



'HEAVEN'

26 Feb - 1 Mar

Week 1 – Supplementary  
Resources

### Additional reading:

**Genesis 8. 6 - 18; 9. 8 – 13:**

<b>Noah, the raven, the dove and the rainbow</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>'The Tale of the Sands' – Sufi story</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Wilderness Meditation I: Wild Beasts and Angels</b>	<b>3 - 6</b>

### Genesis 8. 6 - 18; 9. 8 – 13

#### Noah, the raven, the dove and the rainbow

At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him.

He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more.

In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying.

In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. Then God said to Noah, 'Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.' So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives.



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### Genesis 9:8-13

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.

'I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the

waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.'

God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth'.

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### 'The Tale of the Sands'

A stream, from its source in far-off mountains, passing through every kind and description of countryside, at last reached the sands of the desert. Just as it had crossed every other barrier, the stream tried to cross this one, but it found that as fast as it ran into the sand, its waters disappeared.

It was convinced, however, that its destiny was to cross this desert, and yet there was no way. Now a hidden voice, coming from the desert itself, whispered: 'The Wind crosses the desert, and so can the stream.'

The stream objected that it was dashing itself against the sand, and only getting absorbed: that the wind could fly, and this was why it could cross a desert.

'By hurtling in your own accustomed way you cannot get across. You will either disappear or become a marsh. You must allow the wind to carry you over, to your destination.'

But how could this happen? 'By allowing yourself to be absorbed in the wind.'

This idea was not acceptable to the stream. After all, it had never been absorbed before. It did not want to lose its individuality. And, once having lost it, how

was one to know that it could ever be regained?

'The wind', said the sand, 'performs this function. It takes up water, carries it over the desert, and then lets it fall again. Falling as rain, the water again becomes a river.'

'How can I know that this is true?' 'It is so, and if you do not believe it, you cannot become more than a quagmire, and even that could take many, many years. And it certainly is not the same as a stream.'

'But can I not remain the same stream that I am today?'

'You cannot in either case remain so', the whisper said. 'Your essential part is carried away and forms a stream again. You are called what you are even today because you do not know which part of you is the essential one.'

When it heard this, certain echoes began to arise in the thoughts of the stream. Dimly it remembered a state in which it – or some part of it? – had been held in the arms of a wind. It also remembered – or did it? – that this was the real thing, not necessarily the obvious thing, to do.



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And the stream raised its vapour into the welcoming arms of the wind, which gently and easily bore it upwards and along, letting it fall softly as soon as they reached the roof of a mountain, many, many miles away. And because it had its doubts, the stream was able to remember and record more strongly in its mind the details of the experience. It reflected, 'Yes, now I have learned my true identity.'

The stream was learning. But the sands whispered: 'We know, because we see it happen day after day: and because we, the sands, extend from the riverside all the way to the mountain.'

And that is why it is said that the way in which the stream of Life is to continue on its journey is written in the Sands.

*Sufi Story, supplied by Janet Williams*

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### Wilderness Meditation I: Wild Beasts and Angels

The first day was like playing camp. Collecting firewood and scraps of bark for tinder, locating a source of water. Finding a rocky overhang to lie down under, with a hearthstone in front where a fire could be kept burning. As if these precautions might keep wild beasts, or the wilderness itself, at bay.

Why I was there had yet to reveal itself. The surprise that I had come at all, was still bruise-fresh. Although deep in the cave of my knowing, I was unsurprised to be there.

At sunset, the day burnt down to its embers and expired gloriously, scattering bright cinders along the dark horizon. The first night was long, and cold, and unfriendly. The half-moon had not grown into a sister yet.

The next day, the start of the long walk. Forsaking the known and then the half-known landscapes – the weathered limestone uplands of my childhood – for mesas whose red dust caked my shoes and clothes with foreign dirt. By sundown, I was a long way from what I knew: urban places, book learning.

I was tired when I lay down, and stiff when I got up. Unused to the terrain, I walked,

the first day, too far for my own strength: the first temptation. The second day, my limbs are heavy and slow to obey, my spirits low as the riverbed I'm standing in. My mind sluggish and rebellious.

It murmurs, City boy: Big teacher-O. What do you really know? Where are your teachings now? Your mother, even? Where is your big moment? Who called you here?

I know that, at least.

To the uninitiated, this is a dangerous place – but not all the dangers are external. Men have died out here, but I am not here for that. I am here not to test my limits, but to find them. I am here to find the balance of my life, and learn to walk it blindfold, because the time will come when I need to.

By the time the moon and I have walked a week together, she is half-turned towards me. In this country of her night, I use my other senses more than sight. I learn to identify her citizens by their small scuttlings and larger, intuited outlines – in my imagining, dark-limbed, many-headed – that flow unenquiring as water around the edges of my firelight.



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The wild things I had feared, in whose topaz gaze I now see glints of God's.

Slowly, the desert schools me in its rules. I learn the grace of slow, slow walking. It doesn't matter in the end how long this takes. In the end, there is only this step, and then this one, leaning on the gritty wind.

I learn that a summit is not, especially, an attainment. From a summit, you see all the rest. You won't climb all of them. From one of these, thirsty and hallucinating, I consider floating down. Remember that the real achievement, in this hallucinatory place, is keeping your feet on the ground, one step, then another.

Climbing down from that precipice, I come with small movements. Stop often. Sip tiny, sparing sips from the flat, nearly-empty udder of my water bag. Sit on the floor of the desert afterwards so still, for so long, that I feel the ground exhale beneath me.

At least in the dust of the canyons, my soles leave footprints. On the miles of basalt upland, there was no mark of my crossing. I climb to the highest place, and might have flown there, for all the record I leave of my hard ascent.

I imagine this canyon country as a vast city. Populate its streets, in my solitude, with people, beasts, vehicles; cover its steepnesses with private dwellings and public buildings stretching to the limit of sight. Squares and pavements washed and swept. Crowded markets, libraries, temples, homes.

I re-inhabit, in this game, the clothes of human relativism – of knowing and being known, the confinement of identity: son, friend, brother, priest, king, messiah.

The titles that people attach to you for fear they might not know you properly without them. Or for fear they might, perhaps. It is not so very tempting. I erase my cosmopolis.

Out here where the diamond gaze of God radiates from the very rocks and stars, I am at once dwarfed and magnified. I and the cosmos are a dance of atoms. In that dance, we are not separate. There is no privacy beneath this sky, nor do I seek it.

If I speak of these things in the towns I am a prophet or crazy – both are a little sacred, a little unsafe. Among my people, dead prophets are preferred, on the whole.

And in my humanity, I am cowed by that. Sometimes I hide from God along the canyon bottom. I follow the sound of hidden water to its source, use the trickle to wet my hem and rinse off the crusts of dust and blood. Sit and give in to a little self-pity. Remember the cool of thick-walled houses, buckets of water raised dripping from deep wells.

It's water that haunts me. Not food (after my guts' first hungry yelps and twistings), but its association with people – my people. The smoke from my solitary fire carries the scent-memory of baking bread, of morning in my mother's house. The remembered incense of lamb roasting in the open air.

But the most potent ghost is water. My body ekes it out now, but my eyes and soul beseech the landscape for the lush green of fig-trees.

Mirages shimmer, a foot above the sand, with the silver shiver of olive groves. Anything but the reds, beiges and striated greys of this sere place.

God sits with me in this dry gully too, and waits. A lizard runs fearlessly across my foot, and vanishes up a tall crack in the



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wall. It's an afternoon where I have become sunk in torpor and refuse to move.

Even after the sun slips suddenly over the lip of the gorge and is gone, dousing us in shadow. I and the invisible lizard, we sit on, in this place defined by absence.

Much later, a huge full moon sails silently up the eastern sky. For me alone, she repaints this blood-coloured wilderness in the kinder colours of night. A flashflood of moonlight washes the world white. Through the middle of it, she makes for me, from the jagged shadow of the cliffs, a road of pure blackness – along which, at last, I consent to walk.

Most damaging to balance are the times of ecstasy. God allows me those, although we both know they are dangerous to humans. The vast, indifferent tenderness of the desert morning before the dew burns off: every pebble foreshortened by its own sharp little shadow. The early sky a brimming bowl in which floats the far-off speck of a bird of prey. Every single object emitting the silent roar of God until my senses disintegrate and I too am the roar, I am the silence.

And, killingly, its opposite. Any great height has its corresponding drop. God and I both know this too: part of our walk together is to teach me the wisdom of staying with the contour lines of my own journey.

And sometimes, I did drop. Into a sweet and savage fury that descended like a hammer – like a locust cloud laying waste in seconds to every hopeful scrap of a year's harvest. It came once in a meadow newly blooming with flowers after rain. It came once when I was up on high ground, caught in the sharp white teeth of a sleet storm. I stood, and my hair and beard and

eyes filled up with beads of ice, and I raged at the white void which contained at that moment no God I was kin to: insisting, I am part of this, and only this. Let me be one with this circle of the hawk, the sleet, the brief flowers, the ringing rock. It has given rise to me, let me die back into it. What business do we have, hoisting the small rag of human consciousness to blow threadbare over this huge emptiness?

And sooner or later, sentience would answer. Not from the blank sky, that has absorbed without comment all the human anguish addressed to it throughout our race's perturbed history. And not from beneath my feet. But out of the silence of my own heart.

Angels did attend me at those times. They are always midwife to that moment when the sublime releases us and human experience has to rebirth, squalling and bereft, onto the hard ground of our other parent.

What brings us back to ourselves? The touch of the physical. The rough friendship of rock, sunlight on cold skin. Sudden warm rain. The single harsh cry of a nameless desert bird, whose guttural imperative in that bleak place carries the authority of a man's shout: Wake up! Emergency! Get up and live your one life!

Who is to say these things are not angels to us? Their hiding-place revealed when something larger than our understanding slips inside the meaning of the moment, stretching its significance to breaking point. Hearing the taut silence, the universe leans in. The angel moves; the silence breaks like an egg. I tumble out, undone with wonder, and walk on through my new-flowering wilderness.

*J Rowbotham, 2008*