

>SPECIAL SECTION



THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND

Turning to nature
in a time of crisis

[by William Cronon]

I stand on this familiar ground, gazing out across the lake in the city that is my home, with the buildings of the University of Wisconsin and the dome of the State Capitol rising from the water on the horizon. Today I've sought out what may seem a rather humble refuge: a mile-long strip of land, often no more than a few dozen yards across, stretching far out into Madison's Lake Mendota. It is called Picnic Point, a homely sort of name from a time when what Americans sought from such places was "pleasuring grounds" for genteel retreat.

On this particular autumn day, I linger for a time beside a small swamp halfway down the peninsula. Yellow leaves drift downward as I watch, alighting on the water to become miniature boats afloat on their own bright reflections, miracles of fall color mingled with the dark hues of approaching winter. It is a blessedly commonplace scene, evoking the wheel of the seasons and the cycles of life and death. I stand in its presence as only the most recent of a long line of other human beings who have also sought solace in retreats like this one.

Then I turn back to gaze at the city on the horizon. Ordinarily, I might find in this view a welcome reminder that even in the midst of "civilization," nature is omnipresent, if only we care to see it. But today my thoughts are elsewhere. I see two towers burning in the sky, orange flames pouring from their ruptured sides, dark clouds churning toward the heavens, tiny figures gazing helplessly from windows above the fires, and then, in what seems to be but is not slow motion, the long terrible descent as everything dissolves and crumples to the earth below. Try as I might to escape it, this nightmare vision inscribes itself on the clear air before my eyes. The familiar buildings framed by the colors of autumn on the far side of this lake are where I live and work. Usually they seem so calm, so normal, that one might reasonably expect to take them for granted. But now, in the looming shadow of those vanished towers, it suddenly seems clear not only that one cannot take such things for granted but that one must not. They are too precious.

This pilgrimage I have made to Picnic Point is hardly mine alone. I'm quite certain that most of us have made similar journeys in the days since September 11. In doing so, I think we're recalling one of the oldest reasons we humans have for turning to the natural world in our search for meaning. We, of course, protect wild places for many reasons. In recent years we've come to think of them as preserves of biological diversity, places where life can go about its evolutionary

This Land Is Your Land

- **Introduction**
by William Cronon
- [Loving the Land](#)
by Scott Russell Sanders
- [Saying Grace](#)
by Barbara Kingsolver
- [Wild Comfort](#)
by Carl Safina
- [Seeing Clearly](#)
by Sallie Tisdale
- [Sacred Ground](#)
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by Janisse Ray
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- [Finding a Time Pool](#)
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- [War Against the Earth](#)
by Kathleen Dean Moore

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business with less interference from us than it might encounter elsewhere. But wild places--whether they be domesticated patches like Picnic Point or great wilderness areas like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge--have carried many other historical meanings as well. They've served as symbolic reminders of what the landscape looked like before we threatened to turn all of nature into either a source of commodities or a playground for recreation. They've recalled for us the frontier conditions under which pioneers once lived as they seized this land from its earlier inhabitants and made homes for themselves in the wilderness. They've provided patriotic monuments to American nationalism, such as Yosemite and Grand Canyon, extraordinary parks whose grandeur can compete with anything that Europe might have to offer. And they've stood as icons of a romantic godhead sublimely immanent in all of creation.



MINNESOTA by JIM BRANDENBURG

I live right up next to Boundary Waters Canoe Area—that's why I moved here. I came for the wolves and the wilderness. This is a canoe country: Within a 30-mile radius of me there are almost 1,000 lakes. I took a weeklong canoe trip with my family from the northern border of Quetico Provincial Park, in Ontario, down through the Boundary Waters, about 70 miles in all. The river grass was like hair, flowing back and forth like wheat in the wind.

But people have also turned to nature for solace of a much more personal sort, never more so than in times of crisis and turmoil. The young men who endured the bloodshed of the Civil War also discovered that their months of living in the open air would call to them for the rest of their lives, leading them to seek outdoor retreats like no prior generation of Americans, and producing the first great wilderness parks in the United States, at places like Yellowstone and the Adirondacks. There they could reenact the vivid moments of their youth where, as Walt Whitman wrote,

The numerous camp-fires scatter'd near and far, some away up on the mountain / The shadowy forms of men and horses, looming, large-sized, flickering / And over all the sky--the sky! Far, far out of reach, studded,

breaking out, the eternal stars.

A century later the movement to give legal protection to wild places in the United States would culminate in the great Wilderness Act of 1964. The dreams of visionaries like John Muir and Bob Marshall and Aldo Leopold finally came to fruition at the height of the Cold War, two years after the Cuban Missile Crisis and less than a year after John Kennedy's assassination. The timing was no accident. It was a moment when the most potent symbol of terror was not a pair of burning skyscrapers but a mushroom cloud. "We learn to live with horrors," wrote the poet Nancy Newhall in the Sierra Club's *This Is the American Earth*, "evils as old as man, suddenly expanded into new until they hang world-wide, sky-high, above our lives." Nuclear war was the backdrop against which the preciousness of wild nature was cast into stark relief. "In the decades to come," Wallace Stegner wrote, "it will not be only the buffalo and the trumpeter swan who need sanctuaries. Our own species is going to need them too. It needs them now."

As Stegner well knew, it is not species that feel this need; it is individual human beings who seek harbor in times of storm. So I stand on this narrow strip of wild land, searching not just the world around me but my own heart. These falling leaves, the light dancing on this water, this gray sky, the pungent smell of this damp soil as the life around me returns to the earth that nurtures it. Although all these are ever changing, they also stand apart from the terrible human drama that now engulfs us. They bear witness, as Wendell Berry once remarked, to "wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief." Picnic Point, humble though it may be, offers sanctuary: a place consecrated by the truths it helps us recollect, a refuge to which we can retreat in time of need, a place we go looking to find ourselves.

Retreat, of course, does not mean escape. One of the things I love about this peninsula is that it carries me into nature even as I remain in the heart of my city, for, of course, we are never outside the natural world, no matter where we live or what we do. The great challenge of modernity is to remember, in the face of all that tempts us to forget, just how interconnected the world is. That is even true of those blazing towers, which remind us of the immense natural forces implied by a very large object moving very quickly with many tons of jet fuel on board, a Faustian bargain we have made with kinetic energy in the service of our own freedom. Nature is there, too.

It is likewise present in those minute spores we have so recently learned to dread, wafting invisibly through the air in search of dark damp locations where they can enlist macrophages in the work of manufacturing still more spores. We suddenly remember where our oil comes from. We suddenly remember what can be done with enriched uranium. We suddenly remember what can happen when we ignore the pain and hatred of those who might wish the world different from what it is. The nature we change and use for our own purposes needs remembering as much as the nature we preserve as wild sanctuaries, if we are truly to understand our place in the world--and if we are to save both it and ourselves.

There is fear in such remembering, of course, but there is also hope. Recognizing vulnerability is itself an act of strength. The journey back to nature is also necessarily a journey into ourselves to remember who we are and what we believe. For how else are we to change the world, how else are we to take

responsibility for it, than by reminding ourselves that the choices we make and the lives we lead have consequences for which we can and should hold ourselves accountable? We go to sanctuaries to remember the things we hold most dear, the things we cherish and love. And then--the great challenge--we return home seeking to enact this wisdom as best we can in our daily lives.

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