



**Renewal in the Wilderness:
A Spiritual Guide to Connecting
with God in the Natural World
by John Lionberger**

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Like John Lionberger, the spiritual experience that set me on the path to ministry took place outside, unexpectedly, although under warmer weather conditions than Lionberger describes in *Renewal in the Wilderness*. Lionberger's encounter was on a midlife Outward Bound trip during winter in northern Minnesota, USA. Skiing back to retrieve someone's abandoned pack, he felt "a shower stream of pure and profound warmth, from the inside out" (p. 17) and a sense of perfect peace. After wondering whether he was becoming hypothermic or had suffered a small stroke, he considered whether it could be God.

Much later, after wrestling with God and finally surrendering to faith, Lionberger still struggled to figure out how to translate his new relationship into action. He had the impulse toward ministry, but not the traditional sort as he understood it. When he finally asked himself what to do about his desire, he was answered immediately by an inner voice that said: "You are an idiot, aren't you? Take people into the wilderness to find what you found" (p. 22).

Lionberger listened. He created *Renewal in the Wilderness* ministry, which takes men and women in midlife on wilderness adventures to help them reconnect spiritually. He notes that the wilderness spiritual experience seems embedded in our DNA and illustrates this by quoting from scriptural passages and traditional wisdom from the world's religions.

Too often, however, people recognize their hunger for spiritual depth and even recognize that they might find it outdoors, but don't act. They find excuses for remaining comfortable in habitual activities that do not feed them. Rather than enter the wilderness, they decide to be adult and rational. Lionberger queries, "What about a spiritual quest is rational?" (p. 43).

The women and men who join Lionberger on his adventures learn how to create the conditions that invite spiritual

encounters. They open their senses, becoming attentive to each moment. They push themselves to their limit, finding the edge of their strength and the beginning of God's. They find wholeness, and sometimes, holiness.

Although not every spiritual director or directee has access to these trips, or even wilderness, Lionberger provides suggestions and exercises to help people create openings for deep to meet deep. He suggests direct contact with nature, but also indicates that people can meet Spirit in their own wilderness times, such as after a divorce. He emphasizes finding the extraordinary in the ordinary, the "door that does not look like a door" (p. 98). He advises us to let go of expectations which he terms "killers of possibility" (p. 85).

The heart of this book is the wild. It is there that Lionberger, and the people from his trips (who he quotes extensively) leave their comfort zones to test themselves, to find silence and solitude, and hope for transcendence. Every evening Lionberger and his fellow sojourners sit in a circle and share their experiences of the day. One night a man named Frank told how a hummingbird hovered by a flower on his Hawaiian shirt for about thirty seconds. He asked, "How can I say I saw God in that hummingbird?" Then he added, "But how can I say that I didn't?" (p. 23).

It is the mystery and surprise of Spirit that Lionberger and Frank find in the wilderness. Read their stories, be inspired, and go on your own exploration. ■

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