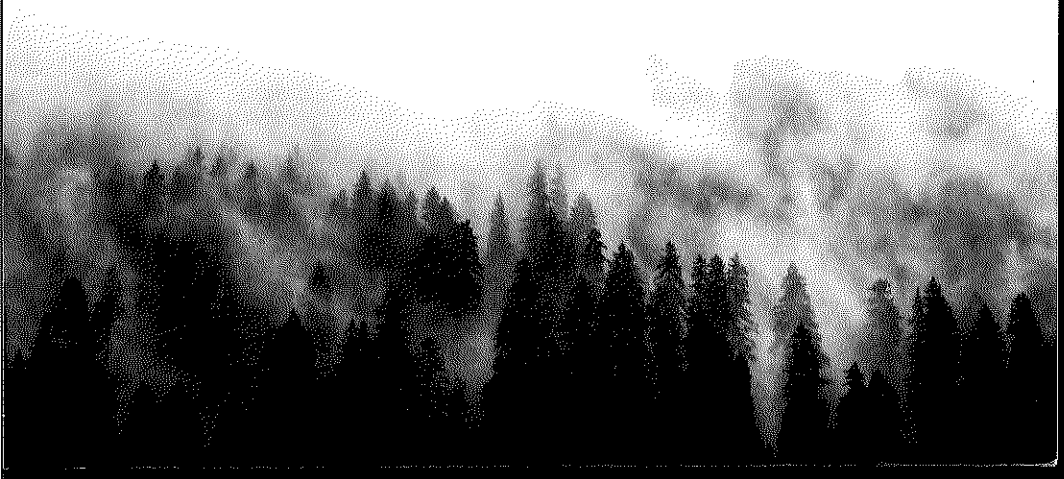
Listening at Lookout Creek
Nature in Spiritual Practice

Gretel Van Wieren



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Oregon State University Press Corvallis

Library of Congress Control Number:2019945651

ISBN 978-0-87071-985-1

♾ This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

First published in 2019 by Oregon State University Press
Printed in the United States of America

Oregon State University
OSU Press

Oregon State University Press
121 The Valley Library
Corvallis OR 97331-4501
541-737-3166 • fax 541-737-3170
www.osupress.oregonstate.edu

For Inga, Clara, and Carl

Acknowledgments

Several notes of thanks are in order. Many thanks to Kathleen Dean Moore and Charles Goodrich, who invited me to participate in the 2011 Blue River Quorum at the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest and introduced me to this very special place; and to the Spring Creek Project, which awarded me a 2015 Andrews Forest Writers' Residency, which served as the fodder for this book. Thanks to Michigan State University for granting me a sabbatical term to complete this volume, and to my colleagues in the Department of Religious Studies for their cheering attitudes toward interdisciplinary projects. To Kathleen Dean Moore, Todd Fleming Davis, and Tom Montgomery Fate for reading early drafts of several of the book's chapters and for offering such helpful and encouraging comments. I am forever indebted to my parents, Glenn and Jacquelyn Van Wieren, for the gift of the Cedar Shack, and to my three sisters, Heidi, Kuria, and Rebekah, for all the hours spent together in the woods. Many thanks to my editor at OSU Press, Mary Elizabeth Braun, for seeing something in the book project early on, and to Micki Reaman and Susan Campbell for guiding it through to the end. And to Jeff, my love, who sends me to the river to fish when I need it the most, and to our three children, Inga, Clara, and Carl, who enliven our little family with their shining spirits.

1

Baptized by Lookout Creek

There is spirit to these woods, if you take the time to listen. That is what I attempted to do in the spring of 2015 as a writer-in-residence at the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest in Oregon's western Cascade Range. Andrews is the most studied primal forest ecosystem on the North American continent and perhaps in the world. Here scientists conduct National Science Foundation–funded, long-term ecological research (LTER) experiments that span two hundred years, including studies on the spotted owl and the dynamics of old-growth forests. A unique aspect of the Andrew's LTER work involves humanists, such as myself, who are invited to reflect on the forest and its experiments from the vantage point of poetry, art, philosophy, and, in my case, religion and spirituality. Previous Andrews' writers have included Robert Michael Pyle, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Scott Russell Sanders, and Alison Hawthorne Deming.

Listening for the spirit of the woods is also what I have attempted to do in my home forest, the Manistee National Forest in the northwest corner of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. Five hundred thousand acres of red, jack, and white pine, balsam fir, northern white-cedar, soft and hard maples, aspen, white birch, red oak, and black cherry;

the Ojibwe called this place *ministigweyaa*, or "spirit of the woods." I grew up in these woods, different from the Andrews. Home to the Little Manistee River and my family's cabin, the Cedar Shack, this is where I, with my three younger sisters, learned to fish and wade in rivers, build fires and send smoke signals, and distinguish false from true morels. This is where I came to love the water and woods, and where I am now trying to teach my own children to do the same.

Yet decades of moving from place to place—Minnesota, Eastern Africa, Washington, DC, upstate New York, Connecticut, Illinois—have made trips over the years to the Cedar Shack scarce and short-lived. Even though we have moved back to Michigan and are only a three-hour drive from the cabin, my husband Jeff's and my day-in-and-day-out obligations as university professors and parents of three overscheduled teenagers have made forest time thin and rushed. Having an Ivy League PhD, it turns out, does not help: read, write, and publish (in an office) is this mantra. Not sit, watch, and listen (out of doors).

But it was not always like this. For years, I studied and attempted to emulate the lives of the mystics. Three times I did the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius, a yearlong practice of sitting in silent, contemplative prayer for at least an hour a day. As a pastor in rural, dairy-farming New York, I would walk the field and woods behind the parsonage every day, oftentimes twice a day, to the point that there emerged a discernable, winding path that Jeff and I affectionately came to call "Grasshopper Mountain." I could stand in a river and fish and not think about what time it was. I could walk in the woods and feel that I belonged.

Hence, what I resolved prior to my stay at the Andrews was that I was out of practice. Thus, I went to the woods with my own kind of experiment: Was it possible, I wanted to know, to rediscover a deep sense of connection with the natural world, and could it be done in just ten days?

The day I arrive at the Andrews, it is just beginning to drizzle. By the time I head out for a run on the gravel road toward Lookout Creek, which runs through the Andrews Forest and empties into the Blue River and eventually the McKenzie River, it is officially pouring. I think about my run in the Andrews the first time I visited several years ago. A gathering called the Blue River Quorum, we were a collection of scientists, artists, and humanists charged with the ambitious task of writing a new environmental ethic over the course of four days. Then, too, it had been misty and overcast, not cold, but not warm either. During my run on that trip, I had stumbled across a beautiful, crystal-clear pool in the creek and had been inspired to go for a swim. Soaking wet and stripped down to a sports bra and skimpy jogging shorts, I had felt like a drowned rat when I happened to bump into the quorum's organizer, philosopher Kathleen Dean Moore. We had yet to meet, and I remember feeling embarrassed standing there half-naked and shivering. Kathy nevertheless graciously shook my hand and told me that she looked forward to talking further at dinner.

Then it was October; now it is May. I wonder this time what different types of things I'll see on my run. As I enter the forest, I come upon a small trail that veers in the direction of the creek. A small wooden sign marked as the "Discovery Trail" leads the way. I turn onto the trail and instantaneously the memory of quiet and aliveness, moss and Douglas-fir, comes back to life. I recall the narrow path, hopping over strewn logs, wanting to run faster and faster and faster but not being able to safely without stumbling and tripping. But now I don't care. I run and run, heart pounding, arms pumping, energy mounting. I nearly smack headlong into a giant Douglas-fir. I stop, look up and down and around. Around and around again. It is magnificent, so big that I cannot even come close to encircling it with my best bear hug. I think about how amazed my children back

home would be and wish they were here. Had they ever seen a tree this big, I wonder? No, I didn't think so.

I continue to run but now with less abandon. I had discovered something and didn't want to miss more. There was so much going on, ferns, mosses, wildflowers, trees, birds. Birds. I stop again, this time to the beat of tiny warblers flitting from branch to branch, chirping like tongues rolling fast in a Pentecostal healing service. I try to focus my eyes, but with the gray overcast sky and rain it is difficult to see though the drizzle and brush. Then I see one. *Flit!* Another. *Flit!* Tail straight up. *Flit!* Despite the dark shadows I try hard to key in on their colors. Focus, focus, look past, then back, past then back. Be still, be still, I tell myself. Don't breathe. Then I see it. Dark gray brown, mocha, with a hint of, is it red? Even through the rain they are incessant.

Close to the creek, I realize with a flash where I am. It is the same spot where I dunked myself in the pool the last time I was here! The same downed Douglas-fir crossing the creek, though now there is another. The trees are enormous. I guess close to five hundred years old. I look down to the creek from the bank. The water is "gin clear," as anglers refer to it under such circumstances. The rocks are a rainbow of pinks and blues and lavenders and gray-whites. I feel like I am being sucked into a black hole. The ground begins to swirl as I look into a giant spinning, shimmering bowl. I slowly, wobbly, pick my way across one of the trees. When I reach the crisscrossing log, I have to hoist myself over it, as if mounting a horse that is much too big for the rider. I plant both feet on the bottom tree and leverage myself up onto the top tree, shimmying down the other side. After I regain my balance, I continue to walk across the log over the stream. I jump down on a mossy boulder the size of a Smart car, then down again to creek level to a small island of stones. Surrounded by the big leafy green umbrellas of mayapples, I spot the pool. Smooth on the bottom, dipping to five feet, blue as a Montana sky.

For a good few minutes I debate whether I will be able to leap across the water that flows around the island. I take a step and slip on the smooth small stones that line the creek bed. That wasn't going to work. I remove my shoes and socks and walk gingerly barefoot. The water is cold, less than forty-five degrees. I think about my annual spring plunge in the Little Manistee River back home in Michigan at my family's cabin. Lookout Creek is at least that cold. I stumble, wince, and grab for a boulder in the river. What I find instead is a caddis casing. Then a stonefly and a snail. There are fish in this river, I think to myself, but I can't fish for them. "No fishing allowed." "Research in Progress," read a small sign at the entrance of Andrews that I passed on my drive in.

I ponder this for a moment. In the Manistee National Forest where my family's cabin is located, fishing and hunting are permitted even at the research stations that are located within the forest bounds. But the trees at the Andrews are old. Very old. And the research experiments that go on here are unique. Very unique. At the Andrews, there are spotted owls, and long-term ecological studies that are designed to last two hundred years. But what does this mean for human activities in the Andrews? If not fishing, then what about driving the big SUVs and trucks up and down the Blue Reservoir Road that I had seen on my drive to the Andrews? What about my little Ford Focus rental car, for that matter? It still ejects plenty of carbon dioxide. On my run, I am sure that I damaged some plants, not to mention thousands to millions of insects and microbial organisms in the soil. Is that okay from a scientific research station point of view?

What about in moral terms? Go deeper: spiritual terms. The Jain religion, an extreme sect of Hinduism, believes that it is immoral to kill any living organism, anywhere, anytime. They live by five ethical principles, all of which revolve around the axiom of *ahimsa*, or, "no harm." Some monks and nuns eat as little as possible in order to avoid killing microorganisms that are required to digest food. A

small broom helps to scoot away insects so they won't be stepped on and killed. A mask over the mouth guards against the unnecessary inhalation and death of living beings, no matter how small. Jains are famous for their animal hospitals, where they give creatures, especially cows, a decent place to live out their lives and die a natural death. Gandhi, who was heavily influenced by the Jains, came into conflict with religious leaders for advocating the mercy killing of a suffering calf. He believed that it was more ethical to kill the calf than keep it alive in its state of pain.

I decide skinny-dipping would be a morally acceptable action. I strip down in the rain and step into the cold creek. The rocks are slipperier and sharper than I thought they would be. I step gingerly until—*slip*, I fall into the pool, dunking all the way under the freezing water. This is my baptism into the Andrews Forest, I decide. I am here. I will be still. I will listen.

I step as quickly as possible out of the stream and squeeze out my dripping hair. I look across the bank to a moss-covered cave half expecting to see a cougar staring at me. I stare a bit longer and, cold, put on my shorts, shoes, and jacket and stuff my bra and underwear into my pockets. I attempt to find my way back to the trail, only to find myself on the backside of the warbler den. *Flit, flit, flit,* they sing. I think about my ten-year-old son, Carl, back home, who for his life cannot stop talking. "I will not forget you," I whisper to the birds. And to my son. I climb up the bank, find the trail, and begin to run. Jogging more slowly, I am reminded of the email message that Kathy Moore had sent me the previous week: "I hope those deep forests replenish you and whisper in your ear."

This book recounts my attempt to work my way back to connection with nature, both at the Andrews and back at home. Half of the chapters document my daily experiments in nature-reconnection during my ten-day stay at the Andrews; the other half reflect on times of nature connection I've had with my three children, Inga, Clara, and Carl, at the Cedar Shack in the midst of our otherwise hi-tech, hyper-overloaded lives. The Andrews chapters focus on cultivating nature-connection through the practices of silence, attentiveness, and participation; the Cedar Shack chapters too focus on these practices, though with special focus on doing them with children, and particularly through the arts of fishing and hunting, activities long central to my family's life in the Manistee Forest.

As I oscillate between these distinct experiments, I work through the spaces of silence and noise, withdrawal and engagement, boredom and busyness, or what theologians have traditionally called the creative, paradoxical place between the *via negativa* and *via positiva*. I do this not as a literary device, but because I have come to realize that it is these poles, and much in-between, that define the content of our relationships—to one another and to the world of nature. Accepting and living into these paradoxes, one may reach deeper truths about life's meanings, and the frailty and graciousness of nature and the human spirit.

A disclaimer: Even though I am a professor of religious studies, hold divinity and doctoral degrees from Yale University, and am an ordained minister in the Reformed Church in America, I have yet to finally determine or resolve what precisely I believe about God and faith more generally. So, please, do not begin this volume thinking that it is going to offer anything close to a clear, systematic explanation of religion or theology or spirituality. Rather, think of it as a story of a perpetual spiritual wanderer, a saunterer, in Thoreau's terms, whose deepest yearning is simply to keep alive the yearning, the love for walking in the thick of the mystery of life. I know this rings of the hopelessly romantic, but that is not what I intend it to mean. What I mean is this: whatever I ultimately went to the Andrews looking for continues to elude me, for I am just as spiritually restless and disconnected from nature today as I was then, if not more so. What I have come to realize is that my experiment at

the Andrews was less about restoring a final or settled connection with nature, God, self, or any other entity or being for that matter, and more about embracing the reality that is—*change: constant, perpetual, uncontrollable change.* Consider this book, then, a narrative about that.

2

Skiing In

My fascination with mysticism began in my early twenties when I worked as a community organizer at Bread for the World in Washington, DC. Jeff and I had just returned from Uganda where, upon graduating from St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, we had volunteered for several months as "house-parents" in a transitional home for children who had been orphaned by war and AIDS. At Bread for the World, I found myself surrounded by a collection of radical, peace-and-justice-oriented types, Roman Catholic to Quaker to agnostic, many of whom talked frequently about figures such as Dorothy Day, founder of the socialist Catholic Worker Movement, and Thomas Merton, the contemplative Trappist monk who famously converted from agnosticism to Catholicism as a college student at Columbia. Having been raised in an intensely pious, conservative, evangelical home in Holland, Michigan, the world of Christian mysticism, with its Catholic bent, had been largely unknown to me. Yet the mystic's singular spiritual yearning for a deep connection with God, a perfect kind of faith, I knew well. That was the world I grew up in.

I began to read. Evelyn Underhill's massive tome, *Mysticism*; Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*; Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of*