

Is Nature Really on Our Side?

It has been a hallmark of Unitarianism to respect and co-inhabit with nature. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a famous essay “On Nature” in which he espoused the belief that nature is mankind’s natural milieu and man must do everything in his power to preserve and protect the natural world. Henry David Thoreau took the drastic step of isolating himself, deliberately building a cabin on the edge of Walden Pond where he could experience nature first hand during every season. He wrote “Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself.”

There is something elemental about communing with nature, something very Buddhist-like. Again, Thoreau said of his sojourn at Walden, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” And indeed if anyone has read Thoreau’s account of living at Walden Pond, the reader knows that Thoreau achieved his objective.

But one can appreciate Nature in many ways. It takes a true philosopher and thinker to respond to Nature not as an environment to inhabit as a house, a building or a locale, but as a co-traveler through life. Are not the birds, the insects, the fields and woods, and the very hills and valleys a part of our co-mingled existence? If we lived separately from them, it would be a drab existence indeed.

Again, in Thoreau's words, "The Harivamsa says, 'An abode without birds is like a meat without seasoning.' Such was not my abode, for I found myself suddenly neighbor to the birds; not by having imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them."

But having said all this esoteric and elevated mouthful, the question arises "How does Nature see us, mankind, in evaluating the role of co-respondent in this *affaire de coeur*. It must be said that although man appears to hold all the cards in its relationship with nature - Hydrogen bombs, hydroelectric dams, genetic manipulation, Doppler weather stations, and so forth - Nature has a few potent tricks up its sleeve - floods, hurricanes, droughts, wildfires, lightning, earthquakes, and a whole lot of ways to make use of them to cause mankind to sit-up and take notice. Is Nature just toying with us. waiting for us finally to go too far before it lowers the boom?

Robert Frost - aha, you just knew we'd get around to him, didn't you? - Robert Frost wrote a poem in which he put just such a question, and a sort of answer, into eighteen lines of iambic pentameter. It's called "Our Hold on the Planet" and it's reproduced for you in your order of service. Follow along as I read.

Our Hold on the Planet
by Robert Frost

We asked for rain. It didn't flash and roar.

It didn't lose its temper at our demand
And blow a gale. It didn't misunderstand
And give us more than our spokesman had bargained
for;
And just because we owned for a wish for rain,
Send us a flood and wish we'd be damned and drown.
It gently threw us a glittering shower down.
And when we had taken that into the roots of grain,
It threw us another and another still
Till the spongy soil again was natal wet.
We may doubt the just proportion of good to ill.
There is much in nature against us. But we forget:
Take nature altogether since time began.
Including human nature, in peace and war,
And it must be a little more in favor of man,
Say a fraction of one percent at the very least,
Or our number living on the planet wouldn't be steadily
more,
Our hold on the planet wouldn't have so increased.

You may have noticed that with any Frost poem, the poem is playful and yet serious, mirroring his formula that a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The delight is in the first ten lines, but the poem switches tone at line 11, suggesting a potential for disaster if man misbehaves out of his own petty human nature. But taken as a wider perspective, Nature must be forgiving enough to allow us to survive, taking a slight edge from the oddsmakers who foretell doom. It's a reassuring thought, as far as it goes.

But you really must notice that it is Nature who is in control. Frost implies that Nature likes us; so, like a cat playing with a mouse, it deigns to let us maintain a “hold on the planet.” What would Thoreau make of this point of view, I wonder? Before I attempt to answer that, I want to travel to another literary source - forgive me, once an English teacher, always an English teacher.

This one is maybe a little more familiar to Floridians or transplanted Floridians. My source this time is the Florida author and folklorist, Zora Neale Hurston, an author I unfortunately did not discover until I was in my last years of teaching. I say “unfortunately” because such a discovery should come early in a career. Hurston is such a rare and talented writer that no serious student of literature should be denied exposure to her glorious prose. Ms. Hurston lived in Eatonville, just outside Orlando, for much of her life, spent a lot of time in the company of the Harlem Renaissance poets, including Lawrence Dunbar and Langston Hughes, and wrote achingly beautiful prose. Her masterpiece novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God, is set in 1920’s Florida and deals much with the African American, Caribbean, and native Indian settlements which dotted the Everglades and whose inhabitants worked as transient crop pickers, but whose lives had a vibrancy and a *joie de vivre* living and working in Nature that Thoreau would have understood and relished.

The community was caught in the great hurricane of 1926 that destroyed the levees of Lake Okeechobee and wrought havoc, death, and destruction for many South

East and Central Floridians. The unsuspecting crop pickers first became aware of a change in atmosphere and a general discomfort in the inhabitants of the "Glades." Hurston wrote, "Morning came without motion. The winds, to the tiniest, lispings baby breath had left the earth. Even before the sun gave light, dead day was creeping from bush to bush watching man." Like Thoreau, Hurston personifies nature as "watching man," but man is also watching and waiting. Again, Hurston's words: "They huddled closer and stared at the door. They just didn't use another part of their bodies, and they didn't look at anything but the door. The time was past for asking the white folks what to look for through that door. Six eyes were questioning God.

"Through the screaming wind they heard things crashing and things hurtling and dashing with unbelievable velocity....And the lake got madder and madder with only its dikes between them and him.

"The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God."

Hurston seems to sense what Thoreau had pointed out in Walden. Nature was a character in the dance of life. Whether it was called God, or the Lake, or the Wind, Nature was reminding that man serves at Her pleasure.

“The monstropolous beast had left his bed. The two hundred miles an hour wind had loosed his chains. He seized hold of his dikes and ran forward until he met the quarters; uprooted them like grass and rushed on after his supposed-to-be conquerors, rolling the dikes, rolling the houses, rolling the people in the houses along with other timbers. The sea was walking the earth with a heavy heel.” *

Not since I read the beginning chapters of The Grapes of Wrath have I read such powerful prose describing the strength of Nature. As Steinbeck had done in his masterwork of the Dust Bowl years, Hurston succeeded in making a character out of the weather; and the character had turned malevolent. You might well ask, “Where is Robert Frost’s assessment of a gentle Nature who allows our hold on the planet to continue?”

Well, that’s just the point, isn’t it? Is Nature really on our side? We are the supplicants before Nature, and Nature is ultimately in control. As Frost points out, Nature allows us to maintain the ruse of control, with occasional diversions called hurricanes, droughts, floods, and such. But we all know deep in our hearts that Nature is the stronger of us, and we all know deep in our hearts what we have to do. We must, like Thoreau and Hurston, recognize that Nature is at the very least a co-equal, worthy of our respect and fealty. And so, that brings us to a decision - what to do about the conflict between man and Nature. (Pause)

I propose that we stop trying to control Nature and instead treat her as a potential ally - a benevolent force who wishes man to succeed and maintain a hold on our planet.

To that end, we at All Faiths are embarking on a discussion this month in our adult RE classes of the question of climate change and our individual and collective role in it. I encourage any of you who hold an interest in climate change to attend the sessions and share your opinions. Joan Marshall is leading the discussions all this month.

I want to close with a few items gleaned from recent world events. I think they exemplify the power of Nature and what can result if we ignore Nature as a potential ally and instead provoke a dangerous foe.

Item One: In a TV interview with Secretary of State John Kerry, the Secretary points out that the last decade has been the hottest on record since records have been kept.

Item Two: Not to be upstaged by the previous year, **2015** was globally the warmest year since records began in **1880**, according to NASA and NOAA. The average temperature across global land and ocean surfaces was 1.62 F (0.90 C) above the 20th century average, NOAA said.

Item Three: In a recent article in USA Today which appeared June 28, 2016, Doyle Rice reported: "The floods that killed 26 people in West Virginia last week resulted from a vicious line of storms that came in one after another."

er like a line of freight trains, dumping “one-in-a-1,000 - year” amounts of rain on the vulnerable, mountainous state.” Most of the people who lost their homes didn’t have flood insurance because of the unlikelihood of flooding in the area.

Item Four: A magnitude 7.8 earthquake struck Nepal on April 25, killing more than 8,800 people. It damaged or destroyed nearly 900,000 buildings, created avalanches in the Himalayas, and left almost 1 million children out of school. Major aftershocks, including a magnitude 7.3 tremor three weeks later, slowed recovery efforts and added to the devastation. This was the deadliest disaster on record for the nation of 26 million people.

Item Five: Floods followed by a severe heat wave hit southern India. The floods came on the heels of one of India’s longest heat waves in years, which claimed 2,000 lives in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states. In May, temperatures climbed to as high as 118 degrees Fahrenheit in the worst affected areas of Telangana, which includes the major city of Hyderabad.

Perhaps these random weather disasters - all occurring over the past year - put a new light on the question “Is Nature Really On Our Side?” Or just maybe they point out the important continued relationship between man and Nature, one of mutual respect between the two most important players on the planet. I’d like to think that the latter is true. I’d like to think we have enough intelligence to recognize a friend in Nature. I’d like to think that we will not

take that friendship for granted, thus ensuring that Nature really is on our side.