

BEAUTY, NATURE, AND RELIGIOUS SENSITIVITY...

"Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in,
where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike"
(John Muir, 1912)

In the weeks between my first Covid jab in late April
and the first calendar days of the southern hemisphere winter and our Flu injections,
the 12 year young Japanese Maple (*Acer Palmatum*) in our front garden,
(a seedling gift from a mate when we were leaving Canberra)
was undergoing a time of transition.

From the gentle chlorophyll green sea-of-life-filled foliage—a miracle of evolution,
to its chosen orange and burgundy seven-acutely pointed, lobe leaves...
Not an all-at-once process, but a gradual must-do life-saving transition
as its energy from photosynthesis is diverted to the roots, resulting in
autumn technicolored leaves pirouetting to the ground in a light wind—plop,
to become crisp brown litter and our garden's spring fertiliser.¹

Nature outdoors.

Nature approaching the cold of winter clad in a brilliant palette of colours.

Nature inviting us to appreciate daily experiences of wonder.

As Albert Camus wrote: 'Autumn is a second spring when every leaf is a flower.'

We do not just perceive the 'world'.

The 'world' gives us something to perceive.

A feeling of 'at home in the universe'... accepting we are creatures of the earth.

Yes, a discerning that the universe sustains us,
and that there is a functioning creativity within the universe
to which we must be related constructively, dare I say 'intimately',
in order to fulfil our human nature.

As it's been said by others: we are the universe come to consciousness. (*Meland 1934:156*)

When we lose our sense of wonder, we objectivise the Earth
as a thing that can be used and abused at our consumeristic whim.

There is no shortage of disaster data.

The beauty of nature is a fundamental aspect of the human relationship
with the wider natural world.

In the words of the process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead
beauty is 'intense harmony'... the guiding lure in every becoming moment.

¹ The dropping of leaves by deciduous trees is called 'abscission'. It occurs on the cusp between autumn and winter, as part of an arc of growth, maturity, and renewal.

As I stand at my bedroom window on a chilly—sometimes foggy—late autumn morning
and gaze out at our self-pruning Japanese Maple, I am struck
by three important ingredients from nature: awe, wonder, and curiosity.

So how should we live in a world overflowing with autumn's natural beauty?

Rejoice in it!

Care for it!

Strive to add our own mite of beauty with whatever talent we possess!

And—we, just perhaps, may be able to move from an appreciation
of a maple in its autumn glory, to a sense of the sacredness of that tree, and all of nature,
and in doing so, will attempt to protect nature.

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A nineteenth century Scottish-American
who was a loving observer of the natural world in all its beauty, wonder, and awe,
was the inventor, shepherd, explorer, writer, and naturalist, **John Muir** (1838–1914).

Muir has a reputation as a bit of an ascetic—someone who would plunge into the wilderness
“with little more than a crust of bread and a small packet of tea.” (*Brune 2015*)

He is best known as the co-founder of the Sierra Club,
and throughout his life was often referred to as ‘John of the Mountains’.

He is remembered as the patriarchal parent of America's national parks.

Especially of his treasured Hetch Hetchy Valley near Yosemite in California.

It is said he claimed the two greatest moments of his life were
when he camped at Yosemite, and
when he found the rare orchid calypso (*Calypso borealis*)
blooming alone in a Canadian swamp.

At age 29, while working in a carriage factory “repairing an industrial belt”, (*Austin 1987:7*)
he suffered an injury to the cornea of his right eye which almost blinded him.

Shortly after, in appreciation of his sight, Muir began his years of barefooted ‘wanderlust’.

He travelled... no, to be more accurate, he ‘sauntered’ thousands of miles
around the world—USA, Canada, Alaska, Japan, India, Australia
to name a few countries.

But especially across the whole of America.

“One such walk,” records Muir's biographical record,

“was across the San Joaquin Valley through waist-high wildflowers and into the high
country for the first time. Later he would write: ‘Then it seemed to me the Sierra should
be called not the Nevada, or Snowy Range, but the Range of Light... the most divinely
beautiful of all the mountain chains I have ever seen.’”

But ultimately it was California's Sierra Nevada and Yosemite that truly claimed him

During 1903–1904 Muir went on a ‘tree hunting’ world tour.

He wanted to see the Baobabs, the true cedars of the old world,
the Kauri of New Zealand, the strange Araucarias that had so long fascinated him,
but, most of all, he wanted to visit Australia
“and see if the rumours about the great Eucalyptus were true.” (*Ryan 1985*)

When in Australia he visited the zoological and botanical gardens and parks
in Fremantle, Melbourne, and Sydney, before heading to New Zealand.
The Narbethong Special Purposes Reserve north of Healesville
and near Marysville, in Victoria, preserves some of the beech trees, eucalyptus,
and tree ferns Muir saw on his trip.

In a note published by the *John Muir Center*, it says of his NSW stay:
“Muir travelled inland to see the eucalyptus forests of the Great Dividing Range and
took the train from Sydney to Mt Victoria in the Blues Mountains to see the Jenolan
Caves...”

For Muir, we were born and baptised in wildness.
All his life he ‘preached’ a radical religion of beauty and a ‘gospel’ of getting outdoors.
His radicalism manifested itself in a non-anthropocentric view of nature
which saw humans as part of the natural world rather than the centre of it.
“Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees... The winds will blow
their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like
autumn leaves.” (*Brune 2015*)

And he rooted his bare-footed sauntering faith in this world and no other.
“His oft-repeated exclamation ‘Glorious!’ wasn’t directed to a deity but to the
uncontrollable creations of nature.” (*Highland 2019:3*)

As the internationally acclaimed Celtic spirituality teacher John Phillip Newell says,
Muir’s approach to study and observation was eccentric
“This was my method of study,” says Muir.
“I drifted about from rock to rock, from stream to stream, from grove to drive... When I
discovered a new plant, I sat down beside it for a minute or day, to make its
acquaintance and try to hear what it had to say... I asked the boulders I met, whence
they came from and whither they were going.” (*Newell 2021: 160*)

Regarded in his day as an ‘orthodox’ Christian
Muir was impatient with religion that was ‘sectarian’
as well as any narrow insistence on dogma, doctrine, or confessions.²

Interestingly, older biographers identified him as a creationist,
while modern scholars seem to place him in the evolutionist camp.
He personally admired Charles Darwin and even felt compelled to defend his work,
understanding evolution to mean not random change

² “Muir’s natural theology is one of liberation rather than redemption. His is a creation-centered spirituality assuming the goodness of all things natural, wild, and free. No savior is necessary: all we have to do is ‘lift up our eyes unto the hills’. In this natural religion there is no original sin and no overwhelming burden of guilt. No world-transforming sacrifice is required. In this sense Muir’s new faith is profoundly unChristian.” (*Tallmadge n.d.:71*)

but continuous, ongoing creation by a Divine Inventor...
A blend of empirical science and Judaeo-Christian metaphysics. (*Limbaugh 1985*)
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Moving north, **Margaret Atwood** is a Canadian poet, novelist, essayist, and environmental activist. She is also the author of the 1985 book on which the TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* is based.

In one of her poems which expresses a naturalistic spirituality, Atwood writes:
'God is not the voice in the whirlwind. God *is* the whirlwind.' (*Selected Poems, 1965-1975*)

For many traditional theists such a view is somewhat akin to 'pantheism', popularised in Western culture in the thought of the 17th-century Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza³ (1632–1677) and expanded somewhat by Australian-born Manchester-based philosopher, Samuel Alexander (1859–1938).

Today, there is a range of titles: 'mystical naturalism', 'naturalistic theism', 'religious naturalism'. Echoing cell biologist **Ursula Goodenough** at the 2021 IRAS⁴ Conference, "A religious naturalist takes nature to mind and also takes nature to heart—seeking, and finding, deep resources in these understandings for spiritual (inward) and moral (outward) orientation, including an ecomoral orientation." (*Goodenough 2021*)

In short: religious or mystical naturalism features a blending of world-views and ideas that explores trackless places and experiences which are different from most traditional expressions of religion. Deep attunement. Deep knowledge. Honouring nature all the way down. (*Goodenough 2015*)

Where the sacred is not a separate '*supernatural*' sphere of life. More like the caffeine in coffee than like a strawberry on top of a pavlova. (*Stone 2017:19*)
Appreciating the sacred can be as simple as looking carefully at ordinary daily events:

- the click-clack of two branches knocking together in the wind
- that rain is not a singular thing but made up of billions of individual drops of water, each with its own destination and timing
- hearing the love-making songs of the Green Grocer cicadas... are signs enough.

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The earth has now turned. The season is changing in my front garden. The skeletal branches of our Japanese Maple, triggered by warmer early-spring days and sunlight, has lured the sap within to move, to venture up, and once again engage in a new season of leaf and green-beauty creation.

So spare no lament for the autumn maple leaves... 'rainbow alleluias'. (*Robert Howard 2015*)

³ Spinoza spoke of 'God or Nature' in such a way as to say that 'God', rightly conceived, is the same as the entire inter-connected universe

⁴ Institute on Religion in an Age of Science

Nature is never static.

Life is animate... continually incarnating itself

“in microbes and maples, in humming birds and human beings... [where] we are a result of nature’s inherent processes... part of the emergence of the universe itself.”

(Bumbaugh 2003)

Nature in autumn and spring reminds us and calls us to a ‘new’ religious sensitivity.

Thus, never let it be said that religious wisdom comes *only* from books,

or ‘ordained’ teachers, authorised rituals, or creedal statements.

Or worse, as in John Muir’s case,

from a tyrannical and fundamentalist father...

“a narrow, angry Calvinist who tried to teach the young Muir that we are ‘poor worms of the dust, conceived in sin’.” (Newell 2021:149)

Religious sensitivity also comes from our attentiveness, recognition, and imaginative appreciation of the natural world... from sunrise to sunset.

Observing the world of life around us brings many gifts

as John Muir’s ‘spiritual pilgrimage’ and ‘observing’ also indicates.

A Newer Testament.

The gospel of the natural present moment.

A natural ‘wild’ spirituality... released from the captivity of supernatural religion.

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