

PARENTING AS A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

*Deepening Ordinary & Extraordinary
Events into Sacred Occasions*

Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer

Ch 8
Wonder

For People of All Faiths, All Backgrounds
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ever know if he propped a bottle in her mouth or held her in his arms and sang. Seth is a teacher, and he used to think of teaching as an unsung profession. He had always liked the line from *A Man for All Seasons* in which Sir Thomas More suggests to Richard that he would make a great teacher, and Richard objects, "And if I was, who would know it?" To which More responds, "You, your pupils, your friends, God. Not a bad public, that." That line kept coming back to him as he took care of his child alone. Who will ever know? "You, your child, God." As the months went on, he would remind himself, "Not a bad public, that."

Being present is not easy. I remember when I was a graduate student at Yale University hearing Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf counsel a Jewish student who could not decide whether to skip classes for the High Holiday services. "Go to class," the rabbi told him. "If you come to services, you will think about your class. If you go to class, you will think about the services. I want you to think about the services, so go to class." How many times did I go to the office and think about my child? How many times did I stay with my child and think about the office? Could I have the ultimate spiritual achievement of being totally *there* in that space and time? Perhaps children are just the ones who can teach us that, for their pasts are short and the future not yet a concern. Watch a small child play, and you will see a totally present being.

As children get older, they become more distracted, more like us. Hank took his family to a Zen Buddhist retreat center for three weeks, a risky adventure with a twelve-year-old kid who loves television and CDs. His eyes glowing with pride, Hank told me, "Rick liked the vacation a lot more than he expected. He loved hanging around the fields, helping to make a compost heap, and, on a lazy morning, taking a book and going 'back to futon.'" The last night, Hank asked Rick what he enjoyed the most. "I was thrilled with his answer," Hank said. "It showed that he really understood what the place was all about. He said, 'What I liked best about being here was being here.'"

Chapter 8

NATURE

Wonder

"Can we go visit 'Nature' today?"

I thought this chapter would be easy to write. So many people I know consider the awe and wonder evoked by the natural world the center of their spiritual lives. For lots of folks, the grandeur and beauty of a mountain peak or an ocean are the origin of their sense of "something more." Long before people have children, they are often touched, their hearts lifted, their urge to pray awakened by a sunset, a flowing creek, a perfect flower. A friend of mine who never talks about religion came home from a vacation on a river in Utah and said simply, "It was God's country."

Surprisingly, however, the parents I interviewed did not spontaneously choose to speak about the natural world. So I had to ask them directly, "How has having children affected your relationship with nature? How have you found ways to share the beauty of nature with your children? Why do you think so few people have mentioned experiences with nature when not specifically asked?"

"When I had children, I could not wait to share with them my reverence for the outdoors," Rob told me. "I remember once riding on a highway with my four-year-old and nearly driving off the road, I was so stunned by the beauty of a setting sun. I tried desperately to get my kid involved in my excitement, but he was playing with a wire toy—I think it was called a Slinky—and he just could not be distracted. Then I realized that for very young kids the whole world is awesome. They don't see the distinction between a really neat toy and a sunset."

"For me," said Hope, "the initial impact of having small children on my relationship with nature was negative. I simply could not get out and

be in nature as often as I did before. I was much more limited in the trips I could make, the walks I could take. After one disastrous camping trip with a nursing baby who slept in my sleeping bag and declared the night 'open bar,' we found ourselves spending more time away from nature than in it."

Rob told me about his youthful experiences in the wilderness. "My first wife and I had no children. We spent all our vacations in national forests, far from any other human beings. Sometimes we would be naked for days on end, eating just berries and peanut butter. We would climb mountains and test ourselves against the elements, putting ourselves at risk in order to experience the heightened concentration, the exhilaration. Now that I have children, I would no more do those things than fly to Mars. I feel challenged enough by trying to raise these kids; I hardly need to seek out extra risks."

Parenting ends up teaching us most when we are willing to expand our categories, to see the whole in a tiny part, to throw away the script and be shown a new perspective. I had started off assuming the experience of nature had to be an awesome hike to a majestic site. Parenting brought people many joys, but that was not one of them. When I listened harder, however, I heard many stories of spiritual moments in which parents led their children, and the children led them, to a deeper appreciation of the wonder of creation. Kids see the universe in a grain of sand more easily than we do. They are a lot closer to the ground, and they spend more time getting their hands dirty.

"At first, my kids just kept me inside," Doreen said. "In the end, however, I think they enhanced my love of the natural world. Over the years with small children I learned to enjoy nature in small ways. You don't really need to go so far from home. One fall I took my kids to the park every day, and we gathered autumn leaves. The kids wanted to take them home and look up their names in a book. My five-year-old said, 'If you know the name of something, it can be your friend.' So we borrowed a leaf book from the library. That winter, cooped up in the apartment, we did a lot of projects with our friends the leaves. If you really pay attention, even one leaf—not to mention a whole bunch—can give you a great deal of joy."

Marc told me this story: "My wife and I made the mistake of taking our kids on a mountain-climbing vacation when the youngest one was too small to really hike. One day, my wife took the older one on a chairlift to

climb to a glacier. I stayed back in the valley at the hotel with our three-year-old. We spent the whole day walking around the town looking for tiny wildflowers. By the end of the day we had counted ten different kinds. It wasn't a glacier, but it was miraculous."

Donna, an artist, has chosen to stay at home with her three small children. "I cannot even dream of getting out to someplace beautiful right now. At night, after I get the kids to sleep, I field phone calls from our creditors. Then I go upstairs to my bed to read. My nightstand is piled high with library books. Although I never studied science in college, it is my favorite topic now for evening reading. I read about astronomy, about the mating patterns of elephants, about how physicists believe the world came to be. I feel expansive and inspired. There is more out there in the universe than me and my kids. Much more. The reading sustains me."

For me, one of the unexpected dividends of having children was a new and different connection to the natural world through a most unanticipated dimension—animals. I grew up without pets in my home, and I was ill at ease with (OK, afraid of) animals. To make matters worse, I had allergies. In thirty years, I had mostly steered clear of nonhuman life. Yet I eventually became a mother to pets as well as children. My motive was simple: to relieve the monotony of the days at home with a young child. But I ended up with more than I anticipated.

For our first venture, I selected an animal that was the least threatening to me—a hermit crab. Hermit crabs looked like a lot of fun: my daughter could carry the pet around in a little plastic box; they eat simple household foods and defecate not at all (I still haven't figured out how that is possible). When we went on a vacation, the hermit crab could come along in the box. Also, how sad could we be when a crab dies?

It worked beautifully, and we had some wonderful times watching Hermie race along the driveway, taking him or her (it's hard to tell with a crab) back to the "old country"—the beach. As one might have predicted, Hermie did eventually die. I had assumed that death for a crab meant staying in the shell for longer and longer periods of time until it just never came out anymore. That was the way I would have arranged matters. Unfortunately, nature had other ideas. The death of a hermit crab propels the animal out of the shell where it lies attached by a slender thread to its old home, quite visibly transformed—indeed, quite unmistakably dead. My daughter and I were both surprised by how saddened we were. This

taught me that death is never easy, even in the easiest situation. Not a bad lesson for my daughter as well.

Emboldened by the experience, we graduated to gerbils. We bought a male and a female (although we didn't know which was which, the pet store owner assured me we had a fertile couple) and settled down to learn about the beauty of the reproductive process. I had assumed one of the gerbils would grow visibly pregnant, and we could count the days till the blessed event. In fact, it came as a huge surprise. One day when I was alone in the house and talking on the phone, I glanced over to the gerbil cage to see tiny bare gerbils emerging, one after another, from one of the adult gerbils. I felt the holiness of the moment—but only for a short time. My next response was panic. "What do I do?" I asked my friend on the other end of the phone line. "I don't know how to handle this!"

"I don't think you have to *do* anything," she said. "Animals are programmed to handle this kind of thing themselves."

I found it hard to believe that something as enormous as the creation of life could take place without anyone reading any books or involving any professionals. I told my friend I had to get off the phone, and I promptly called the pet store.

"What do I do?" I asked the man who had sold us the gerbils.

"You don't have to *do* anything," he said.

By now, there were seven offspring running about the cage. They eventually settled down to nurse (I finally got straight which adult gerbil was which; the male was the one who still had time to read the newspaper!), and I raced off to pick up my daughter from school. All the way home, I was so excited I thought I would burst out with the news. When she discovered it on reaching home, my daughter was as thrilled as I. Many litters later, my younger daughter was the one who happened by the cage during an unexpected birth experience. It was a highlight of her life.

Pets can expand children's sense of life and its mystery. Sarah obviously had a mother with fewer inhibitions than I concerning animals. "We had lots of animals: rabbits, guinea pigs, tortoises, iguanas, fish, cats, and dogs. At one point we had fifteen animals. There was no argument; whatever we wanted that was living we could have. I was mostly interested in the cats. I was fascinated by their lives outside our home. They would go away for days at a time and come back with their prey. It was a window for me into

the jungle, the aspect of life that was not civilized, where living beings killed to eat. I was just enthralled by the animals. The way they moved, the way they smelled. I got to witness their world, which was so different from ours. It humbled me and gave me perspective."

Gardening is also a source of great joy to children and, through them, to parents. Watching the seed become a flower is a miracle, just as it was when the baby was born, and the child is duly impressed. Particularly thrilling are bulbs, planted in the dead of winter as symbols of hope. Just when you have forgotten all about them, one morning your child comes running inside: "Look! Look! There is a flower on our path!"

Sandra shared this story. "When my daughter was six, I told her she could not go to see the movie of *The Secret Garden* until I had read the whole book to her. I figured we would diligently read every night, many chapters, in order to hasten the opportunity to go to the movies. I thought this was a way to cram some good literature down her throat. But I soon discovered she absolutely adored the book and couldn't wait to hear the next chapter. I had no idea what was enchanting her so much or what she was even making of the whole story.

"When we finally went to the movie, she was thrilled. She sat on the edge of her seat for two hours, and I did not see her blink the entire time. When it was over, I asked her what she thought of it. She said she loved the movie but that she wished that they had shown more scenes in which the children were actually digging in the garden and working on it to make it grow. 'The flowers came up so quickly!' she complained. She had understood intuitively that the healing of the depressed children had to do with the process by which they tended the earth and cared for the plants. The movie made it seem like magic. I was amazed by her insight. That afternoon, we went out and got all the paraphernalia to start her own 'secret garden,' which she worked on for many months. The connection between the hard work and the joy in the results was powerful."

Miranda, a single mother, told me a different kind of story about flowers. "One winter my daughter was sick every few weeks. One particular illness lasted a long time. Toward the end of it, I was not feeling all that healthy myself. I called in sick at my office. I didn't want to go out and leave my daughter alone, even to go to the store. After a few days of eating pasta and watching TV, we were both very grouchy. It was a cold, dark winter day. At about two in the afternoon, I realized I was still in my bathrobe. We

were sinking. I had to do something. Suddenly, I had an inspiration. I called a florist and ordered a bouquet of spring flowers, a big one. I knew I would be sorry when my credit card bill arrived, but that would be later. Right now, I knew we needed flowers and no one was going to send them to us, so we would just have to send them to ourselves.

"When the doorbell rang and the flowers were delivered, I was sure I had done the right thing. We both sat there for hours just staring at their beauty. They lifted us out of ourselves. A few days later, we were both better."

Shayna shared with me her feelings about the night. For her, the stars were always amazing. "I never really understood what religion was all about until I got out of Los Angeles to the desert. Then I got it. The open, endless space, no segments. When you lie on your back you can see just stars forever. When I learned that what your eye sees as a star is actually light from a glob of gas atoms a million years ago, it made it even more amazing." Shayna agreed with the physicist Richard Feynman that at least in the case of stars, "it does no harm to the mystery to know a little about it."

As a mother, Shayna read her children a book called *Walk When the Moon Is Full*. She decided that if the custom described in the story was good enough for the children in the book, it was good enough for her children. So once a month, on the occasion of the full moon, they would have a nighttime walk to see the stars, to listen to the sounds, and to wonder. The Yiddish poet Aaron Zeitlin warned, "If you look at the stars and yawn . . . then I created you in vain, says God."

Rainbows were always a source of joy to Maureen. When she was cooped up at home with young children, she hung a simple glass crystal in front of her dining room window. Every morning, when the sun came through the crystal, multiple tiny rainbows formed on the opposite wall. If a child touched the crystal and made it move, the rainbows danced. You could see the colors on the dirt-streaked wall, on the milk in the cereal bowl, even on a child's skin if he walked by the path of the light. The magic never ceased.

Ron also found that his children helped him to see the wonder in the natural world. He recalls saving his spare change when his daughter Abby was a toddler to take her to the Philadelphia Zoo. One bright, sunny Sunday they set out on a streetcar and then two buses, paid their admission, and even bought snacks and souvenirs. It was a big deal, and Abby had a

fabulous time. But she never once looked at an animal in a cage. What captured her attention were the pigeons who were running loose throughout the zoo. She was simply delighted to chase them all afternoon! At first Ron was disappointed, but eventually he found the experience amusing and even he learned from it. "When I realized that there was a city square right down the street from our apartment filled with pigeons, I was really quite delighted. My daughter taught me that the wonders of nature were actually closer to home than I had realized."

Some families have a "sacred place" outdoors that they enjoy sharing together. Children seem quickly to understand the concept. Pam and her husband and three-year-old loved the spot at the top of the hill near their house. They would often take a picnic there and sit under a tree and relax. They had never officially called it a "sacred place," but one morning, Pam and her daughter were lying in bed and talking. Her daughter was asking, for the millionth time, when they could have another child. Pam explained that the Goddess had not chosen to grace them with that blessing just yet. She suggested that they pray to the Great Mother of All. As Pam opened her mouth to begin the prayer, her daughter put her hand over her mother's mouth and said urgently, "Not here, Mom! We have to say the prayer at the top of the hill!" She knew that the Great Mother would be more accessible there.

During the early days of writing this book, we were snowed in a great deal. At first, all I could think of was how bored the kids would be and how much I wanted to get to work. I spent the first snow days frantically calling people on the phone and digging up videotapes for the kids to watch. When they were settled, I began typing up an interview I had conducted with Eileen, a friend who had moved from the city "back to the land" and raised her sons on a primitive dairy farm, facing the challenges of nature. I was envying her family life on the farm and the obvious gains to the spirit of facing life together in its immediacy, learning self-reliance, exulting in simple pleasures. The irony finally got to me. Here I had an opportunity to live "back to the land" in miniature, and all I could do was try to escape.

A snowstorm or a power failure (or as happened to us later that week, both together) are times when life becomes more primitive than usual. The children respond with utter delight, finding excitement in challenges like shoveling snow or helping to build a fire or walking a mile through

the ice to the store for batteries. As adults we are put out by the inconvenience, worried over the mechanics of getting along without our usual equipment, but kids see the adventure in being forced to confront the elements unassisted. If we have the ability to see it from their perspective, we can relax and enjoy what nature has wrought. Forced out of our homes, we can either regret the loss of our comforts or enjoy a long, magnificent walk in the snow.

Some families create this kind of emergency deliberately by going camping. They choose to leave their homes and live in fragile shelters, leave their stoves and cook over a fire they build themselves, leave their television sets and Nintendos and spend the nights watching lizards scamper across the earth. Doug takes his children wilderness camping every summer. He told me why: "You learn more in nature than you do in a mall. I took my three small children hiking into a deep canyon last summer. They were happily swimming in a pool at the bottom when a fierce thunderstorm appeared out of nowhere. We had a four-mile hike back out. The trail rapidly became a stream, and they had to climb up the canyon on all fours, with their socks on their hands. I carried the little one while the other two whined, 'Why did *that* have to happen just when we were having fun?'

"I explained to them that huge rainstorms knock down old trees, which become food and shelter for animals. It really had nothing to do with *their* hike. Nature is much bigger and grander than we are, and learning to respect its beauty and its terror, its generosity and its violence, is a good lesson in humility. I also explained to them that they would have to call up all their reserves of courage and strength to get themselves quickly and safely out of there before it got dark. You don't negotiate with the sunset. It turned out to be a rough passage out, but one that helped my kids understand more about life and about their own resources for meeting its challenges."

Greg loved backpacking and determined that his son, born when Greg was over forty, would feel confident in the wilderness. "I took Max on his first wilderness backpacking trip a month before his fourth birthday. We had matching backpacks and matching red felt hats. We walked three and a half miles to a mountain lake. I wanted him to know what it was like to push himself along a hot, dusty path and then feel the immense joy of

peeling off your hiking boots at the end, the cool air on your bare feet. These are life's fundamentals.

"We were relying on each other in the wilderness in a total and intense way that makes a relationship strong. I was completely responsible for his welfare, and, in some sense, he for mine. I explained to him that if I should fall and hit my head (a very unlikely occurrence on that trail), he should stay right by my side and blow his emergency whistle until someone came. I showed him where the food was and how he could keep himself alive until someone rescued us. This is a great deal of responsibility for a little kid, but it helped him conquer fears."

Tina felt that nature was a kind of substitute religion for her parents, and she resented it. Her parents quit their church in anger over politics when Tina was young. They bought a house at the seashore and developed a Sabbath ritual. Every Sunday morning, they drove to the shore. They always took the same walks along the beach. This was their family prayer life. Her mother would point to the sunset and say, defiantly, "That's *my* idea of God. When things get too much for me back home, I think about this spot and everything gets into perspective again." Tina loved their house at the shore, but she always felt her parents were "holding out on her," that there was something more they were keeping from her.

When she became an adult, Tina came to believe that for her, it was faith in God that ultimately put everything in her life in perspective. She joined a church and also continued to love sunsets. When she had children, she did not want them to think they had to choose between church and nature. So she found a summer family camp that was run by the national headquarters of her church. There, on the shores of a beautiful lake, the family sat on the ground and heard Bible stories, played games, discussed issues, and visited the "Green Chapel" morning and evening for group prayers, more often for individual meditation.

Paula was concerned that Judaism and her son did not seem to "click." Paula had always loved services: the prayers, the songs, the Torah stories. But she had to admit that seeing it from her son Dan's perspective, it *was* an awful lot of words. "You know that prayer in the liturgy," she asked me, "the one that says, 'If our mouths were as full of words as the ocean, we could not praise one-thousandth of your goodness'? It seems that doesn't keep us from trying!"

Paula noticed that Dan shut down completely during services but really came alive when he was studying birds in science class or walking through a creek on a Cub Scout outing. It was not until Dan was eight that Paula realized that long before that thick prayer book was written, Judaism was a religion of the earth. There were still many paths back. That fall, Paula and her husband built a sukkah, an outdoor dwelling with leafy branches for a roof, and the first night of the festival of Sukkot, at the full moon, the whole family slept in the sukkah. The next morning, as they awoke to birds singing instead of the clock radio, Dan looked up from his sleeping bag blissfully. The pieces of his world were beginning to come together.

For some families, their love of nature goes beyond wonder and appreciation. Their concern for the environment results in specific practices designed to respect and honor the natural world. The way in which we eat can be a spiritual path. Marla's family is involved with no organized faith, but they have a "religion" of their own: vegetarianism based on a moral concern for animals. Long before their children were born, Marla and her husband committed themselves to a strict vegetarian diet. In addition, they decided to conserve natural resources by never using disposable materials for eating in their home.

Marla's children were teenagers when she told me about the surprising consequences of their practices. "Neither of my children have ever eaten an animal in their lives. Nor have we ever had paper plates or plastic at our family table. We were prepared to be flexible with them if necessary, but our children totally embraced our practice and have never challenged it. Although we did not give them a religious faith, we did give them this. It provided a kind of identity for our family. I think it taught them that they could be different from others and that was OK. It taught them that you have a choice about what you do, that what you do matters, that you can make ethical commitments in your daily life, and that you can live by a principle—in this case, respect for animals and the natural world. I now see that the way we eat is our spiritual practice as a family."

The summer I was finishing this book, I fasted for twenty-six hours, alone on a mountain ridge in California. I spent one sunny day building a lean-to out of a tarp and one majestic, windswept night amid endless snow and countless stars. When I got back, people asked me how my solo adventure compared to parenting. After all, I was writing a book about the spiri-

tual experience of parenting and had just had a very different and spiritual experience. How were they different, how were they the same?

First, the differences. While both parenting and surviving outdoors alone are difficult, parenting (just for the record) is much *more* difficult. It is also noisier, messier, more complicated, takes much longer, and requires more equipment.

On the other hand, although parenting and solo camping are quite unlike one another, what makes them both spiritual is precisely the same thing. It is the mystery.

The more I looked out at the view from my site, across the mountains to Lake Tahoe in the distance, the less I knew it, the more enigmatic, magical, mystical, and unfathomable it seemed. The more I know my children, the deeper and longer our relationship becomes, the less I feel I really understand about them, the more I come to honor the ultimately ineffable forces that go into creating their separate selves. Both the wilderness and my children, in different ways, connect me with the enigma of life, remind me of how little I can finally account for or understand. But I can certainly appreciate the blessing of meeting them (my children) and seeing it (Lake Tahoe) in my lifetime.

The Orthodox Jewish thinker Samson Raphael Hirsch, as an old man, insisted on traveling from his home in Germany to Switzerland. When asked why, he explained that soon he would be standing before his Maker. "I will be held answerable to many questions. But what will I say when I am asked, 'Shimshon, did you see my Alps?'"

Saint Augustine said, "Men go abroad to wonder at the height of mountains . . . and they pass by themselves without wondering."

A young mother I know called me a few days after her daughter was born. She was sleep deprived and incoherent, but among her ecstatic ramblings I remember one bold declaration: "She's more beautiful than Yosemite National Park!" When parents meet their Maker, if they have had their eyes open and been willing to be surprised, they can surely affirm they have seen God's wonders.