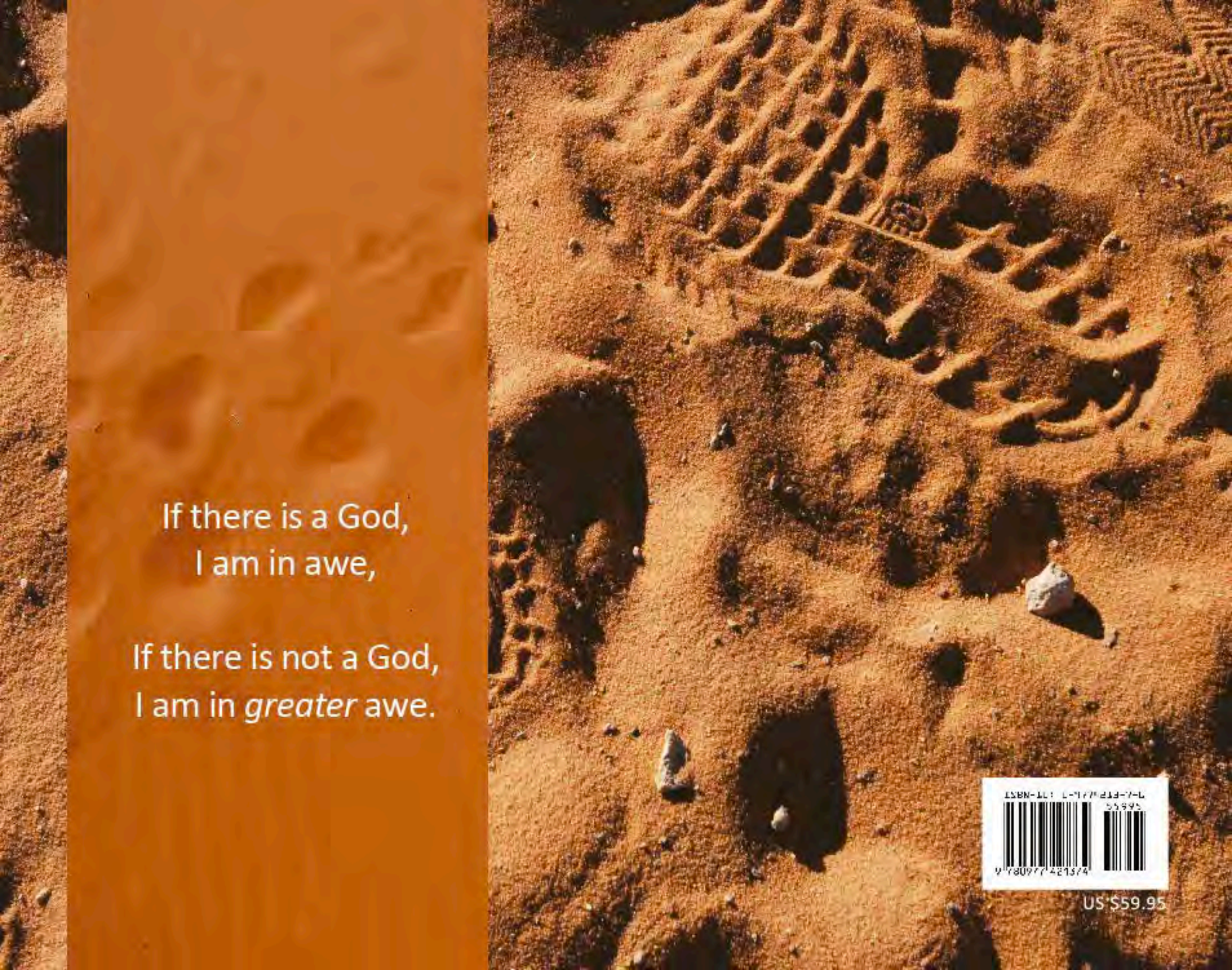


*Finding Ourselves  
on  
Sacred Ground*

Jan Phillips and Ruth Westreich







If there is a God,  
I am in awe,

If there is not a God,  
I am in *greater* awe.



US \$59.95



# *Finding Ourselves on Sacred Ground*

Jan Phillips and Ruth Westreich



Livingkindness Foundation  
San Diego, CA

# Dedication

We dedicate this book to all women who stand at a threshold of choice or commitment.  
We dedicate it to you in the hope that you seize this moment, that you choose yourself,  
that you finally, once and for all, understand how much this world counts on your creativity.  
And then, knowing that, that you *choose to create* as often as you can.

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# Introduction

We are two women who have a primary relationship with our creativity. I, Jan, am a writer, a musician, and a photographer. Ruth is a painter, a designer, a jewelry maker who felt a calling to photography and committed herself to learning the craft. She chose me as her mentor and we devised a plan for action that worked with our busy lives. We would take one week a year to leave behind the busy-ness of our schedules and commit ourselves fully to a photographic experience in nature.

We started with the Finger Lakes region in the Northeast, where I was raised, and inhaled the breath of autumn in places I had loved as a child—Watkins Glen, the gorges of Ithaca, Letchworth State Park. While some people make pilgrimages to official sacred places—Chartres Cathedral, the Holy Land, the pyramids of Giza, Sedona—Ruth and I consider everywhere we are as sacred, as the “new holy.”

We find, as we look through our viewfinders, the majesty of an oak, the mysteries of a swamp, the holiness hiding in the hollow of a cliff. For both of us, the notion of Divine has shifted from “up above” to “deep within and all around.” We are not drawn to the certainties and boundaries of religions, but to the mysteries and infinite wonders that Nature has to offer.

We do not feel separate from the forest, the waterways, the mountains as much as we feel kin to them, their conscious cousins who can bring to light what they may need from us in these times of environmental peril and turbulent climate change. Marion Woodman, the Canadian psychoanalyst, reminds us that “the images on which we feed govern our lives.” The mythologies we embody and live from are rooted in imagery. Concrete images come to mind when we hear the words Garden of Eden, Pearly Gates, God the Father. These images were installed in our imaginations when we were young, innocent, and hungry to be taught. The culture cooperates in perpetuating the myths of our guilt, of a coming judgment, of a male God on some heavenly cloud and we continue to be a part of this unfolding myth until we commit to thinking originally and reshaping our worldview.



The photographs that Ruth and I take come from a consciousness of our oneness with the wild things. When we look, we see heaven all around us, feel infinity moving through us. And the images we capture are modern day icons of the sacred. In some way, as image-makers who are public, who speak of our work and the hope behind it, we play a prophetic role in the making of our culture. We dare to say “the old ways are failing us, the mythologies of the past no longer serve us,” as we put forth images of a new vision, of our own sacredness and the sacredness of the earth from which we come.

Each of us sees from a different perspective—you may be looking through a telescope while I study life through a microscope—but ultimately what we see is Creation looking back, reflecting our vitality, our vulnerability, the vastness of our potential as humans to create a culture and civilization of integrity and kindness.

What Ruth and I discovered as we journeyed through the Northeast, the Outer Banks and low country of the South, the austere and majestic coastline of the West, the immense and magical Southwest, was that we may see through different lenses, but what we find is the same ineffable beauty. We are in the same sanctuary, listening to the choir of coyotes, horned owls, wind and warblers. The holy water is not in a concrete font, but running through the land blessing everything in its path. The candles are not lit and doused by a sacristan in the private hours, but set afire at dawn and laid to rest at sunset by the hand of the miraculous, unfolding cosmos.

What we have found is that these weeks of looking, of being silent in the presence of the wild are our times of being healed by nature’s medicine. Finding ourselves on sacred ground—no matter where it is—is a cause for celebration. Giving ourselves time to be in nature, to breathe in the beauty, to photograph the splendor, to read the notes our Mother is leaving—this is the holy quest, the sacred pilgrimage. This is the great miracle of self-healing, the great discovery of Love Itself disguised as a feathery fern or a speckled fawn.

Once we realized the many ways our annual pilgrimage into the silent places calmed and healed us, we decided to create this book to inspire others to make time for their creative work, to lose themselves in wonder and awe, to come face to face with the Beauty they seek. The woods are full of medicine for the soul, the valleys and mountains are healing hands that dissolve the knots of stress and suffering.

It is the wandering itself that heals us—the letting go of our hectic lives for an intimate reunion with *all our relations*, our sacred roots. This book is a record of our returning home, one week a year, over four years. It is our family album, portraits of our sisters the trees, the waters, the valleys, and our brothers, the deserts, the mountains, the rocks. These are images of nature loving nature. They belong to the new mythology that is based in the belief: *everywhere you walk is sacred ground*.



# Northeast



# *The Northeast*

We chose upstate New York in the fall for our first pilgrimage because I grew up there and knew the sacred spots. As a child, I had climbed the 200 foot cliffs of Watkins Glen, felt the spray of the massive falls at Letchworth State Park, wound my way through the gorges of Ithaca and Taughannock Falls.

We planned an itinerary that included these sanctuaries and once we started photographing, our different styles surfaced. Ruth was a nature photographer, happiest when she was off alone with no people in sight, hovering over fungi with her macro lens, searching for interesting textures, shadows and shapes. She was the artist with an eye for abstractions and design, noticing details I'd pass right by. If we were in a forest, I'd often find her on her belly, kneeling over a fern, or perched on a log trying to focus in on a robin's nest.

My shooting style was the yang to Ruth's yin. I was looking for the personal element, for the juxtaposition of human and nature, for images that would represent the holiness of humankind, the sacredness of the earth. I wanted to show us in relationship to our Mother, to create a family album that included our roots and wild relatives. Knowing that a picture is worth a thousand words, I wanted to capture images that told the story of our oneness, our intimacy with the planet. I was looking for images that would bring us to our knees in awe and wonder, images that would portray how we embody autumn, endure winter, and explode into spring in our own human skins.

As a result, I was constantly calling for Ruth to come out of the woods and be my model. We worked together to make images that had a timeless feel to them. We bought material to cover our ordinary clothes so the photos would point to something beyond the ordinary. Where Ruth finds the Holy Essence in the silence of the rocks, the trees, the waters, I find it in the bone and marrow of the breathing ones. And surely, it resides everywhere, for there is nowhere we can go and not find Beauty.





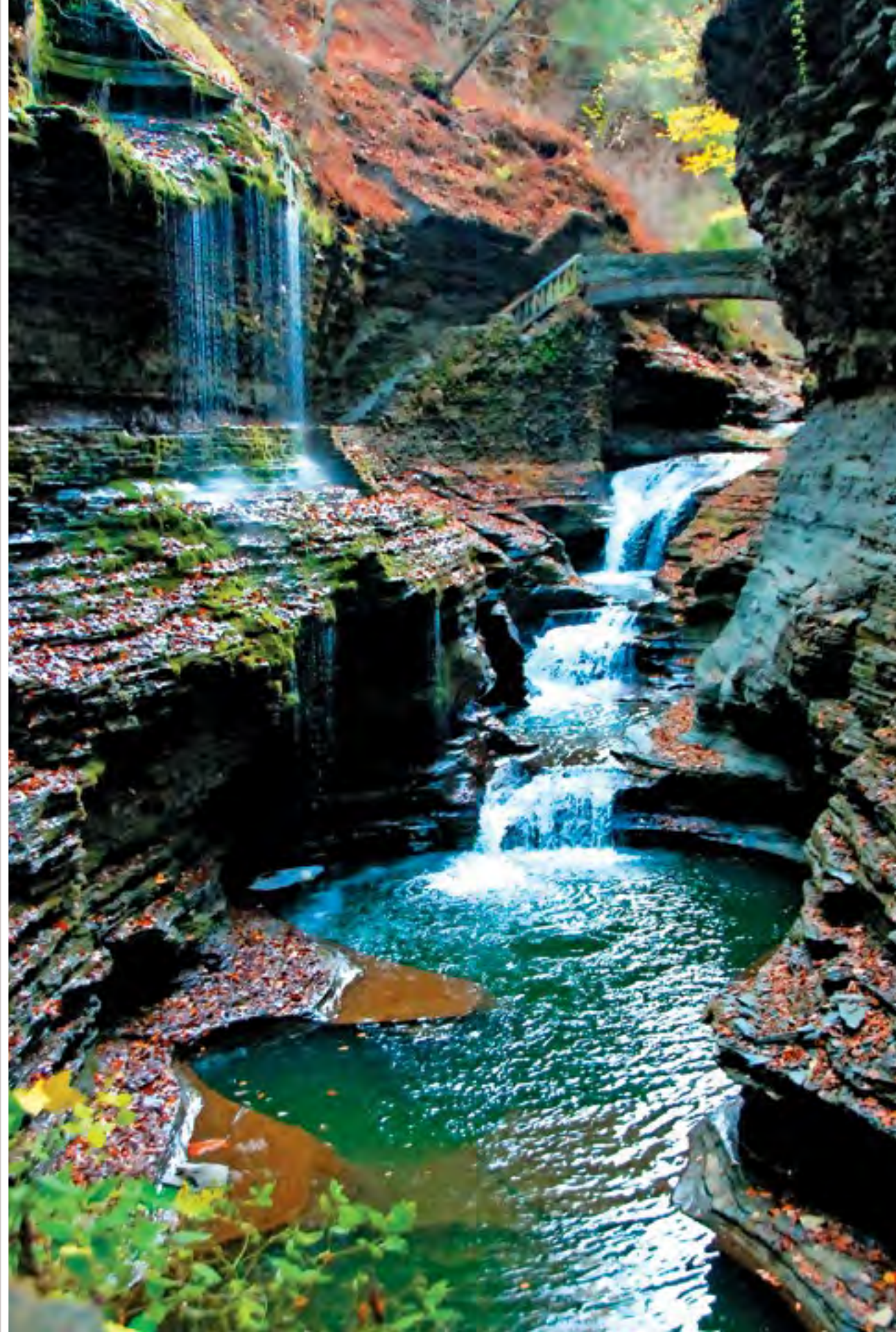


# *Leaving the Known*

Few things awaken the imagination like a vacation from the ordinary. Leaving the known behind is a sure way of rousing the senses. Creativity thrives on the new, the unexpected. It springs forth like a bud in April when the eyes encounter what they have not seen, when the path winds through woods one has never known.

It is a gift to the soul to leave behind what's become familiar—the faces, the scenes, the stresses and summons of our everyday lives—and wake up to a day that holds only the promise of sheer surprise. It's an intentional act, a living prayer, a commitment to our own holy spirit, this leaving behind.

Our lives are full of meaning, long days of diligent work, meeting after meeting with others committed to building a safer world—and this we would not change. But to leave it behind for a week to feed our souls, treat our eyes and ears and every sense to something new—this is what fuels us, what keeps us embodied, mindful of the earth and reverent of the sacred ground from which we rose.









# Solitude

It is a sacred act  
to cross the threshold into silence  
and turn one's ear to the Great Below.

It is a holy gesture  
to enter Nature's sanctuary  
and place your attention on her holy altar.

This rite of passage into your own earthiness—  
your tree being, your river self, your mountain face—  
this is a sacrament of the highest order  
a giving of grace from the Mother to the child.

It is not bread and wine that is transformed here  
but mind and heart  
opened like an iris on a hot June day  
altered like a dune made mighty by the wind.

It is a sacred act  
to cross that threshold  
and come home cleansed, empty and clear-eyed  
able to see again  
the threads that bind us.



As we go about creating our lives, our words and actions transform into the world we belong to, the world we are shaping. As the food we eat becomes our bodies, so do our expressions become the world. We are living in a country that was once just a thought in the imaginations of a few men. We go to work in buildings that were conceived in thought; we listen to music, watch movies, read books that are concrete manifestations of someone's feelings and passions. And these creations touch our hearts, change our minds, move us to action. Energy becomes matter, matter becomes energy, and our hearts are the crucible where the transformation occurs. It is where the creator and created give rise to each other.

When our souls materialize a body in order to do their work in this world, from the very beginning we are led to believe that we are our bodies. But we are not our bodies. We are their observers, their caretakers. We are the Mind behind their movements, the Eye behind their seeing. The cells in our bodies completely replace themselves every seven years, but our consciousness, connected to the Source, maintains its perfect wholeness throughout eternity. Our cells come and go, but our memory of the ocean stays the same.

As we go















# Your Words Are Water to Me

Your words are water to me  
I look to them for life  
for all the ways they speak the truth  
and keep me buoyant when heavy bears down.

Waves of your wisdom wash over and heal me  
a newness rises up in the shape of who I am—  
your soft having worn away the edges of my hard,  
my hollows having opened to the fullness of your swell—  
I am never the same in the wake of your words

You never knew you were writing for me—  
that all my life I needed those sounds, those rhymes,  
those fables and tales that took me away  
and brought me home.

Out of your life you have drawn these words  
like holy water from a sacred well.  
From the surge and swell of your deepest sorrow  
from all directions and from every path,  
you have combed the past for the pearls it offers,  
for what gems might come from the grit and grind.

And these jewels roll in on the wave of your words  
spilling their light over all your tales.  
In your poems and prayers, they light up the dark,  
lift up the deep—  
what once was sorrow is now but a source  
what once an ending now begins something else.

I look to your words to see who I am,  
to find what I long for between the lines.  
I look there for courage when my heart is pounding,  
and see myself bold in the curl of your wave.

I dive deep through the surface  
to the stillness of the center,  
and there, in your poems, in the midst of your story  
I watch myself rise in the mirror of your words.

So write and write; write all you know—  
your words are my water and my thirst is so deep.





To become our own spiritual authority, we have to move and think and speak from our own personal knowing. Our power comes from our ability to transform what we have experienced into what we know. It's an alchemy of sorts, where we transmute the lead of our experience into the gold of our wisdom. Making a life is the process of converting our wisdom into action. Each of us knows what no one else knows because no one else has lived our lives, seen what we've seen, felt what we've felt. The great Persian poet Rumi writes, "The throbbing vein will take you further than any thinking." This is a great clue.

When you think of the people who have inspired you, changed your thinking, altered the course of your life, are they not the ones who spoke and lived from the heart? Are they not the ones who stand before you with the courage to be simply who they are, to share their visions, their struggles, their fears? This is the stuff of spiritual authority—this transparency, this risking, this willingness to say "It's a new frontier here, and not one of us has a map, but with what we know together, we can surely make it."









Transformation involves a major shift in consciousness that results in a new way of being and acting in the world. It leads to embodied and enacted insight. It is deeper than a revelatory idea which may remain cerebral and particular to the thinker. Transformational thinking is cellular, non-local. It belongs to the whole; it is in service to the whole. Transformation is a human family affair.

It does not happen because we will it or work for it. It comes gratuitously when we clear the passageways between our minds and hearts, when we trust and act upon our bodies' messages, and when we master the art of transcending duality, which simply means that instead of resisting what appears to be "other" we embrace it, bring it into ourselves, and see what transpires when the poles unite. Jungian psychologist and scholar Marie-Louise von Franz wrote: "If we can stay with the tension of opposites long enough—sustain it, be true to it—we can sometimes become vessels within which the divine opposites come together and give birth to a new reality." This is the essence of transformation.





# *I'll Tell It To You Again*

I'll tell it to you again:

we are flowers in the same garden,  
descendents of one Mother  
you, a rose,  
me, an iris  
she, a gardenia splashing scent with every breeze.

I could go on and on about our likeness  
every one of us a leaf on the same tree  
a snowflake in the same blizzard  
bubbles in the same champagne.

Can you stop laughing long enough  
to digest this mystery?

If these were the headlines of your daily paper  
would your eyes pop open with joy?  
Do you see the wonder here?  
Can you find your adorable face  
in this house of mirrors?  
Do you hear it clearly?

What you are enveloped in is the body of God.  
What you were born from is the Mother of Life.  
The air you breathe is their giant exhalation,  
their sigh of delight after a long night of love.

Can you bear knowing you're a child of desire,  
born from the embrace of heaven and earth?

In case it comes as a bit of a surprise  
I'll tell it to you again:  
You, my dear, are a beautiful rose  
and I am an iris  
and all those around us,  
flowers in the same garden  
descendents of the same Mother

This is the Eden of your beginning and end.  
This is the Heaven you have sought all along.











