

The memory of wilderness

by [Tom Montgomery Fate](#) in the [April 12, 2000](#) issue

*Night on the Flint River: An Accidental Journey in Knowing God*, by Roberta Bondi

Roberta Bondi's book powerfully demonstrates Montaigne's statement that "every person has within himself the entire human condition." One day Bondi, a colleague and a mutual friend set out on what they intended to be an afternoon's canoe trip near Atlanta. The outing turns into a disaster because the water level is so high that the riverbed is littered with deadfall trees. By the time they realize this, they have waded and stumbled too far down river to turn back. They push on. Jeff Smith, the friend, tears the ligaments in his knee and can barely walk. Pam Couture, the colleague, remains optimistic. When night falls, they are completely lost--tramping through a wilderness so dark they cannot read their watches or see their own hands.

In telling her story, Bondi explores many kinds of wilderness. I thought of James Dickey's disturbing *Deliverance*, which presents the wilderness as unforgiving and unknowable, and Thoreau's *Walden*, which depicts the wilderness as a teacher and estranged home. Bondi declares, "I am simply not an outdoors person." Her most evocative descriptions and deepest insights stem not from her concrete knowledge of the natural world but from her profound understanding of the memory of wilderness--her own, Israel's, and that of the desert fathers. She artfully weaves together these histories with the story of the canoe trip as a way to explore the nature of God.

In one passage she likens Pam to the Abbas and Ammas of fourth-to-sixth-century Egypt: "As the Abbas and Ammas . . . lifted the burdens of blame and self-recrimination from the shoulders of those whose paths they crossed, Pam's love carved out for me a space in the wilderness in which it was safe to breath . . . and accept . . . what I thought was my own impending death." This historical link leads Bondi to her central insight, that "an ordinary human being . . . never ceases to be the tattered image of God he or she has always been, . . . completely transparent to God for someone else so that for a little while the one in need can see God truly through that human being."

For Bondi, her friend becomes, in the holy transparency of her compassion and patience, the Word made flesh. This idea might seem a bit romantic if Bondi didn't so carefully explore the elusive yet sustaining nature of our relationships both with God and with others. God, like a person, is both profoundly knowable and profoundly unknowable. Because we "are made in the image of God [we] are no more reducible to the facts of our lives and the things that can be said about us than God is."

Extended flashbacks often interrupt the account of the harrowing canoe trip. These tangents into childhood torments, perfectionist parents, a failed marriage are long but fascinating. Together they reconstruct the complex wilderness of the author's life. At the end, Bondi extends the conversation to the reader: "Reader, for all these gifts of the Flint River . . . I thank God with gratitude and love. I offer prayers for you, that you may also find gifts in your own experience of wilderness." This shift seems appropriate, since Bondi's struggle for identity, meaning and belief is one that many readers will share.