Before embarking on your outdoor trip, it would be good to do some reading to help frame the experience.

First, there is a very brief excerpt from Wyoming Catholic College's *Philosophical Vision Statement (PVS)* that explains part of our reason for asking you to spend these three weeks in the mountains.

The next two readings are excerpts of writing that provide an example of the kind of attention and quiet admiration toward the natural world that we hope you will develop during your time in the backcountry, both for these three weeks and in your future expeditions. One is from naturalist writer Annie Dillard, and a second is a short paragraph from Mark Twain describing a vision of a sunset experience from his youth. When you get back to Lander, your first writing assignment will be to imitate great nature writers like Dillard and Twain, describing something you saw and experienced on the trip. Pay attention to how they use rich, descriptive words that help us, too, lose a sense of the plain and ordinary, and begin to marvel, admire, and long to change. Without a doubt, each one of you will see something remarkable on your trip: bare feet in cold streams; silent views from mountain peaks; powerful animals in the untamed wild; storms of violence; unforgettable conversations in which you come to know yourself, perhaps for the first time. Keep these experiences in your memory, and when you get back home, we'll ask you about them. And then we'll teach you how to mine your memory and capture its power in words.

To help you better observe the natural world, that is, to read God's First Book deeply, there is a longer excerpt from Dr. Belden Lane. In the excerpt, Dr. Lane does two things: first, he provides an account of how one might learn to carefully read the wilderness in which you will be immersed, and secondly, he offers some thoughts about how the reading of great texts is itself enhanced by a wilderness experience. Please read the essay looking toward how you can put it into practice. Create some time for yourself to try and practice *lectio divina,* as described by Dr. Lane, at least once during the trip. Find a text of Scripture (perhaps from a Mass reading) that strikes you and spend some time going through the four steps: *lectio, meditatio, oratio,* and *contemplatio*. Also, at least once during the trip find a place and go through Dr. Lane's suggested four stages of "reading" a landscape.

Lastly, there are three poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Print these out and bring them with you. At some point during your three weeks in the wilderness, find some time to read the poems. Perhaps read one after summiting a peak; at another time, read the one with your headlamp while you stretch out under the starry sky; and maybe read the last as a group either after a debrief, over a meal, or gathered around a twiggy fire. Recite them aloud together, maybe even try to memorize one or two (your instructors on the trip have already memorized at least two of them). But in all cases try to read them so that your wilderness experience interacts with your reading of the poem. How do the vistas, the sights, and smells around you interact with the lines of poetry Fr. Hopkins wrote? How does your own experience over the weeks effect the way you read the poem? How does reading and discussing it with your companions contribute to your reading?

Philosophical Vision Statement of Wyoming Catholic College

Excerpt

According to Plato, the first step in the long journey of liberal education is the elementary or poetic mode of education. This manner of educating is ordered primarily to cultivating the lower powers of sense—the external senses as well as the internal ones (imagination, memory, emotions, etc.)—through both direct and indirect experience of reality, which means through gymnastics and music.

The senses, memory and imagination must be properly formed because they are inextricably linked to the higher powers of intellect and will. Because, as St. Thomas contends, all knowledge begins in the lower senses, how can we expect the intellect to be properly formed if we have malformed imaginations?

As John Senior explains, imagination affects our ability to think:

> The psychology of thought is precise and difficult; thinking is the process whereby the intellect abstracts from the imagination the intelligible content of what it is the imagination presents. The intellect, like a seagull, dives into the water for the fish, but if there is no water—if there is no imagination— no fish can live and nothing can be caught.

Granted the necessity of forming these lower powers properly, the question is, how will they be formed? Traditionally, beginning with Plato and the Greeks, this has been accomplished through gymnastics for the body and music for the soul.

The term "gymnastic" comes from the Greek gymnos, meaning "naked." Gymnastics, broadly speaking, refers to the naked or direct experience of reality, as the author James Taylor explains:

> For a simple understanding for our times . . . we can think of a gymnastic . . . as direct experience with reality, for example a life lived more out of doors, say, [by] a child walking to school in all kinds of weather. . . . The direct confrontation with the most simple realities of nature, the gymnastic, participates in the poetic mode.

Gymnastics may also include more refined activities such as stargazing, horseback riding, and dancing. Stargazing—distinguishing the constellations and learning their stories—disciplines the eyes and the imaginative power by providing, as St. Thomas says, "an ability to picture material things in their absence." These gymnastic activities, and others as well, bring a person into direct contact with nature and engage and educate the body and the lower powers.

The ancient Greeks well understood that experiencing the natural world through gymnastics instructs us directly in such universal realities as order, proportion, and cause and effect, and in fundamental realities such as birth and death. The natural world also instills in us a certain humility and gratitude, for it exercises a sovereignty over us (a sovereignty often otherwise obscured by thoroughly man-made environments).

This same understanding is found in the Catholic intellectual tradition. The Church fathers insist that God authored two books, the Holy Bible and the "book of the world." If one is to acquire genuine wisdom, one must study both. In our day, unfortunately, though religion and Scripture are studied, the other "book" is rarely experienced directly and immediately through the senses. The consequence of this is a certain narrowing of the imagination and the heart,

accompanied by the naïve belief that the unnatural world man has fashioned can render deep truths or profound learning.

In tacit recognition that our largely man-made environments are deeply inadequate, people almost universally need to "get away" from these environments and restore themselves in natural and beautiful surroundings. A world of virtual reality, languorous comfort, and media assaults on the senses forms mental habits of frenetic restlessness, inability to endure rigor, and imaginative superficiality. The "philosophic habit of mind" that John Henry Newman speaks of as the object of a liberal education requires mental habits and a fertile imagination far more subtle and refined than those inculcated by an Internet world. The steady, reflective, and contemplative grasp of the profoundest truths requires a love of beauty and an appreciation for things learned slowly (and sometimes with difficulty), not stimulation or instant gratification. Wyoming is particularly well suited to answer the need. Its mountains, streams, and prairies, and its traditions of ranching and farming, supply what the modern imagination so sorely lacks. Its nature is awe-inspiring and glorious, yet severe and demanding of discipline. Viewing its grandeur and severity, one is at once humbled and ennobled.

To students setting out on the beginning of liberal education, Wyoming Catholic College proclaims, *Nascantur in admiratione* ("Let them be born in wonder").

"Living Like Weasels" (excerpt)

Annie Dillard (1982)

The sun had just set. I was relaxed on the tree trunk, ensconced in the lap of lichen, watching the lily pads at my feet tremble and part dreamily over the thrusting path of a carp. A yellow bird appeared to my right and flew behind me. It caught my eye; I swiveled around – and the next instant, inexplicably, I was looking down at a weasel, who was looking up at me.

Weasel! I'd never seen one wild before. He was ten inches long, thin as a curve, a muscled ribbon, brown as fruitwood, soft-furred, alert. His face was fierce, small and pointed as a lizard's; he would have made a good arrowhead. There was just a dot of chin, maybe two brown hairs' worth, and then the pure white fur began that spread down his underside. He had two black eyes I didn't see, any more than you see a window.

The weasel was stunned into stillness as he was emerging from beneath an enormous shaggy wild rose bush four feet away. I was stunned into stillness twisted backward on the tree trunk. Our eyes locked, and someone threw away the key.

Our look was as if two lovers, or deadly enemies, met unexpectedly on an overgrown path when each had been thinking of something else: a clearing blow to the gut. It was also a bright blow to the brain, or a sudden beating of brains, with all the charge and intimate grate of rubbed balloons. It emptied our lungs. It felled the forest, moved the fields, and drained the pond; the world dismantled and tumbled into that black hole of eyes. If you and I looked at each other that way, our skulls would split and drop to our shoulders. But we don't. We keep our skulls. So.

He disappeared. This was only last week, and already I don't remember what shattered the enchantment. I think I blinked, I think I retrieved my brain from the weasel's brain, and tried to memorize what I was seeing, and the weasel felt the yank of separation, the careening splash-down into real life and the urgent current of instinct. He vanished under the wild rose. I waited motionless, my mind suddenly full of data and my spirit with pleadings, but he didn't return.

Life on the River (excerpt)

Mark Twain

I stood like one bewitched. I drank it in, in a speechless rapture. The world was new to me and I had never seen anything like this at home...A broad expanse of the river was turned to blood; in the middle distance the red hue brightened into gold, through which a solitary log came floating, black and conspicuous; in one place a long, slanting mark lay sparkling on the water; in another the surface was broken by boiling, tumbling rings that were as many tinted as an opal; where the ruddy flush was faintest, was a smooth spot that was covered in graceful circles and radiating lines, ever so delicately traced; the shore on our left was densely wooded and the somber shadow that fell from this forest was broken in one place by a long, ruffled trail that shone like silver; and high above the forest wall a clean-stemmed dead tree waved a single leafy bough that glowed like a flame in the unobstructed splendor that was flowing from the sun. There were graceful curves, reflected images, woody heights, soft distances, and over the whole scene, far and near, the dissolving lights drifted steadily, enriching it every passing moment with new marvels of coloring.

Backpacking with the Saints: Wilderness Hiking as Spiritual Practice

Belden Lane

(Edited Excerpts from the Epilogue)

Books and Backcountry

Reading and backcountry wandering don't appear to have much in common. Pouring over someone else's experience in wild terrain feels like a denial of the immediacy you seek in being there. To bring books (even books full of wisdom) into a wilderness setting seems like a contradiction. Reading can sometimes be an exercise in abstraction, reducing embodied realities to disembodied signs. It reduces the sudden whirl of a dust devil in a desert canyon to handful of squiggles on a page. There's no question that the written word [like much other technology] has distanced us from the world of nature.

But there remains an element of magic in the act of reading, something we too easily forget. Words on a page don't simply describe; they have a capacity to create. Written texts possess a capability for metamorphosis. Their meanings shift, depending on the context in which we read and re-read them. This is especially true with outdoor reading. Books haven't forgotten their intimate relation to trees, after all. They're still commonly made of paper. We speak of a book as having "leaves" and a small book as a "leaflet." An avid reader is a "bookworm," one who "branches out" into various areas of study. An idea "takes root" within us. Some us have wonderful childhood memories of reading a book in a tree we had climbed, the tree participating with us in the magic of the text.

[By extension,], reading a powerful text (such as the prophet Isaiah) in an evocative landscape can be a spell-binding experience. Your senses are hooked, your imagination pulled into something new.

Lectio Divina et Terrestris

This was the nature of the spiritual reading of the medieval monks, their habit of *lectio divina*. I've tried to combine their monastic way of meditation on the Scriptures or the writing of the saints with a highly sensory practice of "reading" particular places or landscapes. What they called *lectio divina* can be practiced alongside what we might call *lectio terrestris,* a richly interactive "reading" of the earth itself, with the expectation of being changed by what we read.

1. *Lectio Divina* is a four-fold pattern of "praying the Scriptures" formalized by a 12th century Carthusian monk named Guido II. He was prior of the Grand Chartreuse, a monastic community in the mountains of southeastern France. The first step in the pattern of prayer he proposed was **(1) *lectio*** proper, the active, acoustical reading of a biblical text. The monk should read the words aloud, letting them reverberate throughout his body. The brother viewed this as a "carnal activity," a sensuous hearing of the "voices of the pages" (*voces paginarium)*. They saw the text as taking on an oral life of its own. As early as the sixth century, the Rule of St. Benedict urged the monks to be careful not to disturb each other when reading alone in their cells. Sounding the words aloud was thought crucial to their being received most deeply.

A similar kind of embodied attentiveness is necessary for reading the distinctive sounds and energies of a place. Giving the earth its voice, letting it resonate through the whole of one's being, is a process that can't be rushed. A tribal elder takes years to acquire the different "dialects of conifers," the ability to distinguish species of pine, spruce, or fir by simply listening to their needles rustling in the wind. Naturalist writer Annie Dillard lies motionless for hours, waitng for a weasel to take her breath away.

Lectio terrestris demands the exercise of all of our senses. Moving through a field into a forest, even across our own backyard, we come with the expectation of finding a teacher. We have to give ourselves to the enigmatic "text" that opens itself before us. Arrow Mountain in the Wind River Range of Wyoming, for example, has often functioned as such a text in my experience. Overlooking Ring Lake Ranch and the Glacier Trail, it offers a stunning view of the Continental Divide to the west, the Absarokas to the north, and Crowheart Butte to the east. I've stood entranced at tree line (just above 10,500 feet), reading the harsh tale of endurance written into the gnarled white bark pine trees that grow there. These are the highest growing pines in the Rockies, whipped so fiercely by wind and sleet that they survive sometimes only as *krummbolz,* twisted branches clinging to the ground.

White bark pines are the monarchs of the high country, able to withstand long winters and the worst possible conditions for survival. The oldest one in the United States—in the Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho—is 1,275 years old. These are the teachers of what it means to persevere. I sit amazed at their presence, content to "read" them for hours. They've trained me in a profound reverence for the wild.

2. Guido, the French Carthusian, described the second step in his *lectio* process as **(2) *meditatio,*** the oral repetition and thoughtful pondering of a text so as to apply it to one's life. Again the pattern is thoroughly sensuous, engaging the body. The monks spoke of "ruminating" over a passage, like a cow "chewing" its cud, "masticating" the words. They poured over its multiple meanings, delving into its otherness, relating its distant world to their experience. Gradually they came to internalize the text, allowing it to define them in unexpected ways.

The task of *meditatio* requires focused attention and a disciplined effort to let the "other" speak in all its differentness. You must not be quick to reduce its "meanings" to metaphors of your own experience. You have to listen to it on its own terms, prepared to be brought up short at times by the power of the text.

As I've learned more about white bark pine trees—meditating on their distinctive role in the environment—I've been intrigued by the part they play as "nurse trees" in a subalpine terrain. They aren't the "rugged individualists" I might have imagined. They survive at altitudes where other trees cannot, helping to reduce soil erosion and delay snow melt into summer. Their large pine seeds are high in nutritious fats, providing a primary food source for red squirrels, Clark's

nutcrackers, and even grizzly bears. Clark's nutcrackers depend entirely on white bark pine seeds for food and, in turn, are important seed dispensers for the trees. They couldn't survive without each other. A single bird can hide up to 98,000 pine nuts in a given year, many of which are never recovered and so germinate, growing new trees.

White bark pines are a keystone species within a fragile landscape where life depends on symbolic relationships. Everything here is connected—the gray birds with black wings, the white-tipped grizzlies, and the weather-beaten bark of ancient trees. Leaning against the trunk of one of these old masters, I ponder the fact that none of us ever make it alone. Trees like these are teachers, modeling the mystery of the "interdependent co-arising" of all things. Nothing exists entirely in and of itself.

3. The third step that Guido prescribed in his pattern of *lectio divina* is what he called **(3) *oratio,*** a spontaneous response of prayer evoked by the text. He asked, "What desires arise out of your reading of the passage? What do you find yourself yearning for in response to what you read?" The monks expected an increase in longing—greater love for God and neighbors—to arise out of their reflection on the text. Prayer, in this respect, could become a spawning ground for compassion and for action, a sincere plea to God to ask for the gift to love more deeply and act more forcefully.

Desire is the attracting, integrating force of the cosmos, said Teilhard de Chardin (and before him, Sts. Gregory of Nyssa, Maximos the Confessor and Augustine expressed similar sentiments.) I find that the more you attend to any single thing in the universe, the more you learn to love it. Over my years of hiking Arrow Mountain, I've come to know and love these white bark pine trees. The first time I saw them, growing out of the scree near the saddle below the peak, I felt an aching recognition of the sublime. The harsh beauty of their wildly contorted limbs spoke to something deep within me.

I can't imagine a world without the wise presence of those arboreal elders. Standing at the top of the world, they witness of the fierce tenacity of life. They inflame my desire and my determination on their behalf.

[*Ed. Note*: One might readily respond with prayer that is not limited to a motivation to political activism or focused stewardship. One could be moved to worship the God who crafted these trees and pray for sustained fervor; or gain an insight into God's revelation through this experience and pray to keep or deepen an insight into Him; or be moved to self-knowledge based on the experience and respond with prayers of contrition and/or petition in that regard; etc.]

4. Guido identified the fourth and last step of sacred reading as ***(4) contemplatio,*** entry at last into silence, moving beyond all interpretation, beyond all words. The early Desert Fathers described this as resting in the heart of God, letting the mind descend into the heart. To read with a contemplative mind, they said, is to shut down one's inner dialogue, focusing only on God's presence, breathing slowly and deliberately, allowing the text to penetrate to a level deeper than thought.

Something elusive happens in this radical letting go of words. I remember sitting one afternoon beside a dead white bark pine on Arrow Mountain, moving (in my reading of it) beyond attentiveness, reflection, and even desire. Simply *staying* with the tree, beneath its needle-less branches, sharing a deliberate and thoughtless silence. The tree had nothing to offer, and yet the "nothing" we shared at the time was profound. An undemanding presence may be the finest gift we ever give or receive.

Allowing this to happen isn't easy. Like most people, I'm a pathetic contemplative—not very practiced at "staying," distracted continually by intruding thoughts. My exercise of contemplative stillness is like a daily bath in a deep-felt inadequacy, my inner poverty. It seems a worthless exercise, accomplishing nothing. Yet my ability to be open to others is rooted in my capacity to "stick", to stay with being present to what I love. Moreover, it teaches me not to plunge immediately into action, dashing down the mountain to do what I can to save the dying trees.

The practice of *contemplatio* is an exercise of becoming what you read. If sleight-of-hand requires you to identify with the coin and its "longing" for transformation, contemplative prayer demands that you abandon fixed distinctions between subject and object. Shared silence "gathers you up into the body of the present moment so thoroughly that all your *explanations* fall away." Sitting at tree line above 10,000 feet, you slip out of awareness of yourself and into communion [with the One who fashioned these works. You need do nothing more than rest in knowing that you're alive, kept alive by the same One who sustains the trees that surround you.]

Reading Texts in the Wilderness

Practicing *lectio* alongside a spring-fed creek, I give myself to a chosen text, the multifaceted sensuous earth around me, and to the mystery of myself. The joining of these disparate worlds charges my reading with unexpected energy. [*Ed. Note:* If one were to be discussing this reading with others in the wilderness with you, then yet another dynamic is added to the experience.] The joining of these disparate worlds charges my reading with unexpected energy.

When I read outside, as St. Augustine argued, I'm engaging two books at once. The "complementary texts" of Nature and Scripture reveal the mystery of God in alternative modes of discourse. Reading the one alongside the other allows for a wider play of the imagination in the work of interpretation.

The history of the "two books" tradition began very early in Christianity. When someone asked Anthony of Egypt how he could live a devout life in the desert without any holy books, he responded. "My book is the nature of created things and any time I want to read the words of God the book is here before me." John Chrysostom argued that even the illiterate can read God's truth in the book of nature. They don't need any language skills; it's already translated for everyone. Bonaventure spoke of a *duplex liber*, a double book containing the mystery of the Holy Trinity in Scripture and its "vestiges" discernible in the natural world. Cotton Mather declared nature a "public library" and available to everyone, even as Meister Eckhart, echoing Psalm 19, urged that all creatures—even caterpillars—are words clearly spoken by God.

The tradition acknowledges that one's ability to read and interpret this second book is limited because of human sin. The book of nature has to be read in the light of Scripture, lest one exalt the beauty of the creature over the grandeur of the Creator. But the book of nature remains an authentic "mirror," "school," or "theater" of God's grandeur and providential care. The enduring popularity of the "second book" in the Christian imagination is undeniable. From the Old Testament on, Jews and Christians have turned to nature's tome as an eloquent source of spiritual insight.

Reading a sacred text in a wilderness setting increases the sensory receptivity one brings to the work. Backcountry reading, as I've argued, has a kindship with vocalized, sensuous reading of medieval monks. For them, the words on the page weren't merely signs scratched onto paper. They were inspired things. Seventh-century Celtic monks in their monastery on

Lindisfarme, the Holy Island, for example, looked on their reading of Psalms as interacting with the rise and fall of the tidewater around them. The monks' manner of reading was deeply attuned to their environment, never far removed from the daily and (and earthy) tasks of manual labor.

Out of their reading of the Gospels in the 9th century, for example, the monks on the island of Iona produced *The Book of Kells,* one of the most extraordinary books in the history of Christendom. That was a text wholly immersed in the wilderness from which it came. The calligraphers and illuminators who toiled on the manuscript in the monastery scriptorium gazed out onto the wild landscapes of Scotland's western coast. They joined the earth in their labor, filling page after page with paintings of local animals and plants. These included images of birds, intertwined snakes taken from Pictish stone carvings, bunches of grapes from nearby vines, otters and fish seen along the shore, the cattle and red deer that roamed the island, even cats and mice that wandered the monastery's dark corridors.

The scriptorium was stocked with the vellum skins of calves (on which the monks wrote), crushed oak apples and sulfate of iron used in the making the brownish iron/gall ink, and various materials gathered from creating pigments. To produce the vivid purple, green, blue, and red colors, they gathered lichens from local rocks, malachite from nearby peaks, dried indigo plants, even the bodies of insects. They utilized egg whites as a binding medium. Quills were cut from the tail feathers of wild geese. The entire process of reading, writing, and illustrating was deeply earthbound, connected in every possible way to the surrounding landscape. Viking raids on the Scottish coast eventually drove the monks to move their work to the monastery at Kells in Ireland, but the taste and smell of Iona remain on the pages of the text.

One of the Celtic scribes made a habit of drawing a pair of lions at every point in the Gospels where the phrase, "he said" appears (referring to the words of Jesus). The lions held their paws to their mouths as if cautioning the reader to be silent and to listen. Would it be helpful today for us to imagine lions poised on the pages of dangerous books that threaten to change our lives? This is the risk we run in reading hazardous texts in unpredictable places. We are ambushed by a world (and a God) that fills us with awe in breaking us open to love.

Poems for Reading in the Wilderness by Gerard Manley Hopkins

As Kingfishers Catch Fire

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

I say móre: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Chríst — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things –
  For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
    For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
  Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
    And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
  Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
    With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
                Praise him.

God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.