

A Spiritual Field Guide: Meditations for the Outdoors

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“We rest between the gunwales of our canoe at a quiet bay on a Canadian Shield lake, watching the loons or a bear, smelling the white cedar trees and the tamarack swamp, and see evidence of a divine hand.” This kind of experience led the authors to assemble a collection of readings that highlight the link between nature and spirituality. Brady is a theology professor, and Neuzil is a professor of journalism and mass communications, both at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. Their anthology draws heavily from Christian scripture and writings, but is rounded out with pieces from a wide range of sources including the Talmud, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Chief Seattle, and other ancient and modern secular authors.

Meant as a book to be enjoyed outdoors, this guide offers selections to fit any time or place. Readers might sit by the campfire on a moonlit night and discover the thoughts of an astronaut who experienced the opposite view: that of Earth from the lunar surface. Or, sitting by a stream, one can reflect on Annie Dillard’s love for her own special spot, Tinker Creek, or on the sacredness of water in religion by remembering John’s baptisms in the river Jordan. Works from the section called “All God’s Creatures” remind one to stop for just a moment and notice the wildlife present in a backyard. All of these places and beings have a spiritual connection, and slowing down long enough to reflect on them can have a healing effect on today’s hurried and stressed souls.

Well organized into five thematic sections, each with an introduction by the authors along with background information, this book is perhaps best read much like the Bible itself: not from cover to cover, but by selecting different pieces according to one’s mood or circumstance. The authors also suggest some optional reading plans tailored to weeklong trips, weekend trips, day trips, and “backyard breaks.” Each piece is short enough that readers could even catch a five-minute meditative break on their lunch hour.

The authors believe that nature was created by God and reflects His glory, and that He meant for humans to be responsible for it while understanding that they are interdependent with it. Their beliefs, however, do not dominate this book so much as act as a starting point for readers to determine their own stance on nature. Brady and Neuzil extend an invitation to readers to honestly think about important questions like who they are and what their role is in the world. The carefully chosen selections in this volume, whether read under the shade of a backyard maple or atop an arduously climbed mountain, can help readers ponder these points.

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