

## ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY

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**A**t the close of the century when science has flourished as never before, we face a crisis of the human spirit. After nearly half a millennium of Enlightenment, so-called, reaching secular modernity, the avant-garde, symptomatically, are deconstructing it and envisioning something postmodern. Central to these misgivings is the human relation to nature. In other centuries, critics complained that humans were alienated from God. In this century, critics complain that humans are alienated from their planet. Set aside cosmological questions one may (though these too have been returning anew in recent decades), but we cannot set aside global issues, except at our peril. We face an identity crisis in our own home territory, trying to get the human spirit put in its place.

### I.

**A**widespread response is "creation spirituality, elaborating a religious experience of creation, detecting God, the Creator, in, with, and under the spectacular natural history. But I wish to focus here on what we might rather term an "ecological spirituality," one which, though unwilling to venture the language of creation-Creator, finds the natural history on Earth evoking a sense of the numinous. Perhaps there is no supernatural; but, then again, the natural is super, superb. One can doubt whether there is any God, Ground of all Being, before whom one falls down on both knees. But one can hardly doubt that there is nature, fundamental ground in which we live and move and have our being. Ought we not to go down before this Nature, at least on one knee?

Ernst Mayr, among the most eminent living biologists, rejecting religious orthodoxy, but finding the creativity in natural history undeniable, says, "Virtually all biologists are religious, in the deeper sense of this word, even though it may be a religion without revelation.... The unknown and

maybe unknowable instills in us a sense of humility and awe."<sup>1</sup> We detect something sublime in the awe-inspiring sense because there is something sublime in the etymological sense of that word, something that takes us to the limits of our understanding, and mysteriously beyond. Loren Eiseley exclaims, "Nature is one vast miracle transcending the reality of night and nothingness."<sup>2</sup>

Viewing Earthrise from the moon, the astronaut Edgar Mitchell was entranced: "Suddenly from behind the rim of the moon, in long-slow motion moments of immense majesty, there emerges a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light, delicate sky-blue sphere laced with slowly swirling veils of white, rising gradually like a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery. It takes more than a moment to fully realize this is Earth .. home." Mitchell continued, "My view of our planet was a glimpse of divinity."<sup>3</sup>

A first response of both scientists and theologians may be that the astronaut is going to extremes. A frequent fear that theologians have of creation spirituality is that it slips over into vague pantheism and uncritical naturalism; people are beginning romantically and naively to worship Nature and not intelligently and diligently to worship God. A frequent complaint by hardnosed scientists is that one must stick to the facts and not get carried away in mystical interpretation. Earth is, after all, just earth. Earth is a big rockpile like the moon, only one on which the rocks are watered and illuminated in such a way that they support life. No doubt Earth is valuable, but that is because humans are able to value it. It is really human life that we value and not the Earth, except as instrumental to life. We do not have responsibilities to rocks, air, ocean, dirt, or Earth; we have responsibilities to people. We must not confuse duties to the home with duties to the inhabitants.

## II.

Yet is it so amiss to see this home biosphere as demanding religious response? This is just because of the hardnosed facts, and whether or not

<sup>1</sup> Ernst Mayr, *The Growth of Biological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belnap Press, 1982), 81.

<sup>2</sup> Loren Eiseley, *The Firmament of Time* (New York: Atheneum), 171.

<sup>3</sup> Edgar Mitchell, quoted in Kevin W. Kelley, ed., *The Home Planet* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1988), at photographs 42-45.

one goes deeper to detect God under it all. Consider the complexity and diversity—the whole storied natural and cultural history of our planet. Say, if you like, that Earth is only a big rockpile, mere matter, but, as Eiseley insisted, the story these rocks spin is little short of a series of "miracles," wondrous, fortuitous events; and when Earth's most complex product, *Homo sapiens*, becomes intelligent enough to reflect over this earthy wonderland, everyone is left stuttering about the mixtures of accident and necessity out of which we have evolved. But nobody has much doubt that this is a precious place, a pearl in a sea of black mystery. Earth could be the ultimate object of duty, short of God. And if one cannot get clear about God, there is ample and urgent call to reverence the Earth.

Earth is dirt all dirt, but here we find revealed what dirt can do when it is self-organizing under suitable conditions with water and solar illumination. One can, if one insists on being anthropocentric, say that it is all valueless except as our human resource. But we will not be valuing Earth objectively until we appreciate this marvelous natural history. Earth is the only planet, so far as we know, that is a home. This is the biosphere, the planet known to have an ecology, etymologically, "the logic of a home."

The astronaut Michael Collins recalled being earthstruck: "The more we see of other planets, the better this one looks. When I traveled to the Moon, it wasn't my proximity to that battered rockpile I remember so vividly, but rather what I saw when I looked back at my fragile home—a glistening, inviting beacon, delicate blue and white, a tiny outpost suspended in the black infinity. Earth is to be treasured and nurtured, something precious that *must* endure."<sup>4</sup> Ernst Mayr's thoughtful biologist not only has religious humility, there is a respect for nature. "And if one is a truly thinking biologist, one has a feeling of responsibility for nature, as reflected by much of the conservation movement."<sup>5</sup>

Edward O. Wilson, though repeatedly, sometimes intensely, critical of the classical religions with their hope for transcendence, is, interestingly, as

<sup>4</sup> Michael Collins, "Foreword," in Roy A. Gallant, *Our Universe* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 1980), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ernst Mayr, "How Biology Differs from the Physical Sciences," in David J. Depew and Bruce H. Weber, eds., *Evolution at a Crossroads* (Cambridge, MA: the MIT Press, 1985), 60.

a secular humanist, another Harvard biologist who eminently demonstrates a religious respect for life on Earth. He preaches its conservation with evangelical intensity. "What event likely to happen during the next few years will our descendants most regret?" His answer: "The one process now going on that will take millions of years to correct is the loss of genetic and species diversity by the destruction of natural habitats. This is the folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us."<sup>6</sup>

Why is it an almost unforgivable sin to destroy thousands of other species? Because in so doing we harm other people, but that is not Wilson's deepest reason. He urges forming a human bond with other species, loving the fauna and flora. He wants to stretch the self over to a "nobility...defined as reasoned generosity beyond expedience," to "the ultimate ennobling act"<sup>7</sup> This is in our enlightened self-interest, but for those humans who can move outside their own pragmatic utilities and learn to appreciate the "mysterious and little known organisms" with which we coinhabit this planet "splendor awaits in minute proportions." "Love the organisms for themselves, first"<sup>8</sup> Wilson marvels at his prolific home planet with its teeming life.

The planet loves life, and so ought we, Wilson urges: "The more the mind is fathomed in its own right, as an organ of survival, the greater will be the reverence for life for purely rational reasons."<sup>9</sup> We are, Wilson holds, innately inclined to act in our self-interest; this is the law of the survival of the fittest. But, unique among the species, we humans find that our own survival, and flourishing, requires a loving concern for the biodiversity with which we have an entwined destiny. "Natural philosophy has brought into clear relief the...paradox of human existence.... We need the most delicate, knowing stewardship of the living world that can be devised.... The paradox can be resolved by changing its premises into forms more suited to ultimate survival, by which I mean protection of the human spirit."<sup>10</sup>

The sermon continues: "The green prehuman earth is the mystery we were chosen to solve, a guide to the birthplace of our spirit, but it is slipping

<sup>6</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 121.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 131.

<sup>8</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *Naturalist* (Washington: Island Press, 1994), 191.

<sup>9</sup> Wilson, *Biophilia*, 140.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

away.... If there is danger in the human trajectory, it is not so much in the survival of our own species as in the fulfillment of the ultimate irony of organic evolution: that in the instant of achieving self-understanding through the mind of man, life has doomed its most beautiful creations."<sup>11</sup> "The flower in the crannied wall—it is a miracle.... Pull out the flower from its crannied retreat, shake the soil from the roots into the cupped hand, magnify it for close examination.... The handful may be only a tiny fragment of one ecosystem, but because of the genetic codes of its residents it holds more order than can be found on the surfaces of all the planets combined. It is a sample of the living force that runs the earth—and will continue to do so with or without us."<sup>12</sup>

That living force runs through the preacher himself, and we can hear Wilson's own spirituality embodied in what he urges. "Humanity coevolved with the rest of life on this particular planet; other worlds are not in our genes. ... Humanity is part of nature, a species that evolved among other species. The more closely we identify ourselves with the rest of life, the more quickly we will be able to discover the sources of human sensibility and acquire the knowledge on which an enduring ethic, a sense of preferred direction, can be built. ... We do not understand ourselves yet and descend further from heaven's air if we forget how much the natural world means to us. Signals abound that the loss of life's diversity endangers not just the body but the spirit."<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the noumenal world lies beyond our ken, but the world of phenomena, revealed by science and seen at hand, is phenomenal enough to ennoble our spirits.

### III.

Biology and religion are not always easy disciplines to join. But one place they have increasingly joined in recent years is in admiration for this marvelous planet. No other species can be either responsible for or religious toward this planet, but *Homo sapiens* reaches a responsibility that assumes spiritual dimensions. "There can be no purpose more enspiriting."<sup>14</sup> In a planetary, environmental age, spirituality requires combining nature and grace

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*, 344.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 347-48, 351.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 351.

at new levels of insight and intensity. Nature is grace, whatever more grace may also be. The geophysical and biological laws, the evolutionary and ecological history, the creativity within the natural system we inherit, and the values these generate, are the ground of our being, not just the ground under our feet

Life persists because it is provided for in the ecological Earth system. Earth is a kind of providing ground, where the life epic is lived on in the midst of its perpetual perishing, life arriving and struggling through to something higher. Biology produces many doubts; here are two more. I doubt whether one can take biology seriously, the long epic of life on Earth, the prolific fecundity that surrounds us as human spirits on this planet, without a respect for life, and the line between respect for life and reverence for life is one that I doubt that you can always recognize. When J.B.S. Haldane found himself in conversation with some theologians and was asked whether he had concluded anything about the character of God from his long studies in biology, he replied that God had an inordinate fondness for beetles. But species counts are only one indication of diversity, and perhaps the fuller response is that God must have loved life, God animated such a prolific Earth. Haldane went on to say that the marks of biological nature were its "beauty," "tragedy," and "inexhaustible queerness."<sup>15</sup>

This beauty approaches the sublime; the tragedy is perpetually redeemed with the renewal of life, and the inexhaustible queerness recomposes as the numinous. If anything at all on Earth is sacred, it must be this enthralling generativity that characterizes our home planet. If anywhere, here is the brooding Spirit of God. So the secular—this present, empirical epoch, this phenomenal world, studied by science—does not eliminate the sacred after all; to the contrary, it urges a spiritual quest. If there is any holy ground, any land of promise, this promising Earth is it.

<sup>15</sup> J. B. S. Haldane, *The Causes of Evolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1932, 1966), 167-69.