

Glacial Gospel

On our last day in Prince William Sound, I sat alone atop a giant mound of burnished bedrock, close to three booming glaciers, and thought about *glacial gospel*. This was John Muir's phrase to describe what he used to preach to anyone who would listen. He meant not just the truth of glaciers, about which he knew a great deal, but his belief that *Nature could transform souls* — and that glaciers represented Nature on its grandest, wildest, Earth-shaping scale. Be among glaciers, he seemed to say, and you will have to be held in awe; you will have to love the Earth in all its large and small grandeur; you will have to become a better person.

Muir had rhapsodized here with the 1899 Harriman Alaska Expedition. Then, the three glaciers at the top of Barry Arm merged into one long tongue of ice that covered my rock, the black-sand beach where we camped, and the upper arm that we'd crossed by kayak. Now, the three detached, much-reduced glaciers were all climbing onto land, baring rock between their crumbling ends and the sea. The main Barry Glacier was tucked behind a mountain's shoulder, evidenced only by its discharge of ice.

Muir's dictum that *the world's hope lies in wildness* is everywhere apparent — in sharp mountain peaks still rising, in grinding glaciers even as they shrink, in the thin blade of grass beside me, rooted into rock. If our time demands a new truth-telling, one of dire consequences, our strengths might still come from *wild places and wild minds* — with all the hope they can hold.