

Backpacking with the Saints: Wilderness Hiking as Spiritual Practice

Belden C Lane

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The Hebrew Scriptures say that we are sojourners in this cooling world. Geoffrey Chaucer shows how pilgrimages are shams, and Joseph Conrad in his *Heart of Darkness* configures travel as one of despair and nihilism. Belden C Lane, contrary to Chaucer's pilgrimage, contrary to Conrad's journeys, in a very American, Thoreau-manner shows how travelling with a few books through the American wilderness can be a spiritually rejuvenating exercise in journeying into one's own interior castle:

Deep in the Medicine Bow Wilderness of Wyoming, my image as professor, spiritual seeker, and self-styled 'wilderness backpacker' counted for nothing. I could have been just another stray mule deer, with a lion studying its movements from behind dark firs. It was an unsettling feeling. ... The Hindus call it an experience of *darshan*, of seeing and being seen by the holy. [The Jesuit priest] Tony de Mello speaks of prayer as a matter of 'beholding the one beholding you . . . and smiling'. He draws on one of [St.] Teresa of Avila's favorite exercises in meditation, imagining Jesus as gazing at her. '*Mira que te mira*', she says. 'Notice him looking at you . . . with the deepest pleasure'. Poet William Cowper put it this way: 'I seem forsaken and alone, / I hear the lion roar; / And every door is shut but one, / And that is Mercy's door' (55-6).

Lane's openness to change effects in him an annihilation of the ego, the sense of 'I', that most of us can only read of; for the Truth has indeed set him free. The truth that he is nothing compared to the authors he reads while he travels. The range of his reading does him proud: from the Trappist Thomas Merton to the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin, from Rainer Maria Rilke to Ed Abbey of the *The Monkey Wrench Gang* fame.

While Merton and de Chardin and even the Zen Master, Thich Nath Hahn are quite renowned; and all of these spiritual masters are analyzed by Lane, it is of interest to note what Lane has to say of the Franciscan, Father Richard Rohr. Rohr, it must be noted, is one of the greatest Roman Catholic theologians and philosophers of this century. Rohr not only draws from his Franciscan roots but also from the concepts of agape and the Omega Point of the Jesuit, de Chardin. Here is one instance of Lane on Rohr:

'We grow spiritually much more by doing it wrong than by doing it right', says Richard Rohr. The only way to make progress is by making mistakes ... over and over again. The seemingly perfect man isn't perfect at all. He's just better than others at hiding his shadow (137).

Lane's choice of reading material shows his empathy with those who are spiritual through being broken: the sick need Jesus more than those who are whole. Merton and de Chardin both were ravaged by secret affairs. Yet both saw the light of God more clearly than many celibates ever can. Graham Green in his *The Power and the Glory*, showed that both power and glory belonged to the alcoholic, anonymous, and lecherous Roman Catholic priest and not to the teetotaler Marxist self-righteous lieutenant. Lane's worldview is a very different worldview from Indic views and therefore the book should be reviewed keeping in mind the concept of the Christian God.

The Christian God, or Jesus, who is the Messiah hangs powerless in shame from his wooden rood though being omnipotent, omniscient, and eternally existent with Yahweh. The God of the Christians is weak unlike God as understood within the Indic religions. Brahman, as understood within Vedanta, is all-powerful and not weak. Reading Lane's book, one is made aware of the powerlessness of the human subject in the face of the infinitely broken beauty of nature, for:

Things in nature are optimal teachers to help us discern how to be ourselves. They point us back to the reed-bed of a common connectedness. We've been separated from the source of our identity and have to fall in love with it all over again. We need to give ourselves to the well-spring of our passion, says Rumi—delighting in

its beauty and accepting the discipline that love requires. We recognize what we *are* most deeply only as we relinquish what we *aren't* (162).

An interesting fact that even Sister Benedicta Ward does not mention in her works on the Desert Fathers and Mothers is mentioned in this book. Lane's acute observations derived from the lives of the Desert eremites needs to be quoted at some length before being commented upon:

The desert knows desire, after all; it's a landscape forever thirsty. The monks were remarkably attentive to the wounds (to all the baggage of desire) they brought with them into the wilds. These included the forced marriages or affairs from which they had fled, military service they were escaping, family problems that had been overwhelming. Entering the monastic life, they soon realized they weren't leaving the world behind them. They carried the old desires with them, like shadows in the heart—things they now had to face resolutely.

They spoke with keen insight, therefore, of the 'passions' that derived from their inner wounds. These desires continued to bind them in obsessive behaviors as they nursed old injuries from the past. Abba Poemen observed that such wounds (with their unfulfilled longings) have a way of expressing themselves in four stages of unconscious activity. They first appear in the *heart*, as festering wounds that crop up in our dreams and fantasies. They subsequently show up in the *face*, in passing glances of anger, jealousy, or envy. (Abraham Lincoln said that everyone over forty is responsible for his face. It mirrors everything we carry inside.) Thirdly, said Poemen, inner wounds reveal themselves in *words*, in our sniping at others, our passive-aggressive language. And finally, the wounds appear in our *deeds*. We replicate them in our actions, doing to others what had been done to us. What isn't transformed, in other words, will be transmitted. That's the danger of unacknowledged desire (61).

First, Professor Lane sanctifies the humanity of the Desert monks and nuns in all their weaknesses. This takes courage, since we tend to think of the spiritual life as being one of heroism and uninterrupted bliss. In fact, spirituality means accession

to the fact that we are lonely and at some point, have to experience the noonday devil, or *acedia*. In other words, the silence of God threatens us forever with the long loneliness experienced by Dorothy Day in her eponymous book. Jesus, humiliated on the Cross for no fault of his own, had to cry out to his silent Father: 'Father, Father why have you abandoned me?'

To be fully human is to experience the dark night of the soul that sets us wondering whether there is indeed a God who walks with us in our times of deepest heartbreak. Second, and more crucial to our self-fashioning, we are what we carry in our hearts. We *are* the memories we choose to feed in our hearts. In other words, we have choices either to forgive ourselves or, to be trapped in our own prisons of loveless non-forgiveness. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's ancient mariner remained haunted by his memories even though he was shriven by a holy hermit. The mariner, like most of us, could not forgive himself. As Professor Lane shows here, the Desert sojourners understood the workings of the human heart much before either Sigmund Freud or his cantankerous student, Carl Jung came into the world with their verbose nothings.

The book under review has been seen within the usual metaphors of wandering and pilgrimage in many other journals. This reviewer wants to point out one aspect of the author's description which is normatively not Hindu but in reality is about the Sanatana Dharma. Professor Lane speaks of Teilhard de Chardin saying Mass in the Mongolian desert; all alone and without the accessories needed for saying Holy Mass. Father de Chardin then goes on to consecrate the entire world to Christ and imagines within himself the missing accessories needed for the Holy Eucharist. This reviewer cannot help but see in this action of the votary of the Omega Point, the Hindu praxes of *nyasa* and *bhutasuddhi*. As Father Teilhard de Chardin rightly saw, everything is rushing to the Omega Point and as Professor Lane rightly finds, we too, in our moral failings through a process of finding ourselves in the desert, like Jesus, can become sojourners in the here and the now and find ourselves become one with that Omega Point. Like Professor Lane, if only we are silent, God will

speak to us as he did to Job once upon a time, and to Professor Lane. Here is Lane's encounter with the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*:

Then, in the darkness before dawn, I heard it. A voice carried on the wind that seemed to speak inside my body. I didn't *think* it. I simply received it, with an undeniable certainty. Four words addressed to me: 'Speaks with the Wind.' Nothing more. But I knew in that moment that I had been called ... I had been *named* (202). [This understanding of being called by name derives from the prophet Isaiah].

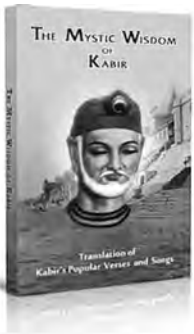
This is a book replete with poetry and wisdom, to be read slowly while seeing 'Eternity ... Like a great ring of pure and endless light' (Henry Vaughan, 'The World'), backpacking with the saints.

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**The Mystic Wisdom of Kabir:
Translation of Kabir's Popular
Verses and Songs**

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Sri Ramakrishna Math, 31, Ramakrishna Math Road, Mylapore, Chennai 600004. Website: <http://www.chennai.math.org>. 2015. 174 pp. ₹70. PB. ISBN 9788178835983.

The very mention of Kabir's name brings to the mind the kind of religious freedom one can breathe in India. 'To the Hindus, he is a Vaishnava Bhakta, to the Muslims, a Pir, to the Sikhs, a Bhagat, to the Kabirpanthis, an Avatar, and to the modern patriots, he is a champion of Hindu-Muslim unity' (1). And why so? Because Kabir addresses the truth beyond any religious denomination: 'There is no austerity like truth, no sin like falsehood. You (O Lord) reside in the heart of him who has truth in his heart' (71).

'In this book we have tried to bring to the lay person interested in Kabir an English rendering of Kabir's works—songs and verses—which are very popular with the masses and in religious circles. ... Although small, this compilation amply

represents Kabir's ideology. The reader will find herein Kabir's message of knowledge, devotion, ethics, and social equality well expressed' (17–8). This is stated by the translator in his introduction, wherein he also presents a brief account of Kabir's life, philosophy, views on yoga, ethical and social approach, devotional message, and literary works.

The selection comprises 275 *sakhis*—couplets in *doha* metre, easy to construct and recite—which 'are the evidences of Kabir's spiritual realizations' (16); and 89 *sabadas*, popular short songs. These *sakhis* and *sabadas* are presented in their original Hindi with the English translation below. At many places the translator adds notes to the translation, in an attempt to clarify certain meanings that could be lost in the translation, or to explain basic terms, or even to enhance the message of the verse. This book is mainly meant for those not much versed in the traditions of North India, as many of the notes suggest. And though the learned translator acknowledges the difficulty of translating poetry, he is still able to render Kabir's mystical experiences in a lucid way:

'We are intoxicated with love. Why should we be cautious? We live free from this world; why should we give importance to it?

Those who are separated from the Beloved, wander from door to door. Our Beloved is within us; why should we wait for Him?

The world labours much for its own name and fame. We like Hari's Name. Why should we love the world?

The Beloved does not part from us for even a moment, nor do we part from the Beloved. We are attached to Him only, why should we be nervous?

Kabir is intoxicated with love and has removed all dualities from his heart. When walking on the path is difficult, why should we carry a heavy load on our head?' (123–4).

Swami Madhurananda