

# Communing with Nature

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Any movement that brings people out to lie in front of logging trucks, risk jail by tearing up survey stakes, or risk life and limb by running a small boat in front of a whaling ship deserves the attention of historians. Environmentalism has always done that. It has roused particularly strong passions in the last forty years, since the denunciations of DDT that followed the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, and they show no signs of dying down.

Reformers of all kinds have commonly been zealous – in the early years of the twentieth century British suffragettes chained themselves to fences, and in the 1960s American civil rights demonstrators marched up to club-wielding cops – but the fight for the vote and other civil rights reflected issues of daily life and everyday freedoms, which the campaigns to protect old-growth forests and whales do not. Environmentalism spoke in different tones and to different ends. Rather than justice and social change it appealed to a sense of morality and called on us to save the planet. In researching environmentalism in Australia, Canada and New Zealand I have found that the passionate element, though perhaps equally powerful elsewhere, is expressed in the United States in an unusual way. This difference is rooted in the American experience, but also in European culture. Americans borrowed and adapted ideas of conservation and natural beauty from Western Europe, and even their distinctive fascination with wild lands and wilderness drew on Romanticism and British pastoral poetry. (Europeans also drew on reports about American conditions).

The particular passion behind the American movement arose from the way in which its environmentalism has appealed to the human impulse towards religion. By religion, I do not mean a creed or a church but the sort of thing the philosopher and founder of pragmatism William James (1842-1910) talked about in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). In this work he defined religion as the 'belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.' It was, he said, the common human response to:

... a sense that there is something wrong about us as we naturally stand. The solution is a sense that we are saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers ... At bottom the whole concern of religion is with the manner of our acceptance of the universe.

Environmentalism, in common with such beliefs as nationalism, progress, science, the free market or scientific socialism, holds, as an article of faith, that its beliefs are not faith but knowledge. They speak not 'the language of the heart or of the emotions, but of serene, impartial reason'. Despite these claims, these movements do serve as religions in the Jamesian sense: they give people an explanation of the world and how human life fits into it and so guide them as to how they should live.

The religious impulse within American environmentalism can be traced back way beyond the counter-culture of the 1960s, to the poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82). When American environmentalists appeal to nature's spiritual values they may mention Emerson but they focus on Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) Transcendentalist author of *Walden*, or *Life in the Woods* (1854) and John Muir (1838-1914) the pioneer advocate for

national parks and founder, in 1892, of the Sierra Club, an organisation concerned with nature preservation. Thoreau, though, was Emerson's protégé and Muir his loyal disciple. Emerson led – by the force of his writings, the passion of his commitment to ideas, and his then scandalous departure from orthodox Christianity – the first generation of American intellectuals, people determined to question their new country and its ideas but also to establish American greatness before the world. With compelling metaphors and striking aphorisms, Emerson showed nature to Americans as a refuge from society, a source of wisdom and ultimate reality. Uniquely 'real' and unaffected by humanity's tricks and shams, nature did not deceive. It was beyond us, but at the same time there was a 'radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts'. According to Emerson, 'every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact...[T]he whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind. The laws of moral nature answer to those of matter as face to face in a glass.'

Emerson set a personal example. He was the first in a long line of those who sought to sever themselves from their Protestant roots, seeking alternative spiritual fulfilment in American environmentalism. He and many of those who followed turned from a childhood of hellfire and damnation to nature or, more precisely, to Nature. Like Emerson, Thoreau also rejected New England Calvinism. Muir abandoned his father's Campbellite Baptist faith for what he described as 'baptism in Nature's warm heart ... every wild lesson a love lesson, not whipped but charmed into us.' (It was the whipping that had helped him memorise the New Testament and much of the Old before he was twelve.) His contemporary, the great naturalist John Burroughs (1837-1921), turned from an equally narrow Protestant upbringing to science and Emerson. Ernest Thompson Seton (1860-1946), nature writer and co-founder of the North American Boy Scout movement, and enthusiast for Native American virtues, once described the harsh Protestantism of his childhood as the religion of Moloch, in which parents sacrificed their children to the idol. Sigurd Olson (1899-1962), a pre-eminent figure in the early twentieth-century wilderness movement, grew up the son of a Swedish Baptist minister in Wisconsin. David Brower (1912-2000), who led the Sierra Club through its transition from conservationist and outdoor recreation club into environmental advocate, grew up a Baptist in Berkeley, California. Dave Foreman, who helped to found and then led the radical group Earth First! in the 1980s, yearned as a youth to become a preacher in the Church of Christ.

Emerson's Transcendentalism drew on German idealism and English pastoral poetry. By 1900 his disciples added science, making a mixture that John Burroughs described in one essay and elaborated in many as 'The Gospel of Nature' (1905). Science, he said, forced us to abandon the old theologies. It had formed in us

... a habit of mind in which these artificial notions [belief in the 'magic of Christ's blood and all the pagan notions of heaven and hell'] cannot live ... The study of nature kills all belief in miraculous or supernatural agents not because it proves to us that the things do not exist, but because it fosters a habit of mind that is unfavorable to them, because it puts us in possession of a point of view from which they disappear.

We should turn, then, to Nature.

Nature love as Emerson knew it, and as Wordsworth knew it, and as any of the choice spirits of our time has known it, has distinctly a religious value ... [it has that because] in intercourse with Nature you are dealing with things at first hand, and you get a rule, a standard, that serves you through life. You are dealing with primal sanities, primal honesties, primal attraction, you are touching at least the hem of the garment with which the infinite is clothed.

That faith in the intrinsic power of Nature was widely popular and still lives, even in its early twentieth-century form. One of my colleagues told of an older relative pressing into her

hands a copy of a John Burroughs' essay with the explanation that this was as close to religion as she had ever found.

The modern American nature religion has only distant ties to an older strain of nature worship that ran through Western civilisation since the classical period, or to New Age religion, or to Eastern traditions such as Buddhism, that environmentalists have also often looked to. It shared a reverence for the natural world and sought spiritual insight in it, but it saw nature in modern terms that appealed deeply (if covertly) to the particular American experience. Thoreau had been content to commune with nature in the woods and fields of Concord near Boston, but, fifty years later, Muir hymned California's Sierra Nevada mountains as God's gardens, and in the 1930s Sigurd Olson looked for insight in the unsettled forests and lakes of northern Minnesota. Landscape photography presented the same ideal. Ansel Adams (1902-84) and his successors presented, in what can best be described as devotional art, a vision of peace in a world that was beautiful, serene – and without humans.

Science even defined wilderness and set value on wildlife. It was in the 1870s that Yellowstone was nominated the country's first National Park, an area set aside for its natural beauty and geological interest. Nineteen years later the experiment was extended when the Forest reserve Act institutionalised a system of national forests. And early in the twentieth century President Theodore Roosevelt, encouraged by his chief of forestry Gifford Pinchot and by John Muir, established conservation (the efficient use of resources) and preservation (through national parks and nature reserves) as national policies. In the 1930s, advocates within the national parks had argued that the parks should preserve all species, for each was, in the words of George Wright, Chief of the Wildlife Division of the National Park Service, the 'embodied story of natural forces which have been operative for millions of years and is therefore a priceless creation, a living embodiment of the past' (1933). A generation later people would define wilderness as those large areas with fully functioning ecosystems. The Place No One Knew (1963), a book produced by the Sierra Club to mourn the loss of Glen Canyon (drowned behind a dam on the Colorado River), presented the full-blown case of wilderness as sacred space and its defence as the modern crusade. In his introduction David Brower declared:

Glen Canyon died in 1963 and I was partly responsible for its needless death. So were you. Neither you nor I, nor anyone else, knew it well enough to insist that at all cost it should endure.

And this ignorance 'has cost all men, for all time, the miracle of an unspoiled Glen Canyon.' Eliot Porter's photographs, which filled each page, showed quiet pools and delicate plants against massive sandstone cliffs. The text of selected quotations that accompanied the pictures spoke of a spiritual search. One said: 'when your spirit cries for peace, come to a world of canyons deep in an old land ...' Another, by William O. Douglas, said that 'to be in tune with the universe is the whole secret'. A passage from Einstein stated that the mystical was

... the most beautiful and most profound emotion we can experience ... To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms – this knowledge, this feeling is at the center of true religiousness.

When environmentalism emerged in the US as a conscious cause in the 1960s it inherited this belief in Nature as the door to spiritual truth and the place of ultimate reality. It incorporated a moral perspective on human treatment of Nature that went back to the American agrarian tradition. For example, in 1915 Liberty Hyde Bailey had made the case in *The Holy Earth*. Bailey, an agricultural reformer, spoke of the conventional virtues of rural living but he made a stronger case, that the earth was holy, and that humans have a duty to take

‘care that we do not despoil it, and [are] mindful of our relations to all beings that live on it.’ Bailey describes man’s relation to the land in terms drawn from ‘the realm of trade’, arguing that it must be put instead into ‘the realm of morals’.

The morals of land management are more important than the economics of land management ... [and] any line of development founded on accountant economics alone will fail.

Around 1915, twenty years before he began writing the essays that made him famous, the pioneer ecologist Aldo Leopold (1886-1948) read and took notes on *The Holy Earth*. He quoted Bailey, weaving his ideas – if not his Christian principles and Biblical rhetoric – into his own argument, substituting ecology for theology as philosophical underpinning. ‘A thing is right,’ he said, ‘when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.’ This message became the secular Golden Rule of American environmentalism.

Moral sentiments also infused Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), the book that sparked off the first wave of 1960s environmentalism. Its warnings about pesticide residues and health made it popular, but morality, not muckraking, kept it in print. Carson preached that we have an ‘obligation to endure’. We have it in our power to ‘silence the re-birth of new life’, and that we were doing this not primarily from ignorance but because we lacked ‘humility before the vast forces’ of nature. The ‘control of nature’, she argued, was a

phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man.

Carson called for her contemporaries to do more than make new policies. She called for a change of values. Her opponents as well as her friends recognised the nature of her argument. The National Agricultural Chemicals Association questioned her scientific evidence but complained much more bitterly about what it saw as her opposition to science, progress, and Western civilisation, and it condemned her as an apostate from the doctrine of progress and human reason. She was. Living as ‘a plain citizen of the biological community’ required accepting the universe from a completely different standpoint to one geared towards ‘conquering nature’.

In the wake of *Silent Spring* all industrialised societies acted to reduce pollution. They passed laws and set up agencies. The American environmental movement developed a search for salvation that marked it off from earlier nature faiths, emphasising its relation to American and Protestant ideals. It couched moral duties to nature in terms of individual stewardship and looked for salvation through an individual relation to nature. The atmosphere of those early years was characterised as much by righteousness as by right policy. Everyone put a brick in their toilet tank to save water, while debates about the amount of energy that could be saved by using cloth diapers instead of disposable ones, or by having permanent-press shirts rather than all-cotton ones, created much heat (and little light). ‘Reduce, reuse, recycle’, became a mantra. The moral strain has survived the counter-culture. Today, books such as *The Consumer’s Guide to Effective Environmental Choices* promise to ‘help you make environmentally responsible choices in everyday decisions, and enable you to audit your personal impact on the earth.’ The Guide assures us that our choices not only ‘send important messages to manufacturers ... [but] let our family, friends and neighborhood know something of our values’:

When you do something that your friends and neighbors can see, you go on record as being concerned about the environment and you act as a role model for them.

Readers raised in pious households will recognise these sentiments. They will also recognise the exhortation that you need not be a community leader or an expert to make a difference:

In retrospect, the triumph of recycling is especially impressive because so much of the change in attitudes and individual behavior was instigated by seemingly powerless children and teenagers who prodded their families, school and colleges into action ... Probably most parents ... have received humbling lectures from their children after being caught tossing a glass jar or newspaper in the trash can.

And a little child, or possibly a teenager, shall lead them.

Since the 1970s, Americans have looked towards a greater goal, an integration of nature and culture that will heal humans and the land. In the counter-culture years of the 1960s, bioregionalists, following an old American tradition of utopian communities, had turned their backs on consumerist society to build new ecologically responsible lives on the land. In the 1990s, a new generation sought nature's blessings in suburban landscapes and suburban lives. Michael Pollan, for instance, called us to the garden in *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (1991):

[T]he idea of a garden – as a place, both real and metaphorical, where nature and culture can be wedded in a way that can benefit both – may be as useful to us today as the ideas of wilderness have been in the past.

We had learned from the wilderness 'more than we needed to know about virginity and rape, and almost nothing about marriage.' The garden offered a middle ground where we might look for 'forms of human creation that satisfy culture without offending nature.' It could help us move past our 'habit of bluntly opposing nature and culture', toward a 'more complicated and supple sense of how we fit into nature.' Others spoke in less exalted terms of 'restoring the ecology of our back yards'. The number of businesses now selling local flowers, grasses, shrubs and trees are a measure of the movement's popularity. In the south-west United States, 'xeriscaping' – landscaping with plants that do not need irrigation – has become an environmental statement. Beyond that, people have connected the cycle of their lives to nature through ceremonies. I have discovered no environmental baptisms, but there are many who mark their continuance in the ecosystem by having their ashes scattered in national parks and wilderness areas or at sea (whereas believers in the triumphant progress of man into the universe may aspire to having their ashes shot into outer space).

The search for insight in the wilderness, the pursuit of virtue in daily life, and the integration of the life of the individual with ultimate realities, have become elements of religious practice, ways to find the 'hidden order of the universe' and to make 'proper connection with the higher powers'. Environmentalism even offers a version of the great battle of good and evil; the cause of environmental protection against unchecked consumerism. It speaks of the apocalypse of environmental degradation and the earthly paradise of the sustainable society. That the problems it addresses have increased and the fears become more real gives the movement even greater appeal. Almost 150 years ago, in his pioneering work *Man and Nature* (1864), George Perkins Marsh (1801-82) warned of the false economy of burning the window frames and wainscotting of our houses to cook our meals. What he saw in the future we face in the present, now described in the collapse of ecosystems and ocean fisheries. We face, too, the death of something in the human spirit as wild nature dwindles to nothing. Environmentalism confronts these losses and calls on us to turn from a life of gadgets to one that serves the world. That constitutes a way of accepting the universe that runs against many of our conventional beliefs – in progress, the sufficiency of human reason, and our destiny as conquerors of the world (if not the universe). While it fails to address some problems and

offers wrong answers to others, the modern environmental movement, in its basic orientation, reaches the level of religion. The passion for environmentalism comes from its followers' belief that they are dealing with the ultimate questions.

**For Further Reading:**

*The Norton Book of Nature Writing* (W.W.Norton, 1990).

Michael Ruse, *Can A Darwinian be a Christian?* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science* (HarperCollins, 1997).

Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Yale University Press, 1983).

Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness* (Yale University Press, 1991).

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