

Listening for and Responding to God in Nature

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Introduction

Last week, we reflected on the question: “How ought we to relate to the natural world around us?” and considering the dangers of an anthropocentric approach to understanding nature.

This week, in keeping with our general theme of “*The Calls of Nature*,” I would like us to consider a similar two-fold question: “What is Nature saying to us, and what ought to be our response?” That is, if Nature is, indeed, calling to us, what is she calling us toward; what is her intention? I believe that Nature extends to us an invitation, and that our response ought to be one of reverential awe.

Yes, I am intentionally anthropomorphizing Nature as a woman. Not because I believe in an actual being who might be called “Mother Nature,” but because I think it expedient for the purpose of today’s reflection to imagine such a being. George MacDonald gave us an image of Mother Nature as a sprightly and kind old grandmother constantly at her work, busying herself about her house, which is the whole of the universe, tidying up every corner, tending to her gardens, and minding her flocks; all the while quietly humming, singing songs of praise to her Father in Heaven.

I rather like that image, and I believe that the more we engage with (quote) “Mother Nature” so to speak, particularly when we are alone with her, the more clearly we hear these “songs of

praise” as it were, and are aware of an invitation to join in the worship.

Nature’s Invitation

This call to worship in solitude with “Mother Nature” is stark yet subtle. Emerson once mused, “... if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars....One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime....If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! [And] every night come out these envoys of beauty to light the universe....”

Richard Dawkins echoed this when he wrote: “We, all of us, share a kind of religious reverence for the beauties of the universe, for the complexity of life. For the sheer magnitude of the cosmos, the sheer magnitude of geological time....you are naturally overwhelmed with a feeling of awe, a feeling of admiration and you almost feel a desire to worship something.”

Both the philosopher and the scientist seem to be echoing Psalm 19, “*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork. Day to day pours out speech and night to night reveals knowledge.*”

What speech do you hear in the passage of time, and what knowledge do you gain by gazing upon the infinite expanse of the night sky?

I recall a book we were given to read in grade school in the U.S. about a 12-year-old boy who heard the call of nature and responded to it. Sam, the boy, ran away from his family's crowded New York apartment to live in the forests of the Catskill Mountains. Through trials, and hardships Sam overcame every danger the forests threw at him for six years. At times nearly starving or freezing to death, he learned how to avoid poison while staying nourished, he learned trapping, fishing, skinning, fire-making, and hawking. In short, he learned how to use nature to his advantage to survive in it. Surprisingly, the book ends with his father and mother and eight siblings moving to his mountain with him to build a farmstead. Sam realizes that although his time of self-reliance is over, that what he craved most since withdrawing into Nature is companionship: community.

Ultimately, *My Side of the Mountain* is a story of a boy who grows into a man by cultivating a vigorous and vibrant relationship with Mother Nature in solitude, only for the man to discover that their relationship ought to be shared.

Jesus Himself, our great example of how to live, "would often slip away to the wilderness and pray." Jesus sought solitude in Nature's Temple to *commune with* the Father.

There is an untamed wildness to Nature, which terrifies and intimidates but, when faced with the courage to listen and hear what she is saying to you, you find a stillness and a mutual acceptance: when we accept the wilderness as it is, we find that it accepts us back into itself.

When we, like Sam or like Jesus, get alone with Nature, and heed her call, we then can hear the words quite clearly: “*Be still and know that I AM.*”

When we are still and alone—when we can listen to the stars—Nature calls us out of our small little lives, with our single, narrow perspectives and to step into a grander narrative, with a larger scope which no one person could imagine.

When we are receptive to the Call of Nature, and respond to her, we are awestruck by the splendor and majesty of our mutual Creator; we are drawn to journey alone into a wilderness only to find our Great heavenly Father calling out for us and there we discover in silent adoration the secrets of the Universe; We shall encounter difficulties, but when we stop our fussing, we shall find ourselves irresistibly drawn on towards a life of togetherness and compassion for our fellows, and for our world. And so the paradoxical Call of Nature is one that draws us into solitude, that we might be drawn together.