Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology
The Journal of the Graduate Theological Union

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology
Volume 2, Issue 2
ISSN 2380-7458

Out of the Box: Pedagogies of Outdoor Christian Spirituality

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Source: *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* 2, no. 2 (2016): 11-22.
Published By: Graduate Theological Union © 2016
Online article published on: February 28, 2018

Out of the Box:
Pedagogies of Outdoor Christian Spirituality

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In Honor of Arthur Holder and Judith Berling

Published in: BJRT, vol. 2, no. 2

> [In studying pedagogy in Christian spirituality, we especially want to look] at the *implicit* definition of Christian spirituality – both as phenomenon or experience and as discipline – being embodied by a particular syllabus and a particular pedagogy: what traditions are being examined? What practices are being held up as worthy of inculcation? What methodologies are being used, and how do these both reveal and limit the phenomena which may therefore be seen? What "version" of Christian spirituality is this course actually an introduction to the study of? Whose story is being told, whose experience… named and examined? And how do the course's pedagogical choices either reflect and confirm, or obscure and undercut, the course's *explicit* definition of Christian spirituality both as phenomenon and as discipline? Should the pedagogy of courses in this field be different from those of other fields, and if so, in what ways?[1]

This quote draws together many of the threads Arthur Holder and I traced in a 1998 study of pedagogy in the field of Christian spirituality. The study was his idea, funded by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS); I first heard of it when he mentioned in a meeting of the

[1] Arthur Holder and Lisa Dahill, "Teaching Christian Spirituality in Seminaries Today" (with Arthur Holder). *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 7 (Fall/Winter 1999): 9-12.

Christian spirituality doctoral area at the GTU that he needed a research assistant for the study. By some miracle I became that research assistant, as well as Arthur's teaching assistant in a course at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific like those whose pedagogy we were studying: a master's level introductory course in Christian spirituality at an ATS-accredited school. Arthur also served as chair of my comprehensive examination committee, taking place more or less simultaneously with both the ATS research project and our teaching together. And when, following my GTU graduation in 2001, I cast about for a job in a tight job market not well supplied with positions in Christian spirituality, I was grateful to land a post-doctoral position as a research scholar on a project studying clergy education at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Stanford University). The Carnegie interviewers later told me that my research project with Arthur – in which we undertook qualitative research into theological pedagogies, involving both syllabus analysis and interview data – mirrored almost exactly the kind of work the Carnegie team would undertake and thus got me the job.

So I am honored to write in honor of Arthur in this issue of the *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* and to give thanks for his many-layered mentoring role in my life and the lives of countless others. Because my collaborations with him at the GTU both involved and have now led to a career of pedagogical practice, I thought it fitting to undertake my own new thinking about pedagogy in this context. Such focus seems appropriate as well in honoring Judith Berling, with whom I took my first and only course in teaching practices at the GTU.

As I reflected on how to structure this essay exploring a more recent area of interest – namely *outdoor* theological pedagogies – I kept returning to the insights of that 1998 study with Arthur. That is, I am curious about the implicit definition/s of Christian spirituality conveyed by such outdoor pedagogies, and how these implicit definitions might

stretch definitions of spirituality (either as a phenomenon or as a research field) accordingly.

In fact, neither Arthur nor I noticed at the time – or at least our published reports from the study don't indicate if we did – that one striking and overriding feature unifying every one of the otherwise diverse courses and syllabi we were analyzing was that they were designed to take place indoors. Whether Catholic or Protestant, required or elective, practice-based or research-oriented, every course was housed in a building of some kind. To point out this obvious fact would likely have seemed a rather dull observation at the time, akin to pointing out that all the participants in the courses were human beings or that they all had names.[2]

Since that time, I've become more curious about how outdoor contexts shape experience and, in particular, how the experience of Christian worship – especially sacramental practice – outdoors both enacts and mediates understandings of what Christian faith means that are different from those embodied indoors.[3] At the same time, while on the faculty of Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, I began experimenting with outdoor teaching, trying to track how such practice across a range of seasons and contexts compared with indoor teaching in generating insight or engagement with subject matter. In this essay I want to reflect on these questions as Arthur and I did: as they pertain to the teaching of Christian spirituality. In a time of ecological urgency, I believe outdoor pedagogies of all kinds – and of Christian spirituality in particular – are a piece of the reconciliation needed in healing the alienation between too many economically privileged humans and the

[2] Indeed, the movement that came to be known as "placed-based education" took root in the early 1990's, well before our research project, but its attention to bioregionally attentive pedagogy hadn't permeated the world of theological education.

[3] See two recent essays: "Bio-Theoacoustics: Prayer Outdoors and the Reality of the Natural World," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 52/4 (Winter 2013): 292-302, and "Indoors, Outdoors: Praying with the Earth," in Shauna Hannan and Karla Bohmbach, eds., Eco-Lutheranism: Lutheran Perspectives on Ecology (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2013) 113-24.

larger world around us. To frame the essay in the terms Arthur and I articulated in 1998, I am exploring what *implicit* understanding of Christian spirituality is conveyed by teaching outdoors as well as how outdoor experience of all kinds (including and beyond teaching contexts) can stretch or expand formal definitions of Christian spirituality into greater ecological adequacy and correspondence with reality.

Bio-Regionality

Perhaps the most important shift I've noticed in moving courses or class sessions outdoors may be the invitation to think and teach bio-regionally – indeed, to think and interpret reality (including what Christians and others might broadly refer to as divine reality) bio-regionally. Christian spirituality as an academic discipline already privileges the particular, since its focus on spiritual experience gains precision when the scope of the study is as fine-grained as possible.[4] And teachers rightly attend with care to the cultural, gendered, or otherwise situated social locations of human participants in the process, and/or of the authors of texts or artifacts under discussion; the most astute also give consideration to how the built environment of a given teaching space fosters or inhibits learning. Yet those who teach Christian spirituality rarely seem to attend with equivalent methodological precision to the specificities of their place. Of the *particularities* of our biological location – any given place in its beauty and fragility – nearly all Americans and many Westernized academics from other contexts are overwhelmingly, shockingly, ignorant.[5]

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[4] On this see Lisa E. Dahill, "Spirituality: Overview," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch et al., vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2007), 25.

[5] As David Orr notes in his classic, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2004), 136, Americans have become largely "ecologically illiterate and ecologically incompetent," believing – from their captivity to the seductions of mass media and the consumer economy – "that this [ecological helplessness] is not only inevitable but desirable." On bioregionalism generally, see the classic text by Kirkpatrick Sale, *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision*, second edition (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000).

One of the great contributions of bioregionalism is to invite participants into our actual watersheds, local ground: to begin again to know and live among those most ancient of relationships: who else lives in this place? What grows here, and when does it flower and fruit and go to seed? What populations pass through, and which nest and raise their young here? Where are the nearest fresh-water sources, and of what kinds of rock and soil is this place made? What are the signs and features of its distinctive weather patterns? If we don't know the place as intimately as we do our own family – as kin – how will we ever discern how to live here rightly, respectfully, lovingly: what kinds of homes and gardens can this place welcome, and how can we limit our appetites and give back to the place so that we and all these local neighbors – one community – might thrive here for generations?

Of course, bioregionalists are not the only ones noting the alienation the global industrial economy and its values creates between people and the places, land, and watersheds cradling our lives; many works draw attention to this impoverishment, perhaps the most fundamental form of alienation humans are capable of, the one underlying and legitimating all the others. In an essay appearing in fall 2016, I propose one way of moving against the grain of that alienation: that Christians return to the early-church practice of baptizing not in sanctuary fonts or baptisteries but out in one's local waters.[6] Such practice invites participants to know well their local watershed: its purity, its currents, the abundant or degraded life it harbors along its banks and in its depths, the unique sparkle and beauty of its flow. It also obliges participants to join with activists working to restore or protect this living water, so that it may be fit both for baptizing and for the fullness of creaturely life in a given place.

Thus, in proposing that the teaching of Christian spirituality also move outdoors, I am simply drawing out further implications of this

[6] Lisa E. Dahill, "Into Local Waters: Rewilding the Study of Christian Spirituality," forthcoming Fall 2016 in *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*.

original insight that Christian life – always and in particular ways in our context of ecological alienation – belongs outdoors. Moving our teaching too strategically out into whatever forms of larger presence a given school or context permits takes a powerful step into bringing these larger biotic relationships into pedagogically accessible awareness.[7] This outdoor location allows for alignment between a professed Christian concern for all creation and actual attention to (and knowledge and love of) that larger world; it also makes possible the reinterpretation – or expansion – of three key terms in the study of Christian spirituality: community, God, and spiritual experience.

Community

Bioregionally oriented outdoor teaching is not simply a matter of moving outdoors what we do indoors: sitting in chairs, listening to one another, reading or engaging texts or other media created by humans. It invites participants into a much larger community of learning, with sounds (human, mechanical, and wild) and such things as weather, or beauty, or physical challenge that distract us from the kind of focus indoor learning makes possible. One cannot teach the same material in the same way outdoors as in; yet being outdoors also creates connections to the larger or more local life of the world that would never occur indoors.[8] If placelessness (and its accompanying ignorance of the specific plant and animal creatures that share our home) is a signal

[7] Jennifer Ayres calls this practice "learning on the ground" and notes that it "demands that we expand our conceptions of culture and community so that the land and all of its inhabitants are also constitutive of the context to which religious leadership is accountable." Good theological education, then, in her view, "requires good ecological education: the sort that prepares us to be good members and caretakers of the commons." See "Learning on the Ground: Ecology, Engagement, and Embodiment," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 17/3 (July 2014): 203-204.

[8] Several recent books in Christian spirituality have contributed to these insights. See Belden C. Lane, *Backpacking with the Saints: Wilderness Hiking as Spiritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Steven Chase, *Nature as Spiritual Practice and Field Guide to Nature as Spiritual Practice* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011); and Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York/London: Oxford University Press, 2013).

feature of contemporary alienation, then getting to know these creatures and their names and lives represents a core pedagogy for Christian spirituality today.[9] Here at California Lutheran University, I have given my Environmental Ethics students the assignment of submitting a photo of one bird and one plant native to this watershed that they have identified and photographed on the CLU campus at some point during the semester. I empathize with those for whom this assignment is truly difficult, requiring the hesitant cracking of that human-enclosed, technology-obsessed bubble within which too many of us live our lives. To return to the wild intimacy our forebears knew (and indigenous people still know) with every texture and whisper of their surroundings, a larger world filled with energy and relationship, seems impossible – yet this is the kinship for which we are born and into which the practice of baptism into wild waters returns us. To teach Christian spirituality surely thus means to invite one another more and more deeply into this larger relationality, precisely here, in every particular place: into the fullest incarnation of the Word through whom all things were made (John 1:1-5).

God

Thomas Berry's essay, "The Wild and the Sacred," draws a powerful connection between realities Western dualisms, including Christianity, traditionally divide: God and the wildness of the world. Understanding wildness as "that which is uncontrolled by human dominance," Berry comments that wildness is not "something destructive, to be 'civilized,' but…. the root of the authentic

[9] For an Indigenous engagement with recent critiques of modern Western "placenessness," see Jay T. Johnson, "Place-Based Learning and Knowing: Critical Pedagogies Grounded in Indigeneity," *GeoJournal* 77 (2012): 829-36. Aldo Leopold's classic call for an ethic adequate to the larger world within which we live articulates this call precisely in terms of attending to community: "All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts…. The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collective: the land." See *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 171.

spontaneities of any being. It is that wellspring of creativity whence come the instinctive activities that enable all living beings" to live, adapt, and thrive in each new moment.[10] Drawing close to wild life – the life of countless plant and animal energies operating according to their own instinct and intelligence, the life of climate and water, wind and soil – requires stepping outside our temperature-controlled rooms and electronically mediated learning experiences, into actual sensory presence to these local neighbors, this larger wildness. In both its intimate proximity and its still terrifying scale, this wildness of the world for Berry provides not just local knowledge but the primal human encounter with the holy. In addressing the oft-noted spiritual vacuity at the heart of many contemporary cultural expressions, he points his listeners not to the realms of religion or spirituality but back outdoors: "We will recover our sense of the sacred only if we appreciate the universe beyond ourselves as a revelatory experience of that numinous presence whence all things come into being. Indeed, the universe is the primary sacred reality."[11]

This sacredness is inseparable for Berry from the world's wildness:

> The beginning of wisdom in any human activity is a certain reverence before the primordial mystery of existence, for the world about us is a fearsome mode of being…. Something in the wild depths of the human soul finds its fulfillment in the experience of nature's violent moments.[12]

Because we too are animals – meant to live in relationship with all the creatures and forces around us, in the cascading complexity of perception our uniquely symbolic minds have evolved to behold – we too are wild, and staying shut in the safety of our buffered classrooms

[10] Thomas Berry, "The Wild and the Sacred," in *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Crown Books, 2011), 48, 51.

[11] Ibid., 49.

[12] Ibid., 50-51.

and sanctuaries robs us of this edgier relationality in which alone, Berry asserts, we may actually experience the sacred. In encounter with the world's wildness we touch both our own deepest reality and that of God.

Spiritual Experience

The discipline of Christian spirituality attends to the Christian life *as it is experienced,* alive in the hearts and minds and bodies and actions of particular Christian communities and individuals. As I find resonance with Thomas Berry's invitation to know the universe as our "primary sacred reality" precisely in its wildness (and our own), so I am increasingly pondering whether the outdoor-correlate to "spiritual experience" – often conceived in the beautiful language of *interiority* – might be the phenomenon biologist E.O. Wilson named as *biophilia:* a passionate and joyous "urge to affiliate with other forms of life."[13] The thrill and wonder of being alive on an Earth of such astonishing beauty and mystery, in relationship with so many companions of all species, draws healthy humans out into joy on a regular basis. Yet as Wilson, Richard Louv, and others have noted, children raised in an increasingly biophobic and technologically-mediated social world are unable to let their toddler wonder at the world expand into risky youthful outdoor adventure, let alone mature adult love of and immersion in the thickness of their bioregion; even adults raised more fully outdoors than today's youth face pressures to work and conduct our lives largely as an indoor reality, cut off from that bioregion by ever-thickening layers of walls, pavement, and screens.[14] If indeed it is true that "natural diversity is the wellspring of human intelligence," its "systematic destruction [by] contemporary technology and economics [comprising] a war against the human mind," then not only students but we who are teachers need

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[13] Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 85. See also the excellent essays gathered in The Biophilia Hypothesis, ed. Stephen R. Kellert and Edward O. Wilson (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1993).

[14] Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2008).

such reimmersion in reality more urgently than at any time in the past.[15] And if *biophilia* is the most encompassing and reliable source of joy we have, then surely it ought to be a hallmark of any healthy Christian spirituality: "that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

Conclusion: Teaching [in] the Wild

After all this, I must note that I do not intend to disparage indoor teaching, worship, or spiritual practice altogether. Interior spaces – and the psychic resonance of *interiority* as a metaphor for spiritual depth and texture – remain essential for many kinds of learning experiences people need, not least in our noisy, distracted world. But we need also to be out. What Canadian philosopher of literacy Robert Bringhurst writes about the alphabet and its letters seems true of Christian spirituality too: "In the early days of the alphabet, letters often lived outside, where they could get fresh air and light. In the long reign of manuscript and print, they have mostly lived indoors, and in the short reign of the keyboard and the microchip, letters have mostly lived in an airless world fully divorced from forest, mountain, garden, earth."[16] He goes on:

> Life in the wild, for a language as for any living entity – animal, plant, fungus, protozoan, or bacterium – means a dependable and nourishing interconnection with the rest of life on the planet. It means a place in the food chain. It means a sustaining, sustainable habitat. That perennial

[15] Orr, 140. The quote continues onto p. 141: "We have good reason to believe that human intelligence could not have evolved in a lunar landscape, devoid of biodiversity…. Elemental things like flowing water, wind, trees, clouds, rain, mist, mountains, landscape, animals, changing seasons, the night sky, and the mysteries of the life cycle gave birth to thought and language." On p. 151 he notes more soberly, "The human mind is a product of the Pleistocene Age, shaped by wildness that has all but disappeared. If we complete the destruction of nature, we will have succeeded in cutting ourselves off from the source of sanity itself."

[16] Robert Bringhurst, *The Tree of Meaning: Language, Mind, and Ecology* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2006/2008), 121.

> connection to biological and physical reality is what feeds and shapes and calibrates a language.[17]

The same is surely true of a learning community. I'm grateful to Arthur and Judith for their roles shaping the GTU as a "sustaining… habitat" that "feeds and shapes and calibrates" generations of thinkers and leaders. And, taught so well, I now wish to teach so that the implicit definition of Christian spirituality my pedagogy expresses might be one of knowing and loving the place where we are, as precisely where we experience the largest possible *inter-species* community, the *wildest* possible G*D incarnate in all that is, and the most joyful *biophilia.* Such teaching and learning – among not only humans but countless other beings – is truly a feast of life.

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[17] Ibid., 161.