



A Church without Walls

Andrea Hayes is an Irish broadcaster, producer and best-selling author. She is a familiar voice on Dublin's Sunshine 106.8fm and has trained with Anamcharadas as a spiritual companion. She was asked to act as MC for the papal visit to The Phoenix Park. This article continues her occasional series on the wonders of the outdoors.

As a child with hearing loss, I was a disciple of silence. Living in an urban setting I craved wild places like woods, sand dunes, large parks or wild fields. My childhood experience of the natural world is something I began to seek out during liminal periods in my adult life.

Many people who love nature and seek out sacred spaces like national parks cite impactful nature experiences from childhood, although often they were not aware of the effects of the experience at the time but say that they feel 'safe', 'home' and 'at one' with a higher power when they are in nature.

My life reveals a connection to nature from my formative years and as my own spiritual journey continued to unfold, I found myself going back to college to study an MA



Glenveagh National Park, Co. Donegal

in Applied Spirituality, awarded by Waterford Institute of Technology. My research allowed me to explore the link between spirituality, nature and specifically national parks. In research I was encountering the great mystery, and fundamentally engaging with the sacred in national parks. I was interested in the connection between people, nature and wonder, what is the 'inexpressible delight' that John Muir, the founding father of the National Parks, wrote about? People still remark that 'Muir's Scottish spirit is alive in Muir Woods.' Do we bring the spirit of the woods with us in our engagement with nature, or do we engage with spirit? Was my experience unique or is the experience



of nature something rooted in the interior self, underpinned with, and permeated by, honouring and writing our story, experiencing nature and in placing trust in our faith.

Robert H. Nelson wrote in his article 'Wilderness, Church, and State' that environmentalists commonly say 'that wilderness areas are the "churches" of environmentalism'. In my own research I contemplated many questions: if nature is identified as having a unique spirit of place where one experiences space, solitude and scale by being in contact with vast wild spaces, could this sacred space be a new place of worship in a postmodern society? Is a national park, or the park maybe

hidden away in your locality, a church without walls?

I explored these questions, and the findings suggest that walking, awareness and journaling about being present to the process, resulted in a deeper level of self-knowing for all the participants. My participants spoke about a sense of connection, transformation and wellbeing from being present to the experience of walking in national parks. Given the findings in my research, I would suggest that during this time of uncertainty because of the global pandemic COVID-19, individuals have awakened to the sacred nature of places like parks, and for some they have connected with their spiritual selves in ways that they have never experienced before. Research carried out by the ESRI has shown that visiting green spaces, such as public parks, benefits physical and mental health, and overall wellbeing. According to the findings, even one visit to a green space per month offers health benefits.

If you have forgotten the joy of exploring your local park why not allow your inner child to take a trip to the park and explore all the beauty, mystery and even moments of spiritual connection it has to offer. In Ireland we have six national parks: Ballycroy, Co. Mayo; The Burren, Co. Clare; Connemara, Co. Galway; Glenveagh, Co. Donegal; Killarney, Co. Kerry; and in the Wicklow Mountains. Further details can be found on the National Parks & Wildlife Service website, www.npws.ie 