a "process of alchemy before my eyes" (*Leap*, 254). Most importantly, Williams highlights the profound commitment made by those who restore art to surrender themselves in the service of that which they love, that which has brought them healing.

With their knowledge, new technologies, professional experience, interpretative gifts, and commitment, the two sisters will restore the painting. Williams is interested in bringing a corresponding set of gifts to the work of restoring wild landscapes, the human spirit, and religious faith. Her commitment is manifest in action. In a private ceremony in the Utah wilderness, Terry and her husband whisper new vows: "Yes, we are here to love. Yes, we are here to experience the body, in both shadow and light, in forgiveness and joy, we return to each other, rejoined. Together we will love this beautiful, broken world of which we are a part" (*Leap*, 261). They then move from Salt Lake City to small village in southern Utah, founded by latter-day pioneers who planted apple orchards. Now living in a small house with a large view, Williams again makes an allusion to the Mormon concept of eternal progression, writing (*Leap*, 266): "I still believe we are the creators of our own worlds."

Leap is a sustained meditation on received tradition in light of one's experience, cognizant of one's social embeddedness yet seeking to reconcile authoritative tradition with experience and to think for oneself. According to Williams, it is not our acceptance of what is—a passive acquiescence to what we are told and a belief that there is nothing we can do—that heals us. The courage to seek, the willingness to embrace questions and be wary of answers, is what names our pain and isolation and opens the door "that leads us to the table of restoration" (*Leap*, 265) where, along with others, we might both conserve the earth and restore our spirits. Paintings, landscapes, and religious traditions can all be restored to greater wholeness. Williams writes (*Leap*, 264):

> Hieronymus Bosch invited me to seek. Joseph Smith taught me to seek truth in a grove of trees. We can have visions. We can have our own personal relationship with God. We can participate in our own healing.… We can obey our own authority through our free agency to choose. I choose to believe in the power of restoration, the restoration of our faith, even within my own Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Faith is not about finding meaning in the world, there may be no such thing— Faith is the belief in our capacity to create meaningful lives.

Such creation is not a creation out of nothing. Our capacity to create meaningful lives, restore faith, and participate in healing, whether for ourselves, the natural world, or our institutions, is grounded in the same kind of knowledge and skills and commitments that enabled the professional art restorationists to restore the Bosch painting.

Vulnerability and transformation

Meditatio, or pondering, as represented in *Leap*, includes imaginative engagement, integrative reflection, and attentiveness to subjective responses. It includes critical reflection—thinking for oneself—in full recognition of one's social embeddedness. This pondering is religious in character to the extent that one embraces vulnerably the transformative potential of this sustained encounter, understood in some sense as a response to what is unsurpassably important and real.

In the Acknowledgments that appear in the final pages of *Leap*, Williams writes (*Leap*, 329): "Carl Brandt, my agent, made a trip to Salt Lake City, knocked on my door, and made me articulate what I was afraid to say, that this book was about faith. While I wavered, he did not." In the main text, on the opening page, Williams writes (*Leap*, 5): "Over the course of seven years, I have been traveling in the landscape of Hieronymus Bosch. A secret I did not tell for fear of seeming mad. Let these pages be my interrogation of faith. My roots have been pleached with the wings of a medieval triptych, my soul intertwined with an artist's vision." The passage Williams has made in this text, from her first surprising encounter with the painting in a Prado gallery to her final vision of the center panel, hanging alone and restored, has been a fearful passage that Williams has embraced vulnerably, open to her own transformation.

Consider first the way Williams presents the vulnerability of her physical body. From her childhood, she recalls the red and white petals of the perennial bleeding hearts (*Dicentra spectabilis*) that grew beneath the largest spruce tree in her grandmother's yard. An image in Bosch's panel depicting Hell reminds her of these flowers (*Leap*, 82):

> I see something I have not noticed before: a bleeding heart torn in half standing upside down on the white brim of the Hollow Man's hat. Some might insist it is a pink bagpipe, a medieval instrument turned into an aberration. But what are our hearts if not both an instrument and an aberration when measured against sharp cruelties? I still hold a memory in my hands of tenderness for all the heart-shaped blossoms I picked up after they had fallen on the black, damp soil. Taking the petals into my hands, I would close my fingers carefully around them like a cradle for all that was vulnerable.

This meditation then proceeds to reflections on breast cancer, including a recent report from her pathologist, indicating that a cyst removed from her own breast was benign. She dreams of clear-cut forests and asks: "Where do the clear-cut breasts of women go?" (*Leap*, 85) "What do I do now with the open space in front of my heart?" (*Leap*, 86).

This reflection on the vulnerability of the physical body shifts to concern about the vulnerability of the human being in its social and familial connections. Williams writes of LDS scholars excommunicated for holding heterodox beliefs (*Leap*, 88). She writes of the heartbreak she experiences at her grandfather's death (*Leap*, 92-100). Vulnerability as fact, however, is not the same as vulnerability embraced in an openness to transformation. Her meditation on her grandfather gestures toward this openness while also casting light on her pairing of the terms obedience and trust as she confronts her shadow on the empty Prado wall.

Her grandfather was a ham radio operator. For almost three-quarters of a century, he listened for voices. It was not the reception of voices alone that mattered, but the communication, the listening *and* the response. "Transmit and receive" (*Leap*, 100). Noting how much of what we hear is "submerged in the unconscious," Williams writes (*Leap*, 98):

> What sounds do we hold in our bodies and retrieve when necessary? What sounds disturb and what sounds heal? Where do we store the tension of traffic, honking horns, or the hum of fluorescent lights? How do we receive birdsong, the leg rubbings of crickets, the water music of trout?

In her meditation before her shadow, discussed above, Williams posits a pairing similar to the call-and-response pattern of the ham radio operator: obedience and trust. The importance of trust would seem to lie in finding something one can surrender to vulnerably, allowing oneself to be shaped and formed by that encounter. Earlier in the text, pondering the birds in Bosch's painting, Williams indicated her willingness to accept the tutelage of birds (*Leap*, 215, emphasis in original):

> It is most humbling to sit among them. *I will take them as my mentors*….
>
> I want to sit with the Council of the Kingfisher where I can consider a reversal of scale and bow at the feet of ducks and finches. The size of Bosch's birds is the size of wild forces within our own lives. I want to forgo my authority as a human being, my self-proclaimed dominance, and be at the mercy of another species' judgment, empathy, and compassion. I want to imagine what the owl hears inside a mouse's heartbeat. I want to understand halcyon days as a time when the points of view being considered are the perspective of kingfishers. I want to be teachable.

The pairing of obedience and trust reveals the difficulty of being formed by another if one is not willing to submit to their authority in some measure. To be teachable requires the vulnerability of an underlying trust.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has its general authorities, but it also places tremendous authority on personal revelation, encouraging a vulnerable trust in God. At the end of *The Book of Mormon*, the prophet Moroni says, referring to the plates found by Joseph Smith on which the writings that became the Book of Mormon were inscribed: "And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost" (Moroni 10:4). Between high school and

college, Williams worked as a cabin maid at an Idaho property near Yellowstone National Park. "Before entering college," she writes, "I wanted to find out what I truly believed in and so, each morning, I would rise early and read from *The Book of Mormon*. I would underline passages in red and ponder them" (*Leap*, 23). Taking Moroni up on his promise, Williams fasted and prayed for two days. She walked to a favorite place, where she watched an osprey plummet after its prey. Back in the solitude of her Idaho cabin, she prayed Moroni's prayer and had a vision of "a figure draped in a white robe of light [who] stood at the foot of [her] bed" (*Leap*, 27). The next morning she relates the vision to her mother and grandmother, who take the six-hour drive up from Salt Lake City to be with her (*Leap*, 28-29):

> And then as a young woman of seventeen years still unable to trust what I had just shared, I asked the women in my life who mattered most if they believed me, if they thought this apparition meant the Church was true.
>
> "Nobody can answer that for you. The question isn't really whether or not the Church is true—" my grandmother Mimi said, pausing.
>
> My mother reminded me of the patriarchal blessing I had received from one of the Brethren shortly before I left home. She brought the typed copy with her and read a passage:
>
> > *Live in tune with the Holy Spirit. Seek the truth always. Be not afraid to learn the truth of anything, for no truth will be revealed to you as such that will be in conflict with God's kingdom.*
>
> "It's all true," my grandmother said, looking out at the great expanse before us. "All of this—"
>
> We sat on the edge of Mesa Falls in silence, mesmerized, hypnotized by the rushing water, the seemingly endless water, and I wondered about the source from which this water falls.
>
> The vision I had in Idaho after fasting and praying in the wilderness was the same vision I had of the osprey fishing at the lake—wings folded in a free fall—the surface of water breaks, holy food is within our grasp.

While *Leap* is an interrogation of faith, the interrogation has its source within the tradition itself; Williams understands Mormon faith as encouraging the active search for

truth. The passage from Moroni grounds this search in scripture and her family context also supports this interpretation of Mormon faith. For example, midway through *Leap*, Williams offers this quotation drawn from her grandmother's journal: "There is more faith in honest doubt than in all the unexamined creeds of past and present. In this sense, each of us must articulate their own religion—that is, their own concept of what is of supreme worth in living, their own mode of expressing that concept in their own commitment in daily life to the values he or she believes to be basic" (*Leap*, 181-182).

Religious reading and ethical practice

As the second step of reading nature religiously, pondering requires a willingness to enter deeply into the various sources that help us understand the natural world and our place within it as well as a willingness to reflect critically upon those sources. In *Leap*, this is portrayed as an interrogation of faith that engages the tensions and contradictions Williams experiences as a fifth-generation Mormon and an environmentalist. This is the stage of *lectio divina* in which one internalizes the text and makes it in some deep sense one's own, placing a particular text in the context of scripture as a whole. *Leap* reveals Williams visiting the Prado museum and the Bosch painting, *The Garden of Delights*, over the course of seven years. She uses the triptych as a focal point around which she strives to deepen her understanding of how her views of the natural world have been informed by her Mormon faith, scientific knowledge, media portrayals, and personal experience. The fundamental tension within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is framed as a conflict between obedience and free agency, which Williams reconciles by identifying those authoritative sources she can approach with a trusting obedience. Reflecting on her life, she writes (*Leap*, 141): "I desire to live differently." Her pondering facilitates her transformation and, by the end of text, Williams and her husband have left their home near Salt Lake City and established a new home in the Paradox Basin of southeastern Utah.

As part of an ethical practice, pondering calls upon readers of nature to reflect critically on their understandings of the natural world. In *Leap*, Williams portrays her critical reflection on the diverse influences of her Mormon faith. Pondering should be—in equal measure—critically reflective of scientific claims, environmentalist rhetoric, and media representations of ecological woes.[128] All that which is accepted uncritically under the lens of a hermeneutic of faith (whether faith in science or religious faith) must lose the patina of self-evident truth under the lens of a hermeneutic of suspicion. Frequently, such reflection will reveal contradictions and ambiguities within any single tradition (whether secular or religious). The process of internalizing one's reading of nature, of making it one's own rather than the uncritical acceptance of what one has been told from one source or another, includes engaging with these ambiguities and finding or creating some measure of coherence for oneself. This internalized understanding will then underlie the third stage of reading nature religiously: responding.

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[128] Such critical reflection—comparable to that directed at Mormon tradition—is not apparent in Williams's writing.

CHAPTER SIX

RESPONDING

The social dimension of reading nature religiously

No single text by Williams illustrates fully everything that might be intended by the third stage of reading nature religiously: *oratio*, or responding. Practical reasoning is deliberation about what is to be done. In elaborating this third stage, I focus on the active response that proceeds from the practices of paying attention and pondering. Consistent with an approach to environmental ethics modeled after *lectio divina*, I emphasize less *what* should be done and more *how* action should be deliberated and engaged. As with the preceding stages of reading nature religiously, the focus remains centered in human community and its transformation.

For the purpose of adapting *lectio divina* to a religious reading of nature, individual response may be necessary but it will not be sufficient. A collective response is required for three interrelated reasons. First, collective response is needed to address virtually all environmental issues, whether by inspiring a critical mass of individuals to respond personally; or by addressing economic, political, and other systems that structure and guide individual action; or by recognizing the many ways in which humans act collectively through governments, corporations, or other institutional structures. Second, the goal of an environmental virtue ethic includes flourishing at individual, social, and ecological levels. Finally, in responding to Stegner's call to create a society to match the scenery, individual authors and readers are involved in a discourse that collectively seeks to envision, create, and sustain vital human-land relationships.

The social dimension of reading nature religiously has already been evident in discussions of the preceding stages. With respect to paying attention, as a child, Williams went birdwatching with her grandmother, Mimi. As an adult, her capacity for paying attention drew significantly on scientific knowledge acquired through her formal

education and through her self-directed study of materials produced by others. With respect to pondering, she considered how her understanding of the natural world was influenced by her Mormon heritage. Her reflections on the Bosch painting were embedded as well in a history of artistic preservation and interpretation. In our exploration of responding, our attention will remain decidedly social, attending to Williams's actions in their social context and watching for evidence of transformation at the social level.

I draw on two texts by Williams to illustrate what responding might mean in reading nature religiously. *The Open Space of Democracy* (2004d) is a short text in which Williams reflects on participatory democracy, community engagement, and wildland protection in a post-9/11 world.[129] *Desert Quartet* (1995) is a set of four imaginative essays exploring what it might mean to model ethical human-land relationships on the reciprocity and respect inherent in erotic love. A third text, *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* (2008a), is also of interest, primarily for the way it portrays Williams participating in projects (prairie dog research in Bryce Canyon National Park and a community art project in Rwanda) organized by others. The ability to collaborate with others, on their projects, is an important dimension of collective action, but this book will not be interpreted here.

The Open Space of Democracy

The Open Space of Democracy is the fourth volume in The Orion Society's New Patriotism series, which is part of their Thoughts on America Initiative.[130] The three

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[129] Subsequent references to this book are cited parenthetically as *OSD*.

[130] The Orion Society is a nonprofit organization whose mission is "to inform, inspire, and engage individuals and grassroots organizations in becoming a significant cultural force for healing nature and community" (http://www.orionsociety.org/; accessed 1 February 2009). The other volumes in the New Patriotism series are Wendell Berry's *In the Presence of Fear* (2001);

chapters that comprise *The Open Space of Democracy*—Commencement, Ground Truthing, and Engagement—were first serialized as essays in the Society's *Orion* magazine (Williams 2004a, 2004c, 2004b). The editors of *Orion* magazine characterized the three essays as "a triptych: three interrelated pieces based on a progression of thought, in this case, a pilgrimage across what she calls the open space of democracy, in search of truth, in search of strength, in search of motivation to rise to the challenges presented by this critical election year" (Anonymous 2004:1). Capitalizing on an "unusually engaged citizenry"[131] in the months preceding the 2004 presidential elections in the United States, Williams's book was the focal piece of an Orion Society effort called The Open Space of Democracy Project, which included a book tour. With stops at campuses, bookstores, and other locations in Colorado, Washington, Oregon, Utah, California, Ohio, Florida, and the District of Columbia, the tour spanned three weeks in October 2004. At each stop, Williams read from her book and moderated dialogues "address[ing] paramount questions of American values and leadership."[132] Williams also posted entries in an online diary associated with the tour in which she reflected on her experiences and related some of the conversations that took place in the dialogue sessions.[133]

In the first essay, "Commencement," Williams writes of her commencement address to graduating seniors at the University of Utah in May 2003, as well as her

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Richard Nelson, Barry Lopez, and Terry Tempest Williams's *Patriotism and the American Land* (2002); and Wendell Berry and David James Duncan's *Citizens Dissent* (2003).

[131] http://www.orionsociety.org/i/general/report2004.pdf; page 2; accessed 1 February 2009.

[132] http://www.orionsociety.org/pages/oo/sidebars/OSD/index_OSD.html; accessed 17 May 2007 (no longer available online).

[133] Quotations from this online diary (URL in preceding footnote) are hereafter cited parenthetically as "Democracy Diary."

ensuing correspondence with United States Senator Bob Bennett, her "neighbor and former Mormon bishop" (*OSD*, 15). In the second essay, "Ground Truthing," Williams describes an extended trip she took with nine others into the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Finally, "Engagement" recounts the land-protection activism of residents of the southeastern Utah community of Castle Valley to which Williams and her husband, Brooke, had moved in 1998. Each essay in the book is accompanied by an image by artist, environmentalist, and social activist Mary Frank.[134] The text is preceded by a "Foreword" from New Patriotism series editor Laurie Lane-Zucker; notes and acknowledgments follow the text.

The political and historical context of the Orion Society's efforts surrounding *The Open Space of Democracy* indicates an obvious desire to capitalize on citizen unrest with the foreign and domestic policies of the Bush administration in the months leading up to the 2004 election. Laurie Lane-Zucker opens his "Foreword" with the statement, "Events of the past few years have not been kind to America" (*OSD*, i). National governmental policies related to the environment are evidently a concern in Williams's text. While not specifically environmental in content, Williams's commencement address articulates clear discomfort with the Bush administration. In addition, a significant event in the Open Space of Democracy Tour was the cancellation of an address at Florida Gulf Coast University because the University president "expressed concern that the forum would be critical of President Bush's environmental policies so close to the election, and that the views presented would be 'unbalanced'" (Democracy Diary). Moreover, the focus in the central essay on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge points to a particular environmental policy issue.

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[134] Each book chapter is accompanied by a single artistic image. As serialized in *Orion*, additional artwork by Mary Frank accompanied each essay. Frank also collaborated with Williams in *Desert Quartet: An Erotic Landscape* (1995).

At the same time, it is not the Bush administration nor federal environmental policy that is the direct focus of discontent and criticism in the third essay. "Engagement" is a call to action primarily at the local and regional level. The focus of these essays as a whole, then, is not how to save a particular landscape in southeastern Utah or the vast expanses of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Rather, it is how to engage the citizenry in participatory democracy in relation to land-use decisions. Williams uses the language of the "open space of democracy" to point to the sustaining role particular landscapes may have in nurturing a form of participatory democracy with room for dissent, all in the overarching context of a reverence for life (*OSD*, 8, 9, and 12). The language is, in part, metaphorical; the open space of undeveloped landscapes is like an uncluttered discourse space in which dissenting voices may be raised. The language suggests a more causal relationship as well, consistent with Stegner's sentiment that something would have gone out of us as a people if we were to destroy the remaining wildlands. While specific land protection activities organize the particular actions recounted in the text, the primary emphasis is on the process of civic engagement rather than on some desired endpoint or outcome. The responsive citizenship Williams calls for in *The Open Space of Democracy* recognizes that the locus of transformation is the human rather than the natural, consistent with Stegner's call for a society to match the scenery.

Commencement

Interpreted as an illustration of *oratio*, *The Open Space of Democracy* portrays choosing and, as possible, implementing actions that flow from the earlier stages of paying attention and pondering. The first essay illustrates this flow from paying attention to pondering to responding. Consider first the events that led up to Williams's commencement address in May 2003. Williams begins this essay by describing her attention to the political rhetoric in the United States following the 2001 terrorist acts (*OSD*, 2):

> Since September 11, 2001, we have witnessed an escalation of rhetoric within the United States that has led us to war twice in two years. We have heard our president, our vice-president, our secretary of defense, and our attorney general cultivate fear and command with lies, suggesting our homeland security and safety must reside in their hands, not ours. Force has trumped debate and diplomacy.
>
> Our language has been taken hostage. Words like patriotism, freedom, and democracy have been bound and gagged, forced to perform indecent acts through the abuse of slogans. *Freedom will prevail. We are liberating Iraq. God bless America*.

This impression of the prevailing political climate, presented with its own rhetorical flourish, is the product of paying attention.[135] Williams is critical of the Bush administration for its military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq and, more importantly here, for what post-9/11 policies have done to democracy and freedom of speech within the United States. Williams ponders the meaning of democracy. "I have always believed democracy is best practiced through its construction, not its completion" (*OSD*, 3). For Williams, democracy is a process rather than a structure; it is a "never-ending project" (*OSD*, 3) that requires the ongoing participation of responsible citizens. Finally, she gives her response. "It was within this context of witnessing America at war and contemplating democracy that I accepted an invitation to deliver the commencement address to graduating seniors at the University of Utah on May 2, 2003" (*OSD*, 3).

The first essay taken as a whole also illustrates the move from paying attention through pondering to responding. Paying attention is reflected in the attentiveness to the

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[135] The rhetoric here raises the question of the extent to which paying attention should be objective or neutral. To what extent do our biases color our perception, hindering our ability to see or hear accurately. In some realms, such as field biology, objectivity is more easily attained; e.g., *this bird is a semipalmated plover.* In other realms, our experiences and other aspects of our positions will affect our observations. The inevitable bias is attenuated only in part by paying attention with an openness to seeing what one doesn't perhaps expect; more sustained attention to identifying and, as deemed necessary, correcting the distortions of one's biases comes in the pondering stage, during which one considers critically those beliefs and experiences that have colored one's perception. In the limited range in which it is possible, one wants to see things *as they are*. Always, however, the more difficult question that calls for our critical reflection is this: *Why do I perceive things as I do?*

rhetoric and content of political discourse. In her commencement address, Williams encourages the students to ask difficult questions, to push through complacency into discomfort. Meeting with a group of the students before the address, she was encouraged by their grasp of the complexity of the issues facing them and by their desire to use language to build community rather than to polarize and divide. In preparing for and giving her address, Williams is aware that some will disagree with her political views, primarily with respect to the ongoing wars. At its conclusion, Senator Bennett expresses his "strong dissent" (*OSD*, 15). Five days later, Senator Bennett wrote her a letter defending the war in Iraq and asking Williams what she would be willing to die for.

A period of pondering ensued. Williams writes of how hard it can be to control one's emotions and really hear those with whom one disagrees. "I calm down, breathe, and allow for deep listening to occur. Senator Bob Bennett listened. He disagreed. He responded. And he asked for more discussion. I want to offer him the same courtesy, time, and respect. I want to listen to what he has to say and why, and answer with a thoughtful response" (*OSD*, 18-19). Weeks, even months, go by. Bennett's question about what she would die for provokes reflection on the sacrifices made by both soldiers and citizens. She realizes

> … that what mattered most to me was not what I was willing to die for, but what I was willing to give my life to. In war, death by belief is centered on principles both activated and extinguished in the drama of a random moment. Heroes are buried. A legacy of freedom is maintained through pain. Life by belief is centered on the day-to-day decisions we make that are largely unseen. One produces martyrs born out of violence. The other produces quiet citizens born out of personal commitments toward social change. Both dwell in the hallowed ground of sacrifice (*OSD*, 16-17).

Given Williams's concern for the erosion of political speech, "quiet" here does not mean silenced. Williams is referring more to the patient, consistent determination of the citizens she envisions. The citizenship advocated here calls for sacrifice. "Democracy invites us to take risks" (*OSD*, 22). Essential are "flesh-and-blood encounter(s)" (*OSD*,

23) with others in a civil dialogue through which we expose our own convictions while also listening and learning from others.

Flowing out of these weeks of reflection, Williams replies to Bennett, noting their political disagreements on the war in Iraq and on protection of wildlands in Utah. "I do believe we can come closer to understanding why each of us is committed to our own points of view and perhaps even adjust our perspectives along the way to find creative alternatives that we cannot only both live with, but feel comfortable in proposing together" (*OSD*, 19-20). She suggested such dialogue occur *in situ* (*OSD*, 20):

> I would like to propose an exchange program between us. I was thinking how our points of views might expand, even change, if we were to accompany each other to these areas of conflict. I would visit Iraq with you to witness the situation in Baghdad through your eyes and then you would visit with me areas now open for oil and gas exploration in Utah (once held as wilderness study areas before being released by Governor Leavitt and Secretary of the Interior Norton last April). Both are regions in need of creative discourse. Both are sites of deep philosophical divisions. Would these field trips interest you? I would like to think that we could bring our imaginations to the table and find a way through our positions to possibilities.
>
> If you and I, a senator and a writer, but first, as neighbors, could find our way to common ground through shared experiences, perhaps it could provide an example of how people can come to listen to one another with real, authentic exchanges. I have always held the image of our founding fathers close to my heart, how they dared to disagree passionately with one another, yet remained open to what each had to say, some even changing their minds, as they forged our Constitution. This is the bedrock of our evolving republic.

While Senator Bennett does not reappear in this book—neither suggested trip came to fruition—this invitation can be seen as her response, which flows from paying attention to political rhetoric and pondering the nature of responsible civil discourse.

Ground Truthing

The three essays that comprise *The Open Space of Democracy*, taken as a whole, also reflect this movement from paying attention ("Commencement") to pondering ("Ground Truthing") to responding ("Engagement"). Williams's invitation to Bennett to

conduct joint field visits to areas about which they disagreed is not as farfetched as it may at first seem. "Commencement" highlighted their differences, bringing them to attention; "Ground Truthing" presents the kind of pondering that can help resolve such disagreements.

Ground truthing is a term of art in the fields of remote sensing and cartography. Williams begins this second essay by providing a definition (*OSD*, 28):

> GROUND TRUTHING: The use of a ground survey to confirm findings of aerial imagery or to calibrate quantitative aerial observations; validation and verification techniques used on the ground to support maps; walking the ground to see for oneself if what one has been told is true; near surface discoveries.

In this essay, Williams writes about her observations and experiences on an extended visit to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Just as practitioners of *lectio divina* often move back and forth between *lectio* and *meditatio*, this essay moves easily between observations of nature and reflections on broader questions of environmental politics and activism that frame and interpret those observations. For example, a day spent exploring the minute wonders of tundra vegetation with Cindy Shogan flows easily into reflections on Shogan's work as the executive director of the Alaska Wilderness League, legislative proposals to open the Refuge for oil and gas development, and the political intrigue surrounding the 2003 Smithsonian exhibition of photographs taken in the Arctic by Indian photographer, Subhankar Banerjee (*OSD*, 38-41).[136]

Williams traveled in a group of ten: her husband, Brooke, and their niece, Abby Thomas, who had recently graduated from Brown University with a degree in

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[136] Banerjee's exhibit, Seasons of Life and Land, opened 2 May 2003 at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History. Originally intended for a more prominent display location, the exhibit was suddenly relocated to a basement display space. In addition, the photographer's quotations accompanying each photo were excised and replaced by brief captions. These changes prompted charges of censorship and political influence (Olson 2003). Also see Banerjee (2003).

engineering; small businessman and ANWR activist Tom Campion, the financial backer of this travel party, and his daughter, Amy Campion, a student at UCLA; Cindy Shogan, executive director of the Alaska Wilderness League, and Cindy's husband, Brooks Yeager, who was the assistant secretary for policy in the Department of Interior during the Clinton administration; and guides from Arctic Treks, Carol Kasza, her husband Jim Campbell, a Vietnam veteran, and their son, Kyle Campbell. Notably absent is anyone who might not favor continued protection of the refuge. This trip will not advance or transform the contentious debate manifest in the differences between Williams and Bennett. Nonetheless, the essay manifests vulnerability through the metaphor of ground-truthing: "walking the ground to see for oneself if what one has been told is true" (*OSD*, 28). One seeks not merely confirming evidence; one looks with openness to seeing something unexpected, to have one's assumptions and beliefs challenged, to be changed by the encounter with nature, if not by a shared experience with a political opponent. Recording her first thoughts of her encounter with the Arctic landscape, Williams writes: "Never have I felt so safe. No development. No distractions. Nothing to break my heart. I was not prepared for this uninterrupted peace" (*OSD*, 30). In addition to this surprise, Williams implies she is changed by her experiences in the Arctic. For example, she writes of finding an eagle's nest at the base of a cliff, crushed by a rockfall, then writes: "Each day, another layer of the self sloughs off, another layer of pretense erodes" (*OSD*, 33). Indicating that her search is not merely for confirmation of what she assumes she already knows, Williams articulates openness to hear something new in her experience, to be called to action by the land: "If we listen to the land, we will know what to do" (*OSD*, 35).[137]

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[137] Williams repeats this line in the third essay, at page 75. In an interview, she interprets this line: "What I mean is that if we allow ourselves contemplative time in nature—whether it's gardening, going for a walk with the dog, or being in the heart of the southern Utah

Engagement

Responding reaches its fullest expression in the final essay, "Engagement." This essay opens with Williams describing her visit to Mardy Murie's home following Murie's death in October 2003 at age 101. She describes the setting and her own emotion of dismay, cites the extended activism of both Mardy and Olaus Murie on behalf of Arctic conservation, and recalls Mardy's reception of the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Bill Clinton in January 1998. She then writes (*OSD*, 67):

> What I wish I could ask Mardy now is, how do we engage in the open space of democracy in times of terror?
>
> I believe she would send me home.

The remainder of the essay then recounts the activism of residents of the southeastern Utah community of Castle Valley to which she and Brooke had moved in 1998. Provoked by the Spring 1999 sale of eighty acres of land by the Utah School Institutional Trust Lands Administration, the residents of Castle Valley—including "Mormons, non-Mormons, Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, attorneys, carpenters, climbers, artists, teachers, and old hippies" (*OSD*, 69)—formed the Castle Rock Collaboration with the explicit intention of "preserving and protecting the natural character of this valley as we seek to understand our own personal development as a community" (*OSD*, 70). They come together, a diverse group of people with different backgrounds and opinions and skills, to respond collectively to a threat to their community. The members engaged in diverse activities of research, fundraising, legal action, education, website development, activism, grant writing, and organizing. Over the following five years, the Collaboration raised nearly four million dollars and protected over three thousand acres from development (*OSD*, 74).

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wilderness—then we can hear the voice of our conscience. If we listen to that voice, it asks us to be conscious. And if we become conscious we choose to live lives of consequence" (Ball 2007).

Preserving the scenery through fundraising and land protection actions are measures of success, but not the only necessary outcomes if one is concerned with creating a society to match the scenery. The Collaboration was also concerned with their "personal development as a community." Shared activism on behalf of their local environment fostered this community development. Williams (*OSD*, 88, 89) reflects on the importance of engagement in the democratic process:

> We are in need of a reflective activism born out of humility, not arrogance. Reflection, with deep time spent in the consideration of others, opens the door to becoming a compassionate participant in the world.… To be in the service of something beyond ourselves—to be in the presence of something other than ourselves, together—this is where we can begin to craft a meaningful life where personal isolation and despair disappear through the shared engagement of a vibrant citizenry.

Vulnerability is evident in the transformation they undergo. They do not merely put matters aright, removing the threat and going back to the way things were. Williams summarizes their transformation as follows (*OSD*, 80):

> As I look back over the story we have been living in Castle Valley, it does not begin to convey the power and empowering nature of the process. It is through the process of defining what we want as a town that we are becoming a real community. It is through the act of participation that we change.

In this collaborative democratic practice, Williams has found a way into the questions Senator Bennett first raised for her. She is engaged with her neighbors in a collective, transformative response to the challenges that face them, engaged in ways that seek to overcome the differences that might otherwise divide them.

Personal transformation in social context

The Open Space of Democracy does not present success achieved, if one has defined the desired end as a particular outcome with respect to environmental protection. Even with respect to the end of fostering democratic engagement, the outcome is far from conclusive. That this work is incomplete and ongoing is suggested by reflection on the

Orion Society's goals in their Open Space of Democracy Project as well as by interpretation of the images by Mary Frank that accompany these essays.

Collective action, frequently in political contexts, is typically needed to respond adequately to environmental challenges and other land-use issues. Part of this collective action is the individual's vulnerable engagement in the civil discourse that shapes community action. Expressing one's convictions and listening to and learning from others are as much a part of responding as are more commonly identified actions. In *The Open Space of Democracy*, Williams portrays herself as reaching out in embodied dialogue across political and ideological divides. Part of what one discovers when pondering is that acting alone is not likely to be very helpful; acting in concert is necessary. Moreover, when one begins to think about what is involved in generating concerted action, one is pressed to consider the crucial importance of deliberating together and, indeed, listening to the ways that each of us reads nature.

In part because some potential dialogue partners chose not to engage, the evidence in *The Open Space of Democracy* of Williams being changed by listening to and learning from her political opponents is scant. While she was on the book tour in October 2004, Williams was asked to speak further about her own vulnerable transformation:

> A woman in the audience at the First Baptist Church asked me a tough question. She wanted to know how my mind has opened to other points of view, if that is what I am asking of others. For example, where was my give and accommodation with President Merwin at Florida Gulf Coast University? Did I appreciate what perspective he was representing?
>
> If my father is shifting his political views, am I? Or do I not feel the need to change?
>
> Am I only interested in seeing other people change to my point of view?
>
> It's a good question.…
>
> Regarding my father, I believe I have changed in terms of my understanding of what he has had to go to through regarding regulations The Tempest Company has been asked to comply with under the Endangered Species Act. It's made me wonder how the

> law could still be enforced, but offer openings that honor specific situations and conditions over broad generalizations.…
>
> The point is we all have an obligation to be open to understanding another's point of view. Perhaps this is as important as actually changing one's opinion. The word empathy comes to mind.
>
> For me, the situation in Florida is an issue of free speech and what an open education means to the life of any university. I can understand why President Merwin did what he did; but I still don't agree with him (Democracy Diary).

That these transformations were given scant play in *The Open Space of Democracy* may reflect a strategic failure in the The Orion Society's Thoughts on America Initiative. The Initiative sought to engage like-minded people; it was an effort to "engag[e] more Americans whose personal lifestyles reflect a commitment to ecological values in a larger movement that extends progressive values to global social and political challenges."[138] As a result, the Initiative may have fostered political divisiveness rather than transformed it.[139]

In the polarized political climate that prevailed when Williams gave her commencement address, the need, according to Williams, was for bridge-building, for building community rather than perpetuating division. Williams opens "Commencement" by describing Mary Frank's painting, *Meeting*, which Williams presents as "an image of democracy" (*OSD*, 2): "A figure drawn in blue is arching over a deep chasm to make contact with a smaller figure outlined in black, also stretching across the divide to meet the other" (*OSD*, 2). By the end of the chapter, Williams has asserted that both freedom of speech and respectful listening are needed to bridge this chasm. The painting visually

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[138] http://www.rbf.org/grantsdatabase/grantsdatabase_show.htm?doc_id=616384; accessed 1 February 2009.

[139] Efforts in collaborative management offer a potentially more fruitful model of participatory democracy (see Brick, Snow, and Wetering 2001; Cestero 1999; Conley and Moote 2001; Menning and Raish 2000; Paulson 1998).

conveys that each figure must reach across the chasm toward the other. Civil dialogue, personal diplomacy, and flesh-and-blood encounter are terms Williams uses to capture this effort to bridge the chasm, concluding the chapter with this question: "Do we dare to step back—stretch—and create an arch of understanding?" (*OSD*, 24). As presented in this essay, Bennett and Williams were successful in exchanging letters, but not in any more substantive, ongoing effort at mutual understanding.

The Mary Frank image, *Self/Dawn*, that accompanies the second chapter depicts a solitary, naked figure seated on a rise in an abstract landscape, with the swirling motions of the sky surrounding an area of uninterrupted light that backdrops the figure. Early in the essay, in language that seems to resonate with this visual image, Williams conveys her initial response to the Arctic landscape (*OSD*, 30): "First thoughts: Never have I felt so safe. No development. No distractions. Nothing to break my heart. I was not prepared for this uninterrupted peace." The language conveys a sense of retreat, perhaps more than ground-truthing in the remote-sensing or cartographic sense. *Self/Dawn* suggests Williams is seeking a different sort of Ground or Truth in her visit to ANWR. Given her failure to convince Bennett to join her in a field experience, part of what Williams seems to be doing in her retreat to the Arctic refuge is bridge-building with the ultimate, i.e., communing with nature in such a way that the distinction between self and the creative power of the universe becomes blurred.

The third essay is accompanied by Mary Frank's *Gathering*. This image shows a female figure standing barefoot on reddish-brown ground; she is a similar color to the ground, though less reddish and surrounded by a lighter brown aura. She is facing an object that appears to be a tornado. The woman's hands gesture toward the tornado; her aura and the tornado's energy seem to be interacting. As with *Self/Dawn*, the image suggests interaction or communion between the human and natural/spiritual realms, but in *Gathering* the human figure is more active—appropriately so for an essay centered on community activism. The ultimate incompleteness and ongoing nature of that activism is

indicated by a textual image at the conclusion of the book that reflects back upon the opening visual image, *Meeting*. In *Meeting*, the two figures stretch to form a bridge over a deep chasm containing a river that is "black like oil, like greed, like grief" (*OSD*, 2).[140] In the opening essay, Williams invites Bennett to engage in dialogue with her over their differences. Bennett does not accept her invitation. It is as if one figure has refused to reach across the chasm, leaving a cliff edge rather than a chasm to be crossed. The textual image that closes the book is of graduating seniors from the Daystar Adventist Academy, a private high school in Castle Valley affiliated with the Seventh-Day Adventist religious tradition, climbing to the top of Parriott Mesa, igniting a bonfire, and pushing the fire over the cliff.[141] Williams interprets this yearly ritual of commencement as a celebration of the daring and vulnerable activity "of pushing an idea over the edge until it ignites a community" (*OSD*, 89-90). The cascading freefall of fire perhaps marks failure in spanning the chasm, but the work of transformation is ongoing. "We cannot know what lies ahead. We may be unsure how to bring our prayers forward. But on this night in the desert, we celebrate this cascading river of beauty" (*OSD*, 90). As does retreating into nature to commune with the spiritual, such celebrations along the way sustain the capacity for continued action and transformation, in spite of inevitable failures, disappointments, and setbacks.

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[140] Significantly, neither of the human figures is demonized. The pain and evil that divides them is portrayed as separate—or at least separable—from them. Such generous assumptions about human nature may be necessary for the kind of participatory democracy Williams envisions.

[141] The land sale that prompted formation of the Castle Rock Collaboration was at the base of this mesa.

Desert Quartet

The responding stage of reading nature religiously entails vulnerability; one is assenting to something beyond one's self and beyond one's control. The movement to action modeled by *lectio divina* is not simply the logical conclusion of a rational deliberation about consequences of actions or principles determining actions or even, perhaps, what virtue requires. As Paintner and Wynkoop (2008:45) note, *oratio* flows from assent, saying yes to God; *oratio* is marked by "the point where we begin to say a full yes to God's work within us." *The Open Space of Democracy* portrays action flowing out of paying attention and pondering but, with the exception of the visual images that accompany the text, does not invite a particularly *religious* interpretation. We turn to another book, *Desert Quartet* (Williams 1995), to further explore how the action that flows from paying attention and pondering might reveal the aspect of reading nature religiously that is the effort to align one's life with the sacred, with something unsurpassably important and real.

Williams writes often of engaging passionately with the landscape in which she lives. "It is time for us to take off our masks," she writes, "and admit we are lovers, engaged in an erotics of place" (1994g:84). The *erotics of place* is a conceptual framework Williams uses (alongside *poetics of place* and *politics of place*) to define her ethical approach to morally worthy human-land relationships. In her erotics of place, she advocates "intimacy with the land" (1994f:64). While much of Williams's writing explores passion and eros, a set of four essays—Earth, Water, Fire, and Air—published as *Desert Quartet* (1995) is her most concentrated expression of an erotics of place.[142] In

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[142] The four essays at issue were originally serialized in *New England Review*, under the encompassing title, "Elements of Love" (1994a, 1994d, 1994c, 1994b). Substantially revised versions (accompanied by artwork by Mary Frank) were published as *Desert Quartet* (1995) and reprinted (sans artwork) in *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* (2001:193-211).

Earth, the narrator is hiking to Druid Arch in Canyonlands National Park. At a narrow place along the trail, hemmed in on both sides by sheer sandstone walls, she writes (2001:197):

> In some places my hips can barely fit through. I turn sideways, my chest and back in a vise of geologic time.
>
> I stop. The silence that lives in these sacred hallways presses against me. I relax. I surrender. I close my eyes. The arousal of my breath rises in me like music, like love, as the possessive muscles between my thighs tighten and release. I come to the rock in a moment of stillness, giving and receiving, where there is no partition between my body and the body of Earth.

In Water, the narrator swims in the Colorado River within Grand Canyon National Park. Floating on her back, she writes (2001:201):

> I dissolve. I am water. Only my face is exposed like an apparition over ripples. Playing with water. Do I dare? My legs open. The rushing water turns my body and touches me with a fast finger that does not tire. I receive without apology. Time. Nothing to rush, only to feel. I feel time in me. It is endless pleasure in the current. No control. No thought. Simply, here.

In Fire, the narrator is in the desert at night, before a fire that has been aroused by the piñon and juniper branches she has fed it. She writes (2001:207):

> The fire explodes. Flames become blue tongues curling around each other. My eyes close. I step forward. My legs open to the heat, the tingling return of heat, inside, outside, shadows dance on the sandstone, my ghostly lover. I allow myself to be ravished. My generosity becomes my humiliation. The hair between my legs is singed. My left hand shields my face from the fire. Fingers open. It is a shuttered scape. Fingers clench. I hold a fist before the flames, loyal and disloyal at once.

Finally, in Air, the narrator is in Anasazi country, perhaps within Zion National Park, before a geyser of air blowing up through the rocks. She concludes the essay with these words (2001:210-211):

> I lean forward and listen. Breath. With my hands on the rocks, I place my mouth over the opening. My belly rises and falls. I move away and listen. I return with my mouth over the opening. Inhale. Exhale. I move away. I listen. I return. I am dizzy. I am drunk with pleasure. There is no need to speak.
>
> Listen.

Below us.

Above us.

Inside us.

Come.

This is all there is.

What is being explored in these four essays is intimacy or passion, which is both feared and desired.[143] "What I fear and desire most in this world is passion," Williams writes (2001:195). "I fear it because it promises to be spontaneous, out of my control, unnamed, beyond my reasonable self. I desire it because passion has color, like the landscape before me. It is not pale. It is not neutral. It reveals the backside of the heart."

The erotics of place

Passion is feared and desired because, by means of it, we encounter vulnerably that which is beyond reason, out of control, and unnamed (Williams 2001:195).The attribute of being unnamed helps distinguish the meanings of the *erotics of place*, the *poetics of place*, and the *politics of place* in Williams's set of metaphors for conceiving human-land relationships. Williams has the eye of a naturalist and is able to name the natural entities about her, whether seashells, birds, or trees.[144] This is revealed in her writing as a poetics of place*:* writing descriptively, accurately, and evocatively about the natural world of her experience. To know the names of things manifests a commitment to place. By staying in one place, she argues, one can extend one's sense of community to

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[143] The editorial comment that precedes these essays, as serialized in *New England Review*, indicates that *intimacy* is what we most fear and desire (1994b:5). The essays themselves, specifically Earth, point to *passion* (2001:195).

[144] Recall that, an English major as an undergraduate, with a minor in Biology, Williams received an M.A. in environmental education before working first on the Navajo Reservation and then as curator of education and naturalist-in-residence at Utah's Museum of Natural History. In addition, birdwatching was a family activity for Williams, extending back deeply into her childhood.

include the natural realm; the politics of place then emerges from our accountability to these communities of which we are members (London 2006:52). Williams asserts: "I think that the naming of things, the poetics of place, the passion that we feel, is naturally translated to a politics of place—standing our ground in the places we love" (Toms 2006:32).

The politics of place arising from a *poetics* of place is similar to traditional environmental ethics grounded in a detailed knowledge of and affinity for particular landscapes. How would an environmental ethic—a politics of place—grounded in an *erotics* of place differ? While passion, specifically love, may underlie both a poetics of place and an erotics of place, the erotics of place differs from the poetics of place in that it is a response to what is wild, chaotic, and mysterious rather than to what has become intimate through its familiarity. While the poetics of place builds from what is named, the erotics of place is called forth by what is unnamable. As Williams conceives these terms, both a poetics of place and an erotics of place can motivate a politics of place—an environmental ethic—though the motivations underlying the consequent ethics may appear paradoxical.[145]

In addition to being unnamed, what Williams suggests is feared and desired in passion is also that which is beyond reason and out of control. With respect to reason, Williams would likely argue that reason has its place, just as naming is fundamental to the poetics of place. However, her desire to move beyond reason seeks, in part, to privilege an emotional, bodily, tactile, and/or sensual engagement with what is

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[145] Throughout Williams's writing, there is an effort to embrace rather than suppress or reconcile paradox; she often asserts that life is paradoxical. Asked one time if she was "deliberately inviting paradox, as if [she were] trying to dissolve the opposites society imposes on us," Williams answered: "Life is paradox, there is nothing to invite" (Caldwell 2006:132).

unnamable in nature.[146] With respect to control, the key term in an erotics of place might be *surrender*. For Williams, the ability to surrender to the erotic—to what is wild and chaotic—is grounded in trust. *Desert Quartet* opens with the narrator walking in the slickrock canyonlands of southern Utah. Trails over rock are generally marked by hand-stacked piles of rock called cairns. Williams (2001:195, 196) writes of the trust required to follow the cairns in such a landscape:

> For as far as I can see, the canyon country of southern Utah extends in all directions. No compass can orient me here, only a pledge to love and walk the terrifying distances before me.…
>
> I have no map, only the cairns to guide me, the hand-stacked piles of rocks that say, "Trust me, turn here, I know the way."
>
> Many resist cairns in the desert, kicking them down, believing each traveler should walk on her own authority. It is also true, some cairns have been designed to fool people, to trick them off the trail so they will become lost forever, a quick lesson in self-reliance: to never believe in the stories of others. But I believe our desire to share is more potent and trustworthy than our desire to be alone. And so I do not anticipate these markers will lie. To walk in this country is always an act of faith.
>
> The cairns I have followed have not secured my own path to intimacy as much as they have given me the courage to proceed—one foot in front of the other in a landscape mysterious, unpredictable, and vast. Nobody really knows the way, that is the myth of convention.

The tension between desire and fear as one seeks erotic intimacy with the land is navigated via this path of vulnerable trust. Whereas there is much that can be named and known in a *poetics* of place, the *erotics* of place demands a vulnerable surrender, in faith, to that which is mysterious and unpredictable, to that which is unnamed, out of one's control, and beyond one's reason.

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[146] Williams's desire to privilege the body is evident in other writings as well, e.g., *Leap* (2000).

The erotic aspects of religious reading

In an essay published in her book, *An Unspoken Hunger*, Williams (1994e:56) applied the adjective *erotic* to Marian Engel's novel, *Bear* (1976). Specifically, she characterized Engel's book as an "erotics of place" with relevance to environmental ethics. In part, *Bear* is a story of a woman's "emotionally and erotically complicated relationship with a large male bear" (Sandilands 1997:137). Reviewer Patricia Morley (1977:359) writes that Engel's protagonist falls in love with the bear "[q]uite literally. The relationship with the bear is erotic, not platonic." Reviewer John Mills (1977), however, expressed his confusion about this interpretation. He did not find himself sexually aroused by the novel; nor did any of his female friends who had read it. Mills (1977:101) concludes, "Honest pornography, then, it is not…." Understanding what Williams could possibly mean by her expression *erotics of place* requires bracketing our preconceptions about what is sexy or erotic, and listening carefully for what Williams is trying to express.

Reading can be said to be an activity of erotic love. Eugene Peterson (2006:3) suggests spiritual reading should be pursued with "the adoring dalliance of a lover." Paul Griffiths (1999:xi) writes of "caress[ing], lick[ing], smell[ing], and savor[ing] the words on the page," as might a lover. For Daniel Coleman, erotic desire is a particular form of spiritual longing. "Reading exercises and gives shape to the outward-reaching energy within us that is our spirituality. In this sense, reading is erotic and like all eros, it leaps with energy and passion; it compels your focus; it reaches out toward an Other" (Coleman 2009:13).

How might an encounter with the natural world, taking religious reading as a model, and with erotic longing at its foundation, transform environmental ethics? According to Williams, most of the essays collected in her book, *An Unspoken Hunger*, were intended to show a poetics of place translating into a politics of place (Siporin 2006:70). *Desert Quartet* had a different intention. Williams explains: "With that book, I

wanted to explore what it might mean to write out of the body and to create a narrative where it was of the flesh, and even ask the question, 'What might it mean to make love to the land?' Not in an [exploitive] manner, but in a manner of reciprocity. That's a very different intention" (Siporin 2006:70). In another interview, Williams gives a similar description of the intention behind *Desert Quartet* (Lynch 2006:97):

> I am interested in the notion of love and why we are so fearful of intimacy, with each other and with the land. I wanted to explore the idea of the erotic, not as it is defined by my culture as pornographic and exploitive, but rather what it might mean to engage in a relationship of reciprocity. I wanted to try and write out of the body, not out of the head. I wanted to create a circular text, not a linear one. I wanted to play with the elemental movements of Earth, Fire, Water, and Air, and bow to the desert, a landscape I love. I wanted to see if I could create on the page a dialogue with the heart-open wildness.

An erotics of place, as Williams conceives it, is reciprocal rather than exploitive. It is bodily and sensual, even sexual, but explicitly not pornographic. Nor does the implicit sexuality of eroticism evoke the metaphor of rape often applied to patterns of human interaction with nature.

Many reviewers, not only Williams, characterized Marian Engel's novel, *Bear*, as erotic. John Mills, however, conflating eroticism and pornography, declared that Engel's story was decidedly not "honest pornography." For Williams, an environmental ethic grounded in an erotics of place rejects the alienation from nature implicit in the pornographic gaze, seeking instead an emotional and tactile connection that blurs the boundaries between humans and nature.[147] In an essay about The Erotic Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark, she (2001:106) connects eroticism—as opposed to pornography and voyeurism—with relationship, reciprocity, and respect:

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[147] In describing her use of the language of eroticism, Williams distances herself from the subject-object duality of voyeurism and the exploitation and self-indulgence of pornography. Instead, she declares her interest "in a participatory relationship with the land," a relationship that reconnects eroticism to its root meaning, grounded in the passion of love (2001:16).

> The world we frequently surrender to defies our participation in nature and seduces us into believing that our only place in the wild is as spectator, onlooker. A society of individuals who only observe a landscape from behind the lens of a camera or the window of an automobile without entering in is perhaps no different from the person who obtains sexual gratification from looking at the sexual play of others.…
>
> Eroticism, being in relation, calls the inner life into play. No longer numb, we feel the magnetic pull in our bodies toward something stronger, more vital than simply ourselves. Arousal becomes a dance with longing. We form a secret partnership with possibility.

What the erotic calls us to—through both sensation and emotion—is wholeness through relationship. "To be in relation to everything around us," Williams writes, "above us, below us, earth, sky, bones, blood, flesh, is to see the world whole, even holy" (2001:104). Eroticism, in contrast to the one-way affection of pornography, is characterized by reciprocity; we both give and receive. And, in receiving, we remain vulnerable. In an interview, Williams asks: "If we stop the world from penetrating us, what does that mean? The body allows us to be human. It is through the body we feel the world, both its pain and beauty" (Jensen 2006:37).

As Williams presents it, a politics of place—an environmental ethic—can arise from either a poetics of place or an erotics of place. The former type of ethic proceeds from intimacy with what we can name and know. The latter, from intimacy with what remains ultimately inapprehensible, ungraspable, and mysterious. The intimacies here differ, one suggesting familiarity and the other vulnerability. Both ethics, arising from their different sources, should be pursued. Or, perhaps better, models of religious reading, as models for reading nature religiously, suggest a way to integrate both sources: poetics and erotics. Religious reading is an unhurried, attentive, bodily, personally engaged, and repeated encounter with the text. One becomes intimate with the details of the text in a familiar sense, just as one who repeatedly visits beloved natural settings becomes familiar with them, knowing them, and being able to name their denizens. Religious reading, however, also reaches with deep longing for an Other, something that the text reveals that

is larger than oneself, and that is worthy of adoration. Through a religious reading, we orient ourselves to this Other; we intend to connect and expect to be transformed thereby. This is a kind of intimacy that leaves us vulnerable—open—before what is beyond our control, beyond our capacity to grasp via reason, and beyond our ability to express in language. The erotic longing at the heart of religious reading thus compels us to venture repeatedly into natural places, intending to encounter mystery and wildness with an open and vulnerable heart. The environmental ethic that ensues from a religious reading of nature will thus utilize all our knowledge to address environmental challenges *and* protect the open spaces in which a mysterious and unnamed Other can be encountered.

Public discourse

One other dimension of action, relevant to *oratio* or responding, has been implicit throughout this dissertation. Williams responds not only via the environmental actions she describes, but also in the writing of her books and essays. The Latin word, *oratio*, means not only prayer addressed to a deity but, more generally, speech, language, or discourse—the bringing together of words to express thought.[148] *The Open Space of Democracy* rises out of a concern for how "language has been taken hostage" (*OSD*, 2) in the contemporary political context. The group of seniors Williams met with prior to giving her commencement address sought "to speak a language that opens hearts rather than closes them" (*OSD*, 4). Out of that open space of spirited conversation, Williams argues—communicating our differences, both speaking and listening—democracy is sustained and practiced.

Williams's call to passionate participation in the democratic process as an engaged citizenry reminds us of the importance of storytelling and the formative weight

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[148] The English-language literature on *lectio divina* almost universally translates *oratio* as prayer. Ralph Keen first drew my attention to this broader usage of the term.

of public discourse. Her early exploration of Navajo storytelling inspired a search for her own culture's stories of place. Framed by the literary discourse whose intent and content was captured by Stegner's call for a society to match the scenery, Williams journaled and wrote herself deeply into the stories of her own Mormon cultural tradition. She assessed those stories critically for their formative influence on her and reclaimed the ability to tell her own story, grounded in and indebted to all the stories that had formed her, yet not determined by them. In *The Open Space of Democracy*, she has emerged from that interior work and is engaging not only in the vulnerable work of collaborating with her Castle Valley neighbors but also participating in The Orion Society's efforts to engage the American citizenry more broadly. All of these writings intersect with and contribute to the body of western writing that responds to Stegner's vision. The writing of these books and essays is yet another manifestation of responding.

Religious reading and ethical practice

As part of an ethical practice, responding calls upon the reader of nature to enter vulnerably into wild, chaotic, and mysterious places and situations which one fails to comprehend and in which one lacks control. In Williams's terminology, this is the erotics of place that gives rise to a politics of place, or an environmental ethic. Consonant with the erotic aspect of spiritual reading suggested by Peterson, Griffiths, and Coleman, in *Desert Quartet*, Williams imagines what it might be like to reach out, with passion and deep longing, to an unnamable and ungraspable Other. We are vulnerable here, and we must proceed in trust. Thereby, we are transformed.

As part of an ethical practice, responding also calls upon readers of nature to take risks as members of diverse communities. In *The Open Space of Democracy*, this is largely framed in terms of engaged citizenship in a participatory democracy. One's own convictions, informed by paying attention and deepened by pondering, are offered within the public discourse. One also listens deeply to others, with an open heart, allowing them

to articulate their own convictions. Then, as possible, one acts, individually and collectively, to respond to the issue at hand, knowing that one's actions are often insufficient and that more must yet be accomplished. The complexity and intractability of many environmental problems as well as changing and dynamic social, political, and ecological contexts may hinder final resolution or successful bridging of the chasms that divide communities. Nonetheless, there is time for rest and respite as well in the final stage of reading nature religiously: surrendering.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SURRENDERING

Sabbath-keeping

According to the first story in the Hebrew scriptures, on the seventh day God rested from the labors of creation. This mythical event grounds the Jewish understanding of sabbath, a practice kept also—in a different form—by Christians.[149] As commonly understood, one is to pause from one's activities every seventh day and observe a period of relative calm and contemplation.[150] The Jewish tradition provides two interrelated understandings of the sabbath, one negative and one positive (Weiss 2003). First, the sabbath is a day on which one refrains from work (see Exodus 20:9-10; Exodus 34:21, and Deuteronomy 5:13-14). Second, the sabbath is a day one is commanded to keep holy (see Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12). Sanctifying the day entails engaging in activities such as contemplation, scriptural study, and the development of virtue, which help to

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[149] Frequent comparisons are drawn between the distinctive days in the weekly calendars of the Abrahamic traditions: Friday for Muslims, Saturday for Jews, and Sunday for Christians (e.g., Ringwald 2007). The practices observed on these "peak" days perform the sociological function of distinguishing these three traditions—and their adherents—from one another (Zerubavel 1985:22, 26). However, the Muslim observance of corporate prayer on Fridays (*salat al-jumaa*) is not directly analogous to the sabbath practice intended here; Friday's congregational prayer is not set within a day of rest, modeled on God's day of rest on the seventh day of creation.

Even if we consider only the Jewish and Christian traditions, the historical story of sabbath-observance is complicated. Senn (1997:86-89, cf. 20) gives a brief outline of the early Christian Church's observance of both sabbath (Saturday) and the Lord's Day (Sunday) (also see Zerubavel 1985:21). Nonetheless, in modern times, most practicing Christians equate the sabbath with Sunday. Also see Shulevitz (2010).

Other religious and secular traditions also include a regularly recurring day of rest; e.g., the Buddhist Uposatha.

[150] The seven-day week is a social convention, not a natural cycle. Its origin derives primarily from the seven planets of ancient Babylonian astrology and the seven days of creation in Jewish cosmology, with possible Assyrian influences as well (Zerubavel 1985:5-26).

align one's life with God's life. The sabbath was traditionally a day of both rest and worship.

Sabbath-keeping, conceived broadly as alternating periods of productivity and rest (and restoration), takes place on multiple scales. The sabbatical year was a year of rest for agricultural lands and payment on debt was not demanded (Bechtel 1912). The sabbatical year was to be observed every seven years (see Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:1-7; and Deuteronomy 15:1-18). The jubilee year included rest for agricultural lands, the remission of debt, and the return of property (Oussani 1910). The jubilee was to be celebrated every fifty years, at the conclusion of seven cycles of sabbatical years (see Leviticus 25:8-55). By forgiving one another and being forgiven by God, the jubilee restored people and land to the state God intended, regardless of how adverse circumstances and human failure may have compromised that state in intervening years. Christian reinterpretation of Jewish tradition subsequently linked the jubilee year to a promised and longed-for eschatological event (Oussani 1910):

> It is the idea of grace for all the suffering children of man, bringing freedom to the captive and rest to the weary as well as to the earth, which made the year of jubilee the symbol of the Messianic year of grace (Isaiah 61:2), when all the conflicts in the universe shall be restored to their original harmony, and when not only we, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, but the whole creation, which groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now, shall be restored into the glorious liberty of the sons of God (comp. Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 4:21; Romans 8:18-23; Hebrews 4:9).

Of particular interest for environmental ethics is the rest and restoration of the land in the sabbatical year and jubilee, thus clearly extending religious concern beyond humans to nature.

Going to synagogue, mosque, church, or other place of worship on the culturally specified day of the week represents only a faint sense of the full meaning of sabbath-keeping. Thus, the near absence of mentions of religious service attendance by Williams in her writings does not necessarily indicate an absence of sabbath-keeping. Her alternating patterns of activity and rest take a natural metaphor—the hibernation of

certain animal species—rather than a mythical event—the seventh day of creation—as a model for practice. The seven-day week turning about the sabbath and the annual cycle enfolding a period of hibernation can be taken as manifestations of the same intentional practice of rest. As Williams uses the metaphor of hibernation, however, more is intended than simple rest. In a 2005 interview with Williams, David Kupfer (2006:169) began by asking, "How do you plug into your muse?" Williams answered:

> I live in a very, very quiet place. I have a sequence to my creative life. In spring and fall, I am above ground and commit to community. In the summer, I'm outside. It is a time for family. And in the winter, I am underground. Home. This is when I do my work as a writer—in hibernation. I write with the bears.

Williams has often characterized the rhythms of her life with respect to an annual cycle, making reference to a winter period of quiet contemplation, withdrawn from the public gaze. In her essay, "Undressing the Bear," Williams (1994e:57-58) asserts parallels between the winter hibernation of bears and her creative processes:

> If we choose to follow the bear, we will be saved from a distractive and domesticated life. The bear becomes our mentor. We must journey out, so that we might journey in. The bear mother enters the earth before snowfall and dreams herself though winter, emerging in spring with young by her side. She not only survives the barren months, she gives birth. She is the caretaker of the unseen world. As a writer and a woman with obligations to both family and community, I have tried to adopt this ritual in the balancing of a public and private life. We are at home in the deserts and mountains, as well as in our dens. Above ground in the abundance of spring and summer, I am available. Below ground in the deepening of autumn and winter, I am not. I need hibernation in order to create.

Creation—for Williams, writing—takes place during this time of inward journeying, but silence is also implicit in this winter retreat. It is out of the quiet of her life, the quiet of hibernation, that Williams writes. "I write in a solitude born out of community…. I write from the stillness of night anticipating—always anticipating. I write to listen. I write out of silence" (Williams 2000:113). Williams has also alluded to the possibility that a

greater silence may come, as the sabbatical year and jubilee echo the sabbath on broader temporal scales.[151] In a 1995 interview, responding to a question from Scott London (2006:56), in which he noted that "nature seems to inspire in us not words but silence," Williams responded: "[H]opefully there will come a time when I have no words, when I can honor and hold that kind of stillness that I so need, crave, and desire in the natural world." In a poetic fragment at the end of *Red*—two sentences presented over two pages, allowing much white space to remain—Williams (2001:254-255) writes: "The great silences of the desert are not void of sound, but void of distractions. / One day, this landscape will take the language out of me."

Beyond these few hints in Williams's writing, we will find no focal text for our exploration of the fourth stage of reading nature religiously. While, as Williams suggests, books are often written *out of* the silence that characterizes *contemplatio*, books are not often written *of* that silence; this is where words cease. Our approach in this chapter thus differs from that of the preceding three chapters; this chapter does not focus on a particular book written by Williams. What surrendering might mean as a stage of reading nature religiously is the focus of this chapter.

Human failure and surrendering

On a research project in eastern Arizona in which I was exploring perspectives on national forest management held by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I joined a Mormon family in their home one evening.[152] After sharing dinner, we had a lengthy discussion about the Mormon faith with the designated missionaries for that geographic region. Then we all knelt on the floor, in a prayer posture typical of LDS

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[151] Notably, *Refuge* and *Leap* were both written over seven-year periods.

[152] Aspects of that research are published in Menning (2006).

adherents. When the words of the ensuing prayer ceased, I began to move to rise. The mother of the family motioned for me to remain kneeling, indicating: Now is when we listen. A similar pause follows *oratio* in *lectio divina*. After the verbal performance of prayer, one retains a humble posture, still oriented to God, and waits vulnerably, attentively, and expectantly, but otherwise passively.

As with paying attention, pondering, and responding, the term *surrendering* comes from Robert Hamma (2002). He defines this phase of the practice by reference to *contemplatio*, emphasizing the attentive but essentially passive aspects of contemplative awareness. "Contemplation begins where all our efforts at meditation and prayer end and we find ourselves caught up in the movement and presence of God. Such an experience is a gift, not something we can cause or accomplish" (Hamma 2002:25). In his book, the readings intended for the surrendering stage of *lectio divina* are short aphorisms, generally only a sentence in length, intended as a thought or mantra to be carried throughout the reader's day. "Recollection of the phrase or repetition of the mantra may serve as a way to cultivate a contemplative awareness within us. Doing so is a process of surrendering our hearts to the One who has called us" (Hamma 2002:26).[153]

Hamma's language about the giftedness of the experience of the presence of God recalls Barry Lopez's (2005) reflections on his Antarctic experience. Lopez wrote that this gift felt like absolution, or forgiveness—a feeling of being set free from guilt and responsibility for one's actions, a lifting of the burden of "complicity in the world's waywardness" (2005:xxi). Lopez's language highlights an important dimension of reading nature religiously as a way of doing environmental ethics. Writings on *lectio*

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[153] That one might "cultivate" awareness is not inconsistent with the "gift" of being caught up in the presence of God. Using agricultural imagery, what happens in contemplation is more like the cultivation of the soil to prepare it to receive the seed than it is like the agricultural work of sowing and fertilizing and weeding to produce the crop.

divina do not typically reference responsibility, complicity, guilt, forgiveness, or absolution, though the encounter with many scriptural passages may evoke reflections on human failure and confessional responses that may, in turn, be answered by a sense of absolution. Surprisingly, Hamma's application of *lectio divina* to encounters with nature barely notes widespread anthropogenic degradation of natural settings, and then primarily only in the introductory materials (e.g., Hamma 2002:29). The readings and prayers he provides do not illuminate responsibility, articulate remorse, or express confession. Nonetheless, surrendering, for our purposes, must mean something more than being lifted up into union with divinity. It must also address the emotional burdens of failure as one seeks to enact and embody human-land relationships that foster mutual flourishing.

Guilt, grief, and despair

It is hard to imagine not being drawn to awe and perhaps praise by any open-hearted, attentive encounter with the natural world. This may be true even for landscapes that have been substantially transformed by humans. "[A]ll land, no matter what has happened to it, has over it a grace, an absolutely persistent beauty" (Adams 1974:xii). For those with eyes to see, awe and praise would seem to flow naturally from paying attention. However, when we take a sabbath pause from our labors, it is not always from the labors of creation. Too often it is from our labors of desecration. In Mark Jarman's (2004:23) poem, "Outside," God tries again with Adam and Eve, saying "This time nothing's forbidden.… Eat all you want. Let bygones be bygones." Adam and Eve set out immediately to find the garden wall, "Going because just thinking / There is a wall makes them feel cramped." Eventually they canvass the entire earth: "They eat the fruit of knowledge and see the problem: / Without a wall, the world is all they have, / Crisscrossed by their progress, a vacant lot." The wall here could signify several things, including a persistent human resistance to restraint, whether imposed by another or self-imposed. In light of environmental history on the North American continent, the search

for the wall also suggests the way the open frontier allowed us to evade environmental (and social) responsibility for the places we already lived. Reading nature religiously, having eaten of the tree that bears the fruit of knowledge, may bring much to our focused attention and critical reflection that is to be lamented—the vacant lot—rather than responded to with awe and praise.

Guilt, grief, and despair may follow thoughtful reflection on the natural world, despite one's efforts to respond adequately. Knowledge alone may bring grief. With their enhanced capacity for recognizing what is there and also knowing what is gone, "[e]cologists are both blessed and cursed with seeing natural systems clearly" (Windle 1992:364). Even when in possession of accurate and sufficient knowledge, one is often tempted to view one's action as insufficient, even futile. Michael Soulé (1990:238) has noted that conservation biologists require fortitude to continue their efforts to preserve places, species, and ecosystems in the face of repeated losses. When so many of the narratives we construct to tell the stories of the natural world around us have declensionist endings, it is difficult not to despair. Bill Cronon (1993) has noted his students' tendency to experience despair and disempowerment at the end of a semester studying environmental history. In all these cases, to the extent loss is attributable to human action, guilt may accompany feelings of grief and despair.

The amount of despair and guilt we experience may be proportional to the vulnerability with which we read nature. Williams's experiences in *Refuge*, as she attended to her mother's dying and the bird refuge's flooding, give evidence of that. Elsewhere, she has written: "I think of my own stream of desires, how cautious I have become with love. It is a vulnerable enterprise to feel deeply and I may not survive my affections" (Williams 1994f:63). The grief that ensues from reading nature may arise from the inevitability of loss in a world characterized by mortality and natural tragedies, from our deeply felt awareness of human complicity in extinctions and desecrations that are not inevitable, and from the gnawing sense of failure to protect what we love despite

our best efforts. If *paying attention* draws our sensory perception to all that is flawed, broken, or dying in our social and ecological worlds, if *pondering* deepens and complicates our sense of complicity in environmental degradation, and if *responding* makes all too evident to us the limits of our abilities and willingness to set right what has gone wrong, then how can *surrendering* not be a giving up in futility? As alluded to in the discussion of Burton-Christie's (2007) work in the earlier chapter on paying attention, reading nature *religiously* may offer a fruitful way out of this dilemma. Reading nature religiously entails an orientation to a force or power greater than oneself. The nature of this force or power—and one's relationship to it—bears on one's capacity to move through grief, despair, guilt, and cynicism. We will consider first the nature of Williams's God, before returning in the final section to the question of whether such a conception of God can assuage these emotions.

Conceptions of God in *Refuge*

Lectio divina and the analogous practice of reading nature religiously are distinguished from other modes of reading by the reader's desire to be transformed; the reader is intentionally vulnerable. Among the many things that may be transformed in the reader by this vulnerable encounter with the natural world is her conception of God, meaning her understanding of the ultimate force or power around which she orients her life. In her interviews, books, and other writings, Williams reveals her changing understanding of God. The overall pattern of the change is from general acceptance of the formative stories of her religious upbringing in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, through a critical questioning of those stories and their influence on the capacity of Mormons to engage fully in environmental protection efforts, to a deepened and transformed understanding of self, God, and nature that emerges from these lifelong reflections.

Refuge reflects a period in her life when Williams—at least compared to later times—retained a rather childlike faith in the religious narratives of her upbringing, in part because they were so interconnected with family narratives. In her earlier books for adults, Williams highlighted the profound importance of stories in shaping cultures and fitting communities to the landscape, but hadn't directly addressed Mormon tradition. *Pieces of White Shell* explored the stories of Navajo culture; *Coyote's Canyon* turned to stories of her own home landscape, as yet unreflected through Mormon eyes. The recurrence of cancer in her mother, however, turned Williams's attention to her family history. At this more personal level of reflection, as conveyed in *Refuge*, Mormon stories surfaced more explicitly. Williams presents family, place, and religion as deeply connected. Her genealogy traces its Utah roots to the 1850s, to the original handcart companies who migrated to the area from Missouri after Brigham Young declared the Salt Lake Valley to be the place where the Mormon community would find religious freedom (*Refuge*, 13). She expresses her connection to this place with a natural metaphor: "The birds and I share a natural history. It is a matter of rootedness, of living inside a place for so long that the mind and imagination fuse" (*Refuge*, 21).

While a feminist critique of the patriarchy of Mormon tradition surfaces in *Refuge*—the critique itself a manifestation of religious freedom—the Mormonism of Williams's family and surrounding culture is largely taken for granted. Although Williams inhabits this culture during the period recounted in *Refuge*, her presentation of Mormon culture and belief is not apologetic; she is not rising to Mormonism's defense in this book. Nor is her apparent understanding of the sacred, even at this stage, limited to Mormonism's Godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (see *Refuge*, 240-241). Rather, Mormonism allows her a space in which to find what is holy and to receive grace in and through nature. In a key passage, Williams (*Refuge*, 148-149) recounts a journey to Salt Well Flats. On the salt flats "there is no illusion of being safe.… Only the land's mercy

and a calm mind can save my soul. And it is here I find grace" (*Refuge*, 148). Williams links vulnerability to religious belief:

> It's strange how deserts turn us into believers. I believe in walking in a landscape of mirages, because you learn humility. I believe in living in a land of little water because life is drawn together. And I believe in the gathering of bones as a testament to spirits that have moved on.
>
> If the desert is holy, it is because it is a forgotten place that allows us to remember the sacred. Perhaps that is why every pilgrimage to the desert is a pilgrimage to the self. There is no place to hide, and so we are found.
>
> In the severity of a salt desert, I am brought down to my knees by its beauty. My imagination is fired. My heart opens and my skin burns in the passion of these moments. I will have no other gods before me (*Refuge*, 148).

There is nothing explicitly Mormon in those lines, nor in the oft-quoted passage that follows just a few paragraphs later:

> I pray to the birds because I believe they will carry the messages of my heart upward. I pray to them because I believe in their existence, the way their songs begin and end each day—the invocations and benedictions of Earth. I pray to the birds because they remind me of what I love rather than what I fear. And at the end of my prayers, they teach me how to listen (*Refuge*, 149).

Importantly, however, the intervening paragraphs are fully immersed in Mormonism. Williams writes of sitting in church as a child, listening to stories about Christ's forty days and nights in the wilderness. She asserts her belief that sojourns into nature—whether Christ's, Joseph Smith's, or our own—are sacred. And she quotes a passage from Mormon scripture (D&C 88:44-47) that she carries with her, in which God's majesty and power are said to be visible in the earth, sun, moon, and stars. As presented in *Refuge*, then, Williams's nature spirituality coexists and intersects with her Mormon

heritage.[154] Encounters with nature are holy and revelatory of God's power and majesty. In nature, prayer is elicited and grace received.

Conceptions of God in *Leap*

Birds as messengers of grace appear again near the beginning of *Leap*, though that book's tension with the institutional religion of Mormonism, transmitted through her family, is clearly foreshadowed:

> As a child I remember believing that if I could ride on the backs of Canada geese they would deliver me to the future because they had arrived from the past. When I would bear my testimony before members of my own congregation, I would say I believed in God not because of what I had learned in church but because of the geese I watched each spring and fall, the fact that they knew their way, that they always returned. My parents said it was a sweet analogy. Not knowing what that word meant, I said, "No, they are not my analogy, they are my truth" (*Leap*, 16).

In *Leap*, the compatibility between Williams's nature spirituality and her Mormon religious heritage comes into sustained question. The ultimate power or force to which she is seeking to orient her life is no longer assumed uncritically to be the God (or Godhead) of the Mormon religion. Her spiritual experiences in nature, which had earlier seemed compatible with her Mormon tradition, now are less easily reconciled with that tradition as Williams reflects critically on the institutional church's approach to environmental questions.[155]

Williams's exploration of the body of Bosch's painting, the body of the Earth, and her own body leads her to reflect on the "sensual life, not in the service of the Self, but in

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[154] Williams's implication, in *Refuge*, that her nature spirituality is compatible with Mormonism is distinct from and thus not undermined by her critique—in the same text—of patriarchal Mormon culture, including its emphasis on obedience to authority (see *Refuge*, 286).

[155] In *New Genesis: A Mormon reader on land and community* (1998), Williams collaborated with William Smart and Gibbs Smith to give voice to environmental sensibilities within the mainstream of Mormon belief.

service of the Sacred within a shared community honoring the dignity of all its members" (*Leap*, 147). While the painting leads her to re-examine her natal tradition, this re-examination proceeds in light of complex and dynamic understandings of the sacred and the dimensions of community.

> In trying to wrap my arms around my religious beliefs, I am aware I pick and choose what feels right to me, adapting as I go, adopting what I like and discarding what I don't within my own ethical framework, which is a simple one, to help more than harm and contribute to the well-being of my community with love, good works, and compassion. I accept the Organic Trinity of Mineral, Vegetable, and Animal with as much authority as I accept the Holy Trinity. Both are sacred.
>
> How do we remain faithful to our own spiritual imagination and not betray what we know in our bodies? The world is holy. We are holy. All life is holy (*Leap*, 147).

For Williams, the members of her shared community include not only humans but plant and animal denizens of place as well. As revealed in this quotation, her sense of the sacred encompasses both the Godhead and this more ecological dimension. She also clearly articulates a desire to incorporate both spiritual imagination and bodily or sensual knowledge. (In this quotation, note as well the phrase, "All life is holy," which foreshadows a perspective more fully developed in later writings.)

As she continues her critical exploration of her Mormon heritage, Williams distinguishes religion—for her, Mormonism—from spirituality, by which she seems to mean a less institutionally structured practice of orienting oneself to the sacred:

> What is the difference between a religious life and a spiritual one?…
>
> Religion brings us into community with a shared set of beliefs, symbols, and songs. We can choose to be internally engaged or not. The religion goes forward whether we are present or not. The rules are written. Those in authority tell us what to do. It is, for the most part, comfortable and supportive. We are known. We belong to a congregation and we are taught to worship a creed "the result and fruit of many minds. . . . Purified from all the oddities, shortcomings, and flaws of individual experience." There are answers to be found. It is a peace we can borrow. We learn compliance, cooperation, and sacrifice. We can bask in the warmth of feeling part of an organism that knows its place in the world.

> Spirituality is solitary. Its companion is conflict, a gnawing at the soul that cannot be ignored. We are engaged. There are no rules. There are no maps. We live with the discomfort and ambiguity of our own authority. At times, it is lonely, often informed by pain. On other occasions, it is the body submerged in a phosphorescent tide, every movement sparking a trail of illumination. Afterwards, we sit on the shore in moonlight. No candles are necessary. Spirituality exists when we are present, buoyed up by the waters of attention. We learn the courage of faith. It is a peace that is earned. We can take solace in the heat of doubt knowing this is the pulse of poetry.
>
> … Religion is a rabbit. Spirituality is an owl. An owl will overtake a rabbit (*Leap*, 211-212).[156]

The predator-prey phrasing of her comparison suggests a competitive relationship in which the owl—spirituality—will prevail over the rabbit—religion. Moreover, the rejection of community suggested in the description of religious life appears to turn against the concern expressed earlier for shared community, recognizing the dignity of all members. Yet the predator-prey relationship is part of the dynamics of ecological community, suggesting a broader perspective that can encompass both religion and spirituality, as Williams understands them. (Recall that Williams, in *Leap*, was attempting to restore LDS tradition, not reject it.) Further, the community rejected is the community formed by individuals seeking safety by obedience to convention and compliance with authority, rather than a community that might be formed by a risky and vulnerable, yet also joyous, seeking after God.

In *Leap*, Williams is seeking reconciliation between environmental concern and religious tradition. Just as *Refuge* was not an apologetic for the Mormon tradition, *Leap* is not an unmitigated rejection of the faith. Through her interrogation of faith, Williams is transformed, as is her understanding of religion and God. No longer constrained within the bounds of her particular religious tradition, Williams acknowledges diverse understandings of the ultimate force or power, and recognizes her own ability to think

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[156] The embedded quotation, unattributed by Williams, is from Carl Jung (1938:63).

differently. “Moments of spiritual recognition in whatever language we choose to speak, to whatever God we happen to know. These are the seeds of our own renewal, our conversations with a living mystery” (*Leap*, 226). Williams concludes *Leap* with a continued belief that Mormonism can be restored, drawing on the environmental sensibilities that have been evident in the faith since its early decades. “I choose to believe in the power of restoration, the restoration of our faith, even within my own Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Faith is not about finding meaning in the world, there may be no such thing— Faith is the belief in our capacity to create meaningful lives” (*Leap*, 264).

Conceptions of God in *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*

As an interrogation of faith, *Leap* presents extended, wide-ranging reflection on religion and, implicit within that, Mormonism’s conception of how one orients oneself to the ultimate. Such discourse is much less extensive in the *Open Space of Democracy*. Nonetheless, Williams’s continued development of a conception of the sacred unbounded by her Mormon heritage is evident in this passage:

> There is a particular juniper tree, not so far from our house, that I sit under frequently. This tree shelters my thoughts and brings harmony to mind. I consult this tree by simply seeking its company. No words are spoken. Sensations come into my body and I recognize this cellular awakening as an organic form of listening, the spiritual cohesion one feels in places like the Arctic on such a grand scale. A throbbing intelligence passes from this tree into my bloodstream and I remember my animal body that has evolved alongside my consciousness as a human being. This form of engagement reveals familial ties and I honor this tree’s standing in the community. We share a pact of survival. I used to be embarrassed to speak of these things, my private correspondences with trees and birds and deer, for fear of seeming mad. But now, it seems mad not to speak of these things—our unspoken intimacies with Other (*OSD*, 75-76).

In this paragraph, Williams reveals what is often suppressed in the public discourse of modern environmental ethics: religious experiences, intuitions, or beliefs.

Primarily secular and at best religiously pluralistic, environmental discourse does not make the assumption that the western monotheistic God is the Author of nature in the way that such an assumption may have been made in the medieval period.[157] Reading nature religiously, however, must include some intimation of ultimacy, some encounter with something grasped as being of "unsurpassable importance and reality" (Klemm and Schweiker 2008:12). Secular environmental ethics frequently brackets or dismisses such a possibility, and even literary nonfiction on environmental themes often mutes or carefully couches intuitions of a religious nature. In the middle section of *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* (2008a:142), Williams is participating in a research project on prairie dogs and views a red-shafted flicker, eliciting a memory:

> Whenever I see a flicker, I think of the one who flew into our home at a moment of doubt. I was struggling, wondering if I dared to write what I know in my body, what I have experienced regarding my relationships with animals. Do I tell the truth, that I believe animals can be messengers; would I lose all credibility, appear unstable, insane?

In the endnote that accompanies this language of losing credibility, Williams (2008a:400) writes: "Many of us within the conservation community worry about this when speaking from a place of instinct and intuition verses [*sic*] scientific fact."[158]

Though muted or carefully couched, these expressions convey intuitions of something beyond us, individually and collectively, that calls to us and challenges us, and to which we must respond. Often evading or rejecting explicit mention of any particular

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[157] In part, this is a manifestation of broader patterns, going well beyond environmental ethics. Philosopher Charles Taylor (2007b), for example, has argued that the default option in modernity is unbelief.

[158] A similar sentiment was expressed in *Leap*. Williams writes of reading an article by art restorationist Jerónimo Seisdedos, who had restored Bosch's painting in the mid-1930s. Reflecting on his words about a love of art, Williams (2000:257) writes: "I think about my love of the land back home, about the healing grace of wildness, and how difficult it is to articulate why conservation matters, why wilderness matters to the health of our souls and how a language of the heart becomes suspect."

God, the authors of literary environmental nonfiction may nonetheless refer to some form of reverence for life. This is perhaps the dominant language of a contemporary religious reading of nature, allowing for—while not assuming—traditional conceptions of God as the Author of the book of nature or, in Williams's case, the God as understood by Mormonism.

Reading religiously does not presuppose a fixed understanding of ultimacy.[159] Even in its explicitly Christian context, *lectio divina* is a way of coming to a *better* understanding of God. Williams's religious readings of the natural world reveal a complex perception of ultimate power and value only partly determined by her Mormon heritage. Over the decades, Williams's sense of ultimacy has come to align substantially with Albert Schweitzer's reverence for life. Near the end of *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, Williams (2008a:342) writes: "We have not lost faith in God. / We have lost faith in Life." More explicitly, in the endnotes to that same book, Williams writes of Schweitzer: "His philosophy and phrase 'reverence for life' has become bedrock in my own thinking of how we try to embody an ethical stance toward life" (2008a:401).

Williams's sense of what is of unsurpassable importance and reality is similar to David Klemm and Williams Schweiker's (2008:6) concept of the integrity of life, which they propose as "the centerpiece of theological and humanistic thinking." Klemm and Schweiker (2008:1, emphasis in original) define religions as "*essentially* ambiguous social and cultural forces"; they must be interpreted and lived in ways that promote the continuance of human and non-human life globally. As Klemm and Schweiker interpret the concept, integrity of life has two dimensions. First, integrity of life—which they carefully distinguish from claims about the sacredness of [almost always merely human]

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[159] Again, we are exploring Williams's changing conceptions of ultimacy in order to ascertain whether her conception might help address the problems of guilt and despair. Only certain conceptions of ultimacy will suffice for those purposes.

life itself (2008:83-84)—provides the critical test for religious actions and relations (2008:3, 54). Given that religions are ambiguous social and cultural forces, one can evaluate alternative religious actions and relations with respect to whether they promote the continuance of human and non-human life globally. Second, integrity of life also "has the status of a sacred power or *religious* presence" (2008:55, emphasis in original). Recalling Hamma's claim about the sacred presence within nature, Klemm and Schweiker assert the invisible is revealed in the visible. We respond—orienting our lives—to the integrity of life incarnated "in stories of courageous or creative individuals or communities, in the sight of an integral ecosystem, in the experience of truthfulness in a loved one's death, or in the wholeness of a perfect symphony or novel" (2008:55). Integrity of life, then, is both an evaluating criterion and a force or ideal toward which we responsibly orient our lives.

From Latter-day Saint to latter-day human

In 2008, Sierra Club Books published a compilation of essays under the title, *Holy Ground: A Gathering of Voices on Caring for Creation* (Moseley 2008). Lyndsay Moseley, who edited the compilation, had served on the staff of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, had helped launch the Sierra Club's national faith partnerships initiative, and had been named by *Sojourners* magazine as one of ten emerging Christian leaders for her efforts to bring together environmental and faith communities.[160] Williams contributed the final essay in the collection, "God, nature, and the great unraveling." She dedicated it to Louis Gakumba, a young man to whom she had

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[160] Individual people can be both religious and scientific. These are not alliances that necessarily must be bridged *between* people. There is no necessary conflict in being both religious and scientific. Nonetheless, environmental movements seek to bridge institutional structures that are often organized as either religious or scientific. At this organizational level, alliances can be profitably developed.

grown close while working on a community art project in genocidal Rwanda, and whom she had helped secure a visa to the United States to study at Salt Lake Community College.[161] During her time in Rwanda, Williams became more deeply aware of our common humanity, crossing and transcending boundaries of race, nationality, ethnicity, and faith; "we are simply human beings inhabiting the Earth, together" (Williams 2008a:309).[162] Having long since stretched beyond the insular understandings of her religious heritage, Williams affirms a less elaborated, more encompassing faith appropriate to this vision of shared humanity. "We live our lives looking for that golden thread we can follow to the next clearing of light. It is momentary. We are caught in the recognition that we are not alone but belong to a quivering web of faith" (Williams 2008a:383).

Despite his life experience, Gakumba professes belief in a trustworthy and all-powerful God (Williams 2008a:345). One imagines he and Williams have had several opportunities to share their conceptions of God. The essay in *Holy Ground* is structured as a response to Gakumba; Williams is apparently answering a question that he had asked, or at least implied. In the essay, Williams recounts her journey of faith. She begins by quoting Walt Whitman's poem, "To a President." Whitman writes of "dangled mirages" and Williams (2008b:255, 256) continues: "Religion offered me a mirage, a

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[161] On Rwanda and Williams's relationship with Gakumba, see the last third of Williams (2008a).

[162] Recalling the emphasis on storytelling that recurs throughout her work, Williams frames this common humanity in terms of the stories people share of their lives. After listening to the stories of genocide survivors, Williams (2008a:279) reflects: "The healing grace of sharing one's story is another form of witness. In tragedy and loss, it is the story that remains and reminds us of our shared humanity." Williams was in Rwanda, in part, to explore her own grief, part of an "ongoing narrative of love and loss," following the death of her brother, Steve (Williams 2008a:238). Recalling the language of the subtitle of *Refuge*, her narrative of her mother's death, Williams (2008a:353) writes of the Rwandan survivors: "I want to hear their stories. We need to know their stories, their own unnatural histories of family and place."

belief I took as truth. Whatever I was walking toward remained an illusive bet on the horizon, shimmering and wet.… Mirages are common [in the Great Basin]: a destination never to be reached, only a liquid lie to follow all the way to the horizon, another name for hope." For Williams, Mormonism was both spiritual life and cultural identity; conformity to cultural identity ensured safety within community. She believed what she was told while in church; outside, in the natural landscapes of Utah, she thought for herself, drawing on her own experiences and intuitions and imagination. Truth was found in the things she saw in the natural world: birds, primarily.

Beyond mirages, Whitman's poem speaks also of Nature, characterized by the terms amplitude, rectitude, and impartiality. For our purposes, the capitalization of Nature here indicates that something of the sacred dimension will be revealed by reflection on these three attributes. Echoing Wallace Stegner's impressions of the effects western lands can have on their human residents, Williams characterizes the American West as large in landscape and sky, calling forth the human response of humility. Herds of deer, watched attentively by Williams and her brother throughout the seasons of their childhood, embodied rectitude, understood as "strong moral integrity of character or actions" (Williams 2008b:258). The deer revealed themselves as gentle, yet with great strength and stamina, pointing to "a world both intimate and unfathomable" (Williams 2008b:259). Finally, the indifference of the desert displayed "the power of impartiality…. It was in the austerity of Utah's red-rock desert that I came to know God as a force of nature on Earth, not an exalted being levitating in heaven" (Williams 2008b:259). With her faith journey so strongly influenced by her experiences in nature, Williams (2008b:259) summarizes her spiritual transformation by analogy to the deer: "It feels quite simple, really, my allegiance to a natural mind over an institutional one. My path from a Latter-day Saint to a latter-day human has been, in its pleasure and struggle, like walking the gentle path of deer."

Williams (2008b:260-261) concludes this essay:

> For me, religion is still a mirage in the desert—only now I no longer see it as a shimmering glint of hope on the horizon but as an abstraction of thought that I cannot hold. Neither does it hold me. The God I know is water—a dewdrop and a flood, a weeping rock wall, and the Atlantic in full swing, retreating one moment and rushing in the next. I feel the holy waves within my own body.
>
> God is rain. God is drought. Earth is a revolving state of grace.
>
> I believe in both God and nature. God in nature. God within the majesty of our own breathing, pulsating bodies. We are not separate. The God I have felt move me from the seat of certitude to the seat of my own heart translates to heat, the white-hot current that runs through all of us. The Great Unraveling inspires a letting go of all we have been taught, as our ego begins to untangle itself from what we have created to a deeper understanding of what has been created before us. This unlearned moment becomes our awakening. Earth underfoot replaces heaven above. Instead of trying to define the ineffable through our own images and count ourselves as members of a congregation in power, we can begin to live with the mysteries and humbly congregate around them with awe and wonder and respect.

Williams has not lost her faith; she still believes in God. She *has* lost any unreflected obedience to the authority of Mormon tradition. Moreover, her sense of community extends beyond the bounds of her faith community to include the ecological community as well as suffering humans worldwide, regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, or religion. Given the faith journey revealed in her successive books, it is perhaps not surprising to read, in the biographical note accompanying this essay, that Williams "was raised [not *is*] a fifth-generation Mormon" (Williams 2008b:261).

Reverence for life

In her journals written prior to her death in Auschwitz in 1943, Etty Hillesum (1983:96) wrote: "[S]ometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths." Using the metaphor of breath, paying attention can be viewed as inhalation, pondering as the inward turning, responding as exhalation, and surrendering—*contemplatio*—as the extended pause before the next inhalation. As rest, it recalls the sabbath practices of Jewish and Christian tradition. We pause from our efforts in recognition that God did the same, thereby aligning our lives with God's, and in

recognition that most of what comes to us comes as gift and not as the product of our own strivings, thereby developing both humility and gratitude. Recall the "implausible but real" fruitfulness of the doomed kumquat bushes in Robert Adams's (1986:5) description of the razed landscapes of Southern California. The continued fruitfulness of nature, even where the integrity of life has been relentlessly strangled and incapacitated by human activity, reminds us that forces larger than us are at play. In sabbath-keeping, in pausing between two deep breaths, we acknowledge that.

As the last stage of a practice of reading nature religiously with relevance to environmental ethics, surrendering is not merely a giving up in futility before the difficult—and often seemingly impossible—work of envisioning, nurturing, and bringing to fruition human-land relationships that sustain mutual flourishing. In light of the widespread degradation human activity has brought to natural landscapes, we are at least as likely to be gripped with guilt as with awe as we pay attention, ponder, and respond to the natural world. Whether surrendering can bring us the sense of absolution about which Lopez writes perhaps depends on the ultimate force or power to which we are surrendering, and from which we might receive such absolution as a gift.

One possibility is to surrender to a God conceived of along predominantly Christian lines. Lopez's language suggests this move. While explicitly seeking to present his experience as outside of religion, the language of absolution reflects a conception of God consistent with the ethical monotheism of Christianity.[163] Lopez lives within and is in some measure a product of western culture, inheriting language and concepts heavily influenced by Christianity. A sense of guilt—Lopez (2005:xxi) writes of feelings of "complicity in the world's waywardness"—suggests repentance, to which God may

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[163] Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all ethical monotheistic religions, meaning adherents of these religions believe there is just one God who expects or demands compliance with ethical guidelines for behavior.

respond with forgiveness, or absolution. Ultimately, whether one receives a sense of absolution from such a God will depend on one's understanding of God's propensity to grant release and restore us to wholeness, of God's propensity to witness our failures and love us anyway.[164]

Given Lopez's efforts to distance himself from any particular religion, perhaps he is responding to a force conceivable outside of Christian tradition, even though the words he uses are strongly colored by that tradition. This suggests a second possibility for conceiving of the nature of the ultimate force or power in such a way that release from feelings of despair and guilt is possible. For Williams, this force seems to be life itself. Even as early as *Refuge*, as she suffered with the death of her mother and the flooding of the bird refuge, she gained strength and recovered hope when she found the displaced birds from Great Salt Lake had relocated to the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in southeastern Oregon. "All is not lost. The birds have moved on. They give me the courage to do the same" (*Refuge*, 253). Later when the flocks return to Great Salt Lake, she sees tens of thousands of avocets and stilts take flight. "Oh, blessed wings. In this moment, I realize how little I have hung on to for so long" (*Refuge*, 275). From an early, largely unreflective acceptance of the Mormon worldview, through a period of critical reflection on that tradition, to an emergent understanding of the sacred perhaps best captured by Schweitzer's concept of reverence for life, her ability to articulate the sustaining force of life has deepened. In an interview, Tricia Brick (2003) asked Williams "From what source or sources do your stories arise?" Williams replied: "Quite simply, the source is life. Day to day, day by day. I never stop being amazed by the simple, raw, true power of life." Such amazement comes from a religious reading of nature whereby

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[164] The mechanisms for such repentance and absolution, including the possible relevance of a confession of some type, are variously understood within the Christian tradition.

one perceives the extravagant abundance and generosity of life, irrespective of our actions. While guilt and despair may still be part of our emotional response to reflection on human-land relationships, a trust that the power of life is stronger than the destructive effects of human action is an alternative path into a sense of surrender, of rest and respite in the pause between two deep breaths.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

Literary traces of sacred encounters

Mary Oliver, Barry Lopez, Robert Adams, Terry Tempest Williams, and other authors frequently employ religious language in their poems, essays, and books. For some, there is an occasional reference to God. Other language that is markedly religious includes expressions of awe, references to feelings of absolution, and declarations of reverence for life. These expressions in their writings are traces visible to the reader of the authors' encounter with the sacred—with something beyond them that, by virtue of its power or value, compels them to reorient their lives with respect to it.

That these authors convey these experiences in this language suggests they have performed a religious reading of nature. This dissertation has described one way of conducting such a religious reading of nature, taking *lectio divina* as a pattern. Reading nature religiously, under this model, proceeds through stages of paying attention, pondering, responding, and surrendering in one's encounter with the natural world. Paying attention requires careful observation, the naming and description of relevant details, and awareness and articulation of emotional responses as one repeatedly visits natural settings. Pondering requires a willingness to enter deeply into the various sources (religious, scientific, and otherwise) that help us understand the natural world and our place within it, as well as a willingness to reflect critically upon those sources. Responding calls upon readers of nature to take definite actions that flow out of the previous stages of paying attention and pondering, utilizing our knowledge born of familiarity to address environmental challenges and protecting natural settings in which the mysterious and unnamable Other can be encountered. Surrendering involves acknowledging human limits of understanding, will, and action, and nonetheless finding rest and restoration by trusting in some force greater than ourselves.

When reading nature religiously, these four stages are accompanied by a willingness to be transformed by an encounter with the sacred, in or mediated by nature. The transformation itself is not the primary goal. However, the desire to come to greater knowledge and love of the sacred, however conceived, and to orient one's life with respect to what one takes to be of unsurpassable importance and reality, will tend to bring about some transformation.

Religiosity and ethical reflection

One does not need religion to have a framework for thinking through questions of what it means to be human, what the world is, and how we ought to interact with other people and with the more-than-human world. Nonetheless, many people, when reflecting on human-land relationships, incorporate images, concepts, values, and other elements derived more or less directly from religious sources. The approach to reading nature religiously offered in this dissertation invites readers to deepen their own ethical awareness, reflection, deliberation, and action, having learned from these interpretations of works by Terry Tempest Williams.

We all interpret the natural world and have some understanding of how we can or should interact with it. These modes of interpretation and understanding are influenced by our upbringing—within our families and, for some, in one or another religious setting—and by the common cultural context we all share. As we saw with Williams, her religious readings of the natural world respond to a complex and evolving perception of ultimate power and value only partly determined by her Mormon heritage. Engaging in a deliberate discipline of reading nature religiously will help us identify the multiple sources of our understandings, to engage them deeply, and to reflect critically upon them.

Those for whom this ethical practice will seem like a worthwhile endeavor will be those who desire to deepen their own spiritual experience, to find greater meaning in their lives, to become better people, or to live flourishing lives. Those to whom this approach

appeals may be aware of some spiritual longing or hunger. Williams, in an interview with Justine Toms, elaborated on the title of her collection of essays, *An Unspoken Hunger*. The unspoken hunger, she said, "is our desire, our yearning, our longing to connect with some place, some one, some thing other, outside, beyond ourselves" (Toms 2006:33). Williams's words recall Daniel Coleman's assertion that reading is an erotic activity, compelled by an outward-reaching energy that longs for an Other. Reading nature religiously may be something we all do more or less consciously. However, approaching it thoughtfully as a discipline—attending to the process actively—may help us better orient our lives to that Other, however we conceive it.

Vulnerability and intimacy

Vulnerability and intimacy have been repeatedly mentioned in conjunction with this approach to reading nature. This is neither a reading for entertainment nor a reading for mastery and control. Rather, in seeking to relate to something greater than oneself that can be encountered in or mediated by nature, one takes risks. Despite one's efforts to be knowledgeable, to cultivate awareness, to think critically, and to respond adequately, one is far from in control of the process and its outcomes.

Vulnerability and intimacy are closely related terms. Intimacy alone might suffice for our purposes, but including the term vulnerability as well helps ensure we remember that intimacy, as intended here, has two distinct and important dimensions. First, intimacy suggests familiarity. Reading nature religiously entails repeated exposure. Williams has a lifetime of interaction with the Great Salt Lake area. She has even more intimate relationships with particular locations within that watershed, including sites with the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. When she visits other places, her awareness of the limits of her perception is grounded in deep intimacy with her home landscape. For example, while on a trip to the Serengeti in Tanzania and Kenya, she had a Maasai guide, Samuel Kiplangat. "I am fascinated by what Samuel sees and what I am missing. In the Great

Basin I can read the landscape well. I know the subtleties of place… Home is the range of one's instincts" (Williams 1994e:9). Reading nature religiously requires us to come to know at least one place well, to know it intimately. When we engage with environmental issues far from our homes and deep intimacies, our experience with reading nature religiously will help us find appropriate guides to those other places and issues, guides who embody a similar familiarity and intimacy with those landscapes and the challenges that face them.

Intimacy also means something more. The intimacy of familiarity is consonant with Williams's poetics of place. One knows and can name a place and its denizens; out of that familiarity can then flow a politics of place—an environmental ethic—that draws on that knowledge. There is vulnerability in this. One can be pained by losses and tragedies that assail those familiar places. A greater vulnerability, however, is expressed by Williams's description of an erotics of place and the environmental ethics that might flow from it. Here one is seeking to become intimate with—to encounter and relate to deeply—the sacred itself. One seeks intimacy with the power or force that one takes to be of unsurpassable importance and reality. One longs deeply for the Other, which, as Williams conceives it, is out of one's control, beyond reason, and unnamable. The intimacy here is not familiarity; it is naked vulnerability before an awesome force. Reading nature religiously, thus, entails not only coming to know at least one particular place well, but also putting oneself vulnerably into situations characterized by much greater mystery.

Critical reflection on religious assumptions

According to Lynn White, religiously framed assumptions about human-nature relations lay at the root of the environmental crises of the last half of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, White argued that the solution to those ecological problems would be found not by jettisoning religion but by choosing alternative—more sustainable—

religious assumptions about human-land relationships. Within academic institutions, many scholars responded to White's challenge, developing research interests in fields such as ecotheology and religion and ecology. This dissertation does not seek to articulate the specific content of an alternative religious conception. It does not provide a specific set of religious assumptions that might foster the continuance of human and more-than-human life on the planet. It does suggest a process whereby individuals—and discourse communities—might reflect deeply and critically on these assumptions as they operate in their own lives. From that work, transformation of our individual and collective assumptions may occur.

Philosophical environmental ethics, absent any particular consideration of religious content or sensibility, can construct arguments about how we ought to interact, as human beings, with the more-than-human world. Nonetheless, environmental ethics done religiously also acknowledges the pervasiveness of religious elements (language, images, concepts, values, etc.) in our culture. It recognizes that religious traditions have been the primary cultural carriers of sustained reflection on the virtues and their cultivation in ritual and ceremony. Religious traditions prepare the ground for numinous experience and provide an impetus for continued human transformation toward some more or less clearly glimpsed ideal. Only by drawing on these traditions, by encompassing rather than excising religious dimensions, can scholars and practitioners of environmental ethics respond adequately to Lynn White's challenge to reframe religious assumptions about human-land relationships—including both metaphysical and ethical elements—thereby fashioning a worldview and ethos that is ecologically sustainable. For those with a religious imagination, religious environmental ethics offers persuasive and compelling practices for constructing meaning and for orienting and transforming human-land relationships. This dissertation suggests the generative (and regenerative) possibilities of sustained religious engagement with the challenge of conceiving and

sustaining flourishing human-land relationships, without advocating for a particular historic manifestation of human religiosity.

The ongoing story of a society to match the scenery

For many people, religion provides the ground out of which we live our daily lives, fashioning a sense of the world around us, our relationship to that world, and a story line that articulates our existence in that world. We are influenced by other stories as well, arising within the discourse communities of which we are a part. A central story line in which this dissertation is embedded is the ongoing story about creating a society to match the scenery. Reading nature religiously, on the model of *lectio divina*, draws our attention to the stories of which we are already a part, and encourages us to participate as co-creators in the ongoing story of refashioning our local communities—and our society more broadly—toward the end of mutual human and ecological flourishing.

Nature itself tells a story. It is a book that can be read, and which we are constantly rewriting and extending as we embody our roles as characters in its story. Multiple narratives tell this story at varying scales. Scientific cosmologies, the universe story (Swimme and Berry 1992), or the creation narratives of Genesis provide an overarching framework. More narrowly bounded in geographic and temporal scale, environmental histories narrate the more localized sweep of space and time in which we find ourselves. Our own life stories, articulating our myriad experiences and influences in the places we have known, determine much of the meaning we draw personally from the ongoing story. All these narratives, with their particular perspectives, are reflected upon and shared with others as we read nature religiously, orienting ourselves to a force or power greater than us, and seeking in our individual and collective actions to write the next event in the unfolding story in such a way as to promote the continuance of human and more-than-human life on this planet.

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