

Sacred and Profane: A War Without Winners

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Gleanings from the Liberal Religious Tradition

Victoria Safford, from "Subservice Suburban Soul"

My family's favorite place to view the sunset is a place where the westbound highway meets the main commercial artery of our suburban city. There is a vast expanse of parking lot between the mammoth supermarket and the monstrous home improvement store. It is one deeply, unholy place, with miles of sprawling strip malls as far as the eye can see and farther: a perfect paradise of asphalt, greed, and thoughtless multinational development.

Yet more than once, on leaving the store, I have all but fallen to my knees there because the sunsets are astonishing, and on evenings when the full moon rises, they are breathtaking. There's just enough elevation, and the buildings, awful as they are, are perfectly positioned, however accidentally.

This unlikely and unholy hill offers so startling and memorable a view that one time in summer, when my family was camping in a far-removed, wild wilderness, watching the sun melt into the sea, my daughter sighed blissfully, snuggled closer, and said, "Wow, this is so beautiful. This really reminds me of the shopping center on Highway 36."

It was then that I knew that we were living a little *too* close to so-called civilization.

What makes a place a holy place? How much is what is there, and how much is what we bring, or what we choose to see? Now, I've been told that this parking lot is set upon a hill that ... perhaps 150 years ago was in fact a sacred site for the native peoples living on this land, a stopping place between one great river and another. A few remember that there was an ancient stand of oaks up there. It is known that the sun went down, and heaven and the prairie were engulfed each evening in flames. It is known that the moon came up in splendor.

Beneath the pavement, earth remembers. Every thing ... is gathered in, for ... the holy holds all weeping as well as all celebration, all desecration as well as all tenderness. ... How could a place once sacred suddenly be rendered otherwise?

I know that if I leave an offering among the SUVs and shopping carts—a branch or a little stone ... to signal my reverence, sorrow, and confusion, I may be charged with littering. I know, and do it anyway.

Jeffrey Lockwood, from his book

Grasshopper Dreaming

My job as an entomologist is to kill. But I usually describe my profession euphemistically as "applied ecology" or "pest management." At Wyoming's College of Agriculture, I work to develop new and better means of managing grasshopper outbreaks that would otherwise devastate the Western rangelands that ranchers depend upon to feed their livestock. While agriculture brings forth life, entomology is largely premised on taking life. ... This year I will direct the killing of no fewer than 200 million grasshoppers and more than a billion other creatures, mostly insects. ... That's a lot of killing, and each year it gets harder.

Our empathy for animals that are not soft and warm grows slowly; years of familiarity breed compassion. It might seem difficult to connect intimately with grasshoppers, but they are rather endearing if you give them a chance. ... They are beautiful creatures. On an afternoon's walk, I can find twenty of more distinctive species ... and sometimes I can't help wonder if all this splendor is a necessary consequence of evolution or whether it is simply a miraculous expression of joy.

Taking life, like giving life, can be a sacred act, and so at the beginning and end of each summer, I sneak away from my field assistants and collaborators to be alone, to pray. This is a time when I experience the fullness of the prairie, when I seek what lies at the core of my intentions as a scientist, and when I release the guilt and shame. The thought-words are different each time, but the question I ask myself persists: Why do I continue to develop the means of killing these creatures?

I justify it because my intentions are purified by my love for the grasshopper. I am soothed by the notion that I mean well, that I foster a world in which there is less killing and fewer misunderstandings between species. ... Nevertheless, spraying thousands of acres with insecticides, regardless of intentions, is going to do a lot of harm. ... Inescapably, we live by death. I study how to kill better and less, but a little more of me dies with each field season.

Scientists often attack spirituality ... fearful perhaps that they would end up like me—attached to the creatures I kill, with all of the unrest that this

entails. ... They don't want the troubling touch of subjective feeling, and the unsettling whisper of spiritual insight to confuse the rational process of analysis.

So in the end, how do I live as a scientist *and* an assassin? I know that the grasshoppers suffering and my pain are real. I know that they die so I might live. Grasshoppers are my ecological communion: their bodies are my life. ... Perhaps it is my destiny to ensure that these creatures do not die unknown and unmourned by a dispassionate executioner.

And so I feel compelled tell their story and mine—and also to ask something of you. At your next meal, say grace, give thanks, remember them.

Reflections

My colleague Victoria Safford's experience of spectacular sunsets in an otherwise bleak suburban setting reminded me of a comparable experience Trina and I had in Tucson a couple of years ago. We had stopped at a mid-town supermarket for a few items late one afternoon, and when we emerged sometime later the atmosphere had undergone a radical transformation.

Buildings, cars, the dry desert air itself were bathed in beautiful crimson light. Above us, banks of cumulous clouds positively glowed with what seemed more like an inner fire than the mere reflection of light from the setting sun. Moreover, this sublime spectacle lingered for at least ten to fifteen minutes, during which the two of us stood enraptured by our car. I have never seen a sunset to match it, before or since.

Now, the desert Southwest is well known for its brilliant skies, but this event transcended anything we'd ever witnessed on our many previous visits. Nevertheless, the vast majority of those around us seemed unimpressed. They went about their shopping or continued with their conversations as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

My guess is that the sacredness of that moment wasn't apparent to most who were hurrying home to dinner that night. No sonorous voice boomed out from on high, no one was "raptured" into the heavens, and no paranormal phenomena accompanied the colorful show. In what possible sense, then, could this be characterized as a manifestation of the sacred or the holy? What, if any, were its spiritual implications?

For someone steeped in traditional Western religion, that sunset may have been aesthetically pleasing but not spiritually moving. Some might describe

it as God's handiwork, but then it is to Him and not the natural elements themselves that "alleluias" must be sung. Others believe that the material universe, though created originally by God, is tainted, "fallen," and de-spirited. Earth is but a temporal testing ground in which the drama of human salvation plays out. If one's primary concern is the fate of their everlasting soul, he or she won't get too excited about what happens in the natural environment.

The word "profane" has traditionally been used by the conventionally religious to describe the material world. It literally means "that which stands before, or outside, the temple." Being unsanctified, unconsecrated, and impure the "profane" is excluded from our considerations of the sacred.

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The great naturalist John Muir, who grew up on a farm near Portage, Wisconsin, rebelled against this notion. As a child on what was then the frontier, he developed an unusually deep empathy for the wild and domesticated creatures he encountered. "Of the many advantages of farm life," he wrote,

... one of the greatest is the gaining of real knowledge of animals as fellow-mortals, learning to respect them and love them, and even to win some of their love. Thus, Godlike sympathy grows and thrives and spreads far beyond the teachings of churches ... where too often the mean, blinding, loveless doctrine is taught that animals have neither mind nor soul, have no rights that we are bound to respect, and were made *only* for man, to be petted, spoiled, slaughtered, or enslaved.

As that passage indicates, John Muir rejected the prevailing religious dogma that animals possess *instrumental* value only; that they are here to be *used* but not to be cherished in and for themselves.

But, as Jeffrey Lockwood points out, many of his nonreligious scientific colleagues share this perspective. For instance, one of the world's foremost life scientists, Harvard's E.O. Wilson has also argued that other species warrant our attention because they possess "instrumental value." It is important, Wilson admits, to "befriend" our fellow sentient beings, but only because from an evolutionary standpoint, our own mental health depends upon it. If we separate and estrange ourselves from these creatures we will likely experience depression or some comparable psychological affliction.

The problem with such an outlook, Lockwood says, is that it doesn't generate any real feelings of kinship. One could logically conclude, he points out,

... that if we were able to shed this [evolutionary] baggage with the help of a bit of gene therapy, our obligations to other life forms would disappear.

In other words, for the strictly secular scientist the nonhuman universe is also "profane." Just like the true believing Christian fundamentalist, Wilson seems to believe that other life forms hardly matter *except* as they contribute to our own species' well-being.

The problem, as both Lockwood and I see it, is that neither the scientific materialist nor the religious traditionalist displays any real appreciation for the sacred. Whether the source of their insight is Biblical revelation or empirical research, both end up in pretty much the same place—with a self-aggrandizing and alienated human species whose interests are the only ones that ultimately matter.

What is called for is another means of apprehending and understanding the sacred—one, hopefully, that puts to rest those tiresome old arguments between the defenders of religion on the one hand and the proponents of secularism on the other.

But what are we really pointing to when we describe something as "sacred?" Not the supernatural for, as comparative religion scholar Karen Armstrong writes, "Religion is *not* about accepting twenty impossible propositions before breakfast."

Moreover, the sacred does not require us to make an intellectual commitment to certain articles of faith. There are plenty of devout believers in the world whose staunchly held convictions cause them to act so arrogantly and self-righteously that it offends the very notion of spirituality and the sacred.

On the other hand, a sense of the sacred is not an emotional affectation that mature and intelligent people can do without, as secularists like Richard Dawkins argue. It is not an adaptive mechanism that served humankind at an early stage of its evolutionary development but can be sloughed off like some atavistic appendage. Secularists who think the sacred is destined to disappear are deceiving themselves for, as the noted philosopher John Gray wrote recently:

Religion is not banished by being denied. ... It never goes away, but only changes its shape. The rupture that so many modern

thinkers expected has not occurred. Despite the advance of science, humankind has remained incurably religious and ... the belief that we are moving into a secular age looks ever more like an unwitting tribute to the perennial power of faith.

It would appear, then, that the religious impulse, religious longing, and religious aspiration not only belong to our human heritage, but are likely to play an important role in our human destiny.

But if spirituality and the sacred do have a future, what might those who are neither conventionally religious nor militantly secular have to look forward to? What would a more mature and universal expression of the spiritual impulse look like? A good place to start is with a sermon delivered in 2000 by Peter Morales, the newly elected president of our Unitarian Universalist Association.

First, he said, our spirituality ought to be a wholly natural affair. By creating a false dichotomy, supernaturalism diminishes our appreciation for that which can be a reliable, ongoing source of clarity, joy, peace, and aliveness. The supernatural

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cheapens and encourages us to discount the natural, Morales warns. Please note: he is not repudiating the *miraculous* because it is indeed a miracle that anything exists at all. What Morales rejects is the *magical*, whose realm begins where well-established natural laws end.

Walt Whitman an early and passionate proponent of an earth-centered and earth-friendly spirituality wrote:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the
journeywork of the stars ...
And the running blackberry would adorn the
parlors of heaven ...
And the mouse is a miracle enough to stagger
sextillions of infidels.

Morales also dismisses the idea of a "spiritual reality" that exists apart from the physical. We are *most* spiritual when head, heart, body awareness are working together, and we experience ourselves as a harmonious whole. "Spiritual growth," he says, "comes from deep, honest encounter with reality and that which really matters."

Morales ends with the observation that, for him, spirituality has more to do with “how” than with “what.” The question for us shouldn’t be “*what* does spirituality consist of,” but rather “*how* does it manifest itself?” How does it affect the way we perceive, think, feel, and act? Similarly, Jesus once observed that religion should be judged *not* so much by its propositions but by its fruits, its power to lift us to a new level of love and awareness.

We need to enlist religion and spirituality to accomplish two tasks: to deepen our perception and strengthen our connections. The second task is a function of the first.

Consider this ancient Chinese legend. During a stroll over a bridge on the Hao River, the philosopher Chuang Tzu looked down into the water and said to his companion Hui Tzu, “Look how the minnows dart hither and thither at will. Such is the pleasure fish enjoy.”

The skeptical Hui Tzu replied, “You are not a fish. How do you know what gives them pleasure?” To which Chuang Tzu answered, “You are not I. How do *you* know I don’t know what gives pleasure to fish?”

This little story cautions us about becoming too confident about our own sources of knowledge and insight. Although common sense tells us that a human being standing on a bridge has no ability to commune with a fish, we really can’t know that for sure. Shamans in many parts of the world claim to do as much, and Cesar Milan—the famous “Dog Whisperer”—seems able to develop an almost mystical rapport with members of the canine species. Similarly, Jeffrey Lockwood insists that while science gave him the ability to *see* the grasshoppers, religion gave him the ability reverently to *listen* to them and thereby recognize them as beings with intrinsic value.

The operative word here is “reverence”—an attitude or disposition without which spirituality is meaningless, and the sacred escapes our awareness. “Reverence,” Paul Woodruff writes, “is the well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have.” Reverence, he says, “is most obvious when it is missing,” and it is often absent in people who deem themselves exceptionally bright and well-informed. Intellectual arrogance is a poison pill for the sacred.

Many religious fundamentalists fall into this category and so do some self-described humanists. Take Susan Blackmore, a British psychologist who,

with complete confidence and without the slightest qualification declares that, “We live in a pointless universe. We’re here for no reason at all. There isn’t a soul. There isn’t a spirit.”

Blackmore is one of those no-nonsense intellectuals who subscribes to what Duane Elgin calls the theory of a “dead universe.” For secularists such as her, “All that exists are various combinations of inert matter.”

More “basic” forms of matter (atoms and molecules) are thought to have no vitality or consciousness of any kind . . . and all existence can be explained solely in material terms. . . . Love and happiness are no more than chemical reactions in the body and have no other meaning or significance. . . .

According to Duane Elgin, this is an extraordinary assertion for anyone to make, especially since some 96% of the universe consists of so-called “dark energy” and “dark matter” about whose nature we have hardly a clue. “Vastly larger ecologies of life and learning are likely exist in the spaciousness beyond our contracted vision,” he writes.

Indeed, evidence is mounting that the universe is not as depressingly “dead” as some over-zealous scientists have declared it to be. Jeffrey Lockwood has observed that grasshoppers are social beings who form communities of functional cooperation. Botanists know that plants use subtle odor molecules to communicate. Single-cell organisms use chemicals for the same purpose, and even simple proteins can act as if they had a mind of their own, as one astonished researcher has noted.

Sentience or perceptual ability may be present at the very foundations of our universe, which means that human beings merely stand at the end of a long continuum. “Consciousness is fundamental, the theoretical physicist Max Planck declared. “Matter is derivative from consciousness, and we cannot get behind consciousness.”

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Reverence gives us the ability to entertain and ultimately to embrace the idea of a “living universe,” and once we have done that, our feelings about it begin to shift and to resemble more closely those of Walt Whitman, Jeffrey Lockwood, Chief

Seattle, or Hildegard of Bingen. We begin to recognize that the natural is imbued with the sacred and that even seemingly inanimate objects possess more than instrumental value.

The implications for our relationship to the natural world are profound. If one imagines the universe to be “dead,” disenchanted, and indifferent, what qualms will one have about exploiting, consuming, and degrading it? What difference does our behavior make to such a universe? What do we gain by showing consideration for that which is dead or, in the case of other life forms, so inferior as to not merit much concern.

But in a living universe, relationships can be cultivated, and we experience a richer communion than we ever thought possible. This insight is central to some religious traditions. Taoism describes the universe as a vast ocean of interacting energies. The key to the “good life” is to cultivate harmony with those energies. The Navajo Indians speak of a “sacred wind” that blows through the universe, giving those who are aware of it the capacity to communicate with other sentient life. Hinduism, Buddhism, and certain schools of western mysticism offer comparable teachings.

In terms of a person’s emotional well-being, making the connection to a living universe can prove redemptive.

When we approach the natural world with sacred understanding something happens to us:

existential dread, forlornness, and alienation are replaced by curiosity, gratitude, and a sense of cosmic security. This is something that Scott Russell Sanders, who authored the preface to my own book appreciates. His testimony will serve as the last word today.

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I cannot understand the world, cannot understand my life, without appealing to the force of spirit. . . . If we and the creatures who share the earth with us are only bundles of quarks in motion, however intricate or clever the shapes, then our affection for one another, our concern for other species, our devotion to wildness, our longing for union with the Creation are all mere delusions. . . . I can’t prove it, but I do believe . . . you and I and the black-footed ferret, the earth, the sun, and the far-flung galaxies are dust motes whirling in the same great wind. Whether we call that magnificent energy Spirit or Tao, Creator or God, Allah or Atman or some other holy name, or no name at all, makes little difference, so long as we honor it.