

THE GOD OF NATURE

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O Lord, how manifold are thy works!
In wisdom thou hast made them all;
the earth is full of thy creatures. Psalm 104:24

It is unfashionable today to speak about the God of Nature. The prophets are against it; for they are still making war on the priests of Baal. The God of History is Master of the hour. He will have no truck, it is said, with Nature's Lord. Satyrs and nymphs beware! Down with holly wreaths and May baskets! Hear the Word of the Lord!

Well, I would serve no God but the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob. He talks, I know, of good and evil. He is not the idol of some lawless fertility cult. He declares His righteous will in the context of human events. Yet who is to say that He cannot also speak through lakes and trees, birds and flowers, telling of truth and harmony? Not I. For with Moses I have heard Him thunder from the smoky mountain. With Gideon I have felt Him descend with the dew. With Elijah I have caught His whisper in the wind. With the psalmist I have found Him singing in the grass. With Jesus I have seen Him clothe the wild anemone. It is the same God, I think, who fashioned Adam from the dust.

Let me do the unfashionable then and speak of Him - this God of Nature. For I feel we need Him. We need that wilderness world that He created and from which we come. We can hear Him speaking there when the noise of our human world crowds out His voice.

To be sure we are of nature too. And for that reason it is somewhat contradictory to speak of our human ways as un-natural or artificial. A skyscraper is no less a work of nature than an ant hill. It is wrong to set ourselves apart from the rest of God's creatures as if we belonged to another order of creation.

Still, we are different. God has given us dominion, as the Bible says. More than that there is a strange enmity between us humans and our fellow creatures. We have a way of messing nature up. A billboard along a highway, the sound of an outboard motor rising from a lake, the sight of factory smoke against the stars - such things, though expressions of our nature, seem to defile nature in general. Thus, though it may be contradictory to speak of man, a natural creature, as un-natural or artificial, such words do have meaning. We get the feeling that human civilization is a little out of place in this world. Indeed it seems out of place with something basic within ourselves. I fancy this is one aspect of our original sin. Instead of living as part of nature, we seem to live against nature.

That is why we feel the need to return to nature. I do not mean nature in some abstract, philosophical sense. Rather I use the word in a practical, familiar way. I mean the great outdoors, the world of rock and sky, of plant and beast, untouched by human artifice. This world has something to offer us. A family driving two thousand miles to one of the national parks, an old man feeding pigeons in a city square, a farm boy collecting lightning bugs in a jar, such is the evidence that nature has something we need.

What are the gifts we seek from nature? One is health. For many years Hal Borland brightened the editorial page of the New York Times with his weekly reports of life on his Connecticut farm. His little nature essays nestled alongside weighty commentaries on the international situation like a bird's nest beside a city wall. In one collection of these essays he described the healing experience that came to him one March when he returned home after a near fatal illness.*

....To see buds open into new leaves was to see, suddenly, a marvelous facet of that big miracle which each Spring stirs the earth and all things thereon.

I saw and felt, and it was like feeling my own strong pulse again, sensing my own growing strength. I was part of some universal magnificence, as I had not been for a long time.

Many of us have found that healing experience in nature. When God told Adam that He gave him every green thing for food, I think He meant not only nourishment for the body, but medicine for the soul. There is an amazing power in the open air, the green hills, the deep forests, to refresh and to heal. Nature is hale. She is brim full of life. She is forever making all things new. There is power to mend the broken heart, to give peace to jangled nerves, to send the breath of life coursing through the jaded spirit. Nature is the soul's best sanatorium.

Or the gift may come in the form of wisdom. It is the wisdom of retreat, not retreat in the sense of a cowardly backtracking, but in the sense of a creative withdrawal. When an artist works, he stands close to his canvas, too close to see it whole. Therefore, every so often he stands back and looks. He relaxes and sees. That is what can happen when we exchange the haunts of men for those of our fellow creatures. We stand aside and try to see the human picture whole.

Here too is the wisdom of humility. Nature is big; nature is manifold. When we live only in the midst of human activities, humanity monopolizes our attention. Our universe becomes human-centered. So does our religion. Out in the wilds we learn that there is more than one creature with the breath of life moving about this planet. We shed that conceit which sees the whole world, even God Himself, in orbit about our human concerns.

Here is the wisdom of Nature's own order and plan. We observe her. We learn lessons in life and death, in patience and endurance, in beauty and creativity, above all perhaps, in simplicity. As Wordsworth said, there is more wisdom in a linnet's song than all the books.** When Thoreau took to the woods, not only he, but the whole book-reading world grew wiser.

But nature's richest gift is communion with God. That is not to say that God is absent from human society. God speaks through man most eloquently. Indeed His Word became man. God's voice is heard along the city streets, inside the factories and the shops. God is with man in the midst of man's distinctive concerns. Yet, there are in man obstructions to God's speaking. Man himself is a great talker, and sometimes it is hard for God to get a word in edgewise. Thus, like the prophets before us, we go to the wilderness for inspiration.

* This Hill, This Valley. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1957, p. xii.

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How does God speak through nature? To some God is here mainly as a kind of gigantic inference. When they see a house, they conclude there must be a builder. So when they look at the world around them, they conclude that there must be a Creator. That thought is present to the reverent mind, even though it may not afford rational demonstration. But God is more to nature than an absentee architect. He is a present reality. He appears not just as an inference but as the Creative Spirit speaking through the "language of the sense." * Nature is sacramental, - the outward expression of spiritual power. Just as a musical composition tells us about the inner life of the composer, so the world of nature helps us glimpse the inside of God. And when we live in fellowship with Nature and with that Spirit which speaks through her, every sound, every sight, every touch brings us into communion with our Maker. Call this mysticism, if you will. Call it pantheism. Names cannot destroy reality. That the Spirit of God is present in His world is an experienced fact for millions. As such it can neither be substantiated nor refuted. It can only be enjoyed.

Now if we would receive these spiritual gifts of health, wisdom and communion, it is important that we approach Nature in the right way. For she gives only to those who are receptive and appreciative.

It is important first of all that we go to Nature adoring her for her own sake. Most of our dealings with Nature are utilitarian. We come to use her. We come to plant, to reap, to fish, to observe, to kill. These activities are well enough in their way. There is much to be gained by working with Nature. Our modern civilization rests upon that premise. But if we would receive Nature's deepest gifts, we should come to her without ulterior motives. Why is it that when we enter the woods we must always take with us a gun, a fishing rod, a camera, a magnifying glass, an axe. Could we not be content for once with just bringing ourselves? Nature grants her most precious favors to those who love her for herself. That is the principle of all true love.

Secondly, we need to let nature speak for herself. Let us take her undomesticated. When I came to the Midwest, I was disappointed to find so little country. Things were too cultivated. I have seen more unadulterated wildlife in a Brooklyn alley than on an Iowa farm. (Duluth is not typically Midwestern. It has more in common with the Northwest Territories.) Domesticated Nature has something to offer too. Yet in such a form she speaks more plainly of the artificial than any purely human creation. Mowing a lawn is like docking a dog's tail; it is intrinsically in bad taste. To be sure, we must tame nature where we live. We cannot allow brambles to grow four feet high in the back yard, nor can we welcome the lynx to our fireside. But if we would discover those gifts that only the wilderness offers, then we must learn to take nature straight.

Thirdly, when we go to Nature, let us cast aside all prejudices. Let us not speak of dirt and weeds. They are human conventions. Let us talk of soil and flowers. When I lived in Sacramento I used to have a portion of my yard roto-tilled every year partly for purposes of a garden, partly to keep down the tall grass which became a fire hazard in the dry season. But first I would allow this wild grass to flower. There were six or eight varieties. I would collect samples of each in a vase and bring them into the house. Their beauty was both more exquisite and more rugged than that of a hot house orchid.

* Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey"

