

THE DESERT ZONE

Our “desert” or “wilderness” experiences can give us vitality.

Through human history, spiritual vitality has arisen from the deserts. For instance, the first recorded monotheism comes from the Egyptian deserts. Judaism arises from forty years in the Sinai deserts. The religion of Islam arises from the Arabian desert. Jesus himself was tested in the desert for forty days, and proclaimed himself to be the fulfilment for all who thirst (John 7.28).

Many today speak of spiritual connection to infinity as they travel the Australian desert. Similar things are said of the waterless Antarctic wilderness. There is something about being way out there and hovering in the risk-zone between comfort and death, about the immensity of the stars at night, or about solitude, which touches us beyond words.

But there are many other experiences of the desert wilderness which are not matters of geography. Mental illness, separation, crime, addiction. All these are acknowledged “wilderness experiences”, sometimes they never end..

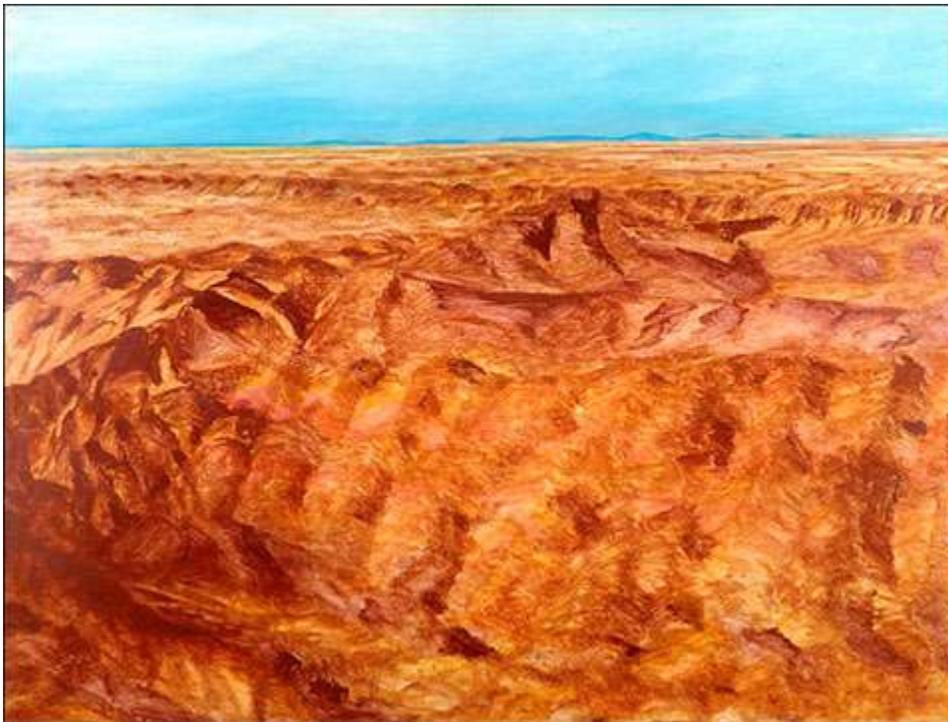
It can also go beyond specific conditions to a general feeling over time – feeling lost in life, needing to get your head together, being angry for no particular reason, losing your sense of direction, and so on. People rightly say they are going through a “wilderness time”.

Could it be that the historic spiritual vitality that arises from the desert can become ours from within our wilderness times too? In this section of the Hope Discovery Tour, we will do some fairly non-intrusive exercise which will help us to see our own desert experiences in this perspective.

Let us start off by noting that there are two responses possible.



Here are two pictures by Australian painters, both around the same time and the same place in Australia - one by Sidney Nolan, one by Albert Namatjira.



What's the difference? What do you see? Here is a little bit of background.

Sidney Nolan flew over the Australian red centre by mail planes and later painted pictures of a barren and dying wasteland. It opened his eyes to the real nature of the outback identity of Australians, and he helped others to look at it anew. He later went on to use this in his Ned Kelly series and his Burke and Wills series. He passed over the deserts and he became an international success.

At the same time, **Albert Namatjira**, lived on and in that same land and painted gentle pictures of majesty, beauty and subtlety. He too became an international success. Though his life was full of complexity and ultimately tragedy, he lived in the spirit of the land.

These two visions of the desert places are a choice we also make. We face the same challenge about our response to our own wilderness experiences and trials. Try and pass over our own wilderness, which could be terribly interesting, or get into it for what it will show us about our true heart.

Here are some questions you can discuss together or alone. It asks for severe honesty from you.

- What has been your desert or wilderness experience?
- What did you gain from that time?
- What did you feel was taken from us?
- And how hard was it to stay open to this learning?
- How did you manage to do it?
- Or has it made you more bitter, more cocooned?
- If deserts can be so productive for us, how can we learn from the experiences of those who suffer enduring deserts?

CONCLUSION

We have been brought up to think that deserts are dead places. But the truth is, in the deserts of Australia and also within us, deserts are full of life. Let us find that life.

CONCLUDING MEDITATION

God, we are being forged in the fires of hope

to gain... *(recall and name)*

This comes while we are swept into vicious circles

of ... *(recall and name)*

We are not alone. We have each other.

And we remember that you wander deserts, and you understand them.

We will remember this.

Amen