

Opening the Book of Nature

Section One

An Introduction

Christians, Jews, and Native Americans share a legacy of awareness that potent lessons are available through reflection and study of the air, land and waters of the world.

However, for all of us, this legacy has not been well preserved. For instance, Jesus did not spend forty days in the temple when he began His ministry. Instead He went off to the wilderness. Likewise, Christians in every century have found spiritual lessons in the wilderness. This is why the Apostle Paul explicitly states that the pagans have no excuse because the very shape and composition of the world describe the power and divine nature of the Creator so that people have no excuse for not believing in God. In fact those who learn how to go out into nature to learn lessons, find the world an endless source of teaching and wisdom.

Jews have a similar legacy. Solomon describes an ability to discern medicinal properties in plants, meaning in the stars and an ability to discern the instincts and attitudes of animals. He teaches (in the Book of Wisdom) that with clean hands and a clean heart, we may discern a great depth of meaning, teaching and wisdom in the very design of the world (7:7-21). He concludes with a summary of the ability to know God through creation, writing, *“Through the grandeur and beauty of the creatures, we may by analogy, contemplate their Author”* (Wisdom 13:1-5).

Thus in the Book of Job, God tells Job, *“Ask the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee: Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee: and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee. Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the Lord hath wrought this?”* (Job 12:7-9).

Native Americans affirm this same understanding about lessons in the design of the world. Chief Walking Buffalo (1871-1967), an Assiniboine from Canada, urges a turning to what he called the “Book of the Great Spirit.” “I turn to the Great Spirit’s book which is the whole of his earth. You can read a big part of that book if you study nature. You know, if you take all your books, lay them out under the sun, and let the snow and rain and insects work on them for awhile, there will be nothing left. But the Great Spirit has provided you and me with an opportunity for study in nature’s university, the forests, the rivers, the mountains, and the animals which include us.”

The person who started the process of recovery in the 19th century is George Washington Carver (1864 - 1943). He describes the great joy that comes from reading the lessons of God in the world. As soon as you begin to read the great and loving God out of all the forms of existence He has created, then you will be able to converse with Him anywhere, everywhere, and at all times. Oh what a fullness of joy will come to you! Carver is important because he develops the concept of “keys” that open nature as a book.

The Opening the Book of Nature (OBN) program helps thoughtful students to connect to these meanings in nature. OBN weekend “explorations” use periods of private prayer and reflection alternating with group process to produce a blend of low key instruction, personal experience, group discussion and sharing.

A unique learning method emerges which helps each person to share in the personal discoveries made by others, to learn from one another’s insights and experiences, and to go on into a more effective ability to discern lessons in creation.

Here are some introductory quotes on nature as a great book of learning:

Section two

Historical commentary

St. Irenaeus of Lyons (129 - 203)

Creation Reveals Him Who formed It

For creation reveals Him who formed it, and the very work made suggests Him who made it, and the world manifests Him who ordered it.

The universal Church, moreover, throughout the whole world, has received this tradition from the apostles themselves.

“Against Heresies,” Book II, ch. 9:1

Origen (185 - 254)

The parallel between nature and Scripture is so complete,
We must necessarily believe that the person
Who is asking questions of nature and
The person who is asking questions of Scripture
Are bound to arrive at the same conclusions.

Ephraim the Syrian (306 - 373)

Nature and Scripture

I considered the Word of the Creator,
and likened it to the rock that marched
with the people of Israel in the wilderness....

In his book Moses described the creation of the natural world
so that both Nature and Scripture

might bear witness to the Creator.
Nature, through man's use of it,
Scripture, through his reading of it,
These are the witnesses which reach everywhere,
they are to be found at all times, present at every hour,
confuting the unbeliever who defames the Creator.

I read the opening of this book and was filled with joy,
for its verses and lines spread out their arms to welcome me;
The first rushed out and kissed me, and led me on to its companion;
And when I reached that verse wherein is written the story of Paradise,
it lifted me up and transported me from the bosom of the book
to the very bosom of Paradise.

Hymns on Paradise, Hymn V:1-3

John Chrysostom (347 - 407)

Nature is Our Best Teacher

From the creation, learn to admire the Lord!
And if any of the things which you see exceed your comprehension,
and you are not able to find the reason for its existence, then for this reason,
glorify the Creator that the wisdom of His works
surpasses your own understanding.
Indeed the magnitude and beauty of creation, and also the very manner of it,
display a God Who is the artificer of the universe.
He has made the mode of this creation to be our best teacher,
compounding all things in a manner that transcends the course of nature.

On the Statutes 12:7

Augustine (354 - 430)

The Book of Nature

Some people, in order to discover God,
read books.
But there is a great book:
the very appearance of created things.
Look above you! Look below you!
Note it. Read it.
God, whom you want to discover,
never wrote that book with ink.
Instead He set before your eyes
the things that He had made.
Can you ask for a louder voice than that?
Why, heaven and earth shout to you:
"God made me!"

Tao Ch'ien (365 - 427)
China

Through Hills and Seas to the Universe

The trees put forth luxuriant foliage,
the spring begins to flow in a trickle.
I admire the seasonableness of nature
and am moved to think
That my life will come to its close.
So little time are we granted human form in the world.
My eyes wander
over the pictures of hills and seas.
At a single glance
I survey the whole universe.
He will never be happy,
whom such pleasures fail to please!

The Poetry of Tao Ch'ien, trans. James Hightower,
Oxford Clarendon Press, 1970, p. 50

Maximus the Confessor (580 - 662)

The Cosmos as Scripture: Scripture as a Cosmos

Creation is a bible
whose letters and syllables
are the particular aspects of all creatures
and whose words are the more universal aspects of creation.
Conversely, Scripture is like a cosmos
constituted of heaven and earth and things in between;
that is, the ethical, the natural,
and the theological dimension.

Ambiguum 10, PG 91. 1128-1129a

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 - 1153)

Learning from Creation

Believe one who knows:
You will find something greater
in woods than in books.
Trees and stones will teach you
that which you can never learn from masters.

Letter to Heinrich Murdach,

Sheikh Muslih-uddin Sa'di Shirazi (1213 -1293)
Iran

Every Leaf is as a “Page of Scripture”

Every leaf of the tree
becomes a page of the sacred scripture
once the soul has learned to read.

The Gulistan, trans. by Sir Edwin Arnold (1899)

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274)

Two Sacred Texts

Sacred writings are bound into two volumes: that of creation and that of
Holy Scripture.

Quoted in Rev. Carla Berkdahl, *Earth Letter*, “Dreaming of
Green Parishes,” Sept., 1998, p. 1

Meister Eckhart (1260 - 1327)

Sermons in Creatures

Anyone who truly knows creatures may be excused from
listening to sermons for every creature is full of God, and
is a book.

Sermons

Dante Aligheri (1265 - 1321)

The Divine Comedy (excerpt)

I raised my eyes aloft, and I beheld
The scattered chapters of the Universe
Gathered and bound into a single book
By the austere and tender hand of God.

Dogen Kigen (circa 1265)
Japan

Comprehending the Universe

The ocean speaks and the mountains have tongues –
That is the everyday speech of the Buddha.
If you can speak and hear such words,
You are one who truly comprehends the universe.

Martin Luther (1483 - 1546)

God's Other Gospel

God writes the Gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also
on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars.

quoted in *The Harper Religious and
Inspirational Quotation Companion*, pg. 120.

Martin Luther (1483 - 1546)

Creation as a Book

All creation is the most beautiful book or bible,
for in it God has described and portrayed Himself.

Luther's World of Thought, trans. Bertram, Concordia, 1958,
p. 179

Paracelsus (1493 - 1541)

Nature is the Universal Teacher

It was the Book of Nature,
written by the finger of God, which I studied...
Nature is the universal teacher.
Whatever we cannot learn from the external appearance of nature,
we can learn from her spirit.
Both are one.
Everything is taught by Nature to her disciple
if he asks for information in the appropriate manner.

The Perfect Man in Christ

William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616)

The Uses of Adversity

Are not these woods
More free from peril than the envious court?

Here feel we not the penalty of Adam,
The season's difference, as the icy fang

And churlish chiding of the winter's wind,
Which, when it bites and blows upon my body,
Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say,
"This is no flattery: these are counselors
That feelingly persuade me what I am."

Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.

And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stone, and good in every thing.

As You Like It

Galileo Galilei (1565 - 1642)

The Grand Book of the Universe

Philosophy is written in the grand book of the universe,
which stands continually open to our gaze.
But the book cannot be understood
until one first learns to comprehend the language
and read the letters in which it is composed.
It is written in the language of mathematics,
and its characters are triangles, circles and other geometric figures,
without which it is humanly impossible to understand
a single word of it;
without these one wanders about in a dark labyrinth.

Robert Boyle (1627 - 1691)

The book of nature is a fine and large piece of tapestry rolled up, which we are not able to see all at once, but must be content to wait for the discovery of its beauty and symmetry little by little, as it gradually comes to be more unfolded.

The Christian Virtuoso, 1690

Thomas Traherne (1637 - 1674)

Dumbness

And every stone and every star a tongue,
And every gale of wind a curious song.
The Heavens were an oracle, and spoke
Divinity: the Earth did undertake
The office of a priest; and I being dumb

(Nothing besides was dumb) all things did come
With voices and instructions...

Matsuo Basho (1644 - 1694)

The Universe as Your Companion
Make the universe your companion,
always bearing in mind
the true nature of all creation –
mountains and rivers,
trees and grasses,
and humanity.

The Haiku Poetry of Matsuo Basho

William Penn (1644 - 1718)

The Library of the Philosopher

The world is certainly a great and stately volume of natural things,
and may be styled the hieroglyphics of a better one,
But, alas, how very few leaves of it do we seriously turn over!
It would go a long way to caution and direct people
in their use of the world that they were better studied
And known in the creation of it.
For how could man find the confidence to abuse it,
While they should see the Great Creator stare them in the face,
in all and every part thereof?
The country is both the philosopher's garden and his library,
in which he reads and contemplates
The power, wisdom and goodness of God.

Some Fruits of Solitude (1692)

John Wesley (1701 - 1791)

The Book of Nature

The Book of Nature is written in an universal character, which everyone may read in his own language. It contains not words, but things which picture out the Divine perfection. The firmament everywhere expanded, with all its starry host, declares the immensity and magnificence, the power and wisdom of its Creator.

Anonymous Hasidic Master (18th century)

The Uplifting of Creation

See your prayer as arousing the letters
through which heaven and earth
and all living things were created.
The letters are the life of all;
When you pray through them,
All creation joins with you in prayer.
All that is around you can be uplifted;
Even the song of a passing bird
May enter into such a prayer.

Quoted in Arthur Green and Barry Holtz, *Your Word is Fire: The Hasidic Masters on Contemplative Prayer*, Schocken Books, New York, 1987, p. 43

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772 - 1811)

The *tsadik*, or righteous person, seeks to reveal the intentions of God.

For in every thing there is the will of the Blessed Name:

So it is in the whole of creation,

And so it is in the details of creation,

Since the Blessed Name desired that each thing would be thus,
with this form, with this power, and with this nature.

So it is with all the creatures in the world, in their silence, sprouting, moving and
speaking -- in each there are differences without number.

And so it is with every single individual within itself -- in each there are many differences in details,
i.e. between every limb, and so forth -- with the grasses and trees and the rest of the particulars of
creation.

In all of them there are great differences in their forms and in their powers and
behaviors.

And all of it was the result of the Creator's will, blessed be His Name,
for he desired that this one would be like so and that one so.

And the righteous person searches out the wills behind each of them,

and clarifies and manifests them by relating them to the realization of beauty That manifests
itself in Israel in general and in the details [of each individual Jew].

For in every single individual of Israel there is a specific realization of beauty

Likutei Moharan, section 17, p.160-1

George B. Cheever (1807 - 1890)

The Gates of Heaven

The man who can really, in living union

of the mind and heart,
converse with God through nature,
finds in the material forms around him,
a source of power and happiness inexhaustible,
and like the life of angels.

The highest life and glory of man
is to be alive unto God;
and when this grandeur of sensibility to him,
and this power of communion with him,
is carried, as the habit of the soul, into the forms of nature,
then the walls of the world are the gates of heaven.

quoted in *The Encyclopedia of Religious Quotations*, edited by Frank Mead, Pillar Books, Inc., N.Y., August, 1976

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807 - 1882)

The Manuscripts of God

And nature, the old nurse, took
The child upon her knee,
Saying, "Here is a story book
My Father hath writ for thee.
Come, wander with me," she said,
"In regions yet untrod,
And read what is still unread
in the manuscripts of God."

Excerpt from "The Fiftieth Birthday of Agassiz," *May 28, 1857*

Tyrone Edwards (1809 - 1894)

God's Two Books

Nature and revelation are alike God's books;
Each may have mysteries,
But in each there are plain, practical matters
For every day duty.

Baha'u'llah (1817 - 1892)

God's Book of His Own Self

Look at the world and ponder awhile upon it.

It unveils the book of its own self before your eyes,
And reveals that which the pen of the Lord
has inscribed thereon.
It will acquaint you with that which is within it
and upon it, and
will give you such clear explanations as to make you
independent of every eloquent expounder.

John Burroughs (1837 - 1921)

Rereading the Book of Living Nature

The book of living nature
is unlike other books in this respect:
One can read it over and over,
and always find new meanings.
It is a book that goes to press every night,
and comes forth fresh every morning.

John Ruskin (1819 - 1900)

The Poetry of Nature

There is religion in everything around us,
a calm and holy religion
in the unbreathing things of nature.
It is a meek and blessed influence,
stealing in as it were unaware upon the heart;
It comes quickly, and without excitement;
It has no terror, no gloom,
It does not rouse up the passions;
It is untrammelled by creeds....

It is written on the arched sky,
It looks out from every star,
It is on the sailing cloud and in the invisible wind;
It is among the hills and valleys of the earth
where the shrubless mountaintop
pierces the thin atmosphere of eternal winter,
Or where the mighty forest fluctuates before the strong wind,
with its dark waves of green foliage;

It is spread out like a legible language
upon the broad face of an unsleeping ocean,
It is the poetry of nature,
It is that which uplifts the spirit within us...

And which opens to our imagination
a world of spiritual beauty and holiness.

Modern Painters

Charles Spurgeon (1834 - 1892)

Books and Sermons Everywhere

Whatever you see,
take care to consider it well,
and you will not see it in vain.
You shall find books and sermons everywhere,
in the land and in the sea,
in the earth and the skies,
and you shall learn
from every living beast and bird and fish and insect,
and from every useful or useless plant that springs out of the ground.

We may also gather rare lessons
from things that we do not like.
I am sure that Solomon did not in the least degree
admire thorns and thistles,
but he nevertheless found instruction in them.
Wisdom has a way of gathering grapes of thorns
and figs of nettles,
and she distills good from herbs
which in themselves are noisome and evil.

Do not fret, therefore, over thorns,
but get good out of them.
Do not begin stinging yourself with nettle;
grip them firmly,
and then use them for your soul's health.

Trials and troubles,
worries and turmoils,
little frets and disappointments,
may all help you if you will.

Like Solomon, see and consider them well –
look upon them,
and receive instruction.

Abdu'l-Baha (1844 - 1921)

Bahai

Creation and Scripture in Accord

The Book of Creation is the command of God
and the repository of divine mysteries.
The Book of Creation is in accord with the written book,
the sacred revelation of all the prophets of God.

In *Makatib*, and cited by Bahiyyah Nakhjavani,
Ronald Co., Oxford, 1981, p. 13.

George Washington Carver (1864 - 1943)

Reading God out of Nature's Great Book

More and more as we come closer and closer in touch with nature and
its teachings are we able to see the Divine and are therefore fitted to
interpret correctly the various languages spoken by all forms of nature
about us.

Letter, February 24, 1930

Martin Buber (1878 - 1965)

Nature, as a whole, and in all its elements,
enunciates something that may be regarded
as an indirect self-communication of God
to all who are those ready to receive it.

At the Turning, 1952

Tertullian (160 - 230?)

God teaches through creation

Nature is a school-mistress, the soul the pupil; and whatever one has taught or the other has learned
has come from God – the Teacher of the teacher.

De Testimonio Animae

Aldo Leopold (1887 - 1948)

A Great Story

I am trying to teach you that this alphabet of “natural objects”
(soils and rivers, birds and beasts) spells out a story.
Once you learn how to read the land,

I have no fear of what you will do to it, or with it,
And I know many pleasant things it will do to you.

Wherefore Wildlife Ecology," in *The River of the Mother of God
and Other Essays*, quoted in Marybeth Lorbiecki, p. 181

Fritjof Schuon (1907 - 1998)

Wild Nature as an Open Book

Wild nature is at one with holy poverty and also with spiritual childlikeness;
she is an open book containing an inexhaustible teaching of truth and beauty.
It is in the midst of his own artifices that man most easily becomes corrupted,
it is they who make him covetous and impious.
Close to virgin Nature, who knows neither agitation nor falsehood,
he has the hope of remaining contemplative like Nature herself.

Light on Ancient Worlds (London, 1965), p. 84

Pope John Paul II (1922 - 2004)

The visible world is like a map pointing to heaven...
We learn to see the Creator
by contemplating the beauty of his creatures.
In this world the goodness, wisdom and almighty power
of God shine forth.
And the human intellect... can discover the Artist's hand
in the wonderful works which he has made.
Reason can know God through the Book of Nature...

Denver, 1993

Basil Pennington (contemporary)

Creation Bespeaks Its Maker

The whole of creation bespeaks its Maker.
As the Greeks would say,
the whole of creation is full of *logoi*, little words,
that give expression to the Logos, the Word.
I can stand on my bluff overlooking the Pearl River Delta
and wonder at it all: the creation of God and humans,
the beauty of the sky, the sea, the islands,
the exuberant energy of metropolitan Hong Kong –
it all speaks of God, gives expression to the Word.

Lectio Divina

St. Anthony the Great (251 - 356)

Once when a visiting philosopher asked how such a learned man as he got along in the desert without books, Anthony replied, "My book is the nature of created things, and as often as I have a mind to read the words of God, it is at my hand." St. Anthony is known for his affection for the animals which surrounded his desert abode.

St. Athanasius (297 - 373)

About the "Book of Creation," he says, "the creatures are like letters proclaiming in loud voices to their Divine Master and Creator the harmony and order of things."

Creation declares its Creator

For creation, as if written in characters and by means of its order and harmony, declares in a loud voice its own Master and Creator.... For this reason, God, by his own Word, gave creation such order as is found therein, so that while He is by nature invisible, men might yet be able to know Him through His works.

John Calvin (1509 - 1564)

Every Part of Creation Reflects the Creator

In every part of the world, he has written and as it were engraven the glory of his power, goodness and eternity....

The world as a theater upon which to behold God's goodness

It is the wisdom of men to search out God's works, and to set their minds wholly upon them. And God has also ordained the world to be like a theater upon which to behold his goodness.

St. Theophan the Recluse (1815 - 1894)

A Ukrainian Orthodox priest, Theophan's ecological importance lies in his insistence that awareness of the lessons in nature is tied to spiritual awakening.

All of creation witnesses to God

Everything is a source from which you can distill a higher and more celestial knowledge that is both valid and useful. Yet this understanding will alter from one person to another, depending upon their power of penetration, their attention, and their faith and devotion. Those who relentlessly and enthusiastically pursue these exercises will in time feel enriched by the wealth of knowledge that is yielded. ...

When we can do so successfully, the world will be like a holy book filled with uncountable and wonderfully different paragraphs; then any object, any event, will refer us to God, so that our thoughts will be directed toward Him. Every activity and movement will be made in His presence. We will walk and act inside the field of the senses and materiality, yet in reality, we move in the realm of the Spirit. Everything will unveil its divine dimension for us, and this will reinforce the power with which our attention turns towards Him.

This text is fertile beyond anything we can conceive. If everything in daily life can be spiritually reinterpreted, it is because everything is a symbol of the invisible realm, but reflected within time and space. This is why it has been said that whatever exists on earth is modelled on an archetypal essence that is actually present on another plane of God's creation.

Philip Sherrard

it is crucial that we learn to read the book of nature, the *Liber Mundi*, in a way totally different from that in which we have been taught to read it.

It demands that we read it in a way similar to that in which the great spiritual expositors tell that we should read the Bible -- we have to learn to look on the world of natural forms as the apparent, exterior expression of a hidden, interior world, a spiritual world: all the phenomena of the world of nature represent or symbolize with things celestial and divine.

Philip Sherrard, *For Everything That Lives Is Holy*, Golgonooza Press, 1995.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr
Egypt

By refusing to separate man and nature completely, Islam has preserved an integral view of the Universe and sees in the arteries of the cosmic and natural world order the flow of divine grace, or *barakah*. . . . Man can learn to contemplate it, not as an independent domain of reality but as a mirror reflecting a higher reality.

Man in Nature, p. 95

St Paul of the Cross (1694 - 1775)

Listen to the sermon preached to you by the flowers,
the trees, the shrubs, the sky, and the whole world.

Notice how they preach to you a sermon full of love, of praise of God, and how they invite you to glorify the sublimity of that sovereign that Artist who has given them being.

Pope John Paul II

Learn to discern the lessons of creation

We learn to see the Creator by contemplating the beauty of his creatures. In this world the goodness, wisdom and almighty power of God shine forth. And the human intellect... can discover the Artist's hand in the wonderful works which he has made. Reason can know God through the book of nature: a personal God who is infinitely good, wise, powerful and eternal, who transcends the world and, at the same time, is present in the depths of his creatures.... Jesus teaches us to see the Father's hand in the beauty of the lilies of the field, the birds of the air, the starry night, fields ripe for the harvest.... If you look at the world with a pure heart, you too will see the face of God (cf. Matthew 5:8), because it reveals the mystery of the Father's provident love.

Denver, 1993

Section Three

For Further Information

Please see the University of the South's new Center for Religion and the Environment as they are now providing an academic perspective on this historic potential to learn from nature. See them at <http://www.sewanee.edu/cre/obn>, or, for an older but larger site, not recently updated, see: <http://www.bookofnature.org/>

The University of South's Center for Religion and the Environment will host a training in July. Please inquire for dates and places.