

The Thin Places Of The Sierra Nevada

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“The human heart is always drawn beyond the here and now. Human presence never finally gathers anywhere; we are never simply or clearly here. No-one stands up straight and direct in the world, each of us is leaning forward into the future that is rising toward us.” John O’Donohue¹

“The mountains are calling and I must go....” John Muir²

The window of my second-story bedroom in Visalia faced east. The telescope in that bedroom of my youth pointed not to the heavens, but to that Sierra Nevada horizon formed by the Great Western Divide—a chain of peaks second in height, length, and magnificence to only the highest crest of the Sierra which hid behind it. Unlike gentler topography of the northern Sierra, here the slope from the Great Central Valley rises quickly into the high country of Sequoia National Park. In winter, I gazed upon snow-blanketed alpine slopes of Mineral King. In summer, they were capped with ever-morphing thunderclouds. Though hidden most middays by smog, in any month you could trace the dark outlines of Florence, Sawtooth, Eisen, Lippincott, and Kaweah Peaks against the dawning sky. The Sierra horizon created a soul-alluring landscape of imagination and possibility of what life might unfold.

Big city amusement parks were not our family’s thing. Open space and opportunities for Sierra camping, hiking, and skiing drew my parents to the San Joaquin Valley and Clovis in 1959 when I was five and later as a teenager to Visalia. My father was a very practical and frugal civil engineer, but he had two passions. He loved the outdoors and he loved flying. Though it strained the family budget, he purchased a small Cessna airplane and when I flew with him above the Sierra, I was transfixed by every detail of peak, trail, lake, and stream below me that I personally knew or hoped to know. My father though seemed in an ethereal world removed from the work of surveying valley properties, in body as well as spirit soaring like an eagle. For father and son, there was a sense of belonging to two worlds: the place of our valley home, and its counterpoint, the great Sierra Nevada.

Living Between Worlds

Many are the ways of understanding our place in the world. The rigid dichotomy between the material and spiritual realms so common in western theology and philosophy seems to lead individuals and societies into unhappy paths of displacement and environmental destruction. Of late I have been inspired by Celtic approaches toward nature and spirit. Popular contemporary Celtic writers such as John Philip Newell³ have tapped into broad and deep spiritual longings that remain unfulfilled by disembodied approaches to place and religion.

In his book *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Christianity*, historian of Christianity and spirituality Philip Sheldrake describes the roots of Celtic religious perspectives.⁴ Early Celtic Christians of Ireland and Scotland inherited from their pre-Christian forebearers a positive view of the natural world and a profound sense of the immanence of God in nature. Absent was the fear that a deep love of place might lead one astray from proper worship, for God was to be experienced not only in a future life, but now, even if in only a transitory way. Nature indeed could be theophany—a visible manifestation of God.⁵

Sheldrake emphasizes dual Celtic passions of one's attachment to a stable place of home and kin, and the equally intense desire for pilgrimage journey into places of instability and risk.⁶ The experience of one is essential to full appreciation the other. To be raised on the edges of small valley towns beneath the shadow of mountains can prime a soul to this perspective.

Beauty

There are graceful connections between place and human flourishing that live on in Celtic traditions. Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donohue centers attention on our essential need for beauty. To critics who question such a focus amidst crises in politics, economics, religion, and environment, O'Donohue responds that the neglect of beauty is what has brought us to this place. Beauty, O'Donohue declares, may surprise us “with swift, sheer grace... like a divine breath that blows the heart open.” Once awakened, “we become aware of new ways of being in the world.”⁷ Perhaps this is at the heart of much longing for mountain pilgrimage. It may lead us on paths toward gratitude, humility, serenity, and hope.

Like many lovers of the Sierra Nevada, I have long set my bearings by the writings of John Muir, that great interpreter of Sierra natural history who imbued nature with spiritual significance. The very first published writing of Muir is from a letter he wrote several years before his arrival in California. He spent months exploring the deep backwoods of Canadian wilderness while the American Civil War raged to the south. In particular, he searched arduously for the rare and beautiful Calypso Orchid. He wrote to his friend and mentor Jeanne Carr upon his first encounter with the flower:

“I never before saw a plant so full of life; so perfectly spiritual, it seemed pure enough for the throne of its Creator. I felt as if I were in the presence of superior beings who loved me and beckoned me to come. I sat down beside them and wept for joy. Could angels in their better land show us a more beautiful plant?”⁸

With respect to his religious convictions Muir asserted: “There is no synonym for God so perfect as Beauty.”⁹ He made the connection between beauty and human flourishing: “Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike.”¹⁰ Beauty is for O’Donohue “the graceful force [that] dissolves old cages that confine us as prisoners in the un-lived life.”¹¹

Seeking Beauty

Mountain air is thin air; at Forester Pass it is only 60% of what one breathes at sea level. At 13,153 feet elevation, this pass at the boundary of Sequoia and Kings Canyon Parks is the highest point on the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT)—the wilderness way that stretches from the Mexican border north 2,653 miles to Canada. Cresting the pass is, both literally and figuratively, a watershed moment. Ascending from the south as PCT through-hikers do, one leaves the dry Kern River watershed that flows south toward the desert half of California. Gazing north reveals the vast High Sierra realm of alpine tundra extending several hundred miles north to Yosemite Park and beyond. Toiling upward from the opposite direction, as do those hiking the 213 miles of John Muir Trail from Yosemite Valley to Mount Whitney, one ascends from the upper reaches of the Kings River Canyon which is by some estimates the deepest canyon on the planet. Forester Pass reveals the first glimpses of their destination which is, at 15,005 feet, the highest point in the lower forty-eight states.

What walkers do atop Forester Pass is diverse. For most, it is a brief place for rest, hydration, refueling, or selfies. Hiking schedules, intense and chilling mountain winds, or thunder and lightning from nearby cumulonimbus storm-clouds often prompt a quick descent. A few pilgrims take a more meditative duration to experience this singular place in the High Sierra.

Several years ago, I made my way to Forester Pass in search of a particular plant species that only grows in the highest reaches of the Sierra Nevada. For lovers of alpine flora, Showy sky pilot is totemic of the alpine High Sierra. Its rosettes of finely dissected, powerfully scented, deep green leaves and, in its brief season, tight, brilliantly blue clusters of flowers can waylay those attuned to beauty.

The previous season I had searched high and high again for the perfect picture of Showy sky pilot: one that catches its flowers in prime display while framed by a background of the beauty of its larger place in the landscape. I had found on one high pass a few plants past their drought-stressed peak, and on another pass a few not in flower. Finally, near the summit of Mount Langley, the southernmost of all the fourteen-thousand-foot peaks of the range, I found abundant plants in full flower. But none whose landscape background did justice to the beauty of its place.

This year I backpacked in the company of my daughter. Setting out from Road's End deep in Kings Canyon we journeyed the less-traveled route south over Avalanche Pass and up the southern edge of the Kings River drainage. The Covid pandemic had closed the backcountry to permits until shortly before our departure and the trail was deserted of fellow humans. We took our time searching the ridge along the Great Western Divide by Colby Pass but found no Sky pilot. Now in the Kern River drainage we circled north toward Forester Pass and a final chance to find the flower.

We arrived at the pass mid-day to be greeted by Showy sky pilots in flower. Beautiful as they were in and of themselves, none yielded a suitable view of their place in the landscape. We ate lunch and considered the meter of our day, which required the longest distance and likely would bring us into camp at dark if we tarried, but here also my place of purpose. I began to explore the ridge above the pass. One after another flowering Sky pilot beckoned me upslope, but each in turn nestled just too low in the rocks, or too far from the vistas on the ridge. Then appeared one in full flower, proud in its lie on a flat, gentle bed

of coarsely decomposed granite. It sat perfectly on the ridge above an almost infinite view south of Sequoia Park and worlds beyond.

This was my Calypso orchid.

Thin Places

The concept of “thin places” in Celtic spirituality describes those where our usual perception of every-day reality may be transformed by awareness of the transcendent. These are places where Celtic peoples sensed the physical and spiritual touching each other—where the line between these realms is “tissue-paper thin.”¹² While any location might serve as a revelatory and transformative thin place, certain ones have greater potential. Mountains, waters, and groves were for Celts particularly suitable. Sheldrake observes that boundaries in the landscape were “among the places where Celts experienced the veil that separated this world and the other world to be particularly transparent.” Such physical thresholds of change prime us to consider the possibility of other realities beyond the obvious and assumed.

Beauty often evokes such transformative thin-place encounters. O’Donohue explains the reversal in perspective that beauty elicits: “A threshold we had never noticed opens, mystery comes alive around us and we realize how the earth is full of concealed beauty... In the experience of beauty we awaken and surrender in the same act.”¹³

Places that present us with contrasting magnitudes of time and space stop us in our tracks and insist we reconsider the measure of our life and values. The visionary poet William Blake wrote of the confluence of secular and sacred, particularity and infinity, temporal and eternal that characterizes the revelation of a thin place:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour¹⁴

Thin places confound our settled worldviews of time, space, and value. If some places are filled with greater potential, then the Sierra Nevada is latent with promise.

The thin separation between the material and spiritual nature of the Sierra Nevada was evident to John Muir. Born of Celtic roots in Scotland and nurtured in the beauty of that place, he left with his father for the Wisconsin frontier as a youth. Early the young Muir abandoned the stern Calvinist worldview his father enforced on the family for a gospel of the transformative power of wilderness beauty. Forays into the wilds of the Wisconsin frontier led to longer explorations such as to the Canadian wilderness. Then he abandoned a profitable manufacturing career to undertake a thousand-mile walk through the war-ravaged South, sailing to California and walking into the Sierra Nevada. After a brief 1868 Sierra foray, he returned the next year as a shepherd, following the seasons opening the mountains in spring and into summer. The journal of his experience comes to us published as *My First Summer in the Sierras*. The connection to Celtic thin-place experience reverberates loudly in Muir's telling.

By the fourth day of his shepherding, they had ascended above the desiccating foothills of early June to arrive at the margin of the great Sierra conifer forests. He writes: "June 6. We are now in the mountains and they are in us, kindling enthusiasm, making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us. Our flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams and rocks, in the waves of the sun—a part of all nature, neither old nor young, sick nor well, but immortal."¹⁵

His first ascent into the high country of Yosemite was equally rhapsodized: "July 26. Ramble to the summit of Mount Hoffman, eleven thousand feet high, the highest point in life's journey my feet have yet touched.... A glory day of admission into a new realm of wonders as if Nature had woingly whispered, 'Come higher.' What questions I asked, and how little I know of all the vast show, and how eagerly, tremulously hopeful of some day knowing more, learning the meaning of these divine symbols crowded together on this wondrous page." He continued: "From garden to garden, ridge to ridge, I drifted enchanted, now on my knees gazing into the face of a daisy, now climbing again and again among the purple and azure flowers of the hemlocks, now down into the treasuries of the snow, or gazing afar over domes and peaks, lakes and woods, and the billowy glaciated fields of the upper Tuolumne, and trying to sketch them. In the midst of such beauty, pierced with its rays, one's body is all one

tingling palate. Who wouldn't be a mountaineer! Up here the world's prizes seem nothing."¹⁶

Among the encounters of that day Muir notes the diminutive pikas laying out haystacks of lupines, soaring eagles, "the plant people, and the glad streams singing their way to the sea" which all widen one's sympathy for nature. "But most impressive of all is the vast glowing countenance of the wilderness in awful, infinite repose." Muir concludes his July 26 journal essay, "and so ends a day that will never end."

Beyond Mount Hoffman lay Tuolumne Meadows, the largest sub-alpine meadow of the range and destination for summer pasturing of the flock. It served as Muir's base for forays into the highest reaches of Yosemite and the beauty of their vast landscapes, just as it has for following generations. But landscape alone is incomplete. Place is not just a location for landscape, it is also habitat—a place of habitation for the minute and particulate counterpoints of the vast and infinite. Muir deeply desired to find one exceedingly beautiful connection to the heather-covered Scottish hills of his boyhood; he sought out White mountain heather, a member of the genus *Cassiope*.

White mountain heather grows in low mats among rocks where snows linger long. The flowers Muir sought are petite, pendant, white bells beautifully contrasting with their arched, deep red flower stalk and deep green leaves. The flowers typically bloom in July and August, but Muir had found none as summer passed into September. He lamented, "Ever since I was allowed entrance into these mountains I have been looking for cassiope, said to be the most beautiful and best loved of the heathworts, but, strange to say, I have not found it. On my high mountain walks I keep muttering, 'Cassiope, cassiope.'"¹⁷

Much of the landscape immediately adjacent to Tuolumne Meadows is dominated by gentle domes of granite rounded by the scouring of ice age glaciers that were a thousand feet thick or more. South of Tuolumne Meadows rises the Cathedral Range. In contrast to gentle domes, the northernmost two peaks of the range, Unicorn Peak and Cathedral Peak, rise like sharp spires. The tops of these mountains of granite remained above the glacial Pleistocene ice-ocean while the surrounding landscape was carried off to lower realms.

On September 7 Muir set out from Tuolumne Meadows to climb Cathedral Peak. His was the first recorded summit of the mountain. Rock climbers clas-

sify routes by degrees of difficulty, and the easiest route up Cathedral Peak is Class 4: a challenging ascent with exposure to steep slopes where ropes are recommended for safety. The telling of his experience reverberates with the sense of a Celtic thin place where the separation of physical and spiritual dimensions dissolves. “This I may say is the first time I have been at church in California, led here at last, every door graciously opened for the poor lonely worshiper. In our best times everything turns into religion, all the world seems a church and the mountains altars.” He continues “And lo, here at last in front of the Cathedral is blessed cassiope, ringing her thousands of sweet-toned bells, the sweetest church music I ever enjoyed.”

After descending the dangerous peak, Muir made shelter and fire by which to journal his day, and writes: “Camped beside a little pool and a group of crinkled dwarf pines; and as I sit by the fire trying to write notes the shallow pool seems fathomless with the infinite starry heavens in it, while the onlooking rocks and trees, tiny shrubs and daisies and sedges, brought forward in the fire-glow, seem full of thought as if about to speak aloud and tell all their wild stories. A marvelously impressive meeting in which everyone has something worth while to tell.”

If thin places reveal our entry into a new perception of reality, the Sierra Nevada was such a place for Muir. If they connect us to a transcendence best expressed in religious metaphor, Muir knew it well. If they give us a vision of deeper purpose and focus to life direction, Muir declares it so. The juxtaposition of the minute particularity at one’s feet with the vastness of surrounding vistas present us with the great scale of beauty where not only the finite and infinity coalesce, but time and eternity as well.

The Thin Place Of Our Resurrection

A blessed life’s journey might bring one to many thin places, but the early Celtic spiritual tradition considered the ultimate pilgrimage to be finding one’s “place of resurrection.” This was the singular thin place where one would best make the final transition from the physical to the spiritual realm. Each person’s place of resurrection was uniquely gifted by God alone for it was “discerned to be their particular doorway to heaven.”¹⁸

In the year I was married, my father began a five-year journey with a breast cancer that metastasized to lung, then bone, then finally to brain. My parents

had annually vacationed at a cabin on Pinecrest Lake with several of my father's oldest friends. The deck of the cabin faced northeast over the far end of the lake where a low granite dome rose above the lake's east end. In one of those gentler moments of retreat, my father pointed across the lake to the dome and said there was where he wished his ashes to be scattered. One fine November day a month after his death, our family made our long way around the north shore to the granite dome on the lake's far side.

O'Donohue writes that "the most profound events of our lives take place in those fleeting moments where something else shines through, something that can never be fixed in language, something given as quietly as your next breath."¹⁹ It was one of those autumn Sierra days absent crowds and hurry when the morning chill of winter's threshold gives way to still, warmer moments of gentle sun. We journeyed slowly—my wife nearly eight months pregnant with our first child. On the dome we read the Lutheran memorial liturgy. Most of the text I have forgotten, but I remember the proclamation of ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and the passage from the prophet Isaiah reassuring us that "those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up as with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, walk and not faint." I thought: how appropriate for my mother who long tended my father through his years of pain and weariness, and how appropriate for my father, who loved to soar with eagles above the Sierra. We scattered his ashes, and we sat in silence with our thoughts.

I recall thinking: I must always remember this moment. I looked to our neighbor on the dome—a Jeffrey Pine growing out of a thin crack in bare granite and considered how life emerges, even flourishes, in the harshest environments. I looked to my wife and felt the force of recognition of life's passing and renewal. I looked west across the lake where the low sun was descending, and I watched the thousands of momentary sparkles of reflected sunlight. And I thought: God's presence may be as constant as the sun, but we sense it only in fleeting moments, like the shimmer on the water. And we were silent. Then my mother pointed south over the lake and called out.

There soaring straight toward us was an eagle. It circled once above us and was gone.

The community of Three Rivers lies nestled in the foothills several short miles from the entrance to Sequoia Park, halfway between the valley home in Visalia and the high peaks of the Great Western Divide. My parents had dreamed of settling there, and two years after my father's passing, my mother retired from teaching and moved to a small place overlooking the main fork of the Kaweah River.

Her home faces south opposite the river from a Franciscan retreat center—confirmation of the potential here for thin-place encounters. Behind the center is Case Mountain, a peak rising to 6,800 feet and home to the sequoia grove that is closer than any other to the valley floor. Early on her new life took the rhythm of an early morning walk along the road that parallels the river, and an obligatory late afternoon “happy hour” on the south-facing porch. The covered porch sits adjacent to exposed granite shaded by an ancient Interior live oak; the otherwise flat surface of the granite bears multiple cylindrical depressions. These are Native American bedrock mortars, the work of generations of Yokut people who had chosen this place to sit together in the beauty of a shady place and grind into flour the acorns that were their physical sustenance. More confirmation.

A different story might finish with Three Rivers being her literal place of resurrection, the final home that she had chosen as her place of transition. Thirty years later dementia brought her back to the valley to live with our family. Walks are now along a Fresno boulevard shaded by century-old camphor trees and happy hours on a large open porch of our equally old craftsman bungalow. The Three Rivers home has passed into the care of our daughter and son-in-law, though we return with her at times to visit. The thinnest times have been when spring resurrects the green of the hills and we gather at dawn for the Easter sunrise service in the Franciscan gardens.

The significance of a place of resurrection is not the literal ashes and dust. It is the singular place where we, or those bound to us by love, can best be reminded of, and transformed by, the thinness that separates our typical daily perception of reality from the depth and breadth of what is transcendent.

Thin Places Endure

The significance of thin places is not that we should or can recreate a particular ancient Celtic version of spirituality. Rather, the needs for beauty, comfort,

purpose, direction, and encouragement endure, so our need for such thin places remains. Four generations of my family have now lived between the worlds of valley and mountain. We still seek and find them in the Sierra Nevada.

Muir used temple language to emphasize the sacred nature of the most transformative Sierra places, particularly the granite-walled glacial valleys and the cathedral-like sequoia groves. For my wife who was raised in Oakdale, a small town west of Yosemite, true north of her Sierra compass points in that direction. We honeymooned in the park and backpacked into its high country. Swimming in the cold, clear waters of Lake Tenaya is her fondest Sierra ritual. She has chosen a place of resurrection in the heart of the Yosemite Valley temple—a place along a bend in the Merced River where the view opens to the face of Half Dome.

Of all the sacred temples of Sierra sequoias, Redwood Mountain Grove has been for me the thinnest. It lacks the draw of trees as large as Generals Grant or Sherman, and access by two miles of dirt road discourages busloads of tourists. When Converse Basin Grove perched above the Kings River was logged a century ago, Redwood Mountain Grove inherited the mantle of grove with the most mature sequoia trees, though climate-change induced fires sweeping the through the Sierras now put all of this in flux.²⁰

The trails through the grove are diverse. One descends along the canyon of Redwood Creek where dogwoods among the giants bring white flower color in spring, and yellow, orange, red, and purple shades in autumn. At the far south end, water gushing from Big Spring drains from the vast cavernous labyrinth hidden beneath the sequoias' feet. Another trail skirts the eastern edge of the grove on the flanks of a high ridge capped by the open crest named Big Baldy. A third follows the spine of metamorphic rock that forms Redwood Mountain proper. That trail once continued south connecting to other paths, but now the south end of this "Sugarbowl" trail descends from a hollow of a strikingly pure population of mature sequoias.

Sierra thin places move through our generations. The unborn child present within the womb of my wife upon Pinecrest's granite dome in his turn grew to love the Sierras. He took summer work through college at a camp at Huntington Lake, proposed marriage cross-country skiing, and they chose to live and work the first years of their marriage at Hume by its lake perched above Kings

Canyon. Their first child died within hours of birth and the two of them scattered her ashes south of Hume within the temple of Sugarbowl sequoias.

Big Baldy above the grove has laid claim to be my place of resurrection. It is scarcely more than an hour of travel by car from Fresno to a trailhead on the General's Highway, the road that links the most visited groves of Sequoia & Kings Canyon Parks. From there a trail follows the high ridge above Redwood Mountain Grove for a several miles through a forest of fir and seasonal flowers before ascending a weathered granite outcrop rising above the surrounding forest. To the east and southeast rises the Great Western Divide. Northeast the vista breaks toward the great wilderness expanse of Kings Canyon Park. Directly below and west is Redwood Mountain Grove and its eponymous mountain. If the air is clear, visible in the distance west and southwest are the cities of the Great Central Valley where most of my life has been lived.

Often when in need of beauty and centering, I have escaped for a short retreat to saunter some few miles and sit a spell on one of Baldy's granite seats. Befitting the boundary nature of thin places, the fullest experiences are sunset and the passage into nightfall when the lights of valley towns brighten to mirror those appearing in the heavens. That is how I unexpectedly found myself commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of my father's passing.

O'Donohue notes that "Most days take no notice of us; but every so often there is a moment when time seems to crystalize."²¹ That October I was not thinking about the coming anniversary. I was only looking ahead to a two-day mid-semester break from teaching. After a sober realization that paper piles would prevent me from taking much of a break, I committed to one short retreat: I would leave Fresno late one afternoon and journey to the top of Big Baldy for sunset and a brief stay. The rest of the break would be given to grading.

Then came the turn of events that marked an unexpected celebration of the anniversary. As I attempted unsuccessfully to grade exams, I received a call from my doctor. The week before during a routine physical exam he had removed a suspicious mole he discovered hidden out of sight and sunlight on my bottom. The mole was malignant melanoma. Suddenly the trip to Big Baldy took on new meaning. It had not escaped my notice that I had reached the age when my father was battling breast cancer. As a biology instructor, I knew that breast cancer genes predispose men to melanoma, as well as cancers of the

prostate, pancreas, and stomach, which was the cancer that led to my grandfather's early death. It was with sudden recognition of this familial serial killer, later confirmed by genetic testing, that I arrived atop Big Baldy just in time to watch the sunset.

The sunset that evening was vivid. The usual orange-red hues of smog-sunsets were absent; in their place glowed a thin band of different color above the horizon and below a green-blue line of cloud. Clear violet-red seemed to radiate from beyond the Coast Range mountains and far west over the Pacific Ocean. It remained a while, then it was gone. From above and below the horizon emerged the many small, beautiful lights I came to watch. Contemplating life in the face of both beauty and mortality is a profoundly transforming human undertaking. Gratitude for both can replace uncertainty and fear. O'Donohue notes that the beauty of thin places restores hope and awakens courage to live life transformed by "remembrance of our true origin and real destination."²²

The thinness to me of Big Baldy has continued. On another October night-fall a few years after that anniversary celebration, I pilgrimaged to Big Baldy in expectation of the Orionid meteor shower. They pale when viewed through the diffuse light of the Valley, but shine through the thin air of that high granite ridge.

Those meteors are the children of Halley's Comet. Bits of ice and rock are shed from their mother as she sweeps toward the sun. They drift asleep in space until our blue orb shakes them out of their long slumber and bids them burn. The life of meteors can consist of billions of years of waiting, then in blazing, brilliant seconds of light, they disappear into the night sky. It seems a cosmic injustice not to watch their show—akin to a child practicing the piano all year, but nobody comes to the single concert performance. So at 8,000 feet above the lights of home, I laid back on Sierra granite to watch. Over just ten minutes that night I saw several dozen celestial concert recitals. Like all recitals, some performances were rather quiet and shy, but others were stunningly bright with tails outshining their mama.

When the time comes, my ashes can be part of cosmic dust to cosmic dust. But right now, we each are blazing through the sky in our own fashion. I don't want to waste what has been in the making for billions of years. The thin places of the Sierra Nevada have helped shake me out of slumber.

Muir admonished, "Climb the mountains and get their glad tidings ..."²³

Excuse me now. The mountains are calling, and I must go.

NOTES

- 1 John O'Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (New York: Harper, 2002), 218.
- 2 William Frederic Bade, *The Life and Letters of John Muir* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1924). Ch. 10: Yosemite and Beyond. Written to his sister Sarah Muir Galloway September 3, 1873 from Yosemite Valley.
- 3 Popular books of Newell's include: (J. P. Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* 1997); (J. P. Newell, *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation* 2008); (J. P. Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings* 2014), and (J. P. Newell, *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul* 2021).
- 4 Philip Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality* (London: Darton Longman, Todd, 1995). Though Sheldrake cautions against a tendency to impute to early Celtic Christians modern concerns for nature's preservation and perspectives such as viewing nature as benign and beneficent, overall he considers features of early Celtic spirituality worthy of contemporary examination and consideration.
- 5 Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds*, pp. 70-75.
- 6 Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds*, pp. 1, 7, 58.
- 7 O'Donohue, *Beauty*, p. 7.
- 8 Bonnie Johanna Gisel, *Kindred and Related Spirits: The Letters of John Muir and Jeanne C. Carr* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2001), p. 41. The letter sent to Carr was not intended for publication, but his University of Wisconsin professor J.D. Butler sent it on to the Boston Register for publication in 1866.
- 9 John Muir, *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, edited by Linnie Marsh Wolfe (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 208.
- 10 John Muir, *The Yosemite* (New York: The Century Company, 1912), p. 256.
- 11 O'Donohue, *Beauty*, p. 8.
- 12 Tracy Balzer, *Thin Places: An Evangelical Journey into Celtic Christianity*, (Abilene, TX: Leafwood, 2007), 26.
- 13 O'Donohue, pp. 12, 2.
- 14 William Blake, n.d., from the poem "Auguries of Innocence" published posthumously in 1863.
- 15 John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), from Ch. 1, "Through the Foothills With a Flock of Sheep." A chapter 2 entry continues similarly: "Another glorious Sierra day in which one seems to be dissolved and absorbed and sent pulsing onward we know not where. Life seems neither long nor short, and we take no more heed to save time or make haste than do the trees and stars. This is true freedom, a good practical sort of immortality."
- 16 Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*. This and the following entries from this journal date are from Ch. 6 "Mount Hoffman and Lake Tenaya."
- 17 Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*. This and the following September entries are from Ch. 10 "The Tuolumne Camp."
- 18 Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds*, pp. 31, 59.
- 19 O'Donohue, *Beauty*, p. 16.
- 20 Kristen Shive, Christy Brigham, Tony Caprio, and Paul Hardwick, "2021 Fire Season Impacts to Giant Sequoias," *National Park Service, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks*, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/2021-fire-season-impacts-to-giant-sequoias.htm>. Giant Sequoia mortality from the 2021 KNP Complex Fire is still being determined, which includes sections of

Redwood Mountain Grove that burned with high intensity. Preliminary estimates are that 3% to 5% of all mature Sierra Nevada sequoias were consumed. This adds to the mortality estimates of 10% or more of all mature sequoias consumed in the fires of 2020.

²¹ O'Donohue, *Beauty*, p. 16.

²² O'Donohue, *Beauty*, p. 8.

²³ Muir, *Our National Parks* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1901), 56.

