

Spiritually Beneficial Aspects of Wilderness Recreation Experiences

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Abstract: Research on outdoor recreation and leisure concepts has traditionally focused on activities and corresponding behaviors. However, outdoor settings are not merely places for recreational behavior, particular settings may have the ability to produce opportunities for individuals to attain both emotional and cognitive benefits. Some of these opportunities may be considered spiritually inspirational and beneficial. Moreover, some may have the capacity to manifest into numinous or "bliss" experiences, literally transforming individuals who have had such experiences. Prior research indicates that certain landscapes have the capacity to instill in people a meaningful "sense of place", conveying a certain sense of inner peace and connectedness to the land itself. Somewhat discernible within these landscapes are the rewarding experiences that people have, and the associated benefits they realize from visiting such areas. A qualitative cross-case comparison study approach was used to explore 'place' as the source of spiritual inspiration and how it may influence the overall beneficial aspects of the recreational engagement; and in particular relates those findings back to the setting itself. Data was collected from twelve key informants through participant observation, self-report journals, and personal in-depth interviews. The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness of northern Minnesota and the Grand Canyon of northern Arizona were chosen as study sites and were selected based on their distinctive climatic and geographic features.

Spiritually Transformative Aspects of Place

"The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step" -- the words of Chinese mystic and philosopher Lao Tzu holds great meaning when considering the individuals' life in terms of it being a spiritual journey as well as the physical passage of one's body through the dimensions of time and space. Trained in the art of spiritual guidance and holding two graduate degrees in education and the social sciences, I have become utterly fascinated with exploring the more subtle aspects of intimate person-nature interactions. More specifically, how different individuals perceive various outdoor places, and whether or not this interaction between 'person and place' holds spiritual significance for the individual, and if so, why?

Currently, I teach courses in environmental studies at a small, liberal arts university in upstate New York. Having previously worked in the field of experiential outdoor education, I came to this teaching position firmly convinced that one of the strengths of experiential learning

is that it engages all of the individual in the learning process -- mind, body, and soul or psyche. Therefore, much of what I teach in the classroom setting about environmental attitudes and values rests heavily on using the outdoor classroom to help facilitate student learning. Moreover, I consistently challenge students to go out and truly experience the out-of-doors in their on-going search for self-understanding. If presented in a broad enough context, discussing environmental values in the outdoor setting encourages the individual to think critically about how they interact with, and more importantly, impact the environment. Moreover, by encouraging my students to actively experience the out-of-doors, in a sense, pushes them to examine their own personal values and corresponding behaviors in light of larger global environmental issues.

Furthermore, my fascination with 'place' combined with my spiritual guidance training and innate passion for wilderness exploration led me to investigate the concepts of "sense of place" and "sacred space" as it relates to the various benefits people accrue from outdoor recreational experiences. More precisely, those that could be considered spiritually significant or subtly transformative.

The following monograph is a reflection on the spiritually significance aspects of 'place' that is based on a body of research that I conducted over the summer of 1995. The intention of this article is not to simply recount (in an academic sense) the particulars of my research. Rather, the goal of this exposition is to reconstruct for the reader, in a more gestalt-like fashion, how twelve women who previously didn't know one another came together and traveled through wilderness together, coming away from their experiential adventure, literally, quite transformed. Moreover, it is my intention to let verbatim narratives taken from several in-depth, follow-up interviews with trip participants convey to the reader the power of their wilderness experiences.

Conceptions of Place and Wilderness Experience

The questions that guided me throughout all phases of this research essentially centered on reaching a deeper understanding of what it is about particular places that move the individual to a degree of spiritual inspiration -- perhaps even invoking a certain profound personal transformation? In effect, what is it that brings about a certain 'mindfulness' if you will -- a certain heightened awareness to one's own perceptions and associated feelings, that encourages the individual to fully bring oneself into the present moment? Is it the way sunlight glints across the shallow azure water, or the sound of wind as it whispers through sparse branches of a solitary pine perched atop a hill? Or perhaps, it has more to do with the rewards of exposing oneself to the challenges of wilderness, allowing the individual to test one's physical and mental abilities against the vicissitudes of raw nature. But then again, perhaps it is the opportunity to engage in deeply meaningful conversations about life with one's wilderness companions. More than likely, it is a combination of all of these factors -- the biophysical

elements that make up or characterize a particular place coupled with good old physical exertion, plus the somewhat unusual social interactions that typically occur when exploring unfamiliar places with others.

Certainly, particular outdoor places provide unique opportunities for certain types of physical activity and group interaction, such as canoeing the vast maze of interconnected waterways that make the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) in northern Minnesota. But also, in somewhat of a subliminal way, the natural features themselves might work more subtly on the individuals' senses and perceptions, thereby increasing the likelihood of achieving this state of mindfulness as previously described.

Various scholars and academicians within the fields of landscape architecture and geography have written about landscapes imbued with meaning, attempting to describe what has often been referred to as a "sense of place" (Brill, 1986; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974, 1977). Similarly, it has been inferred that within this sense of place one may find elements of the sublime that act on one's sense of spirit, thereby enhancing and enriching one's spiritual understanding and psychological growth (Nye, 1994). Additionally, much has been written to convey the notion that place is not just the backdrop against which a cast of characters come in and successfully engage in the act of 'play'-- acting out their own personal scripts. Rather, 'place' itself is a meaningful phenomenon, and correspondingly, bestows deep meaning on the individual who ventures out onto the stage. Relph (1976) further contends that place is not just the "where" of something but that the landscape itself, or rather the 'place' itself embodies deep meaning. More precisely, there are certain places that hold significant meaning for the individual because of some deep interaction that has occurred between the person and the place. In that, the particulars of a place affect the deeper levels of one's sub-conscious, thereby encouraging the individual to not only explore the 'outer' reaches of his or her physical world, but moreover, to explore the 'inner' reaches of one's soul.

Highly distinguished 'place' authors Scott Russell Sanders (1993) and Kathleen Norris (1993) have also written extensively about the spiritual significance of certain places. In particular, places that embody a certain spiritual richness -- conveying to the individual a sense of being grounded and deeply connected to the land itself, committed if you will. In like manner, I too, have attempted to explore the more spiritually transformative aspects of place. And although Sanders and Norris use their literary voices to describe in a much more poetic way than I the ineffable qualities of certain places that render them spiritually significant or inspirational, I, in my own way have attempted to explore the more subtle and somewhat indefinable aspects of 'place'. I suspect that the more subtle aspects of place act somewhat as a catalyst -- calling the individual to enter into periods of deep introspection -- perhaps leading to profound self-awareness and self-understanding. Moreover, I suspect that certain places have

the power to bring about deeply personal spiritual transformation. Similarly, as suggested by experiential educator Elizabeth Roberts (1996), when one fully experiences the heartbeat of a place one gains a life full of quality and meaning -- for it is through our interactions with the unnamed details of a place that we create our own identity and figure out our life's deepest values and meanings.

'Mindfulness' and the Wilderness Experience

As previously mentioned, my academic interests in person-place interactions combined with my interest in spiritual growth led me to explore the belief that particular places themselves invoke in individuals a certain 'mindfulness' -- providing the individual with opportunities to fully engage all of oneself in exploring the 'outer' aspects of wilderness while at the same time encouraging the individual to explore the 'inner' recesses of wilderness within. More precisely, this inner exploration involves asking the difficult questions one typically asks themselves when faced with significant life-changes such as the death of a loved one, being diagnosed with a terminal illness, negotiating a mid-life career change, or separating from a long-term partner. Frequently, when confronted with significant life-changes the individual feels compelled to contemplate life's deeper meaning, and oftentimes come through this period of introspection with a clearer perspective on why they have been faced with such a challenging situation.

Furthermore, provided with an opportunity for this physical and psychological 'inner-outer' exploration, the individual may come away from such an experience as transformed or deeply changed, if you will. Coming through such an experience may change profoundly the way the individual perceives future difficult life-changes. Instead of viewing change as something to be avoided and feared, difficult life-changes could be re-interpreted as prime opportunities for personal and spiritual growth. In essence, journeying into one's own inner depths is actively engaging in the sometimes difficult process of self-discovery. Ultimately, this process lead to discovering one's own individual power, as well as limitations. Moreover, once the individual embarks on this journey -- even though at times it may be difficult -- the individual frequently comes to see their own life circumstances as a incredibly remarkable opportunities for spiritual and psychological growth. In effect, life with all its inherent challenges and pitfalls is more fully embraced by the individual and soulfully experienced for all the richness it has to offer the human spirit.

Mindfulness is part of the overall fabric of Buddhist philosophy and to play with this notion of 'mindfulness' a bit more, Sogyal Rinpoche (1992), defines it as the practice of living fully in the present moment. Rinpoche further suggests that individuals create such pervasive awareness by way of focused meditation or reflective non-activity. In essence, the practice of mindfulness is the attempt to "bring the scattered mind home, thereby heightening one's perceptions, healing one's relationship with the self and

others, defusing negativity, and eventually unveiling the wellspring of compassion for the world and all its inhabitants." (pp. 56) In this regard, practicing the art of mindfulness empowers the individual to reinterpret challenging life-changes and transition not merely as the ending of one situation simply giving way to yet the beginning of another phase of one's life. But rather, embracing the notion of mindfulness enables the individual to interpret significant life-changes as rich, abundant opportunities for inner-exploration and self-reflection.

Women's Wilderness Experiences

The literature is rife with examples of how an individual's self-esteem and self-confidence is positively enhanced as the result of physically challenging oneself and succeeding in the pursuit (Ewert, 1983; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1983; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983; McDonald, 1983; Young & Crandall, 1984). Yet overcoming physical challenge is not the only thing that can build positive self-respect and self-esteem, leading to feelings of empowerment.

There is a growing body of literature that suggests that women tend to feel more comfortable pursuing recreational activities while in the company of other women. Henderson, et al. (1989) and Colley (1984), found that women tend to feel inhibited and physically incompetent in mixed gender groups while engaged in various forms of outdoor recreation. Moreover, a significant number of women expressed the importance of feeling nurtured and cared for while engaged in the act of recreation indicating a certain need to feel emotionally safe before one begins to experience other aspects of the recreational experience (Henderson, et al., 1989; Colley, 1984). What this suggests is that once the individual feels comfortable and safe in her social surroundings she will most likely fully engage herself in interacting with the physical environment as well.

Experiential Adventure: 'Inner - Outer' Wilderness Exploration

Ironically, all twelve women who had come together with the sole intention of adventure travel through wilderness with other women were also all dealing with significant life-change (i.e., death of a loved one, major career change, separation from a long-term partner, and so on). Through their shared experiential adventure this group of women learned a great deal about themselves and each other. They learned about their own personal strengths and weaknesses -- both in terms of physically and emotionally -- and through their shared struggles and triumphs each of these women came away from the experience feeling deeply empowered. In essence, it was through the act of fully encountering the 'outer' wilderness, or rather, the specifics of a particular place, did these women learn how to navigate the turbulent waters of the 'inner' wilderness as well.

Moreover, the goal of their wilderness adventure was not to see how much ground could be covered in a day, but rather, the goal was to explore wilderness in the shared company of other women, and furthermore, to explore the more "contemplative" aspects of outdoor recreational

experiences. Ultimately, the majority of these women came away from their wilderness experience able to deal more constructively and assuredly with the difficult life situations facing them at home.

Research Overview

There were a total of twelve women who participated in this study. Six women canoed through the pristine waters of northern Minnesota's Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) and six women backpacked across the desert floor of the Grand Canyon in northern Arizona. These two areas were specifically chosen as potential study sites. In that, they differed greatly both in terms of the regional geology, climatic conditions, vegetative mix, and types of wildlife present.

Essentially, two different wilderness areas were selected as study sites based on the tentative assumption that there were an array of environmental features or characteristics that rendered each area as potentially significant in terms of it being spiritually inspirational. Moreover, the idea was to see if there were environmental attributes -- including biophysical, social, and managerial attributes that were common to both areas, and that gave rise to a certain "sense of place" or "sacred space". More precisely, these two areas were chosen as study sites not so much in an effort to prove, per say, that a specific mix of biophysical features coupled with particular managerial activities produce various psychological states, which then lead to spiritually transformative experiences. This would be a considerably daunting task! In that, there are simply far too many variables one would need to consider if the goal of this research was to search for axiomatic proof. Rather, the goal was simply to further the on-going investigation of the elusive qualities that invoke a certain "sense of place" or engender particular places as "sacred space".

In addition, the wilderness areas of the Grand Canyon and the BWCAW offer different levels of physical challenge for those people traveling through them. For instance, when traveling through the BWCAW one must rely primarily on canoe for transportation. There is virtually no established trail system other than the relatively short portage trails that lead from one lake into an adjacent body of water. When crossing the desert landscape of the inner gorge of the Grand Canyon one has two different options -- traveling by pack mule or carrying one's belongings in a backpack and traversing the challenging terrain by foot. It was suspected that the mode of transport might also contribute to, or influence, how the individual actually experienced the place they were visiting.

Woodswomen, a leading outdoor adventure organization with a mission of providing high-quality outdoor experiential adventures for women and groups of women and children provided the logistical support for both trips. This highly acclaimed outdoor adventure organization has an international reputation of providing participants with a physically safe and emotionally supportive adventuring environment. Women who guide for the organization are not only accomplished outdoorswomen who possess

superlative technical skills, but they are also trained in group facilitation, focusing specifically on developing positive interpersonal communication and trust building.

It was not by pure chance alone that these two separate groups of women came together to explore wilderness while in the shared company of other women. The two trips were advertised by *Woodswomen* as being more “contemplative” in nature. Furthermore, in addition to providing women with a safe-space to learn basic outdoor skills, part of *Woodswomen*’s mission is to also focus on the more spiritual aspects of the outdoor recreational experience -- introducing trip participants to the more subtle, self-reflective qualities that characterize many outdoor recreation experiences.

Research Findings

These twelve women were given an exceptionally unique opportunity to feel “safe” in exploring the more philosophical and spiritual aspects of their current life situations while out in wilderness. In a sense, all of these women were presented with an opportunity to more fully explore the emotional and psychological dimensions of their own inner wilderness, if you will, while at the same time regaining a sense of what it meant to be physical. In effect, each of the two trips gave them the time and space to fully reflect upon and integrate the changes that were occurring in their life’s lived elsewhere.

Moreover, these particular woman expressed a certain spiritually renewing quality about their wilderness experience, and mentioned that it was primarily due to the fact that they were in wilderness, per say. For many, there was something particularly transformative about being exposed to the raw and unpredictable powers of nature -- far removed from the trappings of modern day civilization. In part, it was the opportunity to attune themselves once again to the basic circadian rhythms life, focusing more completely on ‘being’ in the present-moment, which led to a degree of mindfulness. The following are excerpts taken from two of the follow-up in-depth interviews:

And there I am, sitting out in the woods, in the rain with all the power crashing around me and the lake lighting up with lightening and I’m seeing this incredible landscape with almost x-ray vision, and the rain is coming down, and I’m just encapsulated there. I’m not wet, I’m not cold, I glance around and shake my head in awe at the natural processes that are raging on all around me. And what’s even more [surprising] is that I don’t feel the least bit threatened, instead I feel comforted and truly alive! I sense a power that is really hard to explain and just know that I need more of this in my life -- exposure to the raw powers of nature, and interactions like these with other women in the wilderness. It was spiritual, truly a spiritual experience.

Trip Participant - Boundary
Waters Canoe Area Wilderness

I think it’s because we get away from the electricity and the phones. It is the simplicity, the daily chores. You develop a certain pride in being able to gather the wood and boil the water and cook your own food. And I say to myself, ‘Yeah, I can survive this way out here’ and I love it. And so maybe I can extend this and survive [with simplicity] when I go back home.(slight pause) There seems to be an extrapolation that you can make from the wilderness to civilization... at least I can. Well, you go back to the basics and there’s a certain degree of comfort you get. You know what I’m saying? There is this pure simplicity, this is what it is to be spiritual, to be living the spiritual life. Every time I come out here and experience this [simplicity] I feel clear and aware, almost electrically charged. I think I am beginning to understand why some people lead the monastic life in nature.

Trip Participant - Boundary
Waters Canoe Area
Wilderness

The Power of Physical Challenge

The physical challenges associated with each wilderness environment were at times extremely exhausting. For example, carrying a fully loaded backpack for several miles through intense heat and challenging desert terrain, or sitting out a tremendous thunder storm all alone, crouched down kneeling on one’s life preserver, taught these women much about their physical and mental limits. In essence, most of these women experienced a reawakening to their physical capabilities and a renewed awareness of their bodies. This physical “alive-ness” was something that many had lost sight of in the busy-ness of their everyday lives. When asked to comment on the most meaningful aspects of her experience, one participant responded:

I can’t even fully capture in words what has happened to me since I’ve been out here. The first day, when I looked out over the lip of the canyon and saw the trail that we were headed down, knowing that my knees were weak, and my spirit as well, I thought to myself, ‘There’s no way I can do that.’ And yet, five days later, my body incredibly tired, I feel more alive, more ready to face the challenges that are at home waiting for me. (brief pause) But it’s not just that I feel physically healthier, I feel emotionally more balanced, like there is a spark burning deep within me. I haven’t remembered feeling that spark since I was a young girl. I suppose its the spirit burning deep inside me, urging me to look at life a little differently from this day forward.

Trip Participant - Grand
Canyon

The Power of Emotional Support

Furthermore, for most of these women this was their first foray into wilderness, per say. All but three of the women had never traveled in wilderness before; and of the three who had previously traveled through wilderness none of the three had ever been part of an all women’s’ group. In essence, this was an experience that was quite foreign to

most of the women. In fact, this was the first time that many of them had traveled with a group of people they did not know, while at the same time they engaged themselves in an activity (canoeing, backpacking) that they knew very little about. Therefore it seems completely appropriate that some might have a degree of fear and apprehension about their wilderness adventure.

When specifically asked why they had chosen this particular trip, all twelve participants cited the fact that they knew that they would be in the "safety" of other women while out in the wilderness. What this suggests is that some of these women had the predisposed notion that being in the shared company of other women would provide them with a nurturing and caring environment -- something each woman admitted to needing when having casual discussions with one another on the trip itself. All twelve women agreed that it was the unique combination of being in a *bona fide* wilderness area coupled with the unprecedented level of trust and companionship they felt with one another that most heavily impacted their overall trip experience. The significance of this is that all twelve women came away from their wilderness trip experience feeling fully empowered --- sufficiently able to deal more effectively with the extreme challenges that life had presented them. The following excerpt conveys the power of emotional support:

For so long I had wanted to be with other women in the wilderness, even though I wouldn't necessarily know them. I had a sense that all the artificial differences in our backgrounds would simply fade away and we could just relax and be together sharing our experience. It's different that way. You know, when it's a bunch of women together you can usually count on it being free and easy. And with this group [women] I am still in awe of how we worked so well together. There was no competition. There didn't need to be. We consistently helped one another out. (slight pause). It's the first time in years, literally, that I can remember feeling so comfortable. Comfortable in a group of other people and comfortable in my own skin if you know what I mean. I hadn't even recognized that these past few years that I've felt like I've been buried... You know, buried under all the things that I am to other people -- wife, mother, child, friend, volunteer. I mean, it's taken this trip for me to feel some sort of balance and harmony again. It's as if getting out here, breathing clean fresh air, walking around for miles every day fully loaded down with a pack on my back, feeling my muscles talking to me at the end of the day (slight pause), sharing life stories with these other women, it's given me the freedom to pick myself up and dust myself off and think about what I really want in my life from here on out.

The Power of Wilderness Experience

Throughout time philosophers, environmentalists, theologians, experiential educators, nature writers, and wilderness lovers have all tried to capture in words the power and transformative qualities of a wilderness

experience. Many have written personal accounts espousing the notion that the wilderness experience is oftentimes a watershed life event. An experience where the individual experiences a certain clarity of perspective, a certain attunement with the environment that surrounds them, often resulting in a particularly illuminating experience. Oftentimes, the wilderness adventure traveler is afforded the opportunity to contemplate life's most deeply perplexing and profound questions such as "*Why am I here?*" and "*What is my purpose in life?*" Questions that many times get overlooking in the frenzy of fulfilling one's personal, professional and familial responsibilities.

Personal testimonies taken from several of the women described a certain tacit or felt knowledge that the wilderness experience is something set wholly apart from daily reality -- "sacred" if you will. This tacit knowledge of wilderness as having the potential to imbue visitors with a certain spiritual significance or sacredness has come to be recognized by many outdoor enthusiasts as one of the premier reasons for seeking out experiential adventures in the wilderness setting.

Absolutely not! When I am out here, amidst the tall trees, soaking up the morning mist while sitting quietly on a rock by waters edge, listening to the cry of a loon, I am in perfect rhythm. A rhythm that I don't think reaches me when I am back at home, even though I go outside on a daily basis when I'm there. There is something different about being here... It's the absolute stillness in the middle of the night, the inaudible support and comfort I feel when sitting around the cook stove at night, sharing my feelings with someone I know[emphasis] understands. It's the knowing that no other human being is within miles around me -- about being truly exposed to the rawness of the natural elements and trusting that whatever comes is as exactly as it should be. This is when I am in touch with what I know as God.

Trip Participant - Boundary
Waters Canoe Area
Wilderness

Future Implications: Enhancing Mid-Life Transition

The experiences that this group of twelve women encountered should not be underestimated considering the relatively recent interest in the human-potential movement, and coming to understand oneself throughout the various stages of one's life. Ten of the twelve women who participated in this research were over the age of forty-five, and as previously mentioned, all twelve were experiencing some degree of major life-change. In essence, many of these women were entering mid-life, which for many adults is a time to reorganize or rethink one's roles and responsibilities not only to one's family members, friends, employers, and so on. But moreover, this mid-life transition is for many people a time to reestablish an intimate relationship with oneself.

For many women this is a time that is rife with self-reflection and soulful introspection about life's successes and failures. A time to reevaluate one's lifelong goals and

dreams, discarding those that no longer fit, and dreaming of the endless possibilities of a future that has yet to unfold. It has become widely recognized that this notion of self-discovery -- or rather re-discovery -- is quite common among individuals faced with some degree of life-change. Furthermore, that the on-going process of self-discovery and self-empowerment may be quite essential in maintaining a positive self-image throughout the second half of one's life.

For many people, the out-of-doors provides a mechanism for escape from regular daily pressures, and quite literally, the outdoor environment is the place of *re-creation*. Moreover, as the aforementioned testimonies suggest, wilderness experiences offer a unique opportunity for the individual to experience not only the 'outer' wilderness of the natural world, but the 'inner' wilderness as well -- the wilderness within one's own mind and soul. In effect, this type of wilderness experience offers the individual the opportunity to contemplate both the sacred and profane aspects of life. In a sense, the opportunity to come face to face with the very essence of life itself. For many this experiential encounter with the self amidst the resolute powers of nature is essentially the pathway to discovering a personal 'sense of place' or 'sacred space', if you will, leading to an unprecedented spiritual richness and self-understanding.

What this research suggests is that wilderness experiences have much to offer individuals who may be experiencing significant life-changes, and in particular, women in mid-life transition. What better place to gain a new perspective on the meaning of one's life than out in the open desert, sleeping under a canopy of brilliantly shining stars, or nestled snugly amidst the tall majestic pines, smelling the sweet scent of the ground after it rains? These places, these sacred spaces, if you will, are places where we get to know ourselves on a deeper, more spiritual level. And perhaps more importantly, through exploring the outer wilderness while at the same time exploring the inner wilderness, the potential for developing the "whole" individual is heightened.

End Note

This research offers no concrete conclusions, but rather, opens a series of research vistas to further explore in the future. I cannot say with absolute certainty that 'place' is merely a backdrop for the playing-out of one's semi-conscious spiritual yearnings. On the contrary. In fact, what this research suggests is that 'place' itself work in silent, yet powerfully transformative ways on the individual's sense of self, particularly enhancing one's sense of self in relation to a transcendent dimension. A transcendent dimension that many call god. It is neither my intention nor inclination to search for a definitive on what is, or is not "god" to any particular individual. Rather the results of this research suggests that the potential for developing a more balanced and harmonious individual is awakened through the more experiential aspects of wilderness travel. These types of transformative experiences leave the individual with a keener sense of spirit and a keener sense of place and self, thereby enabling the individual to reconnect with

other people and life's challenges in a more responsive and creative way. In effect, encounters with nature teach us to know, and, in knowing, to love -- both the outer world and the inner world of the self. I end with one final closing thought taken from author, poet, and naturalist Stephanie Kaza (1993):

Each tree, each stone, and rock face discloses its own story, its own beauty, revealing the beholder's as well.

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