

# Family & Faith



Tribune Photos/SHAYNA BRESLIN

People with open minds can find healing and refreshment in the midst of nature. "The wilderness is God's 'hull-scraper'; it strips us of the barnacles of civilization that slow us, distract us, and divert us in our pursuit of God — and God's pursuit of us," John Lionberger, a former South Bend resident, writes in his book "Renewal in the Wilderness: A Spiritual Guide to Connecting With God in the Natural World." Visitors to St. Patrick's County Park in South Bend will find a peaceful place to meditate at this small overlook near the St. Joseph River.

## 'Utterly cared for'

### Minister writes of finding peace, link to God in nature

By **CHRISTINE COX**  
Tribune Staff Writer

**J**ohn Lionberger, a United Church of Christ minister and religious author, admits there are times when he is tempted to not believe in God.

"Faith just isn't a head thing at all. I could talk myself out of God just in a heartbeat," he says in a telephone interview.

"But if I listen to my heart, I think that's the truer voice. That's the grounded voice. I guess, the ancient voice."

It's a voice he didn't hear growing up in South Bend, the son of a doctor and part of a family that went to church in an era "when it was important to be seen in church."

"I just couldn't quite make any sense of it. It looked like God either couldn't control (the world) or gave us just enough rope to hang ourselves and we were doing a pretty good job of it," he says.

Fast-forward through college, a master's degree in journalism, marriage, two children and a successful career in broadcasting and the cable industry.

In celebration of Lionberger's 50th birthday, his wife, Jane, gives him a seven-day trip with Outward Bound. The participants use cross-country skis to break a trail for a dog-sled team through forests and across frozen lakes in northern Minnesota. The trip is so rigorous, they sleep in the snow under tarps with no tents.

It's during a moment when Lionberger is alone on this trip that he feels God. Dark is approaching, and he takes a moment to stretch before rejoining his group.

"In that posture, and in that cold, without warning, I am suddenly overwhelmed with the sense that I'm standing in a shower of pure and profound warmth, from the inside out," he writes.

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Lionberger



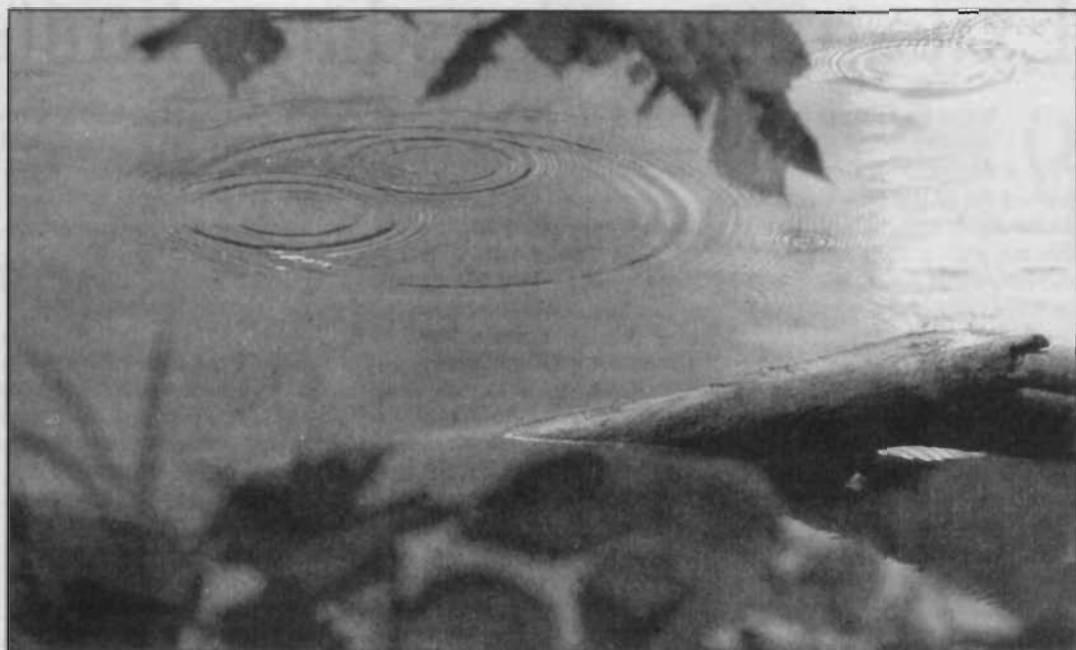
"The delicacy amid the brutal, the toughness of life, and the astonishing diversity and ingenuity of creation isn't lost on any of us," Lionberger writes of finding small treasures during trips to the wilderness, such as this butterfly.

## Nature wraps itself around soul of many

**I**n his new book "Renewal in the Wilderness: A Spiritual Guide to Connecting With God in the Natural World," John Lionberger uses quotes from famous writers, philosophers and leaders to illustrate the importance of nature to the human soul. Here are some quotes from the book, including Lionberger's own words.

- "The closer we are to Nature, the closer we are to God." — Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, German poet and philosopher
- "I believe in the cosmos. All of us are linked to the cosmos. Look at the sun: If there is no sun, then we cannot exist. So nature is my god. To me, nature is sacred; trees are my temples and forests are my cathedrals." — Mikhail Gorbachev, former president of the Soviet Union
- "God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but on the trees and flowers and clouds and stars." — Martin Luther, German theologian and church reformer
- "The word (nature) comes from the Latin, to be born." — John Hay, 20th-century nature writer
- "True silence is the rest of the mind, and is to the spirit what sleep is to the body, nourishment and refreshment." — William Penn, a pacifist Quaker and founder of the state of Pennsylvania
- "God ... cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature — trees, flowers, grass — grows in silence; see the stars, the moon, and the sun, how they move in silence." — Mother Teresa, Roman Catholic nun and humanitarian
- "In gaining our comforts, we have lost much of our ancient and intimate connection with nature, with ourselves, and finally, with God. ... Our concept of the Divine becomes centered almost completely in our head, in our intellect." — Lionberger
- "Wild places demand we live with open and honest hearts. In the wilderness we can move beyond what the rational mind can explain to experience the transcendent, to rediscover a life-renewing joy in being alive." — Lionberger

— Tribune Staff Writer Christine Cox



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## Minister

writes in his new book "Renewal in the Wilderness: A Spiritual Guide to Connecting With God in the Natural World" (SkyLight Paths Publishing, \$16.99).

"A sense of peace that's bone-true and javelin-straight floods me, dwarfing any similar sensation I've ever had. My eyes shoot open to see what's causing this sensation of pure warmth, but there is nothing to see except the darkening sky."

He feels "utterly cared for." "I want an explanation, but there is none," he writes. "In the back of my mind there's a niggling thought that I quickly shove down ... then shove down again ... and again. Then, despite my severest attempts to trap it, the thought springs full-blown and scary into my consciousness.

"'Could it be God?'"

Hell, no, he tells himself. But the peaceful feeling stays, and he searches for answers when he returns home.

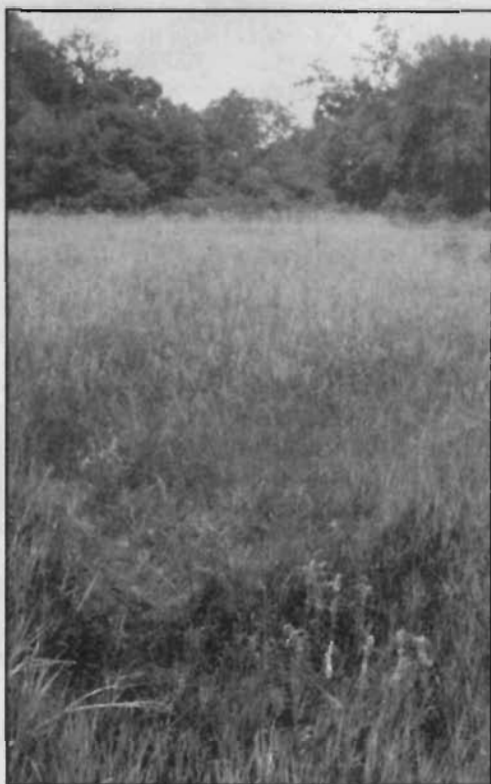
As he wrestles with his newfound beliefs, God compounds his problem by calling him to ministry. He's in the library when God "ambushes" him as he's thinking about what type of ministry to start.

"And the voice of inspiration (God?) answered immediately, something to this effect: 'You are an idiot, aren't you? Take people into the wilderness to find what you found!'" he writes.

So in 2002, after finishing a master's degree in divinity from Chicago Theological Seminary, he started *Renewal in the Wilderness*, a non-denominational ministry. The program takes men and women of all faiths into the wilderness for one day to a week. He averages 4½ trips a year.

Why the wilderness? Because throughout time and across religions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Taoism, Shintoism, among others, nature has been the place for connecting with God, Lionberger writes. The vastness and unpredictability of the wilderness are reminders that God is a powerful creator and that people need to find God in the places He created.

"God is not the God of comfortable places," he writes. "God usually doesn't visit us in life-changing ways at our



ABOVE: A few raindrops create concentric circles rippling outward in the St. Joseph River on July 18, just before a storm.

LEFT: John Lionberger, author of "Renewal in the Wilderness: A Spiritual Guide to Connecting With God in the Natural World," says natural places, even those close to home, can provide transcendent experiences. St. Patrick's County Park in South Bend, with its tall grasses, can be one of those places.

Tribune Photos SHAYNA BRESLIN

### Book signing Saturday

Former South Bend resident John Lionberger will sign copies of his new book, "Renewal in the Wilderness: A Spiritual Guide to Connecting With God in the Natural World," on Saturday. The event will be at 3 p.m. at Barnes & Noble Booksellers, 4601 Grape Road, Mishawaka. Published by SkyLight Paths Publishing, the book sells for \$16.99.

The South Bend appearance is just one stop on a book tour for Lionberger, who lives in Evanston, Ill.

For more information about his book and his wilderness ministry, go to [www.renewalinthewilderness.org](http://www.renewalinthewilderness.org).

desks or in our easy chairs. Spiritually or otherwise, places on the edge — wilderness places (of any kind) — have much to teach us. It's always been that way."

His book, which was released in June, takes the reader with Lionberger as he canoes on the Rio Grande, backpacks in Alaska, mountain-bikes in North Carolina, walks Incan trails in the Andes, and wanders through other wilderness spots in the United States and abroad.

Though Lionberger travels far and wide, he makes it clear to readers that there are opportunities for wilderness experiences close to home.

"You don't need thousands of miles of open space and a backpack or canoe to move into a natural setting," he writes. "Think local parks, state parks, rivers, ponds, or lakes. Where might you go this week?"

The important thing is to "go to those places with awareness, open to surprise" and to live in the moment.

Lionberger, who lives in Evanston, Ill., has a master's degree in journalism, and it shows in the heartfelt details of his writing. The book is never pushy or pompous. It doesn't alienate those who don't believe in God or aren't certain about their beliefs.

Indeed, Lionberger writes "Even atheists have experiences in the wilderness that transcend the normal boundaries of their lives and move them to believe that they're connected to the larger universe. ... And while they may not call those experiences 'spiritual,' they know they've been touched in ways that defy both reason and explanation."

That this experience is universal and age-old never fails to impress him: "The experience has been so similar for so many thousands of years. ... This is stunning. This is just stunning."

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