

As I was reading and reflecting on Newell's book this week, what I did not realize so deeply is how Muir's Christian faith helped shape his vision of preserving the wilderness and what parts of traditional Christianity he rejected. His journey is so interesting.

On December 5, 1871, readers of the New York Tribune, the leading newspaper of its day, saw to an article entitled "Yosemite Glaciers." His readers found themselves reading descriptions of nature like none they had seen before. It was the first attempt of the author, John Muir, to write for publication, and it was also the beginning of a long, affectionate relationship between Muir and his readers. (1)

Nothing could have given Muir more pleasure, for he lived to bring people back to the wilderness for the spiritual and physical healing it could give them. But even in the 1870s he realized that the pure wilderness areas of America were fast disappearing before the woodsman's axe, the shepherd's flock, and the miner's pick. Muir's prose served to awaken the public to the thoughtless waste and unrestrained exploitation that were destroying the natural beauty of the United States. As Newell reminds us, Muir was the pioneer in the US who swayed the public to commit to the preservation of America's forests and mountains.

What drove Muir to become a preservationist? And how did he depart from his strict Scottish evangelical background for a religious view of nature that was rooted in the experience that the earth, the mountains, the trees, are sacred?

His father, Daniel Muir, had a fiery religion and strict approach to life and disciplining his children. Muir's father had a literal interpretation of the Bible, an emphasis on sin and damnation, and expectation that his children would memorize Bible verses or get a whipping. The family moved from Scotland to Wisconsin where there were others from a similar religious affiliation – Campbellites.

Eventually, John Muir left his family home and is able to attend University of Wisconsin in Madison. His world opens up. He meets Dr. Ezra Slocum Carr, a science professor. Carr's wife, Jeanne, introduced him to the thought of William Ellery Channing, with his positive view of a loving God and indwelling divinity.

Take a moment and think about - Who were the people who introduced you to a new way of experiencing the Holy? The people who invited you to let go a previous beliefs and be open? Those moments in life are often exciting, challenging, thrilling, disorienting.

Muir has one of the most profound experiences of his life in 1866. He loved inventing things and working with machines. He was working in Indianapolis, when a file slipped and injured one eye. He lost a sight for a few months. Convalescing in bed with a brochure on Yosemite Valley in his lap, he mused about the industrial accident that nearly robbed him of the ability to investigate the glory of God's creation. But as he regained his sight, he felt he had a new

way of seeing, with the eye of the heart. His brush with blindness called Muir to a higher purpose, beyond any purpose defined in terms of wealth or human utility. Ever afterwards aware of the preciousness of sight, Muir referred to God and nature in terms of light, and dubbed the Sierras the "Range of Light." In 1868 when Muir first entered the Sierras he wrote

Now we are fairly in the mountains and they are into us. We are fairly living now. What bright seething white-fire enthusiasm is bred in us... We are part of nature which like a fluid seems to drench and steep us throughout, as the whole sky and the rocks and the flowers are drenched with God.

He became an evangelist for the Sierras and other wilderness places. Muir liked to describe himself in biblical terms, a John the Baptist preaching the wilderness gospel. The sight of Muir, long beard flowing in the breeze, descending from the Sierras caused visitors to recall images of prophets returning from the wilderness. He wrote in one of his journals,

“Heaven knows that John the Baptist was not more eager to get all his fellow sinners into the Jordan than I to baptize all of mine in the beauty of God’s mountains.”

(John of the Mountains pg. 86)

I don’t know if Muir ever read the quote from Daumal at the beginning of my sermon, but I think he would agree. Muir wanted people to go to the mountains and be in the presence of the Giant Sequoias in what would become Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Park. He knew that by going there people would be changed in those wild places of Divine Beauty. Muir said that people should return to the mountains but not stay there. Return to find inner strength and spiritual vision and commitment to protect that beauty. One of my favorite quotes - “I wish I were so Sequioacal that I could descend from the mountains like John the Baptist to preach the green brown woods to all the juiceless world crying... Repent for the Kingdom of Sequioa is at hand.” (pg 164)

I know some of us cannot go to the mountains and backpack and hike. We can go outside. Maybe we can take time to remember times we were in the mountains or forests. Or we can look at photos that capture the majesty of Divine beauty and light. This can be a reminder for our souls.

What is it like to see Divine Light within us and in the all creation? For Muir, Divine Light is what he called, “spiritual fire” in every tree, in every stone, Every bush is a burning bush” like Moses experienced. This is a similar experience of Teilhard de Chardin. He found himself adoring the Light that is in all things. Newell describes an experience Teilhard had when he was about 30 years old. Teilhard had an epiphany in which he experienced himself being addressed by the Light that shines in matter. What he heard were words from Matthew’s gospel. “It is I; do not be afraid.” (Matthew 14:27). He heard it from deep within the matter of the universe. He loved the world, this world, the matter.

Both Muir and Teilhard wrestled with accepted and popular theologies and beliefs. These beliefs no longer reflected a broader and deeper experience of the Divine. These two men were rooted in the Christian household and biblical stories and images, but found new ways to express this oneness and light.

Maybe that is where we are. Finding language and images that more fully reflect a love for the earth and matter, for creatures and creation, for the oneness in all creation. For Muir the shifts moved him to a life committed to protecting the wilderness and a different approach to spiritual life.

As John Muir rejected his father's harsher aspects about living daily life, he also rejected his father's concepts of God and nature. Daniel Muir subscribed to the view, based on the Bible and strengthened by the Enlightenment and the necessities of frontier life, that God made nature for man's dominion and use. John Muir broke from this view and developed a conception of the value in itself of all creation and the ecological interconnectedness of all things. A walk into the wilderness was a religious experience, for there one immersed oneself in the glory of God's immaculate handiwork. The study of nature was also a religious activity, for there the scientist read the manuscripts of God as surely as a person could read about Jesus' parables about God's kin-dom.

Muir's distaste for an understanding of wilderness solely in terms of its "usefulness" later led him inexorably into conflict with the management school of conservation. Starting the Sierra Club and working to create state and national parks are his life's work from which we have all benefitted. We know the realities of the destruction of so many natural habitats and presence of climate change can fill us with despair. But let's do what we can. How will we do our part to protect wilderness and open space?

Close with words from another 20th-century contemplative who experienced the unity of God's sacred presence through nature was Howard Thurman. He reflected:

The earth beneath my feet is the great womb out of which the life upon which my body depends comes in utter abundance. There is at work in the soil a mystery by which the death of one seed is reborn a thousandfold in newness of life. The magic of wind, sun and rain creates a climate that nourishes every living thing. It is law, and more than law; it is order, and more than order—there is a brooding tenderness out of which it all comes. In the contemplation of the earth, I know that I am surrounded by the love of God. (2)

John Philip Newell (Harper One, 2021) *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul*

Highlights from chapters 6 & 7 (page numbers listed in text)

1) Mark Stoll, "God and John Muir: A Psychological Interpretation of John Muir's Life and Religion,"

The Sierra Club, https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/life/god_john_muir_mark_stoll.aspx

2) Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), 210–211.