

IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

Periodical Letter #12

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from

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Approaching Wadi Rum

Between the two January workshops in Faran, Israel, that I was facilitating with my two Israeli friends, Susan Meyer and Danny Hadas, we drove the short distance to Eilat, Israel's most southerly city, crossed the border into Aqaba, Jordan, and spent two days in Wadi Rum, sometimes called the Valley of the Moon, in southern Jordan before going on to Petra. Both places far, far surpassed my visual expectations and provided me with unexpectedly rich educational experiences.

Wadi Rum is a desert region of approximately 750 square km., so visually overwhelming that one can describe it effectively only with pictures. Yet, my photographs fall far short of conveying the sense of going back forever and ever and expressing the emotional wallop of being enveloped by a felt presence of "the eternal." Wadi Rum evolved over millions and millions of centuries before our species appeared – just a few minutes ago.



You can't visit Wadi Rum on your own, which is a very good thing. It's the home of Bedouins, some of whom spend most of their days guiding visitors. Our two guides, Falach for the first day, and Ahmad for the second, have the same father, but different mothers – "cousins" according to Falach, "brothers" according to Ahmad. The term "half-brother" had no meaning for them. Both were highly intelligent men of gentle demeanour and we valued our time with them greatly. To my surprise both spoke English better than many Canadians and when I asked Ahmad how Bedouins learn English, he replied that while they are taught some in school, mostly they learn simply by listening.



Ahmad (image by Susan Meyer)



Susan, Danny, and I are considering the possibility of offering a future January workshop in Faran, Israel, that will conclude with at least two days spent in Wadi Rum and an optional extension to Petra, which is no more than three hours north. If this is a go for 2021, it will be posted on my web site no later than June and mentioned in a subsequent letter as well. Stay tuned!

To see several more photographs of this area, just click on [WADI RUM](#).

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"When you're bringing your body out into the landscape you're bringing your body home..."

John O'Donohue

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After Wadi Rum, Susan, Danny, and I went to Petra, eschewing rides on camels, donkeys, and horse carts, we hiked 9.3 km. in and out again, the last half entirely uphill, making pictures practically every step of the way. It's by far the best way to see this incredible place, to gain a physical sense of the geological processes that built, then carved this part of Earth – long before humans learned the skill.

On the next page is a photo I made along the "siq" or canyon, the ancient main entrance leading to the city of Petra. The official web site describes the siq as a split rock with a length of about 1200m and a width of three to 12m and height up to about 80m; most of the rock is natural, but another part was sculptured by the Nabataeans, whose presence in the area is dated as far back as 7000 BCE, though the city probably reached it's zenith population of 10,000-30,000 many, many centuries later.





A first glimpse of The Treasury





Please wander farther into this ancient city by clicking on [PETRA](#).
(PHOTOGRAPHERS: I made all my Petra images with an 18-70mm focal length lens.)



My good friends Susan Meyer and Danny Hadas (We stopped here for coffee en route back to Israel.)

For me, coming from a Christian background and traveling in Jordan with two Jews, it was both surprising and comforting to witness the acceptance and warm welcome that Susan and Danny received in Jordan, an Islamic nation, especially in the many cases when they said they were from Israel. Religion was a non-issue with everybody we met when it came to relating to each other on a personal level. It's almost impossible to express how important this was for me!

One evening soon after I had returned home I picked up again Jerry Wright's **Re-Imagining God and Religion** (which I wrote about in edition #6 of "Images, Ideas, and Reflections, March 2019.) Jerry writes about how humankind's common search for meaning has been hi-jacked by the world's major religions, especially Christianity and Islam, the only two religions that "evangelize" or try to "convert" people to their version of "the truth." Here's a little of what he wrote:

"The exclusive claim to truth remains Christianity's (as well as other monotheistic religions') greatest embarrassment and illusion and, psychologically, it's most glaring pathology. It grows out of fear and arrogance accompanied by the narcissistic need to be special by claiming that our tribe is superior to all other religious tribes.

... it has become clear to me that there are no "chosen people" in the sense of having an "in" with that mystery or mysteries we have deemed divine. That which humans have named "God" does not have a favourite tribe, country, political party, or dating web-site, nor is God captured in any one set of doctrines or creeds. There are no sacred texts that can claim to be the truth, including the Bible.

Back in Canada I have been confronted again with snow, freezing rain, ice pellets, and vast sheets of ice. Not infrequently, this means that to venture beyond my front porch is to invite an immediate concussion. It also poses the challenge of how to keep fit without endangering my bones and muscles. The solution for me, it turns out, has been to develop a walking track in my basement by slightly altering the position of three or four pieces of furniture. After a brief warm-up, I stride around this figure-8 (with some minor variation) at a fast pace, usually a “power walk” of about 30 minutes, or however long it takes until my lungs are really pulling in lots of oxygen.

However, the benefits have been far more than physical. Usually I enter a quasi-meditative or meditative state within two or three minutes and lose all sense of time. Often I do my best thinking of the day while I’m en route to nowhere.

I’ve also been cooking and otherwise preparing Middle Eastern dishes. Every time I’ve been in Israel (four trips,) Lebanon, and now Jordan I’ve been deeply impressed with the healthy diet and the varied cuisine – mostly vegetarian and dairy. At home I eat only vegetables, dairy, and fish (except when I’m invited out for a meal, when I eat whatever I’m served and enjoy it,) so being indoors far more than usual due to the treacherous weather has provided me the perfect opportunity to enhance my culinary range. I’ve been making some delicious soups, cooked eggplant and peppers marinated overnight in olive oil and lemon juice, and an avocado sauce (recommended by my niece Laura Calder, host of the Food Network’s “French Food at Home” and on page 18 of her book **Dinner Chez Moi.**)

It’s only fair to tell you that, preferring to steam my vegetables, I haven’t had a stove for more than 35 years and I’ve learned how to do everything I want in a very basic microwave. That includes hard-boiling eggs and (for those of you who eat meat) cooking a roast so tender that your knife will sink through it. (I use a toaster oven occasionally, though mainly for toasting or grilling.) So good Middle Eastern cooking is easy – even without a stove! But, many recipes require no cooking.

The dish I was determined to create was labaneh (or labneh), which is not available at any supermarket or grocery store I’ve ever visited in Canada, but which is a “to-die-for” staple of breakfast and many other meals in Israel and throughout the Middle East.

Labaneh can best be described as somewhere between a natural (unflavoured) whole milk yogurt and a runny, white cheese served with a topping of olive oil and mixed herbs. The recipe is easy, except for one thing. After stirring some salt into the yogurt until the consistency becomes creamy (this is quick), you’re supposed to drain the mixture overnight through cheesecloth before adding the remaining ingredients. To me, that’s a pain, so I tried stirring some salt into a 3-5% unflavoured Balkan-style yogurt, then adding either olive oil (or olive oil infused with garlic, or rosemary, etc.) and topping everything with za’atar, a mix of herbs and seasonings that I brought home with me. Za’atar is readily available through Amazon, or you can virtually replicate it yourself with whatever herbs and seasonings you have on your shelf. Anyway, my creation is so easily and consistently delicious that I will never be without it again. One of my neighbours remarked, “Sounds terrible, tastes fantastic!”

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“All you need is love. But a little chocolate now and then doesn't hurt.”

Charles M Schulz

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I took my Kindle with me to Israel and Jordan, because I had already begun to read again Sharon Butala's **THE PERFECTION OF THE MORNING: An Apprenticeship in Nature**, a book that had moved me profoundly when I first read it back in 1994. Sharon's evocations of the vast rolling prairie of the southwest corner of Saskatchewan, a landscape as foreign to me as that of Wadi Rum, and the emotional and spiritual impact it had on her after she moved there in her mid-thirties, have stayed with me all these years. Recently, I felt that I had to return to the book and to the place. And, well before I had finished reading for the second time, I knew that I would be encouraging you to go there too. (Read an excerpt from Sharon's preface to the original edition below my photograph.)



A bit of Saskatchewan in spring, showing seasonal sloughs, so important to migrating birds, insects, other animals, and plants

*From the Preface of the original edition of **THE PERFECTION OF THE MORNING** by Sharon Butala:*

"Having made the fateful decision to throw up my former life (*FP: as an academic at the U. of Sask. to marry a rancher in the southwest corner of Saskatchewan*) in favour of a brand new one, if in the beginning I often found myself having a difficult, even painful time in finding a footing and in feeling I could even become a member of my new society of rural, agricultural people, in my awe at the beauty and openness of the landscape, I felt as if my soul had at last found its home.... Slowly, I began to see new things, to see my life differently.

... I came as a stranger to this magnificent but in some ways terrible place to live, with its more tragic than triumphant history and, gradually, although never easily, I found a way to feel at home in my

own skin and in this place. ... As I wrote and rewrote, I began to see that there was no separating my spiritual journey, my life, from the reasons for and the effects of my daily contact with Nature.”

And then, in the 10th anniversary edition, Sharon tells us this: “It was my husband’s dream that his 13,000 acres of unplowed native grass, where most of this book takes place, would remain forever in a natural state. In 1996 we made arrangements with the Nature Conservancy of Canada and the Saskatchewan government to make them owners of what had been the Butala ranch. In 2003 and 2004 fifty pure blood Plains buffalo calves from the Elk Island Reserve, twenty-five males and twenty-five females, were introduced onto the ranch, now called The Old Man on His Back Prairie and Heritage Area, together with prairie restoration efforts on the few plowed acres. Peter says what happened is even more than he ever dreamed.”



In reality, there is a single integral community of the Earth that includes all its component members whether human or other than human. In this community every being has its own role to fulfill, its own dignity, its own inner spontaneity. Every being has its own voice. Every being declares itself to the entire universe. Every being enters into communion with other beings. In every phase of our imaginative, aesthetic, and emotional lives we are profoundly dependent on this larger context of the surrounding world.

Thomas Berry

Thank you for traveling with me, FREEMAN

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