

NATURE AND THE COMMON GOOD

By Ken Olson Lewistown, Montana April, 2021

“I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills.” That is the famous opening sentence of the book, *Out of Africa*, by Isak Dinesen. Farther on, she writes:

“Out on the Safari, I had seen a herd of Buffalo, one hundred and twenty-nine of them, come out of the morning mist under a copper sky, one by one, as if the dark and massive, iron-like animals with the mighty horizontally swung horns, were not approaching, but were being created before my eyes and sent out as they were finished. ...I had time after time watched the progress across the plain of the Giraffe, in their queer, inimitable, vegetative gracefulness, as if it were not a herd of animals but a family of rare, long-stemmed, speckled gigantic flowers slowly advancing. ...I had seen the royal lion, before sunrise, on his way home from the kill, drawing a dark wake in the silvery grass, his face still red up to the ears, or during the midday siesta, when he reposed contentedly in the midst of his family on the short grass and in the delicate, spring-like shade of the broad Acacia trees of his park of Africa.”

Isak Dinesen was her pen name, the actual one being Karen Blixen. (Her story was made into a movie starring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford.) The book is her account of moving from Denmark with her husband, in 1914, to manage a coffee farm in Kenya. After he abandoned her, early on, she continued the project herself until 1931; then, severe drought and a bottomed-out market forced her to give it up. This was the heyday of European colonialism all across the entire continent. While sharing some of the general sentiments of the time, it seems that she looked past most of the patronizing attitudes to, instead, encounter the native people with appreciation and the not-yet tamed landscape with wonder.

Shift the scene to the settlement of the Upper Great Plains by Norwegian immigrants. We get a good sense for what the experience must have meant, at least to many of the sod-house homesteaders, by reading O. E. Rolvaag’s 1924 novel, *Giants in the Earth*. The book begins with the account of families traveling across the vast and treeless regions of eastern South Dakota in 1873. For people accustomed to the hills and mountains of northern Europe and totally “at home” with them, the wide, open prairie, with its waves of grass like an endless ocean, seemed to be another world, unwelcoming and oppressive. Concerning a sunset: “At the moment when the sun closed his eye, the vastness of the plain seemed to rise up on every hand –and suddenly the landscape had gown desolate; something bleak and cold had come into the silence, filling it with terror.” Another day, and the mood of the mother, Beret Hansa:

“But something vague and intangible hovering in the air would not allow her to be wholly at ease; she had to stop often and look about, or stand erect and listen. ...All the while, the thought that had struck her yesterday when she had first got down from the wagon, stood vividly before her mind: here, there was nothing to hide behind!

...How *could* existence go on, she thought, desperately? If life is to thrive and endure, it must at least have something to hide behind!”

In all the states on the Rocky Mountain Front there are peaks and plains and everything in between. The western mountains soar, and the short-grass prairies of the eastern part of Montana fit the state’s slogan of the Big Sky country. Much has been made of geography shaping the human spirit. The idea was that living among peaks and precipices made people more introverted and cautious, because, in that topography, one step does not necessarily lead easily to the next, and you can’t see beyond your own valley. That circumstance allegedly produced narrow and provincial views of, well, everything. By contrast, supposedly, out in the far-seeing, big, open spaces, the landscape lent itself to broad-mindedness, an easy, slow-paced, casual, and transparent spirit of toleration and friendliness, with no questions asked. (Somehow, this tone-description is quite different from that of Per and Beret Hansa, in that same sort of terrain in the Dakotas.) Of course, even minimally functioning baloney detectors can debunk the myths.

The truth is that we are long past frontier times, and such stereotypes --if they ever had any credence-- no longer fit. For, migrations have not been only from east to west; we have gone back and forth and up and down, as something like ten percent of our nation’s population moves in any given year. Thus, America is a mix, here, there, and everywhere. There may be local differences, but those can be traced, not to the geography, but to what we bring to it, in the first place, and to how we tend to, on purpose, seek out communities of similar political and emotional sentiments. Thus, we are a divided nation in many aspects, wherever we may reside. On so many issues, there really does seem to be two basic perspectives, and, as on a sliding scale, individuals mentally gravitate to one side or the other.

A saying from the Talmud is that “We see things not the way they are, but the way *we* are.” Centuries of philosophy, psychology, and physiology have indicated that nothing simply is. It is as we perceive it, and that is shaped by all sorts of preconceptions and presuppositions, “pre” meaning ‘beforehand.’ In addition to all this, there are personal likes, dislikes, and preferences. Thus, we bring to the world what we are and what we wish, sometimes to be disabused of our ideas, then making adjustments but, other times, trying to fashion or re-form the world itself to fit our desires. There are perspectives and assumptions that color the thoughts and assessments of every single one of us.

The physicist Freeman Dyson worked, after Einstein, in the same program at The Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton University (Dyson just passed in 2020). In his introduction to *Disturbing the Universe*, he writes: “The physicist Leo Szilard once announced to his friend Hans Bethe that he was thinking of keeping a diary: ‘I don’t intend to publish it; I am merely going to record the facts for the information of God.’ ‘Don’t you think God knows the facts?’ Bethe asked. ‘Yes,’ said Szilard. ‘He knows the facts, but he does not know *this version* of the facts.’”

One of the major differences among people relates to how we define what is meant by the term, “The Common Good,” how wide it is in scope, and to what degree the concept is taken seriously.

Politicians often invoke the idea that America is to be “a shining city set upon a hill.” Some use that phrase rightly, others do not. I’ve heard it attached to ideas of American exceptionalism or superiority, thereby meant to invoke pride. That is not what it is about. The words are those of John Winthrop, spoken in 1630 by the leader of Puritan immigrants from England who were establishing the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The phrase was used in a sermon entitled “A model of Christian Charity” that Winthrop, the Pilgrim lawyer and Governor of the Colony, delivered aboard ship, this prior to his hearers even setting foot on the continent. He said, “Consider that we shall be as a city set upon a hill, the eyes of all people upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work that we have undertaken ...we shall be made a story and a byword throughout the world.”

Thus, he was not celebrating his listeners’ virtues; instead, he was warning them that the whole world was watching to see whether those virtues would actually be practiced, there in the New World. And the virtue he had foremost in mind was that of concern for welfare of others: “We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body.”

His words have remained as a kind of arch-type for what life in America was supposed to be. Our country’s Founders, when they produced their great documents, reserved their deepest scorn for self-interest, while promoting, instead, what they so often referred to as “the common good.”

Any trip to the grocery store in the past year has been jarring. The signs at the entrance indicate that masks are needed to protect everyone, customers and workers, alike. Still, many ignore what amounts to a plea for a lifeline. In a nation that has counted 580,000 deaths from a deadly virus, a toll that could have been very largely mitigated by the trivial procedure of wearing a mask, many still don’t do it. Other nations actually did watch us become, yes, “a byword” of neglect, with a record, at this writing, worse than any other.

Thus, concerning wearing masks, the obvious question: “Why not?” Has that all been due to ignorance of the science? --However, this is regarding people who use cell phones, take X-rays, have surgeries, vaccinate cattle, find facts on computers, and drive around in cars and trucks. (And, for those vehicles, we no longer buy wooden wagon wheels; we get tires.) It’s all science, and it works. We *should* be able to rule out ignorance.

Or is the ignorance *willful*? It may well be that the ultimate cause of the disease, death, and severe economic impact from the virus is to be traced, mainly, to simply not caring about the common good, the good addressed in The Golden Rule about “doing unto others what we would have them do unto us.”

We have, in this country, and in the world, a long history of neglecting that life-giving Rule. The cynic would say (but not only he) that after the Pilgrims fell upon their knees in thanksgiving, they and their descendants fell next upon the Indians, depriving them of both land and life, and it was often the case. The westward expansion of the frontier was carried out relentlessly, while looking through the lens of Manifest Destiny. It was the idea that we were meant to have this land, because we were, somehow, superior. God, too, was invoked to sanctify the undertaking, as scoundrels have so often done. The native inhabitants “were not fully and rightly” using the land, since it was unplowed and only thinly inhabited. How should it not belong to us white folks, who had in mind better plans for it? Of course, “better” was all in the eye of the beholders, but they also had the forceful means to bring it to pass.

In America, we rightly honor the memory of Eugene Debs, who said, in 1918, to the Judge who had sentenced him: “Your Honor, years ago, I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and recognized that I was not one bit better than the meanest man on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal class, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.” A statement for the ages, about the Common Good.

The early part of the 20th century saw the common good pushed aside in yet another aspect. This was the exploitation of the lower working classes by way of the idea that the rich and powerful occupied those positions, simply because they deserved them. Darwin had said that evolution was driven by natural selection. The poet Tennyson pictured nature “red with tooth and claw.” In England, Herbert Spencer coined the phrase “the survival of the fittest,” and applied it to societies. Ruthless “dog-eat-dog” competition was just the way the world worked, with people, too. It was, after all, “natural.” Thus, what came to be known as Social Darwinism was legitimized and promoted. John D. Rockefeller, the tycoon who founded Standard Oil and one of the richest men in the world, wrote, “The growth of a large business is merely the survival of the fittest. ...The American Beauty Rose can be produced in the splendor and fragrance which bring cheer to its beholder, only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it. This is not an evil tendency in business. It is merely the working out of the law of nature and of God.” Among the top dogs of the economic struggles of the era, there was nothing about the Golden Rule, or the Beatitudes, or the Common Good.

It was at about this same time, 1914, that Edgar Lee Masters was publishing his literary work – and masterful it is-- *Spoon River Anthology*. It fancifully pictures various occupants of the town’s cemetery, one after another rising to give a brief soliloquy, a summation concerning their individual lives. Far removed from the giants of industry, something of their same principles were in effect, as bitterly observed by the character, Schroeder the Fisherman:

I sat on the bank above Bernadotte
And dropped crumbs in the water.
Just to see the minnows bump each other,
Until the strongest one got the prize.

Or I went to my little pasture
Where the peaceful swine were asleep in the wallow,
Or nosing each other lovingly,
And emptied a basket of yellow corn,
And watched them push and squeal and bite,
And trample each other to get the corn.
And I saw Christian Dallman's farm,
Of more than three thousand acres,
Swallowed the patch of Felix Schmidt,
As a bass will swallow a minnow.
And I say if there's anything in man—
Spirit, or conscience, or breath of God
That makes him different from fishes or hogs,
I'd like to see it work!

Indeed, we long to see it work, this ideal of the Common Good. Masters' depiction in verse has too many comparable situations in real life.

Charles M. Russell, who died in 1926, was the great Montana artist of the American West, who portrayed so very well the last of the free roaming Indians and the newly arrived cattlemen and shopkeepers throughout the region. He lived, for a while, not many miles from where I do now and, for quite some time, in Great Falls. In 1923, almost a century ago, he was asked to give a speech there, at the local booster club. After listening to several other talks, those that hyped the virtues of the town and praised the pioneer spirit, Charlie Russell tore up his prepared speech and is reported to have said: "In my book, the pioneer is a man who turned all the grass upside down, strung barb wire over all the dust that was left, poisoned the water and cut down the trees, killed the Indians who owned the land, and called it progress. If I had my way, the land would be like God made it and none of you sons of bitches would be here at all!"

It's a powerful statement; some would say, too strong. But C. M. R. knew the history of the West to a depth that very few others did, and he could not allow the hype that all was sweetness and light. Obviously, we need business and industry and agriculture in our time and place, and there's no going all the way back, but that doesn't mean that all was well with everyone, far from it, and surely not well with everything. Nature, too, mourns for a lost good.

One of Russell's greatest works is his huge oil painting from 1914 titled "When the Land Belonged to God," and there's no doubt he had it in mind when he had spoken. It now hangs in the most honored place in a museum near the State Capitol in Helena. The scene is of a huge herd of Buffalo crossing the wide and shining Missouri River and just climbing out to a rise. I can't see it without also thinking of another image, the black and white photograph of a man standing atop a thirty-foot high pile of what must be tens of thousands of Buffalo skulls. Such slaughter was for no economic need, but, instead, was part of the whites' program to eliminate the Indians' sustenance, and thus, to obliterate their way of life. In addition, it was indicative of a mindset that vastly separated humanity from all other creatures.

Francis Parkman's 1849 book, *The Oregon Trail*, is an account of his westward travels, and therein, he wrote: "We encamped close to the river. The night was dark, and as we lay down, we could hear mingled with the howling of wolves the hoarse bellowing of the Buffalo, like the ocean beating upon a distant coast." From these eloquent words, you might sense something of a deep respect and sympathy for the great herds. You would be mistaken. He wrote, just a bit later:

"Twice a day, at sunrise and at noon, the buffalo came issuing from the hills, slowly advancing in their grave procession to drink at the river. All our amusements were at their expense. Except for an elephant, I have seen no animal that can surpass a buffalo bull in size and strength, and the world may be searched in vain to find anything of a more ugly and ferocious aspect. At first sight of him, every feeling of sympathy vanishes. No man who has not experienced it can understand with what keen relish one inflicts his death wound, with what profound contentment of mind he beholds him fall. ...against the bulls we waged an unrelenting war."

Those words were recorded with no qualms, no embarrassment, no shame, and with no conscience; no doubt, the author felt that all who were to read them would approve. Parkman was one of the more educated and refined of his age, later becoming an historian whose works on national and international politics of that time are still valued. But his words about the Buffalo are indicative of a point of view on the natural world that I judge to be perverse, preoccupied only with human self-aggrandizement and entertainment, all at the expense of other living beings who happened to be here long, long before he arrived on the scene. His perception was that such beings were of another world, and thus they had no real value in ours, and, therefore, it was a small matter if they should be accorded no room in which to live and breathe.

American Prairie Reserve is a project in central Montana that is seeking to set aside a large area of short-grass prairie north of the Missouri River; it is the region wherein Lewis and Clarke had written in their journals of seeing "immense herds of Buffalo." The idea is to purchase enough land to provide for a number of self-sustaining herds of Buffalo to thrive, and with them, a rich diversity of all sorts of plants and animals that would make up an ecosystem very much like it once was, as Charlie Russell said, "when the land belonged to God." There are almost no places left where such a thing could happen. It is true, I think, that we only save what we love; without that deep attachment, soon, all will be gone, and our descendants will never experience what the prairie had been for millions of years before us. In 2018, The National Geographic Society named the Prairie Reserve a partner in its Last Wild Places Initiative that recognizes efforts to combat climate change and to sustain biodiversity. Native Americans are thrilled to think that some flavor of vanished history and prehistory might be coming back.

However, not everyone is thrilled. Letters flood newspapers and signs are up all across the state that read, "Save the Cowboy. Stop American Prairie Reserve." There's irony there. For, it's not the much-demonized government—the usual target—that is putting together tracts of prairie for this project. Ranchers are free to sell their land to whomever they wish, and they get fair market value. In other words, it's the actually the free enterprise system that is operating

here --the same one that is usually so much touted by the critics of APR. More irony: in the homesteading days, when the first ranches were founded in all the western states, I doubt that there were many signs up that read, "Save the Indian. Stop the Cowboy." What is that saying about karma or "what goes around, comes around?" Something, surely.

The idea of a Common Good is central to our living and working together as human beings; it enables life to more nearly rich and full and free. The challenge, now, is to have the concept include all Creation, to actually to *be* common, extending to the Whole. For, we live, not alone, on planet earth. If we get to counting, there is something like thirty million other species. Thus, can we extend the idea of the Common Good, not just to *Homo sapiens*, but to "all creatures great and small?" The wise and the truly good and great ones among us have done both. The contemporary poet, A. R. Ammons:

I said I will find what is lowly
 And put the roots of my identity
 down there...
but though I have looked everywhere,
 I can find nothing to give myself to:
 everything is
magnificent with existence, is in
surfeit of glory:
nothing has been diminished for me...
 though I have looked everywhere
 I can find nothing lowly
 In the universe:
I whirled through transfigurations up and down,
Transfigurations of size and shape and place:
 at one sudden point came still,
 stood in wonder:
moss, beggar, weed, tick, pine, self, magnificent
 with being!

Albert Schweitzer had a many-dimensional mind. He was a gifted musician; in fact, he was internationally known as one of the best artists at the largest organ keyboards, playing Bach in all of Europe. He was also a philosopher and a Lutheran theologian and earned a PhD in each of those fields. His intellectual gifts are fully evident in his 1905 classic work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, in which he sought to penetrate beneath nineteen centuries of time and tradition to answer the question of who, indeed, was that Person. In the process, he examined the work of numerous others who had engaged in the same endeavor. He found that their conclusions revealed a good deal about their own biases and predilections, but very little about Jesus, the object of their search. Thus, one of the most sublime statements of faith is Schweitzer's concluding paragraph of *The Quest*, coming after 403 pages of inquiry, investigation, and deliberation:

“He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side He came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.”

Schweitzer, while already highly educated and famous, was also one of those rare individuals to whom fame was nothing, for he gave it all up to embark on a new venture, that of being a medical missionary, a doctor serving the poorest of the poor in West Africa. Before he told anyone of his plans to enter the three-year course for medical school, he said in a 1905 sermon: “This ‘noble’ culture of ours! It speaks so piously of dignity and human rights and then disregards this dignity and these rights of countless millions and treads them underfoot, only because they live overseas or because their skins are a different color or they cannot help themselves. ...We decimate them, and then, by the stroke of a pen, we take their land so they have nothing left at all.” He was one of the severest critics of European colonialism, and he sought to be on the side of atonement for it. In the first month, at his clinic in the jungle, he and his wife saw some two thousand patients.

A great humanist he was, but Schweitzer’s idea of the Common Good extended far beyond humanity. It always had. He once related how, as a small child, he had found it incomprehensible that, during evening prayers, people would pray only for other people. He began to add his own prayer, for all creatures: “Protect and bless all things that have breath; guard them from all evil, and let them sleep in peace.” Decades later, in the African bush, while he was watching a herd of hippos in the river, there flashed across his mind, “unforeseen and unsought, the phrase, Reverence for Life.” Seeking the common good for *all* Creation is what defined his life, and it was for his Reverence for Life philosophy that he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1952. He died in 1965, at the age of 90, while still at his clinic in the heart of Africa.

How are things in Nature, in relation to the Common Good, right now? The current population-curve ought to be frightening, with each and every year finding the world more heavily dominated by human beings than the last (in fact, increasing by 70 million each year). Isak Dinesen’s home at her coffee farm at the foot of the Ngong Hills in Kenya was only eight or nine miles from the town of Nairobi. When she arrived there, it had a population of just 16,000. Now, in the course of a single century, the metropolitan area of Nairobi has swelled to some 9,400,000, and has one of the largest slums on the continent. It took all of human history until 1800 to reach a world population of 1 billion; we are now at nearly 8 billion. Facts like these threaten everything we claim to care about, both in human society and in the natural world.

In one of David Quammen’s several books, *The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions*, he writes, “All over the planet, humanity is at war against other species, against the wildness of wild landscape, against the redness of nature’s tooth and claw. Humanity will win. The only point at issue is the severity of the peace.” One would think there would be high consensus about such obvious and ominous threats, but people are divided in

attitude, even regarding whether nature itself deserves attention and devotion, as though we can get along without it.

Robinson Jeffers, the poet, has this thought from *Boats in a Fog*:

A flight of pelicans
Is nothing lovelier to look at;
The flight of the planets is nothing nobler; all the arts lose
Virtue
Against the essential reality
Of creatures going about their business among the equally
Earnest elements of nature.

However, Jeffers knew *human* nature too well to let beautiful scenes say it all. Thus, a concluding verse in the long poem, *The Inhumanist*:

The beauty of things
Is in the beholder's brain—
...It is the life. Which is like beauty. It is like nobility. It has no name, and
that's lucky, for names
Foul in the mouthing. The human race is bound to defile, I've often
noticed it.
Whatever they can reach or name. They'd shit on the morning star,
If they could reach.

Jarring words to be found in poetry, but realistic, too.

Where does the non-human part of Creation fit in the hierarchy of values in this entire culture? No doubt, the pervasive idea is that we are dominant, at the top, the ones who control things for our own benefit, "as we should." It is reflected in our traditional terminology, which is cast, *not* in terms of wildlife *preservation*, but almost entirely in terms of wildlife *management*. We speak and read about the beneficial or wise *use* of wildlife as a *resource*. In that vein, all of wild nature is a flock, a herd, a fishery, a crop to be harvested, and manipulated and put up for sale, all in the public, the national, and the human interest. It's the subconscious outlook that comes so quickly and naturally to us, the idea of our existing in an anthropocentric universe.

However, it is an idea that we must shed, if the wider world of wonder and diversity of life is to survive in any meaningful sense. For, such a mentality sees things as having no intrinsic value, only the value that we assign to them. It means that tens of millions have come to see animals and plants as little more than commodities or personal amenities, available for the right price -- if interested, that is. Scary thought. It's an argument from ownership and takeover, and it is detrimental and destructive, for it fails to give stature or credence to the full reality of *being*, other than our own. The root of the difficulty is beyond even aesthetic and the ethical arguments and goes to something else, almost metaphysical, having to do with our very place and purpose in the universe.

There's a book that I have paged through a number of times, after first reading it upon its publication forty long years ago, *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation*, by the Canadian wildlife biologist John Livingston. The title itself lends to whiplash -- a biologist saying it is a *fallacy* to try to conserve wildlife? But he means it, and in the same sense that I critiqued the pervasive language about ownership of nature. The implicit assumption in the very notion of "conservation" is that of self-interest: conserve it, for what, for whom? Why, for us, of course.

Livingston writes: "As you begin to experience the full enormity of this problem, you will begin to fear that much of our effort in proselytizing of the 'wildlife ethic' is quite empty and fruitless. It is not that our audiences disagree with us or resent our argument or are offended by it: it means *they cannot perceive it*. They literally do not know what we are talking about." And: "The utilitarian assumption runs throughout the entire roster of 'wise use' arguments, and, albeit less visibly, in the 'quality of life' appeal."

One of Livingston's arguments has to do with our living in "a society of sensual deprivation." Whenever he would put forth that sort of statement in a lecture, he was derided by the urbanites (now the large majority) who would say that he must exist in some sort of solitary chamber, because everyone knows that the urban problem is just the opposite: sensory overload, a kaleidoscope of sights and a cacophony of sounds of bumping, jostling, sweating and swearing humanity in close quarters. That does describe our large cities, but, says Livingston,

"I believe this urban sensory overload ...is a simple *quantitative* overload, having *no variety* whatsoever. The tumult and the hammering all come from a single source; without exception, they are of human manufacture. All of our sensory bruises are self-inflicted. ...We are all alone. The geranium on the tenement window sill is both an offering to the mysterious tidal pull of some distant biological memory, and a heartbreaking cry for help."

Where is help to be found? How about religion? Livingston, again:

"I am particularly interested in the failure of organized religion to contribute one sausage's worth to the advancement of the cause of wildlife. ...What interests me is the apparently willful abdication of what I would perceive to be one of the prime roles of any church: to recognize the value to the human spirit of our life context. ...What could be more appropriate for them than to attempt to understand the nature and spirit of *belonging*? They are missing a heaven-sent opportunity, I think. ...There are a great many people, like myself, who are waiting, with relatively open minds."

It occurs to me that the word "religion" is derived from the Latin *religio*, meaning to bind together again (it has the same root as our English word ligament, that term for the tough, elastic-type of connective tissue that holds a skeleton together). The most profound hope of many of us is that religion can, indeed, be a force for connecting humanity with the rest of creation.

In his 1988 book, *The Dream of the Earth*, Thomas Berry wrote, "It would be difficult to find a theological seminary in this country that has an adequate program on creation as it is experienced in these times. The theological curriculum is dominated by a long list of courses on redemption and how it functions in aiding humans to transcend the world, all based on biblical texts. Such a situation cannot long endure, since a new sense of the earth and its revelatory import is arising in the believing community." There are signs of that rising, not in all denominations, surely, but in a number of them. Many of us are anxious to utilize preaching and teaching opportunities afforded in congregations to make a difference by accenting our kinship to the rest of Creation, something strongly supported and facilitated by *The Clergy Letter* project.

I have found many people to be responsive, but our churches may be too tied to lectionaries that are concerned with chronologically oriented historical events, this to the extent that they only rarely visit bottomless passages portraying the inhabitants of the whole of God's world and the timeless interrelatedness of its elements, such as Psalm 104: "By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. ...In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees. ...The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God. ...Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great."

In Job, chapters 38-41, God speaks to him "out of the whirlwind," and to any others who are "wise in their own conceit," asking,

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. ...Have you entered the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? ...Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion? ...Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life, to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass? ...Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, when they crouch in their dens or lie in wait in their covert?" ...Do you give the horse its might? Do you clothe its neck with mane? Do you make it leap like the locust? ...Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads its wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high? It lives on the rock and makes its home in the fastness of the rocky crag. From there it spies the prey; its eyes see it from far away."

At the end of a long litany of the mystery and majesty of Creation, Job responds, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." It is that confrontation with the stunning wonders of the world all around us that enabled him to reply, with reverence, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you."

Walt Whitman, in the spirit of the Psalmist and of Job, penned many celebratory passages about Creation. Written in 1855, this is a portion of "Song of Myself" from *Leaves of Grass*:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the
journeywork of the stars,

And the pismire is equally perfect, and a
grain of sand, and the egg of a wren,
And the tree-toad is chef-d'oeuvre for the
highest,
And the running blackberry would adorn
the parlors of heaven,
And the narrowest hinge of my hand puts
scorn all machinery,
And the cow crunching with depress'd
head surpasses any statue,
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger
sextillions of infidels.

Modern biology indicates that we have most of our genes in common with other members Primate Order; some 98.4% are identical to those in a Chimpanzee. But we also share many of the same genes as does, say, a blade of grass or a mushroom, an indication of our deep connectedness to the rest of the living world, macro and micro, both. We are joined. (As an aside –but not really that– there is the idea of a “mushroom suit” for natural burials, the purpose being to hasten the process of going back to the earthly constituents of which we are composed. I must say that it has some appeal, certainly much more than the traditional attempt with metal and concrete, but always in vain, ultimately, to totally insulate and indefinitely preserve our physical selves from moth and rust and all other corruption. The latter endeavor seems, in fact, to be highly resistive of the very earthy and completely realistic –and “scientific” –words of Scripture, that “from the dust you are created, and to dust you shall return.”)

Ursula Goodenough is Professor Emerita in Biology of Washington University in St. Louis, having worked there on cell biology for many years. She is also a Presbyterian and actively involved in her local congregation. Keenly aware of the implications of the concept of the tree of life, she writes in *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, “Blessed be the tie that binds. It anchors us. We are embedded in the great evolutionary story of planet Earth, the spare, elegant process of mutation and selection and bricolage. And this means that we are anything but alone.”

A few centuries ago, at the narrow straight at Gibraltar that opens out from the Mediterranean Sea into the vast Atlantic Ocean, tradition says there was a plaque that warned, “Ne Plus Ultra” –No More Beyond. Of course, there was more beyond, much more of the wide world, as the frail wooden ships venturing out farther and farther would soon demonstrate. In the 20th century, humanity learned that the boundaries of creation must be extended, vastly beyond any previous imagination.

John Dobson was a man from San Francisco who spent many years roaming the country and introducing people to astronomy with the large reflector telescope that he built himself. It is virtually certain that more people have looked at the heavens through his instrument than any other, as they responded to his carnival-like call, “Come see the rings of Saturn, Come see the craters of the moon.” One time, a person enforcing regulations in a certain park confronted

Dobson and the group he had attracted, saying that such a gathering was not allowed and he must leave, because “the sky is not part of the *park*.” Dobson: “Ah, but the park is part of the *Sky*.” And so it is, so is everything. In the words of John Muir, “We all travel the Milky Way together, trees, and men.”

Thus, one of the central findings of modern science is this unshakeable fact, that the cosmos is all One, that Creation is a single thing. Muir, again: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.” The very word says it: *Universe*. Muir’s thought was an intuition, but it happens to be true, and is confirmed by the many branches of science. The explorer and naturalist, Alexander von Humboldt (b. 1769) said, “In this great chain of causes and effects, no single fact can be considered in isolation,” and “Nature is a living whole, not a dead aggregate.” He was one of the first to understand that the world is “woven with a thousand threads.” It’s all in keeping with the poetic words of Francis Thompson, that “One cannot pluck a flower, without troubling a star.” Thus, we really do have all things in common.

As addressed in the beginning of this essay, it all comes down to seeing. I have been deeply moved by the perceptive statements of some others who have reflected on related issues, and I commend their words to you.

First, from an essay by Edward Abbey, entitled, “*How it Was*.” It has to do with the Canyon Country of southeast Utah that he first saw, as a young person, in 1944, and of which he says: “A landscape that I had not only never seen before but that did not *resemble* anything I had seen before.” He tells of returning to a particular spot, years later, and finding it utterly transformed. The river and the old trails were gone, blasted and straightened, submerged by reservoirs and pavement, “improved” beyond recognition. The final words of that piece: “All of this, the engineers and politicians and bankers will tell you makes the region easily accessible to everyone, no matter how fat, feeble or flaccid. That is a lie. That is a lie. For, those who go there now, smooth, comfortable, quick and easy, sliding through as slick as grease, will never be able to see what we saw. They will never feel what we felt. They will never know what we knew, or understand what we cannot forget.”

In 1960, a commission in California studying wilderness preservation received a letter from Wallace Stegner. It was not about acreage, but about the *idea* of wilderness, and it said, in part: “Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed; if we permit the last virgin forests to be turned into comic books and plastic cigarette cases.” Of a certain place, again, in Utah:

“It is a lovely and terrible wilderness, such as Christ and the prophets went out into. ...Save a piece of country like that intact, and it does not matter in the slightest that only a few people a year will go into it. That is precisely its value. ...Those who haven’t the strength or youth to go into it and live can simply sit and look. They can look two hundred miles, clear into Colorado; and looking down over the cliffs and canyons of the San Rafael swell and the Robbers’ Roost, they can also look as deeply into themselves as anywhere I know, ...they can simply contemplate

the *idea*, take pleasure in the fact that such a timeless and uncontrolled part of the earth is still there. ...We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For, it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope.”

Now, less and less remains to kindle the sense of wonder. Thus, how precious it is, in and for itself, but also for our imagination and our hope. Sir Thomas Browne, an English physician, wrote *Religio Medici* in 1643. He speaks of intersection of the mind with the exterior world and their respective realms and boundaries. He refers to wonders of far-away lands, relating them to comparable explorations of remote spaces within what he calls “the cosmography of myself,” and then concludes: “We carry with us the wonders we seek without us: there is all Africa and her prodigies in us.”

I think, if that magical image or spirit, likened to a rich and diverse Africa of old, be not first in our own imaginations, then neither will it be allowed to exist very long outside, in any landscape in Nature. It is that deeper and non-sense-related eye that truly makes the difference. It is insight that determines outlook and that allows for sharing.

It is the same with The Golden Rule, central to all major religions and so often cited, which urges us to “Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you.” So it is, too, with Christ’s words in the Gospels, to “love your neighbor, *as yourself*.” For, those are not only admonitions toward goodness, but descriptions of how things actually work. If we think of our own selves in tawdry terms and with shabby or ignoble expectations, so will we assess and treat others, and, ultimately, all the world. Thus, the concept of The Common Good depends upon a truly enlightened self-interest: the ability of people, in their inmost selves, to reflect upon what is truly good *for* themselves, then, likewise, to cast a sympathetic and benevolent eye toward the rest of Being.

Now, as much as any time in the past, we can afford only goodness. So, we pray for and work towards The Common Good, attempting to make it much more than common --abundant, even— in all Creation.

Kenneth H. Olson

April, 2021

