

Ipswich Unitarians

TO SEE IN NATURE WHAT IS OURS

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One of the very best things on television recently was the latest series of BBC TV's 'Springwatch'. The BBC, of course, has a very good record when it comes to what are called 'nature programmes', but because 'Springwatch' is 'live' and its presentation both spontaneous and very well-informed, it is able both to engage its audience and to enthuse it in a way that more 'set-piece' programmes do not. I don't know what the viewing figures are, but they are clearly good enough for it to come back year after year, along with its 'Autumnwatch' counterpart. And the great value of these programmes is what they do to connect an urban, couch-potato society to the natural world.

Concern has been expressed recently that, as a society, we are becoming detached from nature. We are insulated from it in the way we live, in the places we live, and in the values by which we live. And most disturbing, perhaps, is the way that children are growing up without experiencing the natural world. Paranoid parents and the obsession with computer games and so-called social networking societies are, it is believed, effectively insulating a rising generation from the real world, the world of sunshine and rain, grass and trees, birds and animals, insects and wild flowers, and all the rest.

I can't help recalling that my own love for the natural world - and the foundation of my knowledge of it - has its origin in my own childhood in London, of all places, whether it was on expeditions to Hampstead Heath, visits to the Zoo, or just rooting around under stones in the back garden! And most of what I know about birds I'd learnt before I was twelve, either from first-hand observation or from my trusty 'Observer's Book of Birds'!

I don't doubt that there are still youngsters today having similar experiences, but I fear that there are fewer of them. And if 'Springwatch' can awaken both children and adults to nature's beauty, endless fascination and fragility, then it is a very good thing indeed.

One of the results of my childhood experiences of nature - firstly in London but later in rural West Yorkshire and then industrial south Lancashire - has been to make it a fundamental component of my faith and spiritual outlook. There are religions that belittle or dismiss the real natural world and regard it as inferior to some speculative supernatural world. They may see it - or the love of it - as an obstacle to some 'spiritual' path that aims to escape from the natural world into some realm or state of being that has left the earth behind. Or they may see the natural world as nothing more than a convenient source of plunder, something to be 'conquered', 'tamed' and 'mastered', and then exploited in the name of self-interest or - supposedly - of humanity, but afforded no worth and respect in itself. Religion, or 'spirituality', then, is not always sympathetic towards the natural world, and our society's alienation from nature may well have something to do with that.

It can be objected that in the days when people were far more vulnerable to nature's less appealing aspects - disease, parasites, plagues, pests and so on - they were justified in taking a less benign and sentimental view than we can afford to now. But although there is validity in that objection, what is remarkable is that some of the most profound and beautiful perceptions of nature come to us from the past - in some cases, the distant past. Although they were indeed more vulnerable to nature's downside than we are (or like to think we are!), they could still see

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and appreciate its beauty and its wonder, and still see the hand of a benign and loving Creator at work in it.

Today, of course, no 'nature programme' presenter, whatever their personal beliefs, would dare bring religion into their programme – and that's probably a good thing! But that is no reason why nature's spiritual impact and implications should not be expressed by others – by poets, musicians, and artists; and by preachers and liturgists too. And in appreciating the natural world in spiritual terms, they are part of a very ancient tradition indeed. And it is a tradition that we need to recapture if we are to re-connect to the web of life from which we have become so dangerously alienated in our actions and our consciousness.

The Old Testament – the Hebrew Bible, that is – is replete with the awareness that the Divine is intimately associated with the natural world. The Creation is the work of God and it is also the means by which we can discern the nature and the will of God. Humanity is part of the Creation, not above it or somehow removed from it, but by virtue of our distinctive gifts and privileges we do have a special responsibility to care for the earth and its living things; to be its stewards and its gardeners. And if we fail in that charge, then there will be consequences – not in some remote afterlife but here on earth, as night follows day; as an existential and natural fact. Abuse the earth and its inhabitants, is the message, and it will turn on you. And this is, of course, quite true, as we are now seeing as never before – providing we have the eyes to see it!

But the ancient Hebrews also loved the natural world for its beauty and variety, as is witnessed to by many sublime passages in their – and our – scriptures. In Psalm 84, for example, we have a glimpse of life in Jerusalem's great Temple that is truly worthy of 'Springwatch': "Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow has her nest where she rears her brood beside your altars, Lord of Hosts..." (Psalm 84: 3)

Jesus was, of course, in the same tradition and saw the hand and the will of God in the natural world, in the "lilies of the field" and the "birds of the air" (Matthew 6: 28, 26). "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" he asked, "Yet without your Father's knowledge not one of them can fall to the ground." (Matthew 10: 29)

And although institutional Christianity rather lost interest in nature in later centuries, being rather more concerned with the 'next world' than with this one, there were always those who retained the awareness that it is here and now that we encounter the Divine, if we have the eyes to see it and the heart to feel it. Thus Pelagius could write, in the 4th century:

"Look at the animals roaming the forest: God's Spirit dwells within them.

Look at the birds flying across the sky: God's Spirit dwells within them.

Look at the tiny insects crawling in the grass: God's Spirit dwells within them...

God's Spirit is present within all plants as well."

And in the 12th century, Hildegard of Bingen wrote:

"God's Word is in all creation, visible and invisible.

The Word is living, being, spirit,

all verdant greening, all creativity...

This Word manifests in every creature."

And in the 16th century, Michael Servetus wrote:

"There is no creature that does not reflect the creator
and in which the creator's light does not shine."

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In the 18th century, Anna Laetitia Barbauld also saw the Divine made manifest in the natural world. As she wrote for the children she taught here in Suffolk:

“Come, let us walk abroad; let us talk of the works of God.
Take up a handful of sand; number the grains of it; tell
them one by one into your lap.
Try if you can count the blades of grass in the field, or the
the leaves on the trees.

You cannot count them, they are innumerable; much more
The things that God hath made...
There is little need that I should tell you of God, for every
thing speaks of him.”

In the 19th century, the young Charles Darwin could write of two contrasting forests in South America:

“Both are temples filled with the varied productions of the God of Nature: no one can stand in those solitudes unmoved, and not feel that there is more in man than the mere breath of his body.”

In similar vein, the Romantic poets represented an awakening of the human spirit to the natural world and to the Divine that suffuses it. Supreme among them was William Wordsworth, who also sounded a warning note that has proved all too justified in the two centuries since he wrote it:

“The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!”

He continues later:

“Great God! I’d rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn...”

In America, the Transcendentalist movement saw the direct encounter with the Divine in nature as a central aspect of the religious life. One of its most prolific hymn-writers, Samuel Longfellow, wrote:

“God of the earth, the sky, the sea!
Maker of all above, below!
Creation lives and moves in Thee,
Thy present life through all doth flow.

Thee in the lonely woods we meet,
On the bare hills or cultured plains,
In every flower beneath our feet,
And even the still rock’s mossy stains.”

To perceive nature in spiritual terms is a constant in human nature at its most aware, and a necessary one. But this doesn’t mean that we must see the Creation in the crude and supposedly

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religious terms of fundamentalist ‘Creationism’! Quite the contrary! To see nature truly is to see it in scientific and rational terms. But to truly experience nature, to make the profound connection between ourselves as spiritual beings and the web of Creation to which we belong, involves our whole being. And it is the artists – be they painters, musicians, writers, poets – who help us to do this; who recall us to the experience itself when we are in danger of losing touch with it. Mary Oliver is, perhaps, the poet who does this best today, and with some words of hers I will close. She writes in her poem, ‘Straight Talk from Fox’:

“...I see you in all your seasons
making love, arguing, talking about God
as if he were an idea instead of the grass,
instead of the stars, the rabbit caught
in one good teeth-whacking hit and brought
home to the den...”

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