

# Wallace Stegner and Western Spirituality

Richard W. Etulain  
University of New Mexico

In 1952, at midcareer, Wallace Stegner summarized his convictions in a 600-word essay entitled “This I Believe.”<sup>1</sup> Although Stegner said little about the origins of his beliefs, these tenets were clearly learned experientially rather than inherited. He was persuaded, too, that his credo had to be lived out among others. The rules individuals “live up to” must enrich the larger community. Since he had been “born luckier than most of the world’s millions,” Stegner added, he had to commit himself to help others. Along with his good fortune came added duties; that meant he was “more obligated.” In this brief statement Stegner also warned readers away from dogmatic believers. He feared the “immoderate zeal” of Christian, Moslem, and Communist zealots, yet he admitted that “the code of conduct to which [he subscribed] was preached more eloquently by Jesus Christ than by any other.” He also adhered to “a whole catalogue of Christian and classical virtues.” Chief among these virtues were moderation, kindness,

<sup>1</sup>“This I Believe,” appeared first as part of a series of brief newspaper columns in 1952. It was reprinted in 1982 in *One Way to Spell Man*, to which

generosity, steadfastness, and courage. Equally important were self-control and responsibility. Indeed, Stegner emphasized, “no right comes without a responsibility.” To emphasize his earlier point on inheritance, Stegner stressed that these values derived not from a conscience “implanted by divine act but as something learned since infancy from tradition and the society which has bred us.” Once understood, these convictions became decades-long responsibilities for Stegner. He was certain that humankind, with its potential to experience, to learn, must avoid “tribal and denominational narrowness” if its lessons were to benefit all people. Although an individual remained responsible for his or her self-control and duties, Stegner contended that all people must accept a common cause to advance the virtues and esprit de corps of community and country (“This” 3, 4; emphasis added).

Before Stegner produced most of his best-known works, he had pieced together much of this pattern for his spiritual journey.<sup>2</sup> If one means by “spiritual journey” the explicit search for a set of shaping values, Stegner managed but a few stuttering steps in the earliest decades of his life.<sup>3</sup> Although early on he followed no specific religion, never joined a denomination, and avoided most bald statements about personal creeds, in his adult life he diligently pursued spiritual instruction. Much of this instruction obviously derived from Stegner’s peripatetic experiences in the Canadian and American Wests. Over time, he learned to avoid the destructive but popular and tightly held myth of western individualism his father represented and moved on to embrace the nurturing ethic of family and community responsibil-

<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, I have relied heavily for background information on Jackson J. Benson’s thorough biography, *Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work* (1996).

<sup>3</sup>For varying views of “spirituality,” I have profited from Elizabeth Lesser, *The New American Spirituality: A Seeker’s Guide* (1999) and Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (1999). For a convenient collection of excerpts dealing with spirituality, see Katherine Kurs, ed., *Searching for Your Soul: Writers of Many Faiths Share Their Personal Stories of Spiritual Discovery*

ity his mother and wife epitomized. His quest, gradual and nonideological, eventually linked his personal experiences, reading, and friendships in the spiritual apologia he began to articulate in his forties. When Stegner said frequently that he was born lucky, he implied that little of his early life resulted from logical, careful planning. Instead, his nomadic, wandering boyhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, almost without premeditated pattern, wobbled toward fulfillment—and even success. His spiritual odyssey followed a similar unplanned, hit-and-miss pattern.

Stegner's home in his childhood and teenage years featured a civil war between chaos and stability. His father, George Stegner, inflicted with a lifelong, severe case of wanderlust and obsessed with the American Dream, subjected his wife and two sons to more than two decades of hungering and thirsting after the Big Rock Candy Mountain. Homesteading, bartending, bootlegging, and other jobs all proved unsuccessful. Brief stops in Iowa, Washington, and North Dakota prefaced longer but equally unproductive stays in southwestern Saskatchewan and Salt Lake City. A driven, often misguided, and sometimes angry man, George Stegner rarely provided stability or rootedness for his family. As Stegner told one interviewer, since his father was "mixed-up, irritable, and frustrated" and felt "himself many times a failure," he himself had to exorcise that father figure in some of his fiction (Stegner and Etulain 43).

Conversely, Stegner's mother, Hilda Paulson Stegner, exuded perseverance, encouragement, and dependability. A committed nest-builder, Mrs. Stegner more than balanced her husband's anger and instability in shaping her younger son's values. Hilda Stegner became a heroine of his life, as Stegner's wife Mary would later. During his closing years, Stegner saluted his nurturing mother for her "comfort, understanding, forgiveness, uncritical love." Nearly a half century after her death from breast cancer in November 1933, the son could recall his mother's last, sustaining words: "You're a good . . . boy . . . Wallace" (*When the Bluebird* 22, 23). For Stegner, his mother represented those with huge capacities to sacrifice their own dreams in order to nourish those of others.

In the arid and isolated Canadian West and later among the Saints of Salt Lake City, Stegner began unconsciously formulating his spiritual credo. The alienation from his unhappy father, the drawing influences of his sustaining mother—even a few precepts from a Presbyterian Sunday School—were at work on the young, frontier man, and soon after arriving in Utah Stegner discovered the Mormons as an appealing, cohesive group. From these early settings and encounters, Stegner learned a great deal. As he once stated, “I don’t believe you can write about anything . . . without drawing deeply on your own experiences” (qtd. in White and McClanahan 30). Obviously, Stegner knew the power of these settings and scenes when he later wrote that he might not know entirely who he was but he did know where he was from. These early experiences were eventually elevated into principles. His spiritual stories would not be someone else’s twice-told tales but his own; not the barbaric yawp of the postmodern first person but the stories of a sensitive westerner basing his narratives on his place-based experiences. Not surprisingly, his early inchoate thoughts became central to much of what Stegner wrote throughout his career.

Perhaps as much as any major writer of the West, Stegner drew heavily on his own family history to represent the spiritual values he was beginning to hold. He employed the divergent and conflicting attitudes of his parents to illustrate tentative conclusions about his own journey. Pen portraits of George and Hilda Stegner appeared in his novels, stories, essays, and autobiographical works. George Stegner epitomized westerners disastrously linked to a selfish, extractive destruction of the West, those individualistic, ego-driven pioneers who failed to consider group or community needs in their headlong drive to capitalize on the West’s overflowing resources. In contrast, Hilda Stegner represented long-suffering settlers, usually women, willing to sublimate their own dreams to the wants of others, especially those of their children. Stegner also utilized his own story, as a boy and young man coming of age and as an older adult, to build the plots of several stories and books. Stegner seemed compelled to begin with what he knew—his family and friends being *the* important sources of his experi-

ence. Rarely, he once pointed out, did he invent his major characters; such large imaginings were beyond his artistic ken. Thus two of Stegner's early novels, *On a Darkling Plain* (1940) and *Fire and Ice* (1941), draw on autobiographical sources. The protagonists in both books, a returning veteran in Canada and a young Communist at the University of Wisconsin, become dangerous isolatos. So dogmatically certain of their ideas are these two young men that they carelessly separate themselves from needed companionship. Stegner told this writer that as he worked on these early novels he had "the history of [his] father . . . in mind— . . . the recalcitrant individual, the outlaw individual, essentially, as against the society" (Stegner and Etulain 35).

Stegner's first big book, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1945), written in the late 1930s and early 1940s, provides an illuminating glimpse of its creator's nascent spirituality. Completed nearly a decade before Stegner prepared his brief "This I Believe" essay, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* adumbrates much of what he asserted in his abbreviated statement. The most autobiographical of Stegner's early works, this novel features the family of a boomer husband and a nesting wife, Bo and Elsa Mason, and their two sons, Chet and Bruce. The panoramic book closely follows many of the recorded experiences of the Stegner family. Bo Mason characterizes the wrongheaded dreams and drives of ego-directed mavericks like George Stegner. Ripping up the land with scant understanding of the fragile, arid landscape of Saskatchewan, Bo lusts after success—and quick profits. When the crops fail, Bo angrily abandons farming for moonshining. Meanwhile, Elsa tries to sustain the family, protecting the boys from their churlish, trigger-tempered father. She hopes, too, to insure that her sons are educated and learn a few social graces. Setting aside her own aspirations, she pours her dreams into her family. Elsa is, as Stegner wrote of his own mother, "a patient and abiding and bonding force" (*When the Bluebird* 24). Young Bruce Mason, narrating much of the novel, reminds us of what we know about Wallace Stegner. Through the course of the book, Bruce plays diverse roles: apprentice journeyer, keeper of memories, and nascent spiritual guide. Slowly, Bruce begins to understand his father as a malignant anachronism, a born-again

frontiersman still looking for an open frontier that has already vanished. Bruce realizes, too, although much less clearly, how much he owes to the unselfish encouragement of his loving mother. Sorting through his traumatic memories at the novel's end, Bruce concludes that his mother's larger, sustaining vision, instead of his father's narrow, selfish dream, must direct his spiritual path.

If Stegner's parents and his attitudes toward them played central roles in shaping his evolving system of values, so did the lessons he learned from specific places. The linkages between the spiritual maxims he absorbed from his youth and from his mother, as well as those from his various "Wests," stretch across Stegner's life like taut strands of fence wire, providing warnings and clarifying demarcations for searchers wandering those fence lines. Toward the end of his life, in an unpublished diary entry, Stegner summarized how much the American West determined his identity and outlook. He wrote: "I am made by what I was in my youth and childhood. On this, everything I have studied, envied, pursued is an overlay. The culture I have acquired is not something learned or imitated, but something I have *grown*. My twig was bent, but it's still the same twig" ("Notebooks," Box 109, Folder 1). What were those specific lessons of western wisdom that Stegner "grew"? How did his first years in the Canadian and American Wests, when these areas were closing out their frontier years and beginning to exhibit separate regional identities, mold his spiritual insights? Stegner never provided a short, convenient definition of these lessons or identified their sources, but he did, over time, hint at the form and content of the insights he gained.

First of all, Stegner asserted that he had to unlearn two kinds of erroneous notions about his Wests. Nearly all of his earliest schooling in Canada was Eurocentric. He read English and world history and literature but nothing about Eastend, Saskatchewan, where he lived as a boy. Not until he was in graduate school did he undertake systematic study of the American West; his grasp of Canadian western history came even later, as he prepared to write *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memoir of the Last Plains Frontier* (1962). An even larger barrier to understanding the Wests was the myths that encrusted the histories of

the two areas. Early on, frontier images of the two countries, especially those depicting the American side, had hardened into obdurate stereotypes. By the end of the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, the Old West was a wild place in which heroic men tested their courage and fortitude. As Stegner observed, a straight line of homogenizing mythology led from James Fenimore Cooper's hero Leatherstocking to Buffalo Bill's Wild West, on to Owen Wister's *Virginian*, and then to the movie roles of John Wayne and the fictional protagonists of Louis L'Amour. In this century and a half, a western myth evolved into a sacrosanct belief system about westering. In its center, at least for Americans, rode a white male, galloping west to do battle with hostile environments and equally dangerous human competitors.<sup>4</sup>

George Stegner represented this unbreakable frontier myth in Stegner's early years. Over time, Wallace Stegner realized that his father believed in—indeed was driven by—the magic, expansionistic, and materialistic visions of pioneer America. Into his father's alter ego in *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, Stegner poured all the poisonous ingredients of this individualistic, blustering frontiersman. In the fictional sequel, *Recapitulation* (1979), an older and more analytical Bruce Mason senses how much his father—and other pioneers like him—have spoiled the people and places they have touched. Stegner put it succinctly in this novel: Bruce carries “the spiritual injuries” of his boyhood when he remembers “the kind of bruising childhood” (Hepworth 81) that limited his “spirituality.” In another novel, *The Preacher and the Slave* (1950), labor radical Joe Hill also marches to a dangerous drummer. Hill sacrifices the interests and lives of others in his mania to have his own way, much like Bruce Mason's father. These Stegner antagonists have much in common with Hawthorne's Ethan Brand and Melville's Captain Ahab; their cold, rationalistic motivations separate them from other humans, even from those who could love them and help balance their overweening ambitions.

By midcareer, Stegner frequently paralleled the two Wests' coming of age with his own. Just as westerners were gradually realizing the

<sup>4</sup>These trends in western storytelling are discussed in Richard W. Etulain, *Telling Western Stories: From Buffalo Bill to Larry McMurtry* (1999).

large shortcomings of the chauvinistic, materialistic western myth, so Stegner was beginning to perceive the destructiveness of his father's actions as well as some of his own. A handful of life experiences taught him the misdirections of earlier frontier individualists and redirected him toward more communal-based thinking. For example, Stegner found much to admire about the Mormons and appreciated their group society. Although he could not accept Mormon theology and religious beliefs, thinking many of them "incredible," he was drawn immediately to the Mormons' sense of belonging. They "gave me a kind of hole to crawl in," he told one acquaintance; "it was good for me" (Stegner and Etulain 101). If the Boy Scout and Mutual programs beckoned the adolescent Stegner, Mormon perseverance, courage, and "solidarity" continued their appeal to the adult. In analyzing the Mormon Trail experience, Stegner called the Saints "the most systematic, organized, disciplined, and successful pioneers in our history" (*Gathering* 6). These were the very values at the core of Stegner's own spirituality. He also made a leap that many secularists have found impossible: he could see, accept, and account for the enormous power that belief in the supernatural had in shaping Mormon community. Nor was he blind to the cohesive potency of Mormon ties to the past. Like the Saints, Stegner embraced the past—learning from and sustained by his family and western heritages. His sound and happy marriage to Mary Page Stegner (which lasted more than half a century) also stabilized him and taught him community responsibility. Repeatedly, he spoke of this Iowa girl, a librarian and also a graduate student in English, as his most important link to the worlds of music and the arts. Stegner dedicated most of his books to her and often underscored her dedication to worthy causes. In acknowledging his indebtedness to his wife, Stegner pinpointed the most significant symbol of balance in his adult life.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, his career as a university teacher of creative writing and literature also proved a balancing influence. Even though he frequently grouched about the time and energy teaching took from his writing,

<sup>5</sup>Jackson Benson comments extensively on the stabilizing influences of Mary Stegner (61, 320–21, 414–15).

Stegner blossomed as a teacher. He was a superb lecturer and an energetic instructor of undergraduate and postgraduate writers, and for the most part—until the 1960s—he found teaching satisfying and rewarding (Benson 163–64, 264–65). This career came about by happenstance, as he argued on several occasions. While working at a rug and linoleum company during his senior year in college, he was offered a graduate fellowship in psychology. But then, at the urging of one of his professors at the University of Utah, Stegner went off to the University of Iowa for master's work in English. Without much specific direction in mind, Stegner worked his way through the master's and doctoral programs at Iowa City, married, and returned to the Utah campus in Salt Lake City for his first full-time college teaching job. His career path (one not without its delays and disappointments) took him next to the University of Wisconsin and Harvard before returning west to Stanford, where he taught from Fall 1945 until his retirement in 1971.

If Stegner found balance and stability in his contacts with the Mormons, in his marriage, and in his work, he also discovered in the West another central ingredient of his spiritual journey—his growing dedication to conservation and environmentalism. This segment of Stegner's pilgrimage developed over time. As he tells the story, during his boyhood and early adult years, like so many of his contemporaries, he paid scant attention to the environment. Then, a series of events and influences conspired to jolt Stegner's consciousness in new, memorable ways about his West. The 1940s and 1950s were notable leaps forward in Stegner's environmental awareness. Cut loose from his fractious birth family, secure in his personal life and settled in his career, Stegner gained schooling in the basins and ranges of the interior West, developed his own proud sense of place, and portrayed a series of historical and fictional characters who also found themselves challenged by demanding landscapes. Similar to the spiritual passage of Stegner, the journeys of these protagonists and antagonists are closely linked to their western settings.

Stegner claimed that he took his first instructions in environmentalism in the 1930s. While researching and writing his dissertation on the career of Clarence Dutton, Stegner discovered the work of John

Wesley Powell and declared that some day he would do a book on Powell. Throughout the 1940s, as Stegner worked on several other projects, he continued to plug away at his projected study of Powell's career. Meanwhile, Stegner, Mary, and their son Page crisscrossed much of the interior West on automobile and camping trips, and Stegner later wrote several travel essays about what his family saw.<sup>6</sup> These essays, "begun in innocence," Stegner later asserted, illustrated his first "simple-minded love of western landscape and western experience" (*Sound* 10). Also, he was encouraged by his friend Bernard DeVoto to take up his pen on behalf of conservation efforts and urged by David Brower of the Sierra Club to speak and write for wilderness preservation. In the meantime, his book on Powell, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* (1954), had appeared to great acclaim. Perhaps Powell came closer than any other man to being Stegner's hero (Mary Stegner interview). Stegner made clear that, unlike his own father George, Powell avoided mythic frontier individualism and, instead, called for a land ethic beneficial to western lands as well as to the settlers who moved onto them. In the Powell book, Stegner captured and displayed the lessons he had already learned about the need for group efforts in the American West. Revealingly, too, in the opening pages Stegner described Powell's catch-as-catch-can, hardscrabble schooling as remarkably similar to his own in the Canadian West.<sup>7</sup>

Then, at the beginning of the 1960s, Stegner published his best-known essay, "Wilderness Letter," in his collection of essays *The Sound of Mountain Water* (1969). The essay encapsulated Stegner's attitudes about wilderness preservation and likewise reflected his spiritual attitudes about western lands. Wilderness, he began, was a "spiritual resource" that shaped American character and culture. Progress might have "brought . . . increased comfort and more material goods," but it

<sup>6</sup>Some of these travel essays are reprinted in Wallace Stegner, *Marking the Sparrow's Fall: Wallace Stegner's American West* (1998), which Stegner's son Page edited.

<sup>7</sup>I expand on these parallels between John Wesley Powell and Stegner in

also resulted in “spiritual losses.” He argued that people must embrace the natural world because they “need[ed] the spiritual refreshment” these areas provided (*Sound* 146, 147, 149). He added later that he was willing to battle for “the preservation of wilderness . . . as a spiritual resource” because we had forgotten how much our frontier heritage and identity owed to wilderness areas (Page Stegner 117).

By the 1960s, Stegner’s voice was heard among—if not at the forefront of—westerners calling for more careful shepherding of the environment. Many saw Stegner as a direct descendent of Henry David Thoreau, Powell, and Aldo Leopold, as the forceful spokes-man for a new kind of land ethic. Although Stegner’s journey clearly led in these directions, he did not always enjoy the cheerleading expected of him. As he told journalist/historian Tom Watkins, he preferred “to stay home and write novels and histories.” “I am a paper tiger,” he added, “typewritten on both sides” (Watkins 100). In fact, Stegner perceived that his role in environmental activities contained a central irony: “I’m against individualism gone rampant, but I don’t actually seem to be a good team player. . . . Even when I agree wholeheartedly with the people who are urging me along, I don’t like to be pushed” (qtd. in Hepworth 109–10). But neither Stegner’s pen nor voice was still in the next decades. Much of what he wrote and many of his travels were in behalf of a mushrooming environmental movement, yet he spent more of his time than he wished sharing what he had learned about the environment. Stegner won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1972 for his superb novel *Angle of Repose* (1971); he landed a National Book Award for another novel, *The Spectator Bird* (1976); and he narrowly missed a second Pulitzer for his biography of DeVoto, *The Uneasy Chair* (1974)—but had there been an equivalent prize for environmental writers during the 1970s and 1980s, he certainly would have merited such an award.

Stegner’s biographer, Jackson Benson, argues that in the last two decades of his life Stegner found his true voice, which allowed him to articulate his beliefs clearly. Benson points to narrators Lyman Ward in *Angle of Repose*, Joe Allston in *All the Little Live Things* (1967) and

*The Spectator Bird*, and Larry Morgan in *Crossing to Safety* (1987) as the fullest embodiments of Stegner's mature outlook. True enough, these aging narrators illustrate and often seem to speak for several of Stegner's viewpoints, especially when they were particularly grumpy. Yet Stegner's comprehensive spiritual journey—the set of values he speaks explicitly for in the brief essay “This I Believe”—was reflected earlier and included more dimensions than one encounters in these later narrators. What Stegner absorbed from his family experiences, what he derived from his early adult years, and what he took from his reading and teaching centered primarily on the conflicting dualism of individualism and community. From his first to his last fictional characters, Stegner dramatized individuals isolated from groups. From Bo Mason in *Big Rock Candy Mountain* to Charity Lang in *Crossing to Safety*, Stegner depicts persons unable to give way, unwilling to link their individualism to the larger society. As a result, they run aground on the shoals of hurt, disappointment, failure, and even tragedy.

Quite simply, the central theme of Wallace Stegner's western spiritual pilgrimage was the necessity of all westerners to abandon an outdated frontier mythology of dangerous individualism in order to embrace new, communal responsibilities. We had to become civic citizens, attuned and attendant to the “wholeness of community” (Meine, ed., xx, 18, 37). The early novels, *On a Darkling Plain*, *Fire and Ice*, and *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, preached this message, as did Stegner in his pioneering study of ethnicity and racism, *One Nation* (1945). For Stegner, Powell lived and spoke for this sense of the whole, whereas his father, Joe Hill, and Thoreau (surprisingly) were bad examples of unrestrained individualism. Stegner wrote that “the melting pot,” if pushed far enough, “is not only legitimate, it may be essential.” Too often westerners, like other Americans, had lived arrogantly, with “the calm confidence of a Christian with four aces” (“Notebooks,” Box 109, Folder 1). In this light, a misguided, idealistic reformer is for Stegner “one who deals with a polluted water supply by repairing the plumbing,” and a radical is a person “who makes a difficult situation impossible” (“Notebooks,” Box 109, Folder 2).

At nearly the same time Stegner prepared “This I Believe,” he incor-

porated many of his convictions about lone individuals and groups into a long short story, "Genesis." Written as a means of suggesting, "not only the beginning of manhood but the beginnings of a new country," Stegner told his son (*Marking* 279), this story first appeared in *Wolf Willow*. "Genesis" dramatically depicts the coming-of-age ordeal of a young Englishman, Lionel (Rusty) Cullen, during brutal blizzards on the Saskatchewan prairies. Rusty comes to late frontier Canada with his head full of Wild West myths. Like too many other newcomers to the West, the English greenhorn imagines an open frontier inhabited by a few, romantic, larger-than-life heroes. What Rusty learns in the freezing snowstorm is that his dream-like notions are not only false but hazardous, that men must function as a unit if they are to survive. At the end of his exhausting ordeal in a moment of hard-won epiphany, Rusty realizes that he might never "want to do anything alone again, not in this country. Even a trip to the privy was something a man might want to take in company" (219). Rusty's tortuous journey to understanding parallels the path Stegner had followed and that he was laying out for other pilgrims. Embarking in innocence, journeyers had to become lifetime learners. Often their formal schooling and usually their inherited mythologies failed them; they had to teach themselves, usually through discrete personal experiences, the moral and social truths prefacing greater spiritual illumination. Like Rusty, they had to avoid the snares of false stories if they were to break through to newer, larger understandings of themselves among groups of travelers.

Stegner's son Page caught the full significance of this thematic emphasis in his father's work. Embleatically, he used "Genesis" as the closing selection in his recent collection of Stegner's western writings. About the story itself, Page spoke forthrightly: "Not only is 'Genesis' the best story [my father] . . . ever wrote . . . but it is a narrative of rugged individualism subsumed by and sublimated to the need of cooperative enterprise, and this, as any reader of Stegner's work quickly understands, is what the demythologized West was *absolutely* all about" (xviii). Wallace Stegner made this central theme even more explicit in his last years. He spoke of "remembering as a duty," and he saluted the "stickers" among pioneers and recent Americans, those

who kept and nourished their connections with neighbors. In addition, he argued that he “profoundly opposed” “enterprise when enterprise [was] uncontrolled by any notion of the public good” (qtd. in Hepworth 11, 10, 108, 109). In Stegner’s view, individualism without “membership” boded calamity for American society and cultures.

By the 1960s the path of Stegner’s spiritual journey was clear. Now, he hinted, he knew not only where he was from but also where he was going. Keeping in mind these developments, it is not surprising that the ideological, cultural, and social disruptions of the late sixties and beyond often vexed Stegner. During the seventies and into the eighties his pilgrimage suffered several heaves and potholes and equally challenging intersections. For example, he found his Stanford undergraduates and graduate students too self-indulgent and frequently following questionable Pied Pipers. He also wondered why their anger toward Mr. Jones (the Vietnam War) had to be expressed in breaking Mr. Smith’s windows (college buildings). As he told DeVoto’s widow, “the kids get progressively brighter and worse-educated . . . [;] they need to be told more, and give you more hell while you’re telling them” (qtd. in Benson 248). Sometimes such conflicts marred the Stanford writing program Stegner directed. Without question, Stegner’s negative reactions to radicalized students helped lead to his early retirement from Stanford.

Those challenges were represented in the person of Ken Kesey. That former wrestler from the University of Oregon, whose later novels *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) and *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964) illustrated a new cultural consciousness of the 1960s, came to dislike Stegner. The burley Kesey, sometimes thumbing his nose at the traditional, disciplined, and gentlemanly ways of Stegner, also experimented with drugs and advocated lifestyles and experimental writing techniques that irritated—if not alienated—the Stanford professor. Conversely, Kesey thought of Stegner then, and later, as too professorial, too effete, too unwilling to test new social and cultural boundaries. To Stegner’s credit, a generation later when he had contributed an extensive, critical section on Kesey to a book of conversations on western history and literature, he eventually cut much of what he

thought "sound[ed] catty and ungenerous" to Kesey.<sup>8</sup>

Although for different reasons, Stegner similarly clashed with western author Gary Snyder. As Stegner's biographer writes, Stegner "simply could not for the life of him understand that which was being called the 'youth culture of the sixties.'" These "hippie values," as Stegner labeled them, sometimes a mix of romanticism and mysticism, were what Snyder called "Real Values." But for Stegner this new kind of spirituality seemed more misguided than helpful. Having come to his own set of progressive, moderate guidelines after several decades of searching, reading, and pondering, Stegner was affronted by what he considered the egocentric, meaningless wandering of the 1960s. His discontent with these new ideas erupted in his later writings, especially in *All the Little Live Things* and in narrator Lyman Ward's negative reactions to his braless secretary and her live-in male partner in *Angle of Repose*. But Stegner's initial negative reactions to Snyder gradually softened, like those toward Kesey. By the 1990s he and Snyder had become friends (Benson 312-15).

In brief, Wallace Stegner's spiritual journey followed no traditional creed or denomination. In fact, as he frequently observed, he was not a particularly religious man. Rather, his system of values derived primarily from his family and personal experiences in the American West. Gradually discerning the shortcomings of his erratic father and the dangers of lives driven by excessive individualism and expansive frontier mythologies, Stegner turned toward what he considered the nurturing, community-minded, and supportive outlooks of his mother, his wife, and the Mormon community in which he matured. By midcareer, Stegner had formulated his guiding set of principles. In his best-known novels, *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, *Angle of Repose*, and *Crossing to Safety*, his two histories of the Latter-day Saints, his biographies of Powell and DeVoto, and dozens of essays and stories, Stegner preached his spiritual sermon. If westerners would realize, as Stegner had over the years, that the communal spirit of the heroines and he

<sup>8</sup>Wallace Stegner to Richard W. Etulain, July 15, 1982. For more on Kesey's side of the story, see Stephen L. Tanner, "The Western American Context of

roles of their own lives must be adopted and that the John Wayne brand of western exceptionalism must be avoided, he would be satisfied. Although these truths were to be learned in individual, personal quests, the principles had to be employed in behalf of a larger western community.

#### WORKS CITED

- Benson, Jackson J. *Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1996.
- Etulain, Richard W. *Telling Western Stories: From Buffalo Bill to Larry McMurtry*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1999.
- . "Western Stories for the Next Generation." *Western Historical Quarterly* 31 (Spring 2000): 5-23
- Hepworth, James P. *Stealing Glances: Three Interviews with Wallace Stegner*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1998.
- Kesey, Ken. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. New York: Viking P, 1962.
- . *Sometimes a Great Notion*. New York: Viking P, 1964.
- Kurs, Katherine, ed. *Searching for Your Soul: Writers of Many Faiths Share Their Personal Stories of Spiritual Discovery*. New York: Schocken Books, 1999.
- Lesser, Elizabeth. *The New American Spirituality: A Seeker's Guide*. New York: Random House, 1999.
- McGrath, Alister E. *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999.
- Meine, Curt, ed. *Wallace Stegner and the Continental Vision: Essays on Literature, History, and Landscape*. Washington, DC: Island, 1997.
- Stegner, Mary. Personal interview. 8 July 1998. Los Altos Hills, California.
- Stegner, Page. "Introduction." *Marking the Sparrow's Fall*. By Wallace Stegner.
- Stegner, Wallace. *All the Little Live Things*. New York: Viking P, 1937.
- . *Angle of Repose*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971.
- . *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954.
- . *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943.

- . *Crossing to Safety*. New York: Random House, 1987.
- . *Fire and Ice*. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941.
- . *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.
- . "Genesis." *Wolf Willow*: 139–219.
- . *Marking the Sparrow's Fall: Wallace Stegner's American West*. Ed. Page Stegner. New York: Henry Holt, 1998.
- . "Notebooks—Ideas and Themes for Speeches . . .," Wallace Stegner Papers, Box 109, Folders 1 and 2, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.
- . *On a Darkling Plain*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939.
- . *One Nation*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1945.
- . *The Preacher and the Slave*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950.
- . *Recapitulation*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979.
- . *The Sound of Mountain Water: The Changing American West*. 1969. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1980.
- . *The Spectator Bird*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976.
- . "This I Believe." *One Way to Spell Man*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982. 3–5
- . *The Uneasy Chair: A Biography of Bernard DeVoto*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974.
- . *When the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West*. New York: Random House, 1992.
- . *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier*. New York: Viking P, 1962.
- Stegner, Wallace, and Richard W. Etulain. *Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History and Literature*. Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 1983.
- Tanner, Stephen L. "The Western American Context of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*." *Biographies of Books: The Compositional Histories of Notable American Writings*. Eds. James Barbour and Tom Quirk. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1996: 291–320.
- Watkins, T. H. "Typewritten on Both Sides: The Conservation Career of Wallace Stegner." *Audubon* 89 (September 1987): 88, 90, 92, 94–103.
- White, Robin, and Ed McClanahan. "An Interview with Wallace Stegner." *Per/Se* 3 (Fall 1968): 30.