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Where does nature live?

Chase Nordengren | Sep. 13, 2012 Young Voices

One of my most cherished memories from college is of a guest lecture [1] by the late Fr. Jim Edmiston, hosted by my friends and me at The Catholic University of America's chapter of Pax Christi. Fr. Jim, a Franciscan friar and an entomologist, and gave us a small window into the joy and awe he witnessed in the study of fly DNA. His message that day: Get St. Francis' love of nature "out of the birdbath" and into the metaphysical meditations of Christian faith.

Our political debates about the environment -- on slowing global warming, controlling toxins in the air and water, and protecting biodiversity -- are essential ones for persons of faith. Without doubt, we have an obligation to protect God's creation simply because it was created by God and entrusted to us. Still, Francis did more than protect the natural world: He loved it in its individual parts. How we love our natural world may therefore require a more spiritual response.

I thought of Fr. Jim as I stumbled upon and learned more about [2] a quote by the poet Frank O'Hara that now sits on a fence in Battery Park in Manhattan.

"I can't even enjoy a blade of grass," O'Hara writes [3], "unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally *regret* life."

O'Hara's approach is one way to bring our love out of the birdbath.

In certain important respects, God creates natural complexity that we conscious creatures might discover that complexity. Our ability to classify species, to climb trees, to study fly DNA, and to do these things with joy makes us Francis-like in understanding nature as a series of relationships, as a world we must relate to.

Yet another approach is exemplified by Henry David Thoreau.

"I went to the woods," Thoreau famously wrote [4], "because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." Only by shedding society, shedding the unnecessary, Thoreau argues, can one be positive one has allowed creation to shape "the medium through which we look" at our day-to-day lives.

The simple and the complex. The individual and the social. The joyful and the sublime. O'Hara and Thoreau err perhaps on opposite sides of this dichotomy. Francis, the hermit who started a religious order, the smiling monk with the stigmata, the man with no possessions about whom volumes were written, doesn't neatly fit in either place.

Francis realized, Fr. Jim argued, that "God is a lover," that Christ was the center of God's love and the center of God's creation, that through him all things were created and that Christ shares existence with every living thing. Awakening to this, Fr. Jim argues, was Francis' "inspiration." "The fullness of Jesus Christ is encountered in every part of creation." That approach is ethical, certainly, but is primarily spiritual, grounded in respect,

flourishing in love.

Science is founded on the notion, developed by 13th-century Franciscans like Bonaventure and Scotus, that something informative can come from nature. The naturalism of the hermit, of Thoreau, shares the idea that nature can teach us something about how to live. Even O'Hara proclaims the trees can understand him, that when he lies under them, he's "just like a pile of leaves."

A few months after Fr. Jim's death, the Franciscan Monastery in Washington, D.C., erected a butterfly garden on its grounds in his honor. It is a source of quiet and stillness in the middle of a major city. One never gets the sense, however, that the garden or the Franciscans or Fr. Jim reject the city, reject the bustle, reject the signs outside the stillness that life is not regretted. Like the visiting butterflies, they and we live somewhere between the two.

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