

Reconnecting with the Earth

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August 22, 1999

Reconnecting with the earth. Reconnecting with the universe around us. It's an important topic for us to consider, and that's true even if you don't think of yourself as a nature person. Even if you may think of yourself as the writer Fran Liebowitz clearly does when she wrote, "I am not the type who wants to go back to the land - I am the type who wants to go back to the hotel."

But it's an important question for all of us; perhaps especially for those of us who feel like we don't have much connection to the natural world.

I'd like to start out this morning by first sketching out some of the various and conflicting views that we seem to hold about nature.

And there are many of them. Just as it's possible to have many conflicting feelings about human beings, it is possible to have several conflicting attitudes about the natural world. The challenge for us is to try to make these conflicting feelings cohere into some kind of unity which we can then fit within our understanding of the world - our theology, if you will.

Celestine's Sibley's column, which I read this morning, is lyrical about the beauty of the world - and she is not wrong. But, as we know, it is not the whole story. When we think about the natural world many different pictures can come to mind.

The first chapter of Annie Dillard's book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, contains a horrifying drama. So horrifying that I won't read it to you, but the gist of it is that she describes what happens as she watches a frog being sucked dry by a giant water bug.

"Cruelty," she writes, "is a mystery." [7] (i)

And so it is. And there is much in nature that is cruel.

It is hard to make sense of it - to fit these facts into the context of a loving universe, a sheltering universe, or a caring god.

If we contemplate at length the destiny of the frog, whose organs are being sucked out by the water bug, nature may well appear to us to be nothing but a field of destruction and even waste. It can remind us of Wm. Blake's famous saying that "nature is red in tooth and claw."

As one writer has said: "first and last, life consists of eating and being eaten." (ii)

This somewhat gloomy view runs like a thread through western theology, with its split between body and spirit or between the material and the spiritual worlds.

Nature has often been relegated in traditional Christian theology to the realm of the fallen and the unredeemed. To the realm of Satan. At worst, it's savage and destructive, and positively evil. As one of the Puritan settlers called it, "a howling wilderness." At its best, under this viewpoint, it's simply inert and passive, waiting for us humans to come along and do our magic -- to invest the material with the spiritual. As though they could be separated.

As though nature needed to be redeemed by us.

At the other end of this spectrum of attitudes is what the UU writer Phillip Simmons has called, "the Bambi syndrome." And he describes this as the fantasy in which "all animals become wide-eyed innocents"-- never mind those animals that eat their young. Part of this Bambi syndrome, he says, "is the prejudice that animals and nature are pure while humans and society are corrupt." (iii)

Simmons blames this, as others have, on the French philosopher, Rousseau, who in the eighteenth century started the Romantic movement by espousing a back-to-nature philosophy. In his view, nature was the source of all goodness, society and civilization the source of all evil and corruption.

The natural world, and humanity in its natural, uneducated state, are inherently good; it is society that corrupts this original goodness.

Now in these early Romantic views, nature is always described as pastoral. Nature is lovely, benign. It is life-giving.

A paradise where the lion and the lamb obligingly parade themselves before our eyes, so we can enjoy them.

Now I suspect that here in Macon Georgia, in the land of Kudzu and Palmetto bugs, we are not so easily lulled into this pastoral, benign view of nature. And in climates to the south of us, and to some extent here, nature is a force that constantly threatens to overwhelm. Just to not cut the grass for a month, is to risk not being able to find your house. In the tropics and semi-tropics, the plant world is greedy and voracious in its fertility - it seems like it's always just waiting out there for its chance to come back and reclaim the earth.

Setting both of these views aside for a moment, I suspect that if we seriously set about trying to create a relationship with nature, we will find that it is not so different from the process of creating a relationship with another person

Many of the same rules apply, I think.

First, we have to work at it: it doesn't just happen. We have to value the other, too -despite differences in goals and perspectives. And finally, we have to accept a host of imperfections. A multitude of things of which we don't often approve.

We have to work at our relationship. Nature, frankly, does not leap to be in relationship with us. In fact, I suspect that nature is mostly indifferent to our existence. We must work to create an enriching and ethical relationship. We must study its ways and learn its language. Such study has rewards as more of the natural world then becomes understandable to us, and its mysteries are at least partially explained.

We must also care about it for its own sake and not merely for the benefits it brings us.

We have heard much about the exploitation of the earth and its natural resources. Most of us are quite conscious of that. But there is another kind of exploitation - almost a *spiritual consumerism*, in which we seek to use nature for spiritual benefits which we fantasize, or hope, it will bring us. This also, is a kind of exploitation. A kind of using of nature as something other - as a resource which we can exploit.

There is also the effect of television nature documentaries. Now, I actually love these -especially the documentaries about animals.

They have had a perverse effect on our attitudes, because, raised on a diet of nature documentaries, we go out into the woods and expect that within five minutes, we will see a whole parade of animals, just like on TV. Many people in fact are disappointed when they go out on a long hike and it isn't like on TV - coyotes don't go bounding across the field, and you don't see elk and hundreds of birds -all these animals that are packed into a thirty minute television program. And most of us don't go out with 800 mm lenses, so even when we might spot an animal, it is often just a speck on the horizon -not like on TV at all. And so, TV has shaped our expectations and attitudes in a negative way.

Finally, as I said, we must also work out a way to think about or accept the many things of which we don't quite approve.

Palmetto bugs for instance. "Palmetto bugs" are those giant cockroaches you see down here in the south. Let us consider the problem of the Palmetto bug.

Our 7th UU principle teaches us to respect and uphold "the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

Presumably this includes the cockroach and the Palmetto bug. This I say is the true test of one's faith, of one's ethical resolve.

The Buddhist teacher Lama Surya Das wrote in a recent book that, as we practice opening our hearts to compassion, we can expand the range of things that we can love. He talked about an incident in his childhood in which he stepped on a baby bird and killed it, but then he said that now, after years of spiritual discipline, he's reached the point where he cannot even kill mosquitoes. (iv)

I have no such qualms about mosquitoes. My guilt meter barely registers.

But Palmetto bugs are a different story, and, fortunately or unfortunately, killing them is becoming a problem for me. Maybe because they are bigger, and hence, seem more like real animals. And as I've watched them I've noticed that they really seem quite clever -capable of strategy and thinking.

So it has become difficult for me to kill them, even though they scare and revolt me.

Now I'm going to confess to you my solution to this problem. My solution at home, when confronted with a cockroach, is that I take my cat, Rocket. And I pick him up. If he's asleep, I wake him up, and I carry him into the next room. And I put him down in front of the bug, And I point it out to him. Then I wash my hands of it, and I figure, I am just letting nature take its course.

Now in my defense, let me say that I don't really pretend I have no responsibility in this. And yes, I still feel a flicker of guilt as I do this.

But as between my cat Rocket and the bug, it does seem to me that they are about evenly matched. So at least it's a much fairer fight.

Someday I may be where Lama Surya Das is, and you may be too. Maybe you are already. But for right now, I'm still on that path, and we do the best we can.

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The cockroach, as I've said, is a test of our belief in inter-connection.

But in the scheme of things, it is a relatively trivial annoyance.

Despite Palmetto bugs, and mosquitoes, we know that we need these connections to the earth - that we need a connection to the earth, almost as much as we need anything.

We need a connection with our fellow creatures, with the natural world in order to be fully human. We are not, as some religious traditions teach us, merely or even primarily spirit. I do not believe that we are just souls which happen to be temporarily encased in a physical form.

I believe that to be human, we must claim our animal side as well. To see ourselves primarily as spirit, or mind, or even emotion, robs us of an important part of being a human being.

This, at best, is what nature can restore to us: a sense of our kinship with other living things. A sense of connection with the rest of the living, struggling universe.

I've always found *my* deepest sense of the holy in mountains. Mountains restore us to a proper sense of ourselves. They give us back a sense of proportion. From a mountain top our daily lives and troubles shrink back down to their proper size. From a mountain top we can know again, in our deepest being, that we are just part of a vast living, breathing tapestry.

The challenge of mountains is itself a spiritual discipline which teaches many lessons.

When we place ourselves back in the hands of nature - giving up our civilized comforts for a time - whether that's in backpacking, camping, white water canoeing - whenever we put ourselves back into nature's hands and give up some of our control, things become very simple, very fast. We become aware of the extent to which we too are basically animals: *food, water, shelter* - this is what it all comes down to in the end.

In testing ourselves, in placing ourselves at nature's mercy, we realize that it all comes down to food, water and shelter in the end.

And in this knowing, in this experiencing, we see our basic kinship to all other living things. It's almost a relief.

I have mentioned Annie Dillard's dying frog and the loathsome Palmetto bug. Of greater importance may be what I sometimes see as *nature's betrayal*.

That is -- the ultimate betrayal that nature makes.

It is in fact, *life's betrayal*. And it is this: we can give ourselves over to nature, to the natural world. We can love it passionately, embrace it wholeheartedly. We can worship at its temple. Again and again, we can return to it and let its beauty pierce and heal us.

And in the end, it will "betray" us. No matter how passionately we love the world, we will die, and the world will go on. Nature is completely indifferent to our suffering, as well as to our death. As we go falling off the cliff, the rocks and trees will not usually save us, or the swirling waters lift us up - no matter how we've loved them. In fact, that which we most love often turns against us in the end.

So the truth, as I see it, is that nature is an indifferent lover. We humans are the lovers. She, or it, is the beloved, unmoved by our passion.

But this is the price of admission to the cathedral of beauty. Dying is the price of participating in the show. And we can at least say, that it *is fair*: We are not treated any differently than the rest of the earth's creatures.

There is both a terror and a grace in the natural world. Both are unexpected and often undeserved. Annie Dillard writes in her book that, "unless all ages" have been deluded, there seems to be such a thing as beauty, a grace wholly gratuitous... " (v)

And she describes her witness of the flight of a mockingbird, and I will close with this:

About five years ago I saw a mockingbird make a straight vertical descent from the roof gutter of a four-story building. It was an act as careless and spontaneous as the curl of a stem or the kindling of a star.

*The mockingbird took a single step into the air and dropped. His wings were still folded against his sides as though he were singing from a limb and not falling, accelerating thirty-two feet per second per second through empty air. Just a breath before he would have been dashed to the ground, he unfurled his wings with exact, deliberate care, revealing the broad bars of white, spread his elegant, white-banded tail, and so floated onto the grass. I had just rounded a corner when [this] caught my eye; there was no one else in sight. The fact of his free fall was like the old philosophical conundrum about the tree that falls in the forest. **The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.**(vi)*

[emphasis added]

She is right. There is grace, as well as terror, in the world.

As we fall into life, and as we fall into our own deaths, may we strive to find the courage to open our hearts to the mystery and joy in this paradoxical universe, so that we too may fall at last into a sense of grace.

So may it be.

Let us have a moment of silence.

1. Dillard, Annie, *Pilgrim At Tinker Creek* [New York: Harper & Row, 1974].
2. Phillip Simmons, "Out of the Cave," in *World Magazine*, Mar/Apr. '99 issue at 33.
3. *Id.*
4. Lama Surya Das, *Awakening to the Sacred* [New York: Broadway Books, 1999] excerpted in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, Summer '99 issue at 88-89.
5. Dillard at p.7
6. *Id.* at 7-8.