

**Creeping Things and Flying Birds:
The Spiritual Contributions of John Muir
and the Natural World**

Psalm 148:1-10

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Each person follows a different path in the discovery and contact with God. Encounters with the sacred vary from reading the Bible in your quiet kitchen over a cup of coffee to attending a concert (Rock, Classical, Jazz, it makes no difference), to sitting in a church to standing on top of a mountain miles from the nearest road or town.

Today I want us to dwell on our contact with the creator and in particular with how our contact and interaction with nature enhances our sense of holiness, majesty, and feeling a part of the world we live in.

I am sure we all agree that the more we feel connected with God and the sacredness of life the better. And I will gladly take it from any source available to me – being with people, reading books, walking the dog, watching a movie, or listening to music, to name a few.

But another way that has meant a great deal to my life is being outdoors, particularly in wild places of nature — whether it be the woods across the street from my house or some remote place in Wyoming I have hiked six hours to see.

Before my family moved to Greensboro in 1972, I lived in Chattanooga, Dallas and Corpus Christi, Texas, and for a brief nine months in Salt Lake City. When my brother Keith and I got old enough to be allowed to explore on our own, we always sought out the wild places available to us by walking, riding our bikes, and later driving.

Even while in college in Charlottesville, despite all the nonsense one could do as a result of a ridiculous amount of free time, (and being away from parental supervision) my favorite activity was riding a bike or driving west into the Blue Ridge for a day of hiking and exploring.

As far as developing a general sense of God's presence, a sense of awe and respect and humility before the creator, I believe that my time in the woods or around fields, creeks rivers, and lakes, was the biggest influence in my life. In ways perhaps I cannot prove, my experiences in the natural world have made me more spiritual or religious in the best sense of the word – more humble, gentle, grateful, respectful, and forgiving.

Of course one can develop these virtues in many other ways. I am only bearing testimony to my life.

Perhaps John Muir, more than any other American, inspired millions of people to see the potential moral and spiritual benefits of spending time in beautiful majestic wild places. He also inspired our government to protect these places, and he is famously known for Yosemite National Park and the Sierra Club. A very religious man, though not by traditional Christian theology or creed, Muir always insisted that these parks and preserves were not just for play but also places to pray, holy places where we can expect to connect with God.

John Muir was born in Scotland in 1838 and died in California in 1914 at the age of seventy-six.

When he was very young his family came to America and settled near what is now Montello, Wisconsin, north of Madison. They made a successful farm out of the wilderness and worked very hard.

As a child Muir was fascinated with plants, animals, insects, all things wild and wonderful, all creatures great and small. As a boy he was driven to learn everything about everything and was a voracious reader. His father made him go to bed at dark with the entire family but allowed him to get up as early as he wanted to read. So he arose at one a.m. and even invented an alarm clock bed that would tilt up and slide him out at the appointed time. There were no schools but through his self-directed education (much like Abraham Lincoln) he qualified to enter the University of Wisconsin based on an interview with the dean.

He never finished college because of a lack of money, and after working various jobs, he decided to go wandering. Carrying typically only dry bread that wouldn't mold and tea and a blanket, he walked from Wisconsin to Savannah, Georgia, taking notes and specimens of all the things he saw. He was particularly impressed with the forests and caves in Kentucky. Of course kind-hearted people along the way offered him food, shelter, and work. Many years later these notes were turned into the book — *The Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*.

Eventually he went to California and spent nine intense years exploring the Yosemite Valley. He also went to Alaska several times and often explored with a Presbyterian Missionary who was there to work with the Indians or Native Americans.

In 1880 at the age of forty-two he married and settled in Martinez, California, in the Bay Area, to grow fruit on twelve hundred acres, mostly grapes.

From July to October when the grapes were ripening and the work was light, his wife Louie was fine with him going off on his adventures to explore wild places.

What interests me most about John Muir are his insights about how contact with nature improves personal conduct, character, and spiritual growth.

I suspect that his writings have had tremendous influence on the Boy Scouts, the YMCA and the church camp movement. While church camps are now struggling financially and being sold off, not too long ago all presbyteries owned a church camp where church people of all ages

could enjoy the outdoors. And while not always stated, the idea was and still is that being in a beautiful quiet more natural place is good for the soul.

Many of you own homes in the mountains or at the beach or on a lake or own a farm for similar reasons — a quiet beautiful place where as Muir would say, one might hope to see or feel God, a place not only to play, rest, relax, or even do physical work different from office work in the city, but a place to pray as well.

A place to experience deep quiet and be able to see the night sky in all its glory. But I think our home on Watauga Drive is pretty amazing too — in my almost fifteen years there I have seen so many wild and wonderful things — foxes, raccoons, opossums, deer, owls, hawks, and even one night a flying squirrel — they really fly, sort of.

One of Muir's greatest disappointment in life was in not being able to prevent the dam being built in the Hetch Hetchy Valley, part of the Yosemite area, one of the most beautiful and sacred places he knew. But the fight was lost to the needs for water in San Francisco. For Muir it was like desecrating a cathedral.

John Muir was very optimistic about human nature and human improvement. He wrote, "If nature is ever being renewed and improved, then surely nature can produce a nobler race of human beings."

While Muir was a very hard-working person when work was required, and obviously a man of prodigious energy, he was also a great advocate of what we call today a balanced life. He was against what we now call consumerism or working ourselves silly to buy stuff we don't need and does not enhance the spiritual quality of our lives. He always believed that more contact with nature inspires people to a higher ethic, a greater decency. He believed with all his heart, soul, mind and strength that standing before a waterfall or walking in a meadow or climbing a mountain gave people reverence, restraint, generosity, and vision.

Even Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian whose systematic theology runs six million words and eight thousand pages, loved to climb in the Alps and wrote many of his books in a secluded mountain cabin. But he also loved Mozart and felt God in music as well.

I have not always felt rapture and transcendence in the great outdoors. There have been flies and gnats and mosquitos. Once Kate and I climbed a ridge to be transported by a majestic view and instead found at the top, inexplicably, a rusted out abandoned school bus. I believe that is today called a buzz killer.

While fly fishing a beautiful stream outside of Cody, Wyoming, and landing a nice trout on a dry fly and watching the fish rise to take it, full of spiritual joys and mystical rapture, I waded back to the car to be greeted by the largest swarm of mosquitoes I had ever seen. The air was almost black with them. My thoughts quickly turned from God to the devil and my choice of words from the church parlor to the pool hall.

Perhaps God was having a good laugh and reminding me that life is not quite as predictable or wonderful as we wish.

But I thank God for all the great moments outdoors, and I await many more. It is one good way to connect, and connecting with our maker is good indeed. Amen.