



Sacred Nature

How we can recover our bond
with the natural world

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In Memoriam

Felicity Bryan
(16 October 1945–21 June 2020)

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother
and even such a small creature as I finds
an intimate place in their midst.

Therefore that which fills the universe
I regard as my body
and that which directs the universe
I consider as my nature.

All people are my brothers and sisters, and
all the things [in nature] are my companions.

From the 'Western Inscription'
(*Ximing*) by Zhang Zai

Introduction

I vividly remember my first visit to the British Museum, a place that has since become so familiar and important to me. I was a young nun, studying for university entrance, and my tutor had told me to go and look at the manuscripts on display. In those days, the British Library was housed in the museum, and I found myself gazing in wonder at the handwriting of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats. The immediacy of their presence was almost shocking; time seemed to have collapsed. I was looking at the moment that these poems, which were now a part of myself, had come into being. I did not want to analyse the manuscripts. I simply wanted to be in their presence. It was a kind of communion.

My reaction may sound extreme, but I was not a typical museum visitor. For over four years I had lived in a convent entirely cut off from the outside world. We heard no news. As an exception, we

were informed about the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, but our superiors forgot to tell us when it was over, so we spent three weeks waiting anxiously for Armageddon. For four years, I had seen no television, no films, no newspapers. I had no idea about the social revolution of the sixties. As I contemplated the manuscripts, shrouded in my all-enveloping religious habit, I was more like a closeted Victorian girl than a young woman of the mid twentieth century.

Today, when I watch visitors to the museum encountering the great relics of the past, I notice that they seem impelled not just to look but to take photographs. Unlike my younger self, they do not seem to want simply to commune with the Rosetta Stone, for example, but to seek to own it in some way, as though it does not become real to them until they have a virtual copy. Do the changes I have seen over sixty years in even such a small act of witnessing not reflect our changed relationship with nature? We walk in a place of extreme beauty while talking on our mobiles or scrolling through social media: we are present, yet fundamentally absent. Instead of sitting contemplatively beside a river or gazing in awe at a mountain range, we obsessively take one photograph of the view after another. Rather than let the

landscape find an intimate place in our minds and hearts, we are distancing ourselves from nature, which is becoming a simulated reality. Our urban living and all-absorbing technology have alienated us from nature, so that even the magnificent films of David Attenborough may fail to reach our innermost core.

Some of us strongly feel that sense of alienation and loss. But it is not a recent phenomenon. The Romantic poets whose manuscripts in the British Library filled me with such wonder had already mourned our broken relationship with nature. William Wordsworth (1770–1850) recalled the luminous vision of the world that he had enjoyed as a boy but lost as a grown-up:

There was a time when meadow, grove
and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore.
Turn wheresoe'er I may.
By night or day
The things that I have seen I now can see no more.

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He is still aware of the beauty of nature but knows
'there hath passed away a glory from the earth'.
He sees a tree and a field that both 'speak of some-
thing that hath gone'.

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now the glory and the dream?

In my own humble way, I recall something similar. I grew up in the unspoilt Worcestershire countryside in the late 1940s and distinctly remember trying to tell my puzzled parents about something I called 'putsch'. There was no word I knew of for what I recall as a strange but compelling luminosity in the woods and lanes near our home that I could not make my adult companions see. They assumed I was thinking of the fairies pictured in my story books, but it was more of an impersonal, all-encompassing radiance. Once I went to school to be inducted into the rational worldview that governs modern life, I, like Wordsworth, experienced the 'light and glory die away, / And fade into the light of common day'.

But our changed relationship with nature is not just an aesthetic loss. Over many years now, we have become increasingly aware of the damage we are inflicting on the natural environment and its

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potentially drastic impact on human life. It is true that the earth's climate has continually altered over the millennia, but hitherto this has always been a slow process, and we are now seeing rapid changes. Global temperatures and sea levels are rising at an alarming rate and this is entirely due to human activity. We know that burning fossil fuels releases carbon dioxide into the earth's atmosphere, where it is trapped and causes the earth's temperature to rise. Unless this is checked, human life will be imperilled. Water shortages will make it increasingly hard to produce food. Some regions will become dangerously hot, while rising sea levels will make others uninhabitable. Already, polar ice and glaciers are melting fast. Scientists have set a temperature increase of 1.5 degrees centigrade as the 'safe' limit for global warming. If the temperature goes any higher, human life as we know it will be impossible.

As I write this introduction in the summer of 2021, the environmental crisis has assumed new urgency. Temperatures in the United States and southern Europe have reached their highest ever levels, leading to devastating forest fires that have destroyed entire communities. At the same time, Germany and the Netherlands have suffered unprecedented flooding, which has taken lives and

wreaked appalling damage. Climate change is no longer an alarming possibility; it has become a fearful reality. Disaster can be averted only if we change the way we live. This crisis has been caused by our modern way of life, which, despite its considerable achievements, is fatally flawed. We are beginning to realise that the way we live now, for all its manifold benefits, not only inhibits human flourishing but threatens the very survival of our species. We have to change not only our lifestyle but our whole belief system. We have ransacked nature, treating it as a mere resource, because over the last 500 years we have cultivated a worldview that is very different from that of our forebears.

* * *

Wordsworth's perception of the sacrality of nature – its 'light and glory' – may resemble the way we perceived the world when humanity was in its infancy. Today this primal way of life has survived only in a few remaining communities of indigenous tribal peoples. When, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the first Western explorers in Australia, Africa and the Americas watched a shaman entering a trance state, they assumed he was experiencing the 'supernatural' or exploring his 'inner

world'. But the shaman did not encounter gods, nor was he making an interior spiritual journey. Rather, he was acting as an intermediary between his community and its natural environment, ensuring that there was a fruitful interchange between the two. He had no conception of what we call the supernatural. He was not looking beyond or above nature, nor was he seeking the divine within himself, like a modern contemplative. Instead, the shaman projects his awareness outwards into the depths of the landscape, which for him is alive, spiritually, psychologically and sensuously. He experiences an awareness which he and his community have in common with the animals, insects and plants around them – even with the lichen growing on a stone. Where tribal people sense reciprocity between themselves and the natural environment, we moderns see it as a mere backdrop to human affairs. But before the development of modern Western civilisation, our own ancestors would have shared this primordial understanding.

The American anthropologist David Abram believes that our modern Western focus on the 'inner world' and the Christian idea of a supernatural heaven are both results of a profound psychic change. At an earlier stage of our history, we would have experienced nature as animate too, but over

time we have come to regard it as mechanical, prosaic and predictable.¹ After spending many years living intimately with indigenous people of Indonesia and Nepal and studying their cultures, Abram began to understand that they had a far more developed perception of nature than we have in the modern West. What is more, by immersing himself wholly in these tribal cultures, he found that he was starting to develop such insight himself. One night, when sheltering in a cave during a violent rainstorm, he became fascinated watching two spiders weaving an intricate web, creating one elaborate and beautiful pattern after another:

It was from them that I learned of the intelligence that lurks in nonhuman nature . . . leaving one open to a world all alive, awake and aware. It was from such small beings that my senses first learned of the countless worlds within worlds that spin in the depths of this world that we commonly inhabit, and from them that I learned that my body could, with practice, enter sensorially into these dimensions.²

Over the years, he found that he was experiencing hitherto-unexplored levels of consciousness.

When a shaman spoke of a 'power' or 'presence' in the corner of his house, Abram realised that a sunbeam illuminating a column of dust was indeed a power, an active force that not only imbued the air currents with warmth but altered the mood of the room. When walking on dirt paths through the landscape, he learned to slow his pace and become conscious of the spiritual and physical difference between one hill and another.

For most of us, immersed as we are in urban life and increasingly retreating from the world of nature into technology, such an experience is alien. Where we see a range of separate beings and phenomena, tribal people see a continuum of time and space, where animals, plants and humans are all permeated by an immanent sacred force that draws them into a synthesised whole. For millennia, long before the development of urban civilisation, this was probably how most humans experienced the natural world.

The first Western explorers assumed that the 'uncivilised natives' they encountered held these strange beliefs because their brains were insufficiently developed. But the French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939) was convinced that they were neurologically identical with our own.³ When faced with a practical problem, they were able

to respond quickly and efficiently, solving it with skill and insight. Their minds were not different from ours, he concluded; they simply relied on different regions of the brain. Modern neurologists would probably agree. They have pointed out that while we in the modern West tend to rely more on the left hemisphere of the brain, the home of rational and pragmatic thought, tribal people have a right-hemispheric worldview, which identifies connection between things; indeed, the right hemisphere is the source of poetry, music, art and religion. Lévy-Bruhl used the term 'participation' to describe the logic of indigenous people, who experience not just humans and animals but apparently 'inanimate' objects, such as stones and plants, as having a life of their own, each participating in the same mode of existence and influencing each other.

The essence of this 'participatory' understanding of the natural world did not die with the arrival of civilisation. It would be expressed differently in each culture but, until the advent of Western modernity, it remained substantially similar across the world. We will see that people in early civilisations did not experience the power that governed the cosmos as a supernatural, distant and distinct 'God'. It was rather an intrinsic presence that they, like the

nineteenth-century shaman, experienced in ritual and contemplation – a force imbuing all things, a transcendent mystery that could never be defined. In the ancient Middle East, *ilam*, meaning 'divinity' in Akkadian, was a radiant power that transcended any singular deity. In India, the Brahman, the ultimate reality, was indefinable; it was a sacred energy that was deeper, higher and more fundamental than the *devas*, the gods who were present in nature but had no control over the natural order. In China, the ultimate reality was the *Dao*, the fundamental 'Way' of the cosmos; nothing could be said about it, because it transcended all normal categories.

Monotheism, the belief in a single God that is central to the faith of Jews, Christians and Muslims, was the great exception. At the very beginning of the Hebrew Bible, in the first chapter of Genesis, God issues a command to the first human beings, giving them total dominion over the natural world: 'Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all living animals on earth.'⁴ Unlike the other scriptures we shall consider, the Hebrew Bible does not focus on the sanctity of nature, because the people of Israel experienced the divine in human events rather than in the natural world. The historian of

religion Mircea Eliade (1907–86) argued that they were the first people to perceive history as a succession of unique and unrepeatable occurrences.⁵ So while the ancient Egyptians regarded the annual flooding of the Nile and the rising and setting of the sun as divine events, the Israelites saw the hand of their god Yahweh in the incidents of their past and the political challenges of the present. However, so deeply embedded was nature's sacrality in the human psyche that some Jews and Christians, in their distinctive ways, would also affirm it. And as we will see, Muslims made it central to their faith.

But in early modern Europe, the link between nature and the divine was severed, and Christians began to see 'God' as separate from the world. Originally, European Christians, like the peoples of the Middle East, India and China, had seen the sacred as a ubiquitous force that pervaded the natural world and pulled the disparate elements of the universe together. As the Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) had explained in his definitive *Summa Theologiae*, God was not confined to a supernatural heaven but was 'present everywhere in everything'. God was not *a* being but rather 'Being Itself' (*esse seipsum*), the divine essence at the heart of all things. God was all that is, Thomas taught, so

'wherever God exists he exists wholly'.⁶ But Thomas's theology was to be superseded with a radical shift in the Western conception of the divine. By the fourteenth century, students at the universities of Paris, Oxford and Bologna were studying logic, mathematics and Aristotelian science before they began their theological studies, and when they arrived in divinity school, they were so well versed in logical thought that they instinctively tried to describe theological issues in rational terms. The Franciscan philosopher John Duns Scotus (1265–1308) was one of the first to develop a rational, almost scientific theology. As a result, in Western Christendom, people were beginning to regard God as just another being – albeit of a superior kind – rather than 'Being Itself', and it was not long before they would break with the more traditional understanding of the sacred.

The English philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1626) went a step further than the medieval rationalists, pioneering an essentially empirical philosophy. By investigating the phenomena of nature carefully and experimentally, he argued, human beings could discover the laws that governed these forces and would then be able to exploit nature for their own benefit. For Bacon, knowledge was power.

God had given Adam clear instructions to 'fill the earth and conquer it', but God's original plan had been foiled by Adam's disobedience. It was now time for philosophers to repair the damage wrought by the Fall and for humans to break with the ingrained – the pagan – habit of revering nature. They must control and subdue the earth as God had commanded. Nature was no longer a theophany, a revelation of the divine; it was a commodity that must be exploited.

Eventually theology and science came to be regarded as different disciplines in Christian Europe: while theology promoted the study of God, science would explore the natural laws that ruled the earth and thus initiate a new era of human power and progress. While Bacon had inspired the energy and direction of the new science, it was the French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) who established its theoretical foundation by applying the discipline of mathematics to modern thought. Only through mathematics, he believed, could humans acquire accurate and trustworthy information about the world. A scientist must empty his mind of both divine revelation and human tradition. He must not even trust the evidence derived from his senses, since these too could be deceptive; he might be

dreaming when he thought he saw or touched different objects. By laying aside everything he thought he knew the philosopher could achieve a certitude based solely on ideas that were self-evident.

Descartes' famous maxim '*Cogito ergo sum*' ('I think, therefore I am') was, he argued, the only point of certainty, which nothing in the external world could provide. For Descartes, the modern mind had deliberately retreated from nature; it should be solitary, autonomous and a world unto itself, unaffected by and separate from all other beings. And because the material universe was lifeless, godless and inert, nature could tell us nothing about God, the ultimate reality. In Descartes' writings, there is none of the awe that had informed traditional views of the sacred. Indeed, it was the task of science to dispel such reverence. In the future, he believed, people would look at the clouds 'in such a way that we will no longer have occasion to wonder at anything that can be seen of them, or anything that descends from them'.⁷ Indeed, the phenomena of nature resembled the new machines that were now appearing in seventeenth-century Europe – clocks, mills and fountains. They had no inner life, and their value was purely utilitarian. The stage was set for nature's exploitation.

Descartes' rational ethos was endorsed by the British physicist and philosopher Isaac Newton (1642–1727). For Newton too, nature no longer had a sacred core; matter, he argued, was lifeless and inert, unable to move or develop unless acted upon by an outside force. In Newton's theology, God was reduced to a physical phenomenon. Picking up on the note of mastery in the Genesis creation story, Newton defined God's essence as *dominatio* ('dominion'), which he identified with the force of gravity that controls the cosmos. The concept of dominion, which would acquire a political edge when Europeans established their empires, would reduce nature to a resource to be exploited. There was no transcendence because this God was simply a larger and more powerful version of the human scientist, 'a voluntary Agent' who was 'very well skilled in Mechanicks and Geometry'.⁸ What we call God had been given a clearly defined function in the universe and deemed a rational inference from its intricate design. Newton had no time for awe or mystery. 'Tis the temper of the hot and superstitious part of mankind in matters of religion,' he wrote irritably, 'ever to be fond of mysteries & for that reason to like best what they understand least.'⁹ His disciple Samuel Clarke (1675–1729), hailed in his lifetime as the

most important theologian in Britain, had a drastically reductive view of both God and nature: 'There is no such thing as what men call the course of nature or the power of nature. [It] is nothing else but the will of God producing certain effects in a continued regular, constant and uniform manner.'¹⁰ It was only a matter of time before scientists would focus on these effects and find the God element unnecessary.

Some of Newton's physics soon became outdated, but his theology has remained influential in Western thought. When people claim today that they do not 'believe' in God, they are usually rejecting Newton's God, the 'Mechanickal' Creator who designed and dominated the universe. But this view of the divine is unique to the modern West. So deeply ingrained is the idea of the sacrality of nature, that even though people throughout the world have embraced Western science and technology, adopted Western forms of government and followed the West by exploiting the natural world, this narrow perception of the divine has never been wholly accepted in other religions. Many non-Western people still do not comprehend the full implications of our secular concept of nature. They believe that Western science may help them to control their affairs more effectively, but they have not always realised what this

means for their form of the sacred – or indeed for the future of Planet Earth.¹¹

* * *

While it is essential to cut carbon emissions and heed the warnings of scientists, we need to learn not only how to act differently but also how to think differently about the natural world. We need to recover the veneration of nature that human beings carefully cultivated for millennia; if we fail to do this, our concern for the natural environment will remain superficial. But this doesn't have to be an insuperable task, because despite our careless and destructive behaviour, we have not entirely lost our love of nature. Our poets still extol the beauty and mystery of the natural world and David Attenborough's wildlife documentaries continue to attract huge audiences. People flock to the sea for holidays and walk in the woods or in parks at weekends – a return to nature which is both pleasurable and restorative. Even in our large, polluted cities, people cherish their garden, a little oasis of nature in the urban desert. We should consciously develop this remnant of our primordial link to nature in our struggle to save the planet. It is essential not only to our well-being but to our humanity.

This will require imagination and effort. It is crucial that we behave differently not just when we feel like it but all the time. Here the religious practices and disciplines of the past have much to offer. They can help us to develop an aesthetic appreciation of nature and to devise an ethical programme that will guide our behaviour and our thoughts. We must revive the reverence for the natural world that has always been essential to human nature but has become peripheral. Some environmentalists, inspired by tribal peoples' profound relationship with nature, believe that they should be our role models. But this may be too ambitious. Unlike David Abrams, most of us simply cannot live for long years in the wild to imbibe the wisdom and vision of indigenous people. Nor can many of us spend hours every day communing with nature and meditating in the outdoors, as some committed environmentalists do.

But I believe that we can learn a great deal from the insights and practices that developed during the Axial Age (c. 900 to 200 BCE), so called because it was pivotal to the spiritual and intellectual development of our species. At that time, in four distinct regions of the world, the great religious and philosophical traditions arose that have nourished humanity ever since: Confucianism and Daoism in

China; Hinduism and Buddhism in India; monotheism in Israel; and rationalism in Greece. Each of these traditions pioneered a new kind of spirituality. Tribal religion, profound though it was, was felt to be no longer relevant in the new and complex civilisations in which many people now lived. These new spiritualities, despite their differences, all shared a common ethos and, crucially, a similar understanding of humanity's relationship with the natural world. We have never wholly surpassed the profound insights of this time. It is not a question of believing religious doctrines; it is about incorporating into our lives insights and practices that will not only help us to meet today's serious challenges but change our hearts and minds.

1

Mythos and Logos

A great deal of environmental discussion is scientific: we constantly hear about emissions, particles, pollution levels and the ozone layer. This provides us with essential information and we have become familiar with the terminology. But it does not move us emotionally. Today we tend to use the term 'myth' rather vaguely to mean something that is not true. When we hear of gods walking on the earth, a dead man striding out of his tomb or a sea parting to release an enslaved people, we dismiss these tales as 'only myths'. But in the past, 'myth' meant something entirely different.

For most of human history, there were two ways of thinking, speaking and acquiring knowledge about