

Mythic Narratives of the National Parks

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MY BRIEF REFLECTIONS TODAY FOCUS ON RELIGION IN THE NATIONAL PARKS IN A TIME OF CHANGE.

I offer two proposals for your consideration. First, that studying parks as pilgrimage sites, by exploring park mythic narratives and rituals, is useful for better understanding the beliefs and values of American culture and the management decisions in parks that have resulted from these beliefs and values. Second, that the traditional narrative is changing in light of new developments in scientific understanding of the natural world, as well as the demographic makeup of the USA. However, change runs contrary to the very foundations of the national park idea, and at least until now, has been resisted, both in the park service and in the general culture, as we can see, for example in the reassertion of the traditional narrative in the Ken Burns film.

National parks as pilgrimage sites

Traditionally, a pilgrimage site embodies the beliefs and values—that is, the religion—of the people who travel there to celebrate and reaffirm them and their shared community. The values and beliefs are articulated in a mythic narrative (often identified as the “national park idea”) and enacted in ritual activities (like the famous campfire or being present for the eruption of Old Faithful). Sacred sites and the values and beliefs they embody are understood by the people who honor them to be timeless and unchanging, a refuge from the developing and imperfect world of everyday life. However, all sacred sites necessarily mirror the cultural context of their time, in which those beliefs and values are constantly being worked out and contested. No culture is static and no sacred site unchanging. Thus, we can learn a great deal about changes in American culture through studying how the mythic narrative of the national park idea has changed over time, particularly as related to the foundational understandings concerning the relationship between humans and the natural world. We can also better understand why parks have been managed the way they have, in terms of both natural and human resources.

Although traditional religious language about the parks is more common before the mid-twentieth century, at a recent conference I discovered that the language of “spiritual experience” and “transcendence” are becoming part of mission statements. A further example of what I would describe as “religion” comes from the 2009 Advancing the National Park Idea, the report of the National Parks Second Century Commission: “Americans have a *deep and enduring love* for the national parks, places we treasure because they embody our highest ideals and values. National parks tell our stories and speak of our identity as a people and a nation.”¹

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What are the ideals and values embodied in the parks? First, nature is the source of democracy and the parks are a demonstration of it. Myra Jehlen claims in *American Incarnation* that the establishment of democracy in the American “New World” was quite unlike Europe. “When the democratic Enlightenment became associated with the North American continent, something new did emerge ... grounded, literally, in American soil, liberalism’s hitherto arguable theses metamorphosed into nature’s material necessities.... Americans saw themselves as building their civilization out of nature itself.”² As the United States realized its Manifest Destiny across the continent, the national park lands became the places set apart from entrepreneurial development, where the power of the new world could be preserved, intact and unchanging. Here the sacred origins of America could be celebrated and Americans could be renewed. The parks not only contained the power of nature out of which democracy sprang, they also demonstrated the greatness of democracy in the United States. Unlike Europe where the great gardens were owned and enjoyed by the rich, in America the sublime places of nature belonged to all the people—and further, participation in the experience of the parks would make them better Americans.³

A second value embodied in the parks is the greatness of the American nation. Lacking the ancient history of Europe, nature became America’s history—a history that seemed timeless. The big trees were America’s ancient history. Horace Greeley said of sequoias in the Mariposa Grove: “That they were of very substantial size when David danced before the ark, when Solomon laid the foundations of the Temple, when Theseus ruled in Athens; when Aeneas fled from the burning wreck of vanished Troy, when Sesostris led his victorious Egyptians into the heart of Asia, I have no manner of doubt.”⁴ Yosemite Valley was called the nation’s cathedral and the height of Yosemite Falls (2,425 ft.) was compared to St. Peter’s in Rome—one sixth its height. As nineteenth century America was exploring its cultural identity, nature—closely coupled with democracy—was its rock solid foundation.

The parks provided not only the ancient history of the nation, but also its intimate connection with the primal unchanging garden of Eden. As Fitz Hugh Ludlow, a writer who traveled with Albert Bierstadt to Yosemite in 1863, said of the Valley, “If report was true, we were going to the original site of the Garden of Eden.”⁵ A contemporary example is from the Ken Burns documentary when Shelton Johnson, the rock star of the film, says of an experience in Yellowstone, in the midst of snow and bison: “I felt like this was the first day, and this morning was the first time the sun had ever come up.”⁶ The American Eden continues eternally in the parks.

These ideals and values have shaped the story of the park, told through interpretation, landscape architecture, and resource management. Even scientists evoke the mythic narrative.

Joseph Grinnell’s 1916 “Animal Life as an Asset of National Parks” compared the parks to the primeval, unpeopled landscape, as it was “before the advent of the white man.”⁷ George Wright, in *Fauna of the National Parks*, 1932, begins, “The American people intrusted the NPS with the preservation of characteristic portions of our country as it was seen by Boone and LaSalle, by Coronado, and by Lewis and Clark. This was primitive America” that was to be kept intact in the parks.⁸ The Leopold report of 1963 repeats similar themes as it called for the parks to be a “vignette of primitive America” and established the ideal natural moment to be the pristine new world that awaited European entry.⁹

The mythic narrative of the reconnection with primal, pristine America—perhaps especially as it is combined with science—has shaped both the management and the experience of the parks. At the heart of the narrative is the belief that the parks are lands set apart and preserved unimpaired. They do not change. They are our still point in a changing world. As the Ken Burns Film tells us over and over—you *can* go home again. Our parks are there waiting for us, as they have always been, so our children and grandchildren can have the same experience we did when we were children.

Wilderness, naturalness, and beyond

But environmental historian William Cronon asserts that our devotion to our wilderness home leads us to neglect our everyday home environments. He says the way we conceive of “nature” reinforces the separation of human culture from the natural world and says “the trouble with wilderness” is that it emphasizes this dichotomy rather than offering a model of humans as part of the natural order.¹⁰ Many indigenous traditions imagine the world in such a way, often not having a word designating “nature” as something separate from humans. Indeed, using our terms, civilization is sometimes defined as humans living in harmony with nature.

In a similar way David Cole, Laurie Yung, and Gregory Aplet speak of “the trouble with naturalness.” And I’m quite sure they would add with “natural regulation.” Like “wilderness,” “naturalness” carries deep mythic meanings that are rooted in a nature that, without humans, is balanced, in equilibrium. They say that the old “beliefs about the stability of ecological systems, the insignificance of aboriginal humans as ecological agents, and our ability to mitigate the adverse effects of current and future human activity on park ecosystems have all been shaken by research in ecology ... and related fields.”¹¹ “Naturalness” clings to all of those earlier beliefs and the use of the term, they say, prevents attention to actual realities of ecosystems.

William Tweed, retired naturalist at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, has questioned the mythic narrative of the national parks, saying “deeply embedded” in the “legal mandate to conserve the parks in a way that leaves them ‘unimpaired,’ is the promise that things will not change.” This narrative is no longer viable given climate change and new understandings of ecological systems. However, he says, “educating the public to accept change” is extremely difficult because the National Park Service (NPS) “has emphasized that its mission is to prevent change. The NPS must abandon this position and must begin talking about change as an inescapable part of the park world.”¹² Tweed sees anthropogenic change as inescapable in our world, including in the parks. Others, like Daniel Botkin in *Discordant Harmonies*, go even further to say natural processes are “fundamentally stochastic to some degree.” If this is so, he says, we need a shift in our myths, in our symbols and metaphors, as we reflect on the realities of humans and nature.¹³ And I would add, what better place than our parks to development these new myths and metaphors?

This is not to say that a narrative that stressed dynamism, change, and uncertainty would be fundamentally “true” in a way that the story about preserving unimpaired is not. These are both mythic narratives, designed to offer large frameworks that anchor peoples’ ideals and values, and provide ethical bearings to the decision-making processes that can never rely wholly on scientific information. If there is not a singular “natural” way, humans must make judgments on what they imagine to be the ideal state of nature and humans. Although the narrative of changelessness no doubt did a great deal for the parks in the past, today another story is needed that both takes account of scientific knowledge, and connects with the wisdom of contemporary culture on the relationship of humans to the natural world.

Some of the current realities the new narrative must take into account are, first, that parks are not islands. Boundaries are permeable, with external forces like air pollution crossing into the parks, and internal forces like bison and bears crossing in the other direction. The recognition of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is one way of beginning to address these issues, and biosphere reserves are another. Second, change is inevitable. Parks were never museums, even though museum language was—or is—used. Climate change will bring dramatic alterations in the parks, and decisions will have to be made on how to manage it. Can a new mythic narrative emerge that can incorporate these new realities and help in these decisions? And if it cannot, will the national park idea survive? Mythic narratives cannot be created. They emerge out of the transformation of beliefs and values in light of natural and cultural realities. Looking at the Ken Burns film, I do not see the new story. But seeing what the NPS is doing on the ground leads me to think a new

narrative is in the process of emerging. I expect this narrative will incorporate change as a meaningful part of the parks, which will be a dramatic change in the parks' mission. Two elements I think will be central to a new story are first, that parks are not wholly other from what lies outside of them. There is interaction and that must become part of the story. Second, humans are part of the ecosystem, affecting and being affected by the parks. They are not only gardeners or only guardians, but part of the dynamic, mysterious process; and all are involved in change. Such a narrative would not only be inclusive of ecosystem lands lying outside the parks and of humans and nature as part of this ecosystem, but would also better fit the diversity of visitors and the stories they bring to the parks, which would enable the national park narrative to be inclusive of more people and provide a canopy under which a variety of American stories can reside.

Endnotes

1. National Parks Second Century Commission, *Advancing the National Park Idea*, (Washington, D.C.: National Parks Conservation Association, 2009), 14, www.nps.gov/civic/resources/Commission_Report.pdf.
2. Myra Jehlen, *American Incarnation: The Individual, the Nation, and the Continent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 3.
3. See, e.g., Frederick Law Olmsted, "The Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Trees, a Preliminary Report (1865)." Intro. Laura Wood Roper. *Landscape Architecture*, October (1952): 12–25.
4. Horace Greeley, *Overland Journey from New York to San Francisco* (New York: C.M. Saxton, Barker and Co., 1860), 311–312.
5. *The Atlantic Monthly* 13 (June 1864), quoted in John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 133.
6. Ken Burns, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea* (Florentine Films and WETA Television, 2009), Introduction to Episode Two: The Last Refuge.
7. Joseph Grinnell and Tracy Storer, "Animal Life as an Asset of National Parks." *Science*, September (1916).
8. George M. Wright, Joseph S. Dixon, Ben H. Thompson, "Fauna of the National Parks of the United States: A Preliminary Survey of Faunal Relations in National Parks," in Fauna Series no. 1 (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1933), 1.
9. Lary M. Dilsaver, ed., *America's National Park System: The Critical Documents* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1994), 239.
10. William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." In *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1996), 69 ff.
11. David N. Cole and Laurie Yung, eds., *Beyond Naturalness: Rethinking Park and Wilderness Stewardship in an Era of Rapid Change* (Washington: Island Press, 2010), 26.
12. William C. Tweed, "An Idea in Trouble: Thoughts About the Future of Traditional National Parks in the United States." *George Wright Forum* 27, no. 1 (2010): 11.
13. Daniel B. Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 124, vi.