“Sauntering” from *Field Guide to Church of the Wild*, by Victoria Loorz and Valerie Luna Serrels

"Sauntering” is an ancient spiritual practice of slowly and reverently wandering through nature. It involves being open to the possibility of an encounter with a particular place, wild being, and the unknown. The term saunter, according to essayist and naturalist Henry David Thoreau, is derived “from idle people who roved about the country, under pretenses of going a’ la Sainte Terre—to the Holy Land.” Thoreau insisted that sauntering is different from the pedestrian activity of walking for either exercise or to arrive somewhere. He referred to sauntering as reconnecting with our wildness, with the inner freedom to be led without an agenda. And this is so in wild church, saunterings or wanderings are not just walking from here to there, they are a shifting into listening with your whole body, your whole self, to what draws you. And listening again and offering the gift of your presence.

Sauntering is more than an appreciation of the beauty of nature and a slowing of your pulse. Wandering with an open heart, with reverence, opens up the possibility for a mystical encounter. There is no need for special enlightenment training; nor is there expectation of some kind of deep spiritual insight. Rather, sauntering is a heart-opening practice that affirms that this ground where you live is, indeed, sacred. All land is holy land.

This time of solo wandering offers the true sermon of wild church. Participants receive messages particular to them, and they hear them from a variety of preachers: crow, moss or unrelenting sun. The members of the natural world, all speaking in their unique leaf and wind and mushroom voices, pass on whispers of holy wisdom.

This contemplative and yet playful form of spirituality has been practiced by monks and mystics throughout history. St John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century mystic, recorded his practice of sauntering:

I was sad one day and went for a walk;

I sat in a field.

A rabbit noticed my condition and came near.

It often does not take more than that to help at times —

to just be close to creatures who are so full of knowing,

so full of love that they don't — chat,

they just gaze with their marvellous understanding.