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## Spiritual Lives of Great Environmentalists: John Wesley Powell and John Lane

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How many “environmentalists” were there in the 19th century? Probably the same number as in the 18th century, 17th, etc., all the way to ancient times: none. It is problematic to apply a contemporary concept to the culture of a previous time. The context is entirely different. Americans in the 19th century flowed across the continent with the power of a flood and John Wesley Powell was in that flow. The expansion of industrializing America framed his childhood experience, inspired his adult career, and became, as it were, a personal religion, not only for him but for many of his fellow citizens (Worster, 2001). Yet, Powell’s perspectives on the land were distinct from those of most of his contemporaries. He was a prophet indeed, a voice crying from the wilderness. Unfortunately, many of his efforts to conserve the environment fell on deaf ears. Even today, there are those who deny his wisdom, acting as though there are still no limits to our natural resources. Will we ever learn?

Inquiries have been made to such prominent environmental organizations as the Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, the Nature Conservancy, and the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) listserv for contacts and persons interested in sharing their environmental/spiritual views. To date, few have come forth. Perhaps there is skepticism as to the bias with which this series of essays is presented. However, there is no prescribed view that is acceptable while that of another is unacceptable. As is evidenced here and in previous issues, any and all views are acceptable. Nothing is edited save for that done by the computer’s spell check program. Some may view their spiritual perspective as personal. “Does that mean it is private, also?” Others may hold to the opinion that environmental science and spirituality are incompatible. Yet, recent to ancient scholarship suggests otherwise (D’Souza, 2007).

Regardless of your own bias, this series has made two things clear. First, individuals can and do make a difference when it comes to improving the environmental health of a small place, large region, or the entire world. Second, the individual’s spiritual perspective influences their environmental behavior. What is your environmental legacy, large or small? How has your spiritual perspective influenced that legacy? I appreciate John Lane’s willingness to share his environmental legacy and the spiritual perspective he holds, which is making the world an environmentally healthier place for us all.

### **The Environmental Legacy of John Wesley Powell (1834-1902)**

Perhaps the most significant work of an environmentalist, regardless of the century when the individual was born, is to march to the sound of a different drummer, to stand apart from the tide of the times, and work to make the world a more beautiful and healthy place rather than sell one’s soul in the marketplace of convenience and commercial exploitation for self-centered motives. Powell’s

biographers differ in their assessment of Powell's environmental insight and contribution, yet they agree that his approach to addressing America's environmental problems was unconventional because he was a revolutionary. Stegner (1953) said Powell pierced through the misconceptions held dear by the majority of his fellow citizens. "Environmentally" speaking, Powell was probably one of the most powerfully original and prophetic individuals of the latter 19th century. Practically speaking, his importance as a conservationist is entirely related to the differences in natural conditions between the West and other regions of the country. He seems to have been the only national figure to have noticed these differences and responded with meaningful policy recommendations appropriate to the situation on the ground.

Stegner (1953) went on to say that his positions were so unlike that of his contemporaries that he was as David against Goliath or Beowulf against Grendel's dam. He challenged the odds and he met the enemy on their own ground. Behind him was none of the support that many of his contemporaries enjoyed, including some of his opposition. He was not wealthy and well-placed like O.C. Marsh or socially prominent and much-befriended like Clarence King. He had not Ferdinand Hayden's well-developed lobby and no long-term friends in high places. Additionally, he could count on the backing of no university. He had little else with which to fight other than his clarity of understanding, his personal vigor, and the general support of disinterested, scientific men. With these, he made his political maneuvers much like he had maneuvered the rapids on the Colorado River, with a combination of foresight, planning, calculated risk, and just plain guts.

Powell was an exceptional character, like a man standing outside the status quo, who insisted on revealing the reality of so many unpleasant possibilities. These included conflict, spoliation, monopoly, and waste. He held true to his convictions and held his ground in spite of the political and personal costs. Powell presented a complete revolution in the system of land surveys, land policy, land tenure, and farming methods in the West. He denied almost every cherished fantasy and myth associated with the westward migration and the American dream of the Garden of the World. These myths continue little abated today as land managers and developers in the West make the same claim as those of the 19th century – unlimited future supplies of water.

In the introduction to his *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region*, T.H. Watkins called the report "possibly the most revolutionary document ever to tumble off the presses of the Government Printing Office" (Powell, 1983). According to Darrah (1951), he was the first to publically call for reforms in federal land policy. Powell was a crusader for the protection of the public domain for the public, not for the financial benefit of large monopolies. The audacity of Powell to correct the misconceived and inadequate laws affecting the development of the West was unprecedented. Probably the boldest aspect of his crusade was to base his proposals on sound scientific data instead of political wrangling. It was ridiculous of Powell to use his extensive explorations and experience in the West to guide his management ideas. Finally, Powell was preposterous to demand that Americans actually understand the land before they developed it. Understanding the land meant that people would have to think of it differently and work cooperatively to use it sustainably. The conservation movement developed a sound foundation under Powell's vision and insight. Powell's perspective grew out of time spent on the land itself rather than the theoretical halls of eastern universities.

Powell's formal education was scattered and limited but he learned much in the field. He managed the family farm, hiked across the state of Michigan, took long river journeys down the Ohio, Illinois, Des Moines, and Mississippi rivers from St. Paul to New Orleans. He was the son of a farmer and had run a farm almost single-handedly. He developed a very close connection with the land from an agrarian perspective, therefore, his report on arid lands gave irrigable and pasturage lands primary attention. While he focused on farming, Powell understood the role of fires in maintaining the natural health of forests and the subsequent impact forest health had on irrigation projects at lower elevations. Yet, he did not always agree with others in the conservation movement on matters of ecological detail, expressing greater faith in human interventions in nature than others would have liked. For example, Professor Sargent and John Muir felt that a forest could do a better job of conserving water than an artificial reservoir, as Powell had expressed (Worster, 2001).

The seeds of reform Powell introduced were of monumental proportions. Consider the following. First, since a 160 acre farm lacking the means to irrigate its crops was incapable of supporting a homesteading family, he recommended that the size of an irrigated farm be reduced to 80 acres. Second, he proposed that grazing land be carved up into units of 2560 acres, 16 times the accepted size of a homestead unit. Third, Powell was committed to the principle that water rights should accompany ownership of the land. This limited the possibility of land monopolies as it meant water was not a separate commodity but an integral element of the land. Fourth, he proposed that fencing be eliminated and the land managed by cooperatives of local residents. Finally, he wanted irrigation districts to be established by the federal government and managed by local communities following topographic boundaries rather than static rectangles (Powell, 1983).

If judged by the popularity of his proposals, Powell would score low indeed. However, hindsight paints a very different picture of Powell and the effectiveness of his ideas and proposals. Though largely ignored by the promulgators of myth, his vision produced the consolidation of land surveys, the formation of the US Geologic Survey, and the creation of a Public Lands Commission. Additionally, Powell proposed that the land surveys be performed by the Coast and Geodetic Survey rather than the General Land Office. This would place the surveys on scientific footing, out of the realm of politics.

Though his *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region* recommended that lands be classified for their commodious use in timber, minerals, grazing, and irrigation resources, he set the tone for thinking of land in terms of multiple uses. Such sustainability concepts were not normally associated with the conservation efforts of the 19th century. Land value in the 19th century was strictly associated with utilization. Consequently, today's critics of the boomers victory look back and say that the last best chance of managing the West in an intelligent manner for the greatest good for the greatest number went by the wayside (Stegner, 1953).

Though Powell valued land using a variety of commodities, none was valued as highly as water due to its overall scarcity beyond the 100th meridian. For Powell, western land had no value without water. Successful farming was best achieved, according to Powell by ignoring rainfall figures and concentrating on the development of reliable water delivery through irrigation ditches, canals, and the like. By controlling water in this way, control of the land would likewise be achieved. He denied the hopeful but entirely unsubstantiated myth that rain followed the plow. The Homestead Act's promise of free land for family farms was a hoax according to Powell. This Act only guaranteed suffering and sorrow as hopeful settlers staked their all on a gamble they were sure to lose, sooner or later (DeBuys, 2001).

Powell's emphasis on irrigation agriculture required a new spirit of cooperation, hence new institutions. His plan for communitarian development was probably his most original proposal but also the least popular with politician and public alike. In a nutshell, his plan could be described as "federal ownership with local control." Today, we would use terms like holistic or sustainable to describe Powell's ideas of resource management, which were far ahead of their time. Rather than an anecdotal basis for designing a land system, Powell's plan insisted on complying with the land's limits based on the facts not the myths and fantasies of speculators. Eastern methodologies were found to be ill-suited to conditions beyond the 100th meridian since the West was far more heterogeneous than the East (DeBuys, 2001). The West had increasingly varied topography, climate, altitudes, crops, opportunities, and problems. The West was far more complex. The only unity found in the West was drought.

Powell's recommendations required such a significant advancement in understanding and a drastic change in our legal and land systems that the American mind did not take them in. The myth was perpetuated that there must be some way of overcoming the environment or that the environment would adapt itself to our desires. Unhappily, the experiment proved to be a social failure with the destruction of the land as the final result. What 19th century America did in error will forever prevent us from catching up with it altogether. The 1877 Timber and Stone Act further complicated a land

policy already snarled with red tape, riddled with loopholes, and rotten with dishonest practices, which “encouraged monopolization while throwing dust in the public’s eyes.” (Darrah, 1951)

Powell’s environmental legacy did not become evident until the next generation took the reigns of land stewardship. It was more than a quarter century before the first pasturage districts in the form of grazing allotments were established on the National Forests created after Powell’s death. It was yet another quarter century before a system of grazing leases was established on the remaining public domain. Powell’s communitarian approach to land management ran counter to the prevailing individualistic attitude of the day best described as social Darwinism. The word “ecology” had scarcely made its debut. But many of Powell’s recommendations were founded on its premises. American society was slowly beginning to develop an environmental awareness based on these themes but few of Powell’s readers understood the concepts he wrote about. Powell was not an environmental saint but he probably understood the integrated relationships between different natural elements of the landscape in the West better than any other single person (DeBuys, 2001). In a speech at the International Irrigation Congress in Los Angeles in 1893, he stated “you are piling up a heritage of conflict and litigation over water rights for there is not sufficient water to supply the land.” John Wesley Powell was a man ahead of his time yet, many still today refuse to acknowledge the truths he established, namely that the land has limits. The program that the Conservation Congress accepted and adopted and fought for in 1907 was essentially Powell’s General Plan of 1878, amplified and particularized to fit a later generation’s knowledge and needs. Powell became a founder of the national movement to conserve the land, and to adjust settlement and economic use to its limitations. To a lesser extent he sought to preserve its beauty and diversity for future generations (Worster, 2001).

### **Spiritual Perspective of John Wesley Powell**

Powell’s parents held to an animated, evangelical faith. They prayed that their son would be a magnetic prophet for America like his name sake was for the Methodist church in England, drawing sinners out of corruption. They trained their child carefully in biblical doctrine and instilled in him a strong moral character. They taught him to love God above the things of the earth and to make Jesus his lord and master and trust in the promise, “I am the light of the world, he that follows me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life.” (*St. John* 8:12) (Worster, 2001)

Darrah (1951) related how Powell’s father was a full-time circuit rider for the Methodist Church. The itinerant preachers of that day, including Joseph Powell, endured hunger, cold weather, accidents, and abuse as they spread the Gospel message. In the process, they civilized much of the West with their earnest devotion and vigilant faith, seeking to positively influence their listeners even beyond the Gospel message. They often sought to increase the general knowledge of any who would listen, acting as precursors to the 20th century book mobile, carrying books and newspapers in their saddlebags. Joseph Powell frequently loaned such items to people and told them of mechanical inventions, agricultural advances, political issues and scattered gossip.

Powell’s mother Mary taught her children to read using the Bible and British literature. The family gathered morning and evening to pray, sing, and read Scripture. She taught and with her life exemplified the point that God encouraged spontaneous obedience to Him out of love. God wanted his children to practice daily virtue and to act with solicitude and love toward others, especially family members, treating one another with kindness, patience, and understanding. Powell learned Scripture well, memorizing the stories, proverbs, and cadences found there in. Later in life he proudly remembered that while still a small boy he had memorized the four Gospels and several hymns to nurture his love of singing (Stegner, 1953).

During Powell’s early years the success of several Protestant sects created boundless optimism among their many adherents. America was evidently God’s chosen country they concluded, attempting to win over America’s political vitality with Christian morality, including the belief that slavery was wrong. The case against slavery came primarily from Christian sects. In fact, discrediting slavery may have been evangelical Protestantism’s greatest social achievement in the

18th and 19th centuries. This aspect of Powell's faith propelled him into active service in the Union army. Powell's religious convictions were, thus expressed openly to address the social needs of the day. His family regularly attended church and they were ready to do good work on the behalf of their local congregation (Darrah, 1951).

Industrialization in Powell's time saw the United States become the leading economic power in the world and this affluence at the individual level was experienced for the first time on a far greater scale than ever before. This made it difficult to raise a child in the way God and his prophet had instructed. All these economic feats testified to a love of the world, a confidence in human nature, a passion for wealth and power that was decidedly secular.

American culture, of which Powell was a part, saw the rising influence of the natural sciences on the social landscape and rationalism supplanting the faith of traditional religion with a new secularism. In Powell's day science meant geology and evolution as expressed by Charles Darwin. The contest for supremacy between religion and science in the American mind was mirrored in Powell as nowhere else. He reflected the conscience of a nation struggling with issues of justice, cultural diversity, and man's inhumanity to mankind (DeBuys, 2001).

Powell hungered for adventure, some blank space on the map that had yet to be explored. His chosen profession of scientist, rather than evangelist, would satisfy that hunger and plunge him into a national controversy over which world view would assume social authority across the Country. His pursuit of natural history lead to conclusions considered troubling to evangelical religion. Powell acknowledged that God had set in motion natural processes at some indeterminate point in the past but saw no need to invoke divine revelation to explain how things had worked since then. Once Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published, his traditional Methodist faith ceased to play an important role in defining his outlook on life (Stegner, 1953).

As industrialization expanded, it helped some to focus their attention on the essence of nature from a spiritual point of view. For some nature confirmed the reality of God, but not Powell. For example, William Paley, author of *Natural Theology*, in 1802 showed that nature exemplified the wisdom and benevolence of God. Powell was elevated by the landscape but his emotions were completely secular and always checked by scientific reason. The boldest scientific theories of the period came from biologist Charles Darwin and Geologist Charles Lyell. Powell embraced them both, though other prominent scientists of the time remained religious, such as Clarence King and Louis Agassiz who opposed Darwinian evolution.

On his second Colorado River adventure Powell did not honor the Sabbath to the chagrin of his companions. The religious men on the trip preached, sang psalms, and desired to rest on the Sabbath to review their moral responsibilities to others on the expedition. They also found great inspiration in creation as it pointed to a higher Creator. For example, S.V. Jones said there must be a power higher than nature that controls her works. Jones as well as others looked through nature up to nature's God. Powell's religious faith on the other hand, mirrored the evolution of faith observed by many of the educated elite across the country, described best as secularization (D'Souza, 2007). All in all, Powell remains a fascinating character, one worth knowing, for his environmental legacy continues and his perspective on the land is now more important than ever.

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**John Lane**

John Lane is writer-in-residence, Wofford College, Spartanburg, SC, from 1988 with teaching responsibilities in Humanities, Film, Environmental Literature, and Creative Writing.

1. Please describe briefly your most important environmental contribution to local or global preservation/conservation efforts. What is your environmental legacy?

My "environmental legacy" falls in many areas: first there are the books I have edited and published that critics, reviewers, scholars, and readers would classify as "environmental." In my case I need to make this distinction because it is not all my work, though from my first publications my work was often singled out as being deeply concerned with place and even "nature" or "ecology." My last three prose books--*Waist Deep in Black Water*, *Chattooga*, and most recently *Circling Home*-- have all been called "nature writing," and *Circling Home* even appears as a University of Georgia Press "Wormsloe Foundation Nature Book." Whatever is in those books is a legacy of sorts. A second area of "legacy" comes from my local writing in a column called "*The Kudzu Telegraph*," read locally by 30,000 or so people every week. I've been doing this for three years now. Every column takes on something which interests me in this place-- some issue, event, thought, book that has caught my attention. Local people know me as the author of these weekly columns even more than they recognize me as an author of books. And then there is the teaching I've done at Wofford College. I have recently been chair of a task force that is creating environmental studies major that will be housed on a three-acre parcel on a piedmont creek in an old mill office building. None of this would have happened had I not pushed for it relentlessly. That, in itself, is probably one of the largest "environmental" legacies. And I would teach environmental literature courses for a decade now and hundreds of students have taken them. The sum of our discussions and my lectures and our reading would serve as such a legacy. Finally, there is my own effort to "green" my family's life—we have built a sustainable house, we try to reduce our carbon footprint. We work everyday to do this. That too is a legacy of sorts.

2. Please summarize your spiritual beliefs.

How about Pagan/Zen Buddhist/Methodist? My spiritual beliefs were assembled sort of like a landscape-- with various phases of erosion and deposition over 50 years. Methodism is probably still a sort of bedrock but that bedrock has been covered over with these other things-- including New Age, Zen, and agnosticism. There have been uplifts and subsidence. I practice attention, but I do not go to church. I seek the advice of the college chaplain (Methodist) from time-to-time but it would never occur to me to pray in the traditional way that I did in childhood. I have written about my spiritual belief in two places: "Medicine Wheel" (in *Waist Deep*) and "Faith," just out in an anthology called *Living Blue in the Red States* (University of Nebraska Press).

3. How did your beliefs develop? What person, text, or event most influenced your spiritual beliefs?

Recently I have found great spiritual comfort in two very interesting places--Thomas Berry and John McPhee.

4. How does your faith equip you to be environmentally aware, involved, and active?

It helps me see how complex the world is. I am about as far from a fundamentalist as you can get. As my scientist friend Ab Abercrombie is fond of saying, "There is a simple answer for every complex question and it is always wrong."

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