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IAN ROBINSON

**WHERE DID  
SPIRIT  
JOURNEYS  
COME FROM?**



*[www.desertspiritjourneys.org](http://www.desertspiritjourneys.org)*

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# WHY SPIRIT JOURNEYS?

*By Ian Robinson*

Since 2002, we have been making Spirit Journeys into the wide Australian outback. A dozen or so travellers, volunteer-led, camp out there to see what the desert will do in them. Most people get a good surprise. In an over-stuffed era, it is counter-intuitive to do this. In other words, you don't start this in your comfort zone. So I thought it might be good to hear how the surprise first broke out. I will try to be brief but hope it is not too intense. Maybe it is best read when you come back from the desert not before, so please read kindly.



I first went into the desert without really knowing why. I had been through years of illness, depression and disappointment. As it was for Jesus\*, the idea of going to the desert was a surprise with a profound outcome. It had the calling of God on the idea.

Long story short, in 2002, we completed the Seven Deserts Journey.

We were the first people to cross all seven of Australia's major deserts in one journey. That historic feat was made possible by the existence of reliable four-wheel drive vehicles, reliable maps and several good advisors. It had a curious inspiration. I was looking for something spiritual of the kind described in the Bible but avoided by mainstream churches. It was the big connection with God that is experienced in the Creation. To open up to the max, the Bible did not come with us. I went to learn to open up to country. I was up against my own citified prejudices and the very real dangers inherent in the journey. I started out on motor bike but that machine only made it halfway. My wife and daughter made it all the way.

Where did we go? From the east coast and Snowy Mountains, we travelled via Broken Hill, NSW and Coober Pedy, SA. We crossed through the middle of the Great Victoria, Gibson, Sandy, Tanami, Simpson, Strzelecki and Stony Deserts then home via the Snowy Mountains. Five different support teams came and went. It took eleven weeks, and it changed our lives.

A lot of changes flowed from that journey. When we could tune in through the challenges, you could taste in the air almost that God was really present. I later noticed that whenever I gave talks about it, most listeners went wild-eyed with a sort of longing or else went grumpy with a deep discomfort. I noticed that something had taken place in all of us, and it could be passed on to others.



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## 5 INGREDIENTS OF THE DESERT

Even though I had earlier been miraculously called into the church ministry, I now felt uncalled by God. But for what? To figure out what it all meant, I resigned and relocated in order to do doctoral study on what it was all about. It included lots more desert journeys – Canning Stock Route, Hahn’s Track, Colson’s Track, Sandy Blight Road, and many others – sometimes as many as four per year. With a wide range of people telling me what they had found, we did the expensive thing and organised it better in order to keep going. Two teams of volunteers came together in Perth and Sydney. Many committed to help and some even bought their own 4X4 vehicles.

That’s the story in time. It is also important to see where it comes from within persons. Here are some key ingredients from twenty years of listening, study and respecting.

**First**, it has been like finding a lost civilisation, a hidden valley, or Lasseter’s Reef. The desert has brought me to a place where I swoon unafraid in the Great Spirit. After completing my PhD, I wrote about it at an experiential level in “This Thirsty Heart” in 2010 and in historical terms in “If Anyone Thirsts” a few years later. They are for those who share leadership in spiritual communities and those who know they are on their own spiritual journey.



**Second**, I write from a Christian stance, but many travellers locate themselves elsewhere or nowhere. In campfire conversations we are gentle with spiritual stuff and God-talk. The spirituality of Creation is universal, but unless you know that its author loves you, you may feel you need to fight with tooth and claw.

I noticed that Christian faith opened a big door to spiritual connection. To identify with the story of Jesus Christ is to be steered toward a connection with God, neighbour and creation. I have written lots more about this in my books.

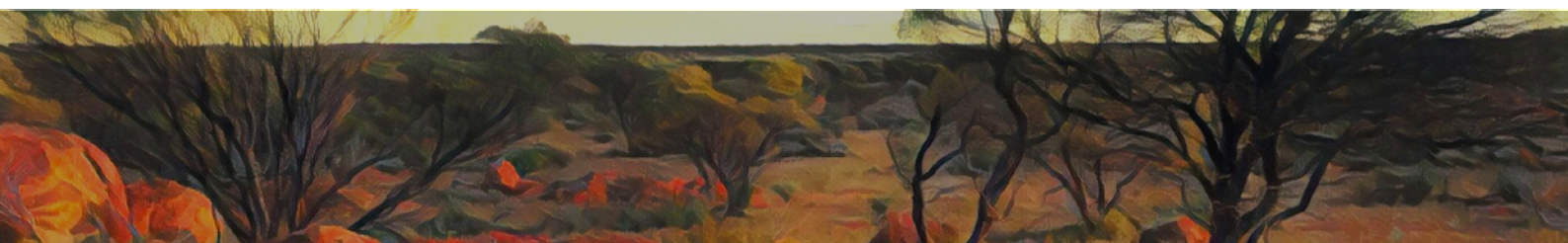
People with other spiritual practices also find a path in this, which I respect and foster, but the goal of this short article is to say where the confidence and generosity of Spirit Journeys came from. I say this because most common these days, people are either strenuously religious or strenuously avoid religion ('Anything But Christianity', as they say).

Spirit Journeys breaks all those moulds. Spirit Journeys are open and generous, welcoming the blessing that everyone brings. They do this, not ignoring the Jesus-inspiration but because of it. Jesus deliberately built a wide compassionate community through an intimacy with the God who made us. Many travellers have found this Spirit to be great good news

**Third**, Aboriginal spirituality is a lightning rod for this experience. When we travel together and eat in friendship, the land starts to share its stories with you. Your task is to be open enough. Not through semi-abstractions of their astonishing art, nor semi-abstract study of the complexities of their culture, nor the layers of oppression and harm, but through being together on country on their terms, that is when any immigrant can begin to deeply connect.

So clear is this now, that aboriginal people have asked me if I have aboriginal forbears. I don't, but the question says a lot. It says that so few immigrant peoples demonstrate a feeling for the spirit in the land that it must seem that it is only possible through a blood-link. It also says that my aboriginal friends have seen the light in me. I am not the only one, and nor is it necessary for all people to experience what I do. It is enough to share in it.

**Fourth**, there is so much more to be discovered of the wisdom of living on this land in its own original terms, not in colonial, industrial or imported terms. Not merely as an ethical issue, but as a love issue. Do you love the earth? Do you let it love you? To love land you need a deeper connection, code words for spirituality. The work of desert spirituality is to open people up to something that can be passed along and to keep training them up.



**Fifth**, my exploration of the lost deserts in the Bible tells me that a physical connection with the desert has been the most definitive form of spirituality for the faith of the Bible, both Jewish and Christian.

When God wants to form a leader, God takes them into the desert and home again. In the stories of Exodus, Elijah, Exile, Ezra, Jesus\* – all echo the same practices for self-emptying, fulfilment and building transformational communities.

In the later Desert Fathers and Mothers, and the derivative monastic movements, ascetic practices were perfected but that is not what Spirit Journeys does – no fasting or weeping or renunciation exercises here. Not just back then, but again and again, the depths of the desert have been like hidden springs rediscovered.

My part now has been to discern and describe this so others can be re-sourced by it and not feel they have to abandon their faith in order to move away from colonialism. I am convinced that if we grasp this, it could open up great wonders, strength and simplicity for us all in this most challenging twenty first century.

### Closing statement

All of these ‘findings’ are connected.

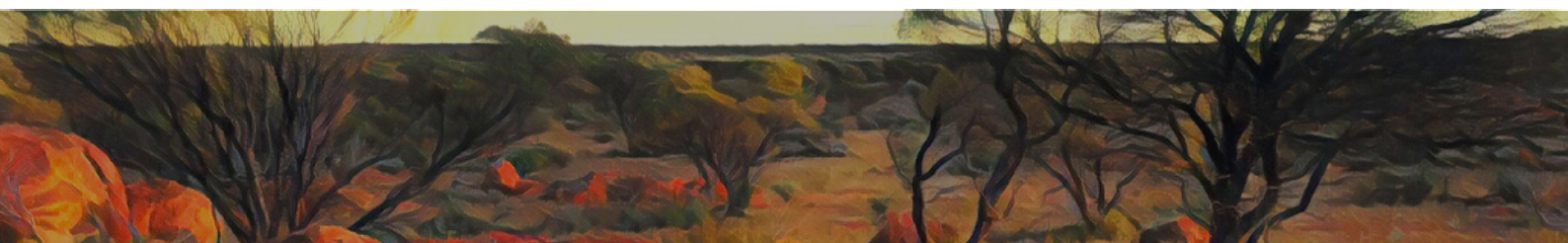
Maybe they aren’t your starting point.

My exploration tells me: Go to the desert and explore what it can do with your spirit. Return home to practise transformation. Let God love you. Become what it can teach you. Remove blockages within. Gather resource and possibilities for this journey, and go to the desert and start another stage all over again.

There is much more to say but for now I have told the story and pointed you in a direction. Make your own discoveries and pass them on to others. Blessings and peace be yours.

*Rev Dr Ian Robinson*

LILLI PILLI NSW, JANUARY 2022



\* For those who read sacred texts, this retelling of a famous story is an example of how Spirit Journeys arises from the Judean-Christian Bible.

‘What am I doing here?’ said Jesus to himself. There was no one else around. Heat rose already from the cliffs above, dryness lingered in the air around his face. He was held by the work of finding enough water by nightfall, hunger alternated with numbness, fatigue and stumbling. Another day of fasting in the Arabah Desert, the wilderness of Judea.

A few weeks ago, was it? Maybe more. His public ministry started at his baptism. As he lifted his dripping hair, a voice from heaven proclaimed him the ‘beloved Son’, and he was swooning in tenderness, radiant with hope for the task ahead. The power that sustains the galaxies, shimmered, pivoted on his personal space like a hovering bird. Then it fell on him like a concussion. Instead of falling into place in his great task, the Spirit threw him out into empty space. He was unable to keep up with what was happening. Not what he was expecting. The fasting began, days became weeks, phase entered phase, dread wrestled with awe, hope with exhaustion, hunger with anger, adoration with annoyance, clarity with anxiety. He orbited within reach of the desert community of John the Baptist – hospitable to all, rough around the edges, passionate, a good crew.

From his side of the Jordan River, the rising sun lit up the towers of Jerusalem, up and away on the top of the hills. Some love that sight, the Golden City. But it was a place resplendent with crushed hopes, compromised principles, an occupying Roman army, and worst of all a legion of ambitious temple-church, capital-city officials.

Looking left, under the barren cliffs to the southwest, he saw the small trees and smoke from the cooking fire at the busy Qumran community - elitist, male dominated, lots of them – always writing scrolls or reading volumes by the desert of the Dead Sea. At least their cousins, the Therapeutae in Alexandria, knew how to party.

Right here, under his dusty feet, was where Jesus’ namesake stood all those centuries ago. Joshua led the way across the Jordan there, with the Torah held high and an army of trumpets, into the Promised Land. Across to the right, surrounded by those deep green palms, the mud walls of Jericho and its half-starved garrison had easily fallen apart. Since then, a few messiah-hopefuls have tried to copy him, pulled armies like rats out of caves in those cliffs, and been smashed on Roman lances.

Just near there, where the wind raises the fine dust so easily, fifty prophets stopped among the bushes, enthralled to witness Elisha cross the same river, with a staff, a mantle and a prayer. The great prophet Elijah’s flaming chariot must have roared overhead right here. He sat and leant back to rest against rocks. On the hill shadowing him, Moses had gazed across the land and spoken his last words - beautiful brutal Deuteronomy, the heartbeat of Israel, all his years and tears compressed into one volume of hope.

And here was Jesus at the lowest point on the surface of the earth, sitting exhausted at the crossroads of nearly everything, trying to fashion a path to the future. All these options and histories and identities met his gaze. There, too, was the power that came at his baptism, filling cherishing inspiring, the centre of a cyclone and the edge as well. Why could he not just hold a triumphal procession? Or one of a hundred other good ideas? Why shoulder such a burden of fasting, pushed into the torrents of human appetites and clever short cuts? He would shoulder more than this one day.

For forty days, he sheltered in the valley dust and the dark cliffs surrounding the Dead Sea, appalled by the presence of King Herod’s palaces at resort-style Masada and his tomb up there at the Herodium. Somewhere and anyhow, Jesus was dramatically discerning the way forward. When the devil’s short cuts cut into his mind, Jesus repelled them with Moses’ words from Deuteronomy, coming again out of the dirt there. It was a feat of focus, with not an original thought in it anywhere. The desert was dangerous, stretching, calling as it always had.