Recently in the Soul of the Wilderness segment, one IJW editor called soul the “experiences, feelings, and values behind the information presented” about wilderness (Martin 2002, p. 3). Soul in this sense is not limited to wilderness advocates. Most environmental activists have special feelings for the natural environment. Robert Perschel of The Wilderness Society recently observed that “we need to find a way to bring spirit and values and ethics and religion into our lives, into our work, and into our contact with the entire landscape—not just those places that are protected forever as wilderness” (Perschel 2002, p. 150). Spirit and soul, although intangible, may enhance environmental experiences at all landscape scales and may play an important, but transparent, role in the lives of committed environmental activists.

The interrelationship of environment and spirit is not a surprise to most of us. We have our own personal experience, and we have a growing literature on religious and spiritual orientations to the environment. This literature is largely historical, anecdotal, or philosophical. Most of the literature explores the environmental attitudes and actions that emerge from religious or spiritual contexts, such as Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, or American Indian spiritualities (Gottlieb 1996; Kearns 1996; Shultz, Zelenzy, and Dalrymple, 2000). Spirituality and soul, however, may also emanate from environmental experiences, attitude, and action (Gair 1999; Johnson 2002; Leenders and Henderson 1991; Shaw and Wendel-Berry 1999; Stringer and McAvoy 1992).

The idea that soul is discovered as people become engaged in environmental experience and action is what inspired my recent study into the spirituality of highly committed environmentalists. I interviewed 18 individuals who were engaged in a variety of action on behalf of the environment. At first I asked general, open-ended questions of these activists. The questions became more focused as I integrated the framework provided by Joel Kovel (1991) in his five essays on spirit. Kovel presented an interrelated set of experiences that have the potential to bring soul into one’s life. These soul experiences are grounded in the direct experience of a vital force, spirit, God, or in experiencing vital spirit through other forms or beings. When such personal experiences are imbued with deep meaning, they may create a desire to take action that leads one to a spiritual path. I found, as all who have explored the phenomenon of spirituality have found, that language inhibits the full expression of those deep meanings. With this limitation in mind, here are some of the soul and spiritual experiences of highly committed environmentalists.

The Direct Experience of the Vital Force

Kovel wrote that spirituality is rooted in the “direct apprehension of a vital and material force pervading the entire universe” (1991, p. 22). The direct personal experience of the vital force does not require any mediating form or being, but it may involve other earthly forms or beings (see Figure 1). Viktor Frankl (2000) noted that even Samuel mistook God’s call for the voice of a human: “If Samuel failed to recognize that the call came to him from transcendence, how much more difficult it must be for an ordinary person to discern the transcendent character of the voice he perceives through his conscience” (p. 62). I found that direct experience of the vital force was uncommon for these environmentalists, as it may be in most human experience.

Even though such direct experience is uncommon, Steve, a 52-year-old environmental education center director, described
a transcendent experience that changed the course of his life. His experience demonstrates vividly what a direct experience of the vital force may be like. After a particularly long string of what he considered failures, Steve spent months alone in an isolated backcountry cabin, trying to figure out where he was going with his life:

On this particular evening I came up and I stood on that stump and it began to snow, and I closed my eyes and I could feel kind of cool-like snowflakes falling, and I remember them specifically touching my eyelids and became sort of absorbed in the sounds of the water coming out of the mountain and was completely absorbed. I was totally outside of myself and lost all track of time. At some point, I consciously became aware of my pulse, and I remember experiencing the sense of amazement that I had become so calm and so quiet that I could actually feel not just my heart beating, but I could feel the blood moving through my body. … At some point I realized what I was experiencing. The movement inside of my body wasn’t blood it was energy, and it wasn’t coming from me it was going through me and it was coming out of the earth through the stump right up through my feet and through my entire being … I remember having a conscious thought that this is just energy moving through me. The conscious awareness was of being absolutely connected to the Earth. I was just another tree standing on the side of the mountain, just like the stone on the bank of the creek, just like a grain of soil, just like the snowflakes falling on my feet and shoulders.

Valerie, a 51-year-old environmental educator, reported that she sometimes directly experiences a power greater than the human experience: “Almost my whole life I’ve had just flashes I used to call them, this absolute knowing or intuition, gut … it was more this absolute instant of clarity where I felt that I knew what I needed to do or what I needed to say or just this immense peace and trust that this is right. … It was not about me, it was something about me was opened to that force that is greater than us.”

Experiencing Vital Force in the World

In contrast to the direct experience of the vital force, this force may be experienced as, or through, a form or being. Examples include an inspirational sunrise, the beauty of a flower, the magic and wonder of a newborn human, or the anonymous kindness of another person (see Figure 2). For most of these environmentalists, the vital force was experienced in or through the natural world. Joyce, a 46-year-old environmental singer-songwriter, said that she finds God in “steelhead salmon and salt marshes.” When Joyce explained that “we all carry that of God within us,” she meant not just humans, but all of the Earth and its life. Ted, a 64-year-old volunteer creator of a Christian environmental program, was “converted” as he said, to environmentalism in his 50s when he saw a flower whose beauty “made my heart stop.” Douglas, a 69-year-old environmental consultant who has spent his lifetime creating trails, said, “I’m not involved [with any religion], I believe in God if that’s what you mean. Anyone who works with the forest has to, if they are honest. I believe in evolution of course, but God made evolution.”

Ellen, an 82-year-old Catholic nun, reported that she had struggled for years with the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. After a lot of reading, studying, and learning, Ellen observed: “It finally settled all of [my] struggles about this dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, and made me realize that the universe is God’s primary revelation before any scriptures, and nature itself is a showing of the divinity.”

Many of the environmentalists expressed the belief that the Earth is God’s creation, and that because it is, people have a responsibility to take care of it. These individuals observed that care for
This sense of connectivity, interdependence, and responsibility led many to think of themselves as stewards of the Earth. Stewardship was sometimes described as a benefit to future generations. As Ted said, “I think the base for [stewardship] is if we are causing species to go extinct, we are not doing the environment any good for ourselves, and, in the long run, we are hurting ourselves one way or another.” Stewardship was also indicated as an approach to take on behalf of the Earth itself and its creatures. Most of the environmentalists said that nature has a right to exist independent of any human purpose, and Dave, a 66-year-old environmental consultant, said that he was close to even feeling that “rocks have rights.”

**Spirit, Desire, and Environmental Activism**

When spiritual meaning directs a life path, it is often expressed as a desire to engage in social action (Kovel 1991). For these environmental activists, the desire to work for the environment came from their experience of an inescapable connection with the Earth, an awareness of how the natural environment is being degraded by human activity, and a feeling of responsibility. Mark, a 55-year-old wildlife professor, linked human interconnectedness with responsibility by saying that he was responsible because “everything I do has a consequence. I don’t know you. I’ve never met you. But I am responsible for your well-being. I’m responsible for the trees’ well-being and the rocks’ well being. Once again, that holism.” When meaning is revealed through an experience of vital force, desire and action are likely to follow. Educating others was the most frequently mentioned form of environmental activism, with 12 of 18 individuals being engaged in some form of educating others. Indicative of the educators, Steve said that “what I try to do now, I try to find a way to help people make a connection with the environment, not just in terms of educational experiences, but significant emotional connections.” The remaining six environmentalists engaged in other forms of action, including nonprofit environmental leadership, lobbying, and consulting on environmental and wilderness management and policy. Quinton, a 57-year-old environmental volunteer who sits on the boards of seven environmental organizations, reflected: “What I value the most is my connection with nature. I see how it has helped me. It’s where I go to relax and rejuvenate and get my energy back. If somebody else doesn’t have that then they are really missing something. I want them to have that, it’s important to me.”

**Paths of Soul**

The environmental commitment of these environmentalists, and more specifically their environmental spirituality, was sustained most often through their connection with nature and was imbued with the meaning of biological and emotional interconnectedness, interdependence, and responsibility. Most indicated that they chose to nurture soul by choosing a path that suited their particular experience of vital force. Some followed an established religious path, such as Joyce’s Quakerism or Ted’s Christian environmental ministry. Many of these environmentalists chose less traditional means of nurturing soul. Steve, for example, said, “I don’t go to a church, I go to a forest.” Marty, a 59-year-old executive director of an environmental organization, believes in God but no longer attends church. She connects with God through “prayers at night, by being out in the world, by just having a
regular feeling of gratitude for things that have been given to me.”

Discussion

The committed environmentalists participating in this study shared a number of characteristics, yet also differed in important ways. All spend quiet time in contemplation, meditation, or prayer, often in the natural environment. All feel connected to nature, and this has great meaning for them, to the point of inspiration. Two self-identified atheists defined their connection using biological terms, while the others acknowledged their emotional connection as well. A number of religious orientations were represented, yet every participant reported being tolerant of and open to others’ spiritual and religious beliefs. Other shared characteristics included creatively engaging in active care for the Earth and for other humans as well as commitment to their environmental work. Every individual perceived a vital force, but the atheists differed from the rest by attributing that force to the sciences, such as biology, ecology, chemistry, and physics and using concepts such as motion, matter, and energy. A few individuals reported having transcendental experiences, where vital force was experienced directly. Most of those interviewed experienced vital force through earthly forms and, most often, through the natural environment in places such as wilderness. The environmentalists described vital force in many ways, mostly aligning with their religious orientation or lack of it. Their descriptors of the vital force included God, chi, higher power, the universe, and even the master of chaos. Many admitted that they do not know what vital force is, they just know that it is.

Results from this study indicate that soul is experienced personally and cannot be universally defined. We can, however, conclude some things from this study of the spirituality of highly committed environmentalists. First, there is a vital force that can be perceived directly and through the natural world. This vital force may be imbued with deep meaning, provide a sense of connectivity and responsibility, and inspire action on behalf of the natural environment. When vital force is personally experienced, it may inspire a traditional or nontraditional spiritual practice specifically intended to nurture soul.

This study did not specifically focus on wilderness activists; however, the environmentalists I interviewed support wilderness, and their environmental work parallels the work of wilderness activists. One study participant, Valerie, who reviewed this article noted: “I think all environmentalists are wilderness advocates, although their day-to-day work is based in more urban-suburban surroundings—where the people are! We want people to experience nature daily, not just as a place where one has to drive to get there. But it is in wilderness where we feel most at home in our souls.” Environmental activists are inspired by knowing that they are connected to the vital force of life in its natural diversity and, most poignantly, in wilderness (see Figure 3). The soul-fulfilling experiences that happen in a wilderness setting are the ones that we may talk about most often. The soul of the wilderness, however, may be invoked just as truly from inside a city limit as the inside of a wilderness boundary. For those who have experienced vital spirit through the natural world, soul also emerges from working for wilderness, not just in it.

Most of those interviewed reported experiencing vital force through earthly forms and, most often, through the natural environment such as wilderness.

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