

## A SENSE OF PLACE

### Scotty McLennan's Sermon for the 10/20 Interfaith Service Memorial Church, Stanford University

“Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it,” says Jacob after bedding down somewhere outdoors on his travels between Beer-sheeba and Ha-ran<sup>i</sup>. For me, college was a place I came upon in my life journey that held special promises – but promises of which I had no real understanding whatsoever at first. College turned out to create and shape my deepest lifelong friendships, provided the basis for meeting my future wife, and launched me on an unexpected career path. Some or all of that, and more, may be true for Stanford alumni in this congregation -- and may be a scary, or a comforting, thought for current Stanford students here this morning. We are also gathered today to memorialize all those members of reunion classes who are no longer with us, and I know their deaths have a particular poignancy for many of you present, precisely because of the deep bonds first forged in this place.

As someone who did not attend Stanford as a student, though, I must say that there is a special sense of place here, that goes beyond the rest, and that has to do with nature. There must be a reason why Stanford's alma mater doesn't speak of relationships, or of academic achievement, but instead of rolling foothills, sunset fire, tender vistas, evening calms and whispering palms.<sup>ii</sup> There are a number of times when I've stood in awe on this campus and said to myself, “Surely God is in this place.” It's happened when I've been up near the Dish “Where the rolling foothills rise, up towards mountains higher, where at eve the Coast Range lies, in the sunset fire.”

It's happened right outside this church, in the middle of the circle at the very center of the quad. The sky is always very big overhead there, and if you look through the archway and back down Palm Drive, it always seems as if you can see to infinity. There's a unique Stanford spirit evoked there, I feel, which has to do with openness and freedom and promise. It seems related to a special California energy of the gold rush in which Leland and Jane Stanford were deeply involved, and a special California energy of the Silicon Valley which Fred Terman and Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard helped launch. It's the energy of “Go West, young man (and woman).” It's the energy of the American Dream itself.

Of course, there's a shadow side to all that energy – of potential greed, and corruption, and huge differentials of wealth and poverty – all of which have been a California legacy as well. Yet, the power of the beauty of nature on this campus retains its untrammelled purity and can be a source of renewal for each of us – a source of divine energy if only we come to sense that surely God is in this place.

I love Wordsworth's poem Tintern Abbey, where he confesses, “I have learned to look on nature, not as in the hour of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes the still, sad music of humanity, nor harsh, nor grating, though of ample power to chasten and subdue.” Then follow the wonderfully mystical words about nature read earlier in this service. Wordsworth had a homecoming of sorts, after years away from the Wye Country in England, and he experienced nature very differently than in his coarser boyhood days when it gave him only sensations and animal pleasures.<sup>iii</sup> Now he finds the divine spirit there: “I have felt a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated

thoughts; a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, and the round ocean and the living air, a motion and a spirit, that impels all thinking things, all objects of all thought, and rolls through all things.” This sense of divine infusion in nature reverberates in the readings in this service from the Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic traditions as well, and in our hymns of the day. I also like to think of nature as a place where we can feel the spirit of those departed, as I often feel the presence of my deceased parents at night as I walk under the stars. How deep I imagine those feelings can run, out in nature on this beautiful campus, thinking of Stanford classmates and friends no longer here. As Wordsworth says in another poem to someone who has died, “Thou hast left behind powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies; there’s not a breathing of the common wind that will forget you.”<sup>iv</sup>

Jacob’s people, the people of Israel, were given land in the Genesis account, in which his offspring would “spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south,” and “all the families of the earth would be blessed” in them.<sup>v</sup> Jane Stanford felt blessed as a Christian by God’s promise to the people of Israel, and by their extended blessing to all the families of the earth. It was important to her to have a rabbi speak at the dedication of Memorial Church in 1903. She also had her own special sense of place on her 8,000 acre farm here in California, where after her only son’s death, a university was founded so that, as Leland put it, “the children of California shall be our children.”<sup>vi</sup> Later, Jane had a vision that seems to echo Genesis: “I could see a hundred years ahead... I could see the children’s children’s children coming here from the East, the West, the North, and the South.”<sup>vii</sup>

May all of us – alumni of this university, current students, faculty, staff and friends of Stanford – be able to experience and appreciate the natural beauty of this campus, the Stanford’s farm. May we find spiritual power in this place today. May we find it in future homecomings. May its memory help bind us together as a special community, far flung across the globe. May it provide a context of deep reflection as we think of friends and colleagues we met in this place, who are now deceased. And may we never stop singing the glory of what God has wrought, here, and throughout the world, and across all the ages. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 28:10-16.

<sup>ii</sup> “Hail, Stanford Hail,” 1893.

<sup>iii</sup> B.J. Whiting et al., The College Survey of English Literature (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1942), p. 52.

<sup>iv</sup> William Wordsworth, Sonnet to Toussaint L’Ouverture.

<sup>v</sup> Genesis 28:14.

<sup>vi</sup> As quoted on the Stanford web page <http://www.stanford.edu/home/stanford/index.html>

<sup>vii</sup> As quoted by Condoleezza Rce, Stanford Commencement speech, June 16, 2002.