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## **THE SACRED ‘WONDEROSITY’ OF NATURE...**

A supernova explodes in some far-flung corner of the universe.  
Billions of years later, driving to work, your memories are recharged  
listening to jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong performing *What a Wonderful World*.  
(Music - Louis Armstrong. ‘What a Wonderful World’)

As I continue this reflection I want to offer a quotation  
from one of my mentors, Bernard Eugene Meland.

He wrote it in 1931 just home from post graduate studies in Germany  
and still formulating his ‘mystical naturalism’.

Subsequently, it has helped shaped much of my thinking and living religiously  
within a naturalistic framework.

The quotation:

“Have you ever communed in the first person with this total wealth of living life about  
you? Have you ever stood with awe and wonder before the unbounded totality of all  
reality—this ongoing process we call the universe, feeling your own intimacy  
with all its life, thrilling with the realisation of the magnitude of that relationship, relating  
you to all the world’s life, past, present and future? If you have, you have experienced first-  
hand religion.” (*Meland 1931:665. Also Meland 1934:234*)

Meland was a breath of fresh air to this then theological student 55 years ago.  
Because Meland inspired, and later others<sup>1</sup> suggested...

There is no good reason to believe that taking nature to heart  
leaves me or others with any fewer spiritual benefits  
than taking to heart the teachings of *supernaturalist* traditions.

If we can go to special places, built by humans, which are designated as sacred,  
surely we can go to special places, shaped naturally,  
which are recognised as sacred.

Now all of that was an ‘aha’ moment for me! So what am I on about?  
Briefly put, there is a new ‘old’ kid on the progressive spirituality block.  
It’s called *Religious Naturalism*, described as the ‘forgotten alternative’.

It has a long pedigree, stretching from Pre-Socratic philosophers  
into Christian medieval times, through to today  
where it has been preserved primarily within the academy  
and small pockets of Unitarian spirituality.  
Echoing cell biologist Ursula Goodenough at the 2021 IRAS<sup>2</sup> Conference,

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<sup>1</sup> The formulation of words following was shaped by Jerome A Stone

<sup>2</sup> Institute on Religion in an Age of Science

“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.”

Religious naturalism is simultaneously a religious and a naturalistic way  
“of understanding and being oriented morally within the world”. (*Hogue 2010:37*)

It has two central aspects.

(i) **Naturalist** views, grounded in science,  
provide a framework for understanding what seems real.

These include the grand story or ‘drumbeat’—the epic of evolution—  
that explains the origins of the cosmos and humans,  
with perspectives from which to consider why we do what we do.

And where the metaphor of ‘web’ is used to describe this interrelatedness.

For instance:

Everyone participating in this gathering  
shares about 35% of his/her/their genes with a yeast cell.  
And 60% with a banana, 85% with a mouse, and 96% with a chimpanzee.

We are all one big astonishing family.

“For just as the Milky Way is the universe in the form of a galaxy, and an orchid is the  
universe in the form of a flower, we are the universe in the form of a human. And  
every time we are drawn to look up into the night sky and reflect on the awesome beauty of  
the universe, we are actually the universe reflecting on itself.” (*Thomas Berry*)

(ii) **Religious** orientation includes spiritual responses,  
which can include feelings of appreciation, gratitude, humility, reverence, and joy  
at the wonder of being alive.

It also includes moral responses, involving values rooted in nature  
—to seek justice and cooperation among social groups and balance in ecosystems.

Wonderosity<sup>3</sup> and awe when contemplating the immense scale of  
matter, space, and time, is surely appropriate once we realise  
we belong to something so very far beyond us.

Such naturalistic wonder and awe counts as deeply spiritual.

In short: Religious Naturalism, or as Meland called it, ‘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.

So as a Religious Naturalist, I want to claim:

Nature and naturalism are for us today ‘the main game’.  
Indeed, the ecological crisis has brought ‘nature’ to the foreground.  
But where to start personally?

Start with your own life.

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<sup>3</sup> Sam Keen invented the word ‘wonderosity’ - combining both ‘wonder’ with ‘curiosity’

With the 37.2 trillion cells of your body  
that are converting energy to make protein right now  
so you can hear these words and see other colleagues.

Or... if you want to know where the environment is, just feel yourself.  
The skin is not a wall around us.

The skin, the lungs, the digestive tract are permeable membranes  
designed to let the environment in.

We ignore the environment at our peril.

Or... it may be one thing to know the most common component of sand  
is silicon dioxide in the form of quartz.

It's another, to walk along Takapuna Beach (NZ) [Taw-kaw-poo-nuh] near sunset,  
with the sand squelching between your toes  
as waves dance around your ankles!

Or... spend autumn—the season of beauty and decline—in Canberra (AUS),  
amid all the coloured maple leaves, fitting of an artist's palette.

Nature scatters the seeds that will bring new growth in the spring...

Yet spoiled by the awareness that every year autumn  
is becoming more silent! Death amidst life!

Or... take a three year old child (maybe your grand-daughter or grandson)  
for a walk along a wetlands track. Don't plan to be in a hurry.

Every twig. Every muddy pool of water.

Every duck or small lizard to cross your path.

Every dragon-fly will be an occasion

for closer 'looking' and 'excitement' and 'wonder'.

The miracle of each moment awaits our sensual wonder.

Hosannah! Not in the highest, but right here. Right now. This.<sup>4</sup>

Horizontal transcendence. Natural not *supernatural*.

An experience animated by a sense of wonder, belonging, and relatedness.

A Newer Testament. The gospel of the natural present moment.

Allow yourself to be shaped by this creativity. This wonder.

Webs of culture, life, and cosmos.

Together they are expressions of how we experience the world.

To be alive is to experience.

We have no inner spiritual development without outer experience, writes Thomas Berry.

us "When we see a flower, a butterfly, a tree, when we feel the evening breeze flow over  
or wade in a stream of clear water, our natural response is immediate, intuitive,  
transforming ecstatic."<sup>5</sup>

The sacred is *not* a separate 'supernatural' sphere of life,  
driven by blinding-light revelations.

The sacred is that which evokes the depths of wonder.

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<sup>4</sup> Goodenough. *The Sacred Depths...*, 169

<sup>5</sup> Berry. 'Forward' in (ed). Kathleen Deignan, *When the Trees Say Nothing*. Thomas Merton. *Writings on Nature*.

In a time of ecological vulnerability and dislocation of the social fabric,  
contemporary Religious Naturalism's conceptions of and attitudes toward nature and religiosity  
have much to commend it.

Especially its willingness to entertain radically new approaches,  
as it engages with some of the most pressing religious and moral issues  
at the core of the ecological crisis.

And to move beyond traditional religious language that has become brittle and lifeless.

Because...

“the miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green Earth in the  
present moment, to appreciate the peace and beauty that is available now.”

(*Thich Nhat Hanh, 1996:367*)

The chief mark of 'religion',  
according to philosopher William Ernest Hocking (1873-1966),  
is not unity but fertility.

Religion is the 'mother' of all the great cultural interests of human life.  
But it lives only while we are making it up.

While our imaginations and creative juices are firing  
and we are generating—crafting—new angles, new narratives, new metaphors  
within the particular context of the moment  
because these things are liberating.

Thus the task of religious faith and the purpose of religious life today  
is to re-read what is going on in the world.

“[T]o re-connect to those purposes and values that, in our best collective judgment,  
through the critical examination of faith, will most truly and effectively inform our  
negotiations of what's going on in the pivotal twilight between the religious  
moral present and future.” (*Hogue 2010: 227*)

Is nature enough?

Nature does not provide for complete and final fulfilment  
of our deepest desires and longings.

Neither does it promise perks like eternal life nor an interventionist deity!

But it is all we have, and it will have to do...

Plus gather people prepared to *interfere*  
with the ongoing destruction of 'earth mother'.

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