There is great good in returning to a landscape that had extraordinary meaning in one's life. It happens that we return to such places in our minds irresistibly. There are certain villages and towns, mountains and plains that, having seen them, walked in them, lived in them, even for a day, we keep forever in the mind's eye. They become indispensable to our well-being; they define us, and we say, I am who I am because I have been there, or there. There is good, too, in actual, physical return.

Some years ago I made a pilgrimage into the heart of North America. I began the journey proper in western Montana. From there I traveled across the high plains of Wyoming into the Black Hills, then southward to the southern plains, to a cemetery at Rainy Mountain, in Oklahoma. It was a journey made by my Kiowa ancestors long before. In the course of their migration they became the people of the Great Plains, and theirs was the last culture to evolve in North America. They had been for untold generations a mountain tribe of hunters. Their ancient nomadism, which had determined their way of life even before they set foot on this continent, perhaps thirty thousand years ago, was raised to its highest level of expression when they entered upon the Great Plains and acquired horses. Their migration brought them to a golden age. At the beginning of their journey they were a people of hard circumstances, often hungry and cold, fighting always for sheer survival. At its end, and for a hundred years, they were the lords of the land, a daring race of centaurs and buffalo hunters whose love of freedom and space was profound.

Recently I returned to the old migration route of the Kiowas. I had in me a need to behold again some of the principle landmarks of that long, prehistoric quest, to descend again from the mountain to the plain.

With my close friend Chuck I drove north to the Montana-Wyoming border. I wanted to intersect the Kiowa migration route at the Bighorn Medicine Wheel, high in the Bighorn Mountains. We gradually ascended

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1. Kiowa (ki'wə).
2. centaurs (sen'tərz), in Greek mythology, creatures that were half man and half horse.
to eight thousand feet on a well-maintained but winding highway. Then we climbed sharply, bearing upon timberline. It was early October, and although the plain below had been comfortable, even warm at midday, the mountain air was cold, and much of the ground was covered with snow. We turned off the pavement, on a dirt road that led three miles to the Medicine Wheel. The road was forbidding; it was narrow and winding, and the grades were steep and slippery; here and there the shoulders fell away into deep ravines. But at the same time something wonderful happened: we crossed the line between civilization and wilderness. Suddenly the earth persisted in its original being. Directly in front of us a huge white-tailed buck crossed our path, ambling without haste into a thicket of pines. As we drove over his tracks we saw four does above on the opposite bank, looking down at us, their great black eyes bright and benign, curious. There seemed no wariness, nothing of fear or alienation. Their presence was a good omen, we thought; somehow in their attitude they bade us welcome to their sphere of wilderness.

There was a fork in the road, and we took the wrong branch. At a steep, hairpin curve we got out of the car and climbed to the top of a peak. An icy wind whipped at us; we were among the bald summits of the Bighorns. Great flumes of sunlit snow erupted on the ridges and dissolved in spangles on the sky. Across a deep saddle we caught sight of the Medicine Wheel. It was perhaps two miles away.

When we returned to the car we saw another vehicle approaching. It was a very old Volkswagen bus, in much need of repair, cosmetic repair at least. Out stepped a thin, bearded man in thick glasses. He wore a wool cap, a down parka, and well-worn hiking boots. “I am looking for the Medicine Wheel,” he said, having nodded to us. He spoke softly, with a pronounced accent. His name was Jurg, and he was from Switzerland; he had been traveling for some months in Canada and the United States. Chuck and I shook his hand and told him to follow us, and we drove down into the saddle. From there we climbed on foot to the Medicine Wheel.

The Medicine Wheel is a ring of stones, some fifty feet in diameter. Stone spokes radiate from the center to the circumference. Cairns are placed at certain points on the circumference, one in the center, and one just outside the ring to the southwest. We do not know as a matter of fact who made the wheel or to what purpose. It had been proposed that it is an astronomical observatory, a solar calendar, and the ground design of a Kiowa Sun Dance lodge. What we know without doubt is that it is a sacred expression, an equation of man’s relation to the cosmos.

There was a great calm upon that place. The hard, snow-bearing wind that had burned our eyes and skin only minutes before had died away altogether. The sun was warm and bright, and there was a profound silence. On the wire

3. Cairns (kārns): mounds of rough stones built as memorials or landmarks.
4. Kiowa Sun Dance lodge: For the annual Sun Dance ceremony the most important Kiowa religious rites through much of the 19th century, Kiowa members built a sweat lodge for their purification and self renewal.
fence which had been erected to enclose and protect the wheel were fixed offerings, small prayer bundles. Chuck and Jurg and I walked about slowly, standing for long moments here and there, looking into the wheel or out across the great distances. We did not say much; there was little to be said. But we were deeply moved by the spirit of that place. The silence was such that it must be observed. To the north we could see down to timberline, to the snowfields and draws that marked the black planes of forest among the peaks of the Bighorns. To the south and west the mountains fell abruptly to the plains. We could see thousands of feet down and a hundred miles across the dim expanse.

When we were about to leave, I took from my pocket an eagle-bone whistle that my father had given me, and I blew it in the four directions. The sound was very high and shrill, and it did not break the essential silence. As we were walking down we saw far below, crossing our path, a coyote sauntering across the snow into a wall of trees. It was just there, a wild being to catch sight of, and then it was gone. The wilderness, which had admitted us with benediction let us go.
When we came within a stone’s throw of the highway, Chuck and I said goodbye to Jurj, but not before he had got out his camp stove and boiled water for tea. There in the dusk we enjoyed a small ceremonial feast of tea and crackers. The three of us had become friends. Only later did I begin to understand the extraordinary character of that friendship. It was the friendship of those who come together in recognition of the sacred. If we never meet again, I thought, we shall not forget this day.

On the plains the fences and roads and windmills and houses seemed almost negligible, all but overwhelmed by the earth and sky. It is a landscape of great clarity; its vastness is that of the ocean. It is the near revelation of infinity. Antelope were everywhere in the grassy folds, grazing side by side with horses and cattle. Hawks sailed above, and crows scattered before us. The place names were American—Tensleep, Buffalo, Dull Knife, Crazy Woman, Spotted Horse.

The Black Hills are an isolated group of mountains in South Dakota and Wyoming. They lie very close to both the geographic center of the United States, if you include Alaska and Hawaii, and the geographic center of the North American continent. They form an island, an elliptical area of nearly six thousand square miles, in the vast sea of grasses that is the northern Great Plains. The Black Hills are a calendar of geologic time\(^5\) that is truly remarkable. Their foundation rocks are much older than the sedimentary layers\(^6\) of which the Americas are primarily formed. An analysis of this foundation, made in 1964, indicates an age of between two and three billion years.

A documented record of exploration in this region is found in the Lewis and Clark journals, 1804–1806. The first white party known definitely to have entered the Black Hills proper was led by Jedidiah Smith in 1823. The diary of this expedition, kept by one James Clyman, is notable. Clyman reports a confrontation between Jedidiah Smith and a grizzly bear, in which Smith lost one of his ears. There is also reported the discovery of a petrified (“putrified,” as Clyman has it) forest in which petrified birds sing petrified songs.

The Lakotas, or Teton Sioux, called these mountains Paha Sapa, “hills that are black.” Other tribes, beside the Kiowas and the Sioux, thought of the Black Hills as sacred ground, a place that is crucial in their past. The Arapahos\(^7\) lived here. So did the Cheyennes. Bear Butte, near Sturgis, South Dakota, on the northeast edge of the Black Hills, is the Cheyennes’ sacred mountain. It remains, like the Medicine Wheel, a place of the greatest spiritual intensity. So great was thought to be the power inherent in the Black Hills that the Indians did not camp there. It was a place of rendezvous, a hunting ground, but above all an inviolate, sacred ground. It was a place of thunder and lightning, a dwelling place of the gods.

On the edge of the Black Hills nearest the Bighorn Mountain is Devil’s Tower, the first of our national monuments. The Lakotas called it Mateo

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5. geologic time: the period of time defined by the formation and development of the earth.
6. sedimentary layers: layers of earth and stone deposited by wind, water, and ice.
7. Arapahos (a-rap’a-hoz’).
Tepee, “Grizzly Bear Lodge.” The Kiowas called it Tscai, “Rock Tree.” Devil’s Tower is a great **monolith** that rises high above the timber of the Black Hills.

In conformation it closely resembles the stump of a tree. It is a cluster of rock columns of phonolite porphyry* 1,000 feet across at the base and 275 feet across at the top. It rises 865 feet above the high ground upon which it stands and 1,280 feet above the Belle Fourch River, which runs in the valley below.

It has to be seen to be believed. “There are things in nature that engender an awful quiet in the heart of man; Devil’s Tower is one of them.” I wrote these words almost twenty years ago. They remain true to my experience. Each time I behold this Tscai anew I am more than ever in awe of it.

Two hundred years ago, more or less, the Kiowas came upon this place. They were moved to tell a story about it:

Eight children were there at play, seven sisters and their brother. Suddenly the boy was struck dumb; he trembled and began to run upon his hands and feet. His fingers became clawed, and his body was covered with fur. Directly there was a bear where the boy had been. The sisters were terrified; they ran, and the bear after them. They came to the stump of a great tree, and the tree spoke to them. It bade them climb upon it, and as they did so it began to rise into the air. The bear came to kill them, but they were just beyond its reach. It reared against the tree and scorched the bark all around with its claws. The seven sisters were borne into the sky, and they became the stars of the Big Dipper.  

This story, which I have known from the time I could first understand language, exemplifies the sacred for me. The storyteller, that anonymous man who told the story for the first time, succeeded in raising the human condition to the level of universal significance. Not only did he account for the existence of the rock tree, but in the process he related his people to the stars.

When Chuck and I had journeyed over this ground together, when we were about to go our separate ways, I reminded him of our friend Jurig, knowing well enough that I needn’t have: Jurig was on our minds. I can’t account for it. He had touched us deeply with his trust, not unlike that of the wild animals we had seen, and with his generosity of spirit, his concern to see beneath the surface of things, his attitude of free, clear, direct, disinterested kindness.

“Did he tell us what he does?” I asked. “Does he have a profession?”

“I don’t think he said.” Chuck replied. “I think he’s a pilgrim.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

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8. *phonolite porphyry* (fə-nō-līt’ pör-fīr’): a type of hard volcanic rock with fairly large crystals, set in a fine-grained groundmass.