



The Heart of the Wild Reveals Our Spiritual Life

Excerpts from
"America's National Parks"
from *The Hour of Land*

by Terry Tempest
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I learned early on we live by wild mercy.

I was standing inside Timpanogos Cave (a national monument) as an 8-year-old child that marked me. Hiking to the entrance of the cave with our church group, we were ushered in by a park ranger. Immediately, the cool air locked inside the mountain enveloped us and we wore it as loose clothing. Immense stalactites and stalagmites hung down from the ceiling and rose up from the floor, declaring themselves teeth. We were inside the gaping mouth of an animal and we were careful not to disturb the beast, traversing the cave on a narrow constructed walkway above the floor so as not to disturb its fragility. But it was the Great Heart of Timpanogos Cave that captured my attention.

When everyone else left the charismatic form, I stayed. I needed more time to be closer to it, to watch its red-orange aura pulsating in the cavernous space of shadows. I wanted to touch the heart, run the palms of my hands on its side, believing that if I did, I could better understand my own heart, which was invisible to me. I was only inches away, wondering whether it would be cold or hot to the touch. It looked like ice, but it registered as fire.

Suddenly, I heard the heavy door slam and darkness clamp down. The group left without me. I was forgotten—alone—locked inside the cave. I waved my hand in front of my face. Nothing. I was held in a darkness so deep that my

eyes seemed shut even though they were open. All I could hear was the sound of water dripping and the beating heart of the mountain.

I don't know how long I stood inside Timpanogos Cave before our church leader realized I was missing, but it was long enough to have experienced how fear moves out of panic toward wonder. Inside the cave, I knew I would be found. What I didn't know was what would find me—the spirit of Timpanogos.

To this day, my spiritual life is found inside the heart of the wild. I do not fear it, I court it. When I am away, I anticipate my return, needing to touch stone, rock, water, the trunks of trees, the sway of grasses, the barbs of a feather, the fur left behind by a shedding bison.

Wallace Stegner, a mentor of mine, wrote: "If we preserved as parks only those places that have no economic possibilities, we would have no parks. And in the decades to come, it will not be only the buffalo and the trumpeter swan that need sanctuaries. Our own species is going to need them, too. It needs them now."

Excerpts from The Hour of Land: A Personal Topography of America's National Parks by Terry Tempest Williams, reprinted with permission.

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