

The Trumpeter
ISSN: 1705-9429
Volume 24, Number 1 (2008)

Heidegger in the Mountains

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In spring, 1981, Dolores LaChapelle wrote a letter inviting me to take part in a small conference in Silverton, Colorado, that August. At the time, I had never heard either of Dolores, or of her book, *Earth Wisdom*, which accompanied her letter. In Colorado, however, she had attained almost legendary status as a woman who had summited the state's dozens of 14,000-foot-high mountains, and who was such a fearless, avid, and talented skier. Her book, with its double-columns of print pushing the edge of every page, was packed with fascinating information that was often new to me. Indeed, when Dolores was researching a book, the little Silverton library led the state in the number of interlibrary loan requests!

She had learned that I was interpreting German philosopher Martin Heidegger as a progenitor of the deep ecology movement, then in its nascent stage. According to Dolores, Heidegger's celebrated idea of "releasement" (*Gelassenheit*) was crucial to the practice of powder snow skiing. For great skiing to occur, according to Dolores, the skier could neither be active (imposing her will on the snowy slope), nor merely passive. Instead, the skier had to "let the mountain be." That Heidegger himself had been a devoted skier convinced Dolores that his notion of "letting things be" was grounded in experience akin to her own.

In *Earth Wisdom* and elsewhere, Dolores drew upon her own insights and on those drawn from pre-modern traditions in order to indicate how humans can and should relate to the non-human world. Getting out of the city and into the mountains was one way for modern people to get a taste of what non-human nature could offer, but once in the mountains, one had to let them be. This in turn required an attitude, a practice, and

a perspective that did not come easily. Climbing, hiking, and skiing with Dolores were always special, especially for those willing to learn from Dolores's coaching, which was measured, respectful, and compassionate. Dolores was intense, loquacious, highly intelligent, and often restive. Above all, however, she wanted to share her insights with others, so deeply was she attached to the many different kinds of "old ways" that opened paths into the beautiful and terrifying dimensions of nature.

Among those who gathered late that summer to spend several days of talking and hiking with Dolores were Bill Devall, George Sessions, Steve Meyers, and myself. At what we would eventually call the "Heidegger in the Mountains" symposium, George Sessions and I argued about Heidegger's claim that human existence has a special role in holding open the clearing in which such beauty and terror can be manifest. Sessions was always wary of anthropocentrism, which he claimed was discernible in Heidegger's thought, despite Heidegger's own critique of anthropocentrism. We didn't settle the argument, although Arne Naess would have rightly observed that Sessions and I were at odds in regard to philosophical first principles, rather than in regard to the planks in the deep ecology platform, which was formulated a few years later.

I honour Dolores LaChapelle for her worthy and important contributions to deep ecology theory and practice. I also deeply appreciate her warmth, her generosity, and her flexibility, as in the case almost twenty years ago when she accepted my invitation to give a talk at Tulane University, thereby suspending her vow never to give a lecture on the eastern bank of the Mississippi River! I will miss her.