

Can Nature Be a Religion?

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith
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On this first day of spring our hearts pulsate with hope that once again the earth shall be renewed, and the vestige of winter beneath our feet will not only turn to mud, but soon fade into distant memory as new blossoms unfold. I eagerly anticipate placing my snow-blower, as huge as a horse, into storage as my mind turns to the splendor and miracle of new growth and the earth resuming its green carpet - a welcome mat for those grown weary with winter's travails.

It was 175 years ago, exactly, (1836) that Emerson single-handedly launched what would be known as the transcendental movement with his essay on Nature. Emerson sought what he termed "an original relationship to the universe." This meant foregoing the old traditional ways of understanding the world and life itself to where we can - and must - develop our own insight, our own poetry, and our own philosophy through what is revealed to us. We do ourselves a disservice by relying on the revelations of others from thousands of years ago.

Emerson, and the whole Transcendentalist movement trusted personal experience as an instrument of truth more than the rational mind. This was an insult to those who praised the enlightenment as the cornerstone of human progress. But Emerson's premise was interesting: If man is imperfect then it follows that his logic is imperfect as well.

I've been thinking about our questionable logic in the aftermath of the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown in Japan. It seems only logical to me that we would declare a moratorium on building new nuclear facilities while shutting down existing ones in order to test them, especially the ones built in the same era by the same contractors as those in Japan. But we prefer to live with risk, as it is economically more beneficial. We are, in fact, so blinded by profit margins that beyond any logic, we refuse to build new nuclear plants that could prove 90% safe in a 9.0 earthquake because they would greatly compromise the financial bottom line. Our logic is wrapped around profit, making risk a remote factor in the corporate equation. [Our logic is as imperfect as humanity itself.]

Emerson perceived nature as an integrated whole, not merely a collection of individual objects like: There are stars above and timber in the mountains, and cows in the meadow and fish in the stream. Nature cannot be isolated. In order to see the cohesive oneness of nature, we must cast off old ways of seeing. It is as though Emerson is speaking to the oil and gas and mining companies directly when he warns that we must see nature with new eyes thus casting off untold years of old views like a snake sheds its skin revealing the child within. And if Chevron and Exxon still don't get it, perhaps they will understand Emerson's deepest concern: "Beauty is a nobler want of humanity than commodity." I don't think that would be

admissible evidence in a court of law today because a jury might be persuaded that beauty is a nobler want of humanity than commodity.

The natural devastation in Japan warns us not to become too romantic or nostalgic about nature. Nature comprises beauty and destruction, avenues for reflection and fear, to be respected for what it ultimately is, namely the mix of good and evil that make up the creation. But it remains so instructive to remember Emerson's warning that "nature has no personality of its own." And when evangelical right wingers express their view that natural disasters are God's wrath towards equality marriage, they need to listen up: nature has no personality of its own. They are merely projecting their own prejudice and it's time to stop this hatred and bigotry in the name of God.

I admit that I don't allow nature to inform my theology nearly enough. I still think of theology as some intellectual construct and fail –perhaps with many of you – to fully grasp nature as religion itself. But how do I identify it and what do I call it?

Emerson was certainly not the first to regard nature holistically. The Pre-Socratic Italian philosopher, Zeno, argued, "All things are part of one single system which is called nature." But even more importantly, and relevant to today's environmental concerns, he maintained, "Virtue consists in a will which is in agreement with nature." Zeno figured that out 400 years before the birth of Christ and yet it remains the sine qua non of our planetary future today. Do our actions, that is, what we will upon this earth, harmonize with the natural world...be in sync with the world we inhabit? Hence, the view that the earth exists for our benefit economically and recreationally comprises a "non-virtuous" position...unethical in its failure to honor the single system to which we all belong.

A couple of decades after Emerson's essay on *Nature*, Spinoza ruffled feathers by positing that God is not external to nature but rather God IS the sum totality of nature itself. The challenge that Spinoza posed to theologians at that time was his belief that we can respond to the world religiously without an identifiable Supreme Being that exists out there on its own. This proved too provocative for Pope Pius IX who by 1864 condemned "religion in nature" in the first seven articles of the Syllabus of Errors. Spinoza hit a raw nerve that still needs exploration.

In my years in Boston, every Monday the Boston Globe carried a column by a cosmologist, Chet Raymo, a progressive Catholic. I think he had more Unitarian followers than Catholic. I wonder how Pope Pius would respond, or even how Pope Benedict the XVI would respond to Chet's latest book from two years ago called: "When God is Gone Everything is Holy."

Essentially Raymo echoes Spinoza: Take away the mythology of a Supreme Being existing outside the splendid cosmic reality staring us in the face, and that which we behold is holy in and of itself. Raymo claims that nature is more "magical" than religion-based miracles. I think he's perceiving revelation with new eyes. As a result,

he writes that religious discipline must embrace ecology and stewardship of the earth.

Is nature a religion? We forget that possibility as we busy ourselves too much with trying to find the right label for ourselves: Agnostic or atheist or pagan or any of the hyphenated: Catholic- Unitarian, Buddhist-Unitarian, Pagan-Unitarian, Jewish-Buddhist Unitarian, also referred to as JU-BU-UU. I ask: Why the need for labels? Why place yourself in the constraints of a box because the spiritual journey progresses with twists and turns, new insights, new discernments – why constrict yourself under a specific banner?

And yet I am moved by what is termed “religious naturalism,” a philosophy I think that is expansive enough for me personally to absorb my little quirks, and at the same time answers affirmatively that nature itself is a religion.

Ursula Goodenough, in her book, “The Sacred Depth of Nature,” gives nature its religious gravitas in ways that would make even Emerson envious. Goodenough understands religion as the human effort to respond to basic questions about how things are (meaning a cosmology), and what things are valuable (denoting ethics).

She exposes the very nub of religion which is a two-fold link: First you need a narrative, a story, of how things are and came to be. And once the story is accepted as an explanation of the big order of things, what follows is a morality – the right way to live in a manner consistent with the cosmology or the narrative. We endeavor to make our moral lives reflect the bigger narrative of what this universe means and how it came into being. And so, when a cosmology is rooted in old faith traditions, the story that gives us dominion over the earth, then we act accordingly. If the Big Story claims that God called homosexuality an abomination, or the Big Story claims that polygamy is in the cosmic blueprint, or that greed lies at the root of all suffering, then morality gets formed in accordance with the cosmological narrative. Morality always follows one’s understanding of the narrative of how this all began. In every religion, for every individual, morality is understood and rooted in the big cosmological scheme of things.

Goodenough believes that at this point in time, a planetary ethic needs to emerge which demands a moral commitment to the earth in light of today’s more sophisticated and scientific view of cosmology. Again, morality is dependent on cosmology. But here’s her biggest contribution to the discussion: Science can provide a contemporary cosmology that will be endorsed across all religious faiths if – and this is a big IF – if the cosmology allows people of faith to feel religious.

Goodenough argues persuasively that the scientific story of nature...the scientific narrative has the potential to be accepted more universally if the narrative emerges as a “solemn gratitude that we exist at all, share a reverence for how life works, and acknowledge a deep and complex imperative that life continues.”

She understands that our moral behavior won't change until we buy into the cosmic narrative which at this point in time can sustain a scientific emphasis as long as that narrative is expressed religiously. She sounds like Spinoza when he said we must respond to this world religiously. Of course responding to the world religiously implies a whole new ethic of behavior. When the more scientific cosmology feels religious, then we can begin sharing the attending moral responsibilities. Once the scientific story conveys meaning and motivation, and becomes spiritually satisfying, then our moral response becomes a religious response.

Goodenough's goal is not to describe or explain nature, but promote awe, wonder, and mystery when considering the vastness of the universe and the complex and perhaps improbable development of life. Religiously speaking, we are the heirs of a profound gift. Morally we are beholden to ensure that life continues and the environment that holds life is sustained.

The catholic priest, Thomas Berry, fully understands this pivotal link between the cosmic narrative and human moral behavior. He has composed a New Story...a new narrative where humans understand themselves as part of an evolving universe. The inspiration to write this stems from his wish to guide our moral decisions in how we function as individuals and as a species. "The story of the universe," he says, "is the quintessence of reality. We perceive the story. We put it in our language, the birds put it in theirs, and the trees put it in theirs. We can read the story of the universe in the trees. Everything tells the story of the universe. If you don't know the story, in a sense you don't know yourself; you don't know anything."

The so-called new cosmology that insists on the story of nature as one indivisible whole brings the old masters to the forefront, those like Emerson and Zeno and Spinoza, let alone the fundamentals of Eastern Religion. What they all hail in common is the belief that religion is not about true or false beliefs, but a matter of practice and praise, feeling and faith. Experiencing the profound relies not on arguing about God's existence or the length of his beard or the color of the carpet in heaven.

Religious naturalism just might prove the label we're looking for. It affirms our 7th principle which is really a cosmic narrative: We are part of the interconnected web of all existence. Getting my arms around that huge concept forces me, inspires me, to live morally as prescribed by the dictates of the narrative. And if I don't, I feel guilt. See - Unitarians can feel guilt by not adhering to the cosmic story. Our narrative makes all of life...every life form sacred, and we must be custodians of the precious earth we have inherited. It is our moral responsibility to walk humbly and with gratitude on this sacred and holy ground.

I think the impossible has just occurred. I have hyphenated my beliefs: I'm a Unitarian-religious naturalist. But isn't this all so foolish? Does nature care about which religious box I put myself in? Of course not.

I will be content to walk under a canopy of stars and allow myself to weep. I will ask: what is the story? What must my religious practice then be? What kind of moral behavior is thus expected? I know the response already - - and so do you: To live in a manner that ensures life continuing upon our fragile planet.

Virtue, if you will recall from Zeno...virtue consists in a will that is in agreement with nature. His narrative is that all things are part of one system called nature. Morally we must live in agreement with nature. May our lives be lived virtuously. May our nation seek virtue in guiding its policies to sustain life on earth.