

After my son died, I went looking for God in the desert

## **If anything had an honest answer, it would be the canyon's cool indifference and heartbreaking beauty.**

by [Belden C. Lane](#) in the [March 9, 2022](#) issue



Orphan Mesa in Abiquiu, New Mexico's Ghost Ranch (Photo by Ned Abenroth)

There are times when the soul needs a canyon. A wide, empty space unoffended by rage, uninsulted by tears. What are canyons, anyway, but absences, losses, vast places for pouring out grief? When you see your life as a thing made of holes, you can find a strange solace in the deep ravines and towering mesas of a high-desert landscape. That's why the haunting canyons of Ghost Ranch in northern New Mexico have called to me again in the past year. I've needed the no-nonsense, cut-to-the-bone effrontery of a wilderness terrain.

Last January our 40-year-old son, Jon, was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia. He was a tattoo-covered hunk of a man, working heavy construction, having made his way to sobriety through years of addiction. His wife and daughter loved him to

pieces, as everyone did who knew him. Extended rounds of chemo seemed at first to do the job. In August he was declared cancer-free. He rang the bell at the hospital. But two months later the cancer returned with a vengeance. He was dead within a week. “Babu,” my five-year-old granddaughter asked me, “what if Mommy dies like Daddy did? Are you gonna die, too, Babu?”

The months that followed were hard. The onslaught of COVID had been bad enough, keeping us from visiting Jon in the hospital, isolating us from friends. For me, painful prostate surgery interrupted the grieving process still further, followed by rotator cuff repair and a diagnosis of skin cancer a few months later. Old age had suddenly galloped its way into my life. I didn’t sleep well. I couldn’t write. Dark thoughts preyed on the edge of my consciousness. Now and then I found myself peeing on the bathroom rug by mistake. Hafiz would have laughed at the thought of old men just getting old, wandering ever closer to the Beloved’s embrace.

But I wasn’t laughing; my spiritual life was a mess. I was walking up a steep path where I kept praying long after praying had ceased to make any sense. I found affinity, if not comfort, in the “terrible sonnets” of Gerard Manley Hopkins, that harried Jesuit who cried out of the depths:

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,  
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.  
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?

I was harrowed by an apocalyptic god from my youth, a god I thought I’d left behind who arbitrarily assigns death to whomever he chooses, an omnipotent deity pulling strings by the naked power of his will. This god had snuffed out my father’s life—by suicide—when I was 13. At the time, I’d perceived it as punishment for my early teenage rebellion. To have Jon’s life snatched away just as suddenly, now, in the closing years of my life, was a cruel irony, and that god reasserted himself powerfully. Questioning my faith altogether, I wrestled with a divine being who didn’t seem to give a damn, all the while longing for one who could hold me tightly to her chest, choking back her tears.

If anything had an honest answer, it had to be the cool indifference and heartbreaking beauty of wilderness. I needed canyon country. Supported by brothers from Illuman, a men’s fellowship that grew out of Richard Rohr’s work, I embarked alone for six days out into the rocky terrain north of Abiquiu, New Mexico.

Though I'd been reading mystics for years, I'd never trusted in visions or miracles. I was mesmerized by the mystics' intimacy with God. But I'd always shrunk back in hesitation from any no-holds-barred embrace of my own. What kept me from exulting in an unqualified yes? I think it was that old god, crouching around the edges of my consciousness. I was afraid of being hurt, tricked by a ruthless god—red in tooth and claw, hiding under a guise of tenderness. Had I ever been able to trust in the God I'd always wanted to love?

What I *have* learned to trust in over the years is wilderness. Again and again on backcountry trails, I've seen fierce grandeur and fragile beauty walking hand in hand. Wilderness, with all its ambiguities, has been my teacher—showing how power and love, terror and delight, can be held in the same mystery. That's why I needed the desert once again.

I went to New Mexico with the hope of healing Jon's spirit of the anger and anguish I'd imagined him still carrying, ten months after his death. His life had blossomed over the last dozen years since his sobriety, only to be cut down in mid-stride. He'd been one of the most caring men I knew. After his death, we found a handwritten list he'd made of people who passed through his hospital room: Jennifer, the night nurse with a six-month-old daughter; Angie, a travel nurse from Baltimore; Keith on the cleaning crew, a Cubs fan. Names were important to Jon. To be cut off so suddenly from all the people he loved must have been horrendous.

We drove north from Abiquiu along the Chama River Valley, looking for a place to park and unload our gear. Then I hiked with the elders up into red rock canyons on US Forest Service land south of Ghost Ranch. We set up base camp in the shadow of Orphan Mesa, a towering butte set apart from the rest of the landscape.

This is a haunting terrain—holding stories of murdering thieves, monstrous snakes hiding in rocks, and the restless spirits of witches riding on the wind. Archaeologists have found the fossil remains of actual monsters—dinosaurs from 200 million years ago—in the bedrock around Orphan Mesa. In 2002, a hiker discovered a fossil quarry that contained the bones of an 18-foot-long crocodile-like creature from the Late Triassic period. Folklore and the hidden mysteries of the land grow side by side in a place like this. Ancient bones give new life to lingering legends.

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Already on that first night, leaving camp and walking out alone, I lost it. Overwhelmed by an unexpected anger, I crouched against a canyon wall with my head in my hands. It's like "pushing through solid rock," Rilke writes of his own agonizing grief. "I see no way through . . . everything close to my face is stone." He cries out at last, "*You* be the master: make yourself fierce, break in." But I couldn't trust anything beyond my own rage. Coming up for air, I realized I hadn't come on this trip to release Jon. He'd have to come to release me.

I spent the next four days alone under a juniper tree near the top of a canyon, overlooking the vast emptiness between myself and Orphan Mesa. I was fasting, drinking only water, praying—for what, I didn't know. "Your absence will be my food," I said to Jon.

Night work was important during my time in the canyons. "Don't go back to sleep," Rumi kept reminding me. Waking up from a nap at 4 a.m. one morning, I decided to tell myself a story as I waited for the sun to rise. I imagined myself as a despairing Elijah, who sat under a juniper tree in the Wilderness of Zin. Having run from the threat of Queen Jezebel, he was waiting to die. Now he was perched on the edge of a canyon near the four corners of the American Southwest.

But this despairing old man had come to honor the son he and his wife had adopted 40 years earlier. The caseworker at Children and Family Services had called the night before we picked him up. "There is only one thing wrong with him," she'd said, laughing. "He has red hair." Through the years, this son would grow into what rabbis might celebrate as a *baal teshuva*, a master of repentance. Such people are not uncommon in AA circles. A *baal teshuva* is one whose holiness (in turning from a squandered life) far exceeds that of a devout person who has never sinned. In matters of failure and forgiveness, the son is often the teacher of the father.

The first hint of daybreak came with a sense of awe. The canyon still lay in darkness, but the top of Orphan Mesa began glowing with a soft, mauve-red light. It was magical, illuminated against the night. As the sun rose, the rock passed through multiple changes of color—from dark blood to burgundy to paintbrush red. I suddenly realized I was seeing my redheaded son rising as a towering mesa from the canyon depths. His greatness and his beauty wanted to assure me that all was well.

Yet I had to ask: If Jon was fine—if he didn't need any release—then what was still stirring in me? What was my work there in the desert? That's when I knew I had to deal with the oppressive god image that was cropping up again in my life, a crippling specter that held me in its grip.

This god was a composite of my fundamentalist upbringing, a twisted Calvinism, and the apotheosis of power that thrives in American culture. It was a god of absolute control, meting out punishments and rewards from a distant heaven—a god I could fear and attempt to placate, but never praise.

I could perceive this god now as an idol, part of a larger public idolatry. Offering power by association, it eats at the hearts of those submitting to its arbitrary might. It runs unchecked in a culture paralyzed by fear and misinformation. I needed to break this idol ritually, at least for myself, once and for all. There on the canyon edge.

I wondered at the time what would stand in its place. That's when the memory of Jesus came rushing back from my childhood. I thought of my Sunday school class, which met in the furnace room of the Bible church down the street from my house. There, hidden amidst paint cans, push brooms, and the sound of flames starting up in a boiler, I'd found a Jesus of profound compassion. I'd been moved at the age of ten to write a book about his death on the cross, marveling at how he had done this out of love for me. The words poured out as I scribbled on the pages of an old spiral notebook.

Jesus and his Abba had posed such a contrast to the god I heard more often from the pulpit and in public declarations of national identity. In Sunday school I'd been gripped by the unexpected vulnerability of a God I might be able to love, a power hidden in weakness. Jesus had renounced absolute control, standing instead with the wounded ones, working from below—weeping and weaving and nudging the world into a greater unity and diversity. Sitting on the canyon rim, I knew it was time to choose the God I'd first learned to love and discard the one I'd long outgrown but who still had a strange grip on me.

To encounter a canyon, we have to resist the temptation to fill what needs to be left open.

A large, flat boulder, surrounded by clusters of sagebrush, lay near the tree where I'd unrolled my sleeping bag. It became an altar. On one side I placed a heavy

triangular rock (40 pounds or more), representing the god of relentless power who ruled by fear of retribution. On the other side I laid broken strands of sage alongside my water bottle. I'd inadvertently stepped on the sage when setting up camp earlier. It symbolized the vulnerability of a common shrub, gifting the land with its fragrance. It showed me a God of compassion, identifying with those who suffer—working undercover, nurturing community, subverting injustice.

I stood before the altar. Boldly speaking to rock and sage alike, I rejected the one god and affirmed the other. Then I picked up the rock and slammed it down onto the altar with all my strength. To my amazement, it broke into smithereens, pieces scattering everywhere. Exultant, I then dipped the sage into the water and splattered everything within reach, pouring the rest of the water onto surrounding sage plants. The hair on my neck rose. The spirits of the place trembled. The whole world broke into dance.

I'd certainly gotten more than I bargained for in this foray into canyon country. By the time I reached my last night alone in the wilds, I didn't know what more to expect. On traditional vision quests, this is when you're supposed to finally break through. But nothing came.

I waited for hours as the night rolled on—struggling to stay awake, counting distant lightning strikes in the western sky. I decided at last simply to sit through the rest of the night, content with what had already come. My mind wandered back to the night of Jon's death. We had sat at his bedside for hours as his breath gradually slowed, the morphine easing his way toward the end. At 3 a.m.—the hour of the wolf—he stopped breathing altogether. It was over.

By then we were exhausted—our daughter-in-law, my wife, and me. We left Jon's body in the hospital room and drove home. I hadn't wanted to leave, and as I thought about it, I knew I should have stayed there with him for the rest of the night. I hated the thought of strangers putting my son on a metal tray and wheeling him into the morgue, alone. I should have stayed until dawn.

Then it struck me that I could still do this. I might be months late, but I could still be faithful—waiting alongside Jon's body, not turning away from his death. So that's what I did, staying awake through the rest of the night.

Within an hour or so I noticed Orphan Mesa coming to life once again. This time it was the moon rising over the canyon wall behind me, casting a soft, slate-gray light

on the mesa's rim. It was cold and deathlike but beautiful, the paleness of my son's body drained of its recent glow of life, there across the room from me. It came once more to reassure me that, as Julian of Norwich writes, "all manner of things will be well," even in death.

Over these strange four days, God had indeed come for this wandering soul, bereft of a son. God came in the red vibrancy of life and the white respite of death. Light spread across the Chama River Valley at daybreak, as the silhouette of Pedernal appeared on the western horizon. Georgia O'Keeffe painted this flat-topped mountain with a frenzy, over and over again. Its blue-black presence is stunning. It held, at last, the secret of what I'd most needed to learn.

In Navajo legend, this place is the birthplace of Changing Woman, a spirit being who watches over all of life's changes. Like Persephone in Greek mythology, she welcomes the passage of the seasons. Each year she becomes what Wiccan mythology calls maiden, mother, and crone all over again, accompanying her people through the births and deaths of their lives. She urges them to rest in the recurring pattern of nature's mystery. She knows that when love is assured, every change can be trusted.

As I remembered Changing Woman, I also remembered the Jesus I'd rediscovered in my ritual. He offered his body on the cross. She created her people from pieces of skin scraped from her arms and legs. Both evince a vulnerability born of compassion. The God I'd reclaimed is a God of love—pulsing in every part of the landscape. Resounding in the movement of stars, the flight of ravens, the fungal network underlying every pinyon pine and prickly pear in the canyon.

Canyons, in the end, have their way. They require our acceptance of emptiness. To encounter a canyon, we have to resist the temptation to fill what needs to be left open. Only love can fill the deepest void of the human heart. "It is the nature of grace," writes Goethe, "always to fill spaces that have been empty." All God needs is a hole that's left open.

Julian of Norwich understood this. The assurance of hope she received in her visions came on the heels of a global pandemic. Bubonic plague had already killed up to 30 percent of the English population, and the country was still reeling. Given the hell they'd been through, Julian had to admit, "it seemed to me that it was impossible that every kind of thing should be well." Yet it was so. She knew it.

When we're radically thrown open and made vulnerable, new things appear on the horizon. We discover that loss is also gain. We learn to trust again. Turning from the promise (and threat) of absolute power, we become part of a community caught up in the long-term, alluring mystery of God's love.

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