

How Nature Prays

A. Stephen Van Kuiken
Lake Street Church
Evanston, IL
February 21, 2016

Ancient Witness: Job 12:7-10

About 30 years ago, Barry and Ann Ulanov wrote a classic book on prayer titled, *Primary Speech*. The book begins with these words:

Everybody prays. People pray whether or not they call it prayer. We pray every time we ask for help, understanding, or strength, in or out of religion. Then, who and what we are speak out of us whether we know it or not. Our movements, our stillness, the expressions on our faces, our tone of voice, our actions, what we dream and daydream, as well as what we actually put into words say who and what we are.

In prayer we say who in fact we are – not who we should be, not who we wish we were, but who we are.

The irony is that often when we think we are praying we are not, and when we are completely unaware of it – when praying is the farthest thing from our minds – we are. So often when we are praying in the traditional sense, it is not “who and what we are” speaking out of us.

So often when we think we are praying it is not our essential or true self that is speaking. So often we pray *the way we think we should* be praying. And “who and what we are” have been run through the ego, which is a filter – a filter of respectability, of expectations, of social pressure, of many things – and what comes out is not the true self speaking but a false self. Human beings are unique in this way. When we hear the sound of the Holy One, it comes very naturally for us to hide and to cover up our nakedness, our true selves. As human beings we wear a mask for every occasion, and try as we might they are almost impossible to remove. When we think we've been able to remove one mask, there is another one underneath. This is simply part of the human condition. Honesty and transparency – if attained at all – are fleeting and momentary.

Again, as the Ulanovs wrote,

In prayer we say who in fact we are – not who we should be, nor who we wish we were, but who we are.

Put this way, true prayer in the traditional verbal sense is an impossible goal, rarely attained by human beings.

The Ulanovs put it another way. “Prayer,” they write,

is that primordial discourse in which we assert, however clumsily or eloquently, our own being.

I just got back from Nicaragua, where we walked across the countryside from village to village, experiencing the gorgeous mountains, animals and nature. My central point as we reflect this morning is that nature can help us learn to “assert our own being.” Those wild things, to whom we

feel so superior, actually can teach us how to truly pray. The animals and plants, birds and flowers, can help us remember that “primordial discourse” that we’ve outgrown.

This is not an easy message to hear. As human beings we assume that we are so advanced or evolved or developed that we couldn’t possibly learn from insects or trees or even children of those who have cognitive disabilities.

Many of you are familiar with the story of Job. Job was a wealthy man, living a life relatively free of worldly cares. Catastrophe strikes out of the blue, and he is faced with the question about human suffering and why a loving God might allow it.

Even though Job was a person of faith and integrity, he loses his wealth, his health and his children, finding himself in misery and despair. When his friends attempt to comfort Job, they say that he must have done something wrong to deserve it. “You should repent,” they say, “since you brought all this on yourself. You must have had it coming.” Zophar, one of his friends (!), accuses Job of being a liar and a hypocrite and that these evil things are simply the consequences of his own sins.

Our passage picks up with Job’s reply to Zophar. He begins first with a very sarcastic line:

*No doubt you are the people,
And wisdom will die with you. (vs. 2)*

Job says, “You think you know it all, that when you’re gone wisdom itself will be dead, too.”

He admits that he is a “laughingstock.” “But,” he says, “that doesn’t make you superior to me.”

*I have understanding as well as you;
I am not inferior to you. (vs. 3)*

“Furthermore,” he says, “you are not superior to things in nature. You have things to learn even from the wild beasts and the plants.”

*But ask the beasts, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
or the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you. (vs. 7-8)*

There is a famous passage of Jesus speaking of anxiety and trust (Matthew 6:25-34, Luke 12:22-31) when he also says we have much to learn from things in nature:

*Look at the birds of the air:
they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns*

*Consider the lilies of the field,
how they grow; they neither toil nor spin*

*Therefore do not be anxious, saying,
“What shall we eat?” or
“What shall we drink?” or
“What shall we wear?” (vs. 26, 28, 31)*

Look at the birds. Consider the lilies. Follow them. Become their disciples. Ask them and they'll teach you. Learn from them. Let them tell you

how to say who we are
how to live truly
how to assert our own being
how to be at one with ourself

In other words, let them show you *how to pray*.

How does nature pray?
Not with words or thoughts or concepts.
Not with images or music or contemplation.
Nature prays by *doing*.

The prayers are acts of hope, acts of trust.

A dandelion sprouting up through the cracks in the cement is a profound prayer, and expression of hope and trust.
The bird singing and chirping at the dawn is prayer.
The salmon spawning in the stream is prayer.
The wolf, suckling and nurturing its young is prayer.

These prayers reflect a hope and trust that doesn't worry about what the future will bring. The eggs are collected, the animals are slaughtered, the fields are plowed under, but the prayers keep coming. Ceaselessly and against all odds, they keep coming and coming, these acts embody hope and trust. We learn from nature that the purest form of prayer is to *live hopefully*, no matter what the circumstances might be.

Who we are speaks most clearly out of our actions. We assert our being, our truest selves, through what we do.

One of my father's favorite aphorisms was "actions speak louder than words." And nature instructs us that this is especially true with prayer. Jesus got at this from a different angle when he said,

*Where your treasure is,
there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:21, Luke 12:34)*

In other words, where you put your time, energy and money is what really matters to you, no matter what you say. Another version could be,

*Where your actions are,
there is your true prayer.*

In nature we see creatures that are at one with themselves, and they express who they truly are with every action, without anxiety or worry. I'm not saying that creatures don't experience pain; they do. But they don't compound their pain with self-pity, worry and despair. Their lives are an elegant prayer, asserting their being, their hopes, their desire to live and reproduce. Listen to what the poet Walt Whitman wrote in *Song of Myself*:

*I think I could turn and live with animals, they are
so placid and self-contained.*

*I stand and look at them long and long.
They do not sweat and whine about their condition.
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep
for their sins . . .*

*Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with
The mania of owning things . . .
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.*

*So they show their relations to me and I accept them,
They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them
plainly in their possession.*

Be not anxious. Don't worry about tomorrow. Ask the beasts, and they will teach you.

I remember something that theologian Charles Birch once wrote. He was talking about how Jesus operated as savior, which means to bring healing and wholeness to people.

There are two ways of living, a sick way which is unauthentic and a healthy way which is authentic living. In unauthentic living we allow ourselves to be molded by what we think others expect of us. We convince ourselves that we really do feel what we are expected to feel. We allow our self-image to be constructed by others. Such living is unauthentic precisely because it hides our real self. The unauthentic life may hide itself behind a barrier of assumed confidence, even arrogance. Yet all the while there is a deep inner longing to drop the mask, to be open, real and honest to those around us. The authentic way is to be ourselves and not to lie to ourselves.

Yet it was these sorts of (unauthentic) people who brought themselves to Jesus: split, contradicting themselves, disgusted and despairing about themselves, hateful of themselves, hostile toward everybody else, afraid of life, burdened with guilt feelings, accusing and excusing themselves, fleeing from others into loneliness, fleeing from themselves. Jesus gave them back to their real selves as new beings. (p. 43-43, Regaining Compassion)

This problem of being split, of unauthenticity, is something we all have as humans, but nature does not. And so we need healing and wholeness in a way that nature does not. We need instruction to help us remember that “primordial discourse,” to be able to say and express who, in fact, we are.

In his book, *The Power of Myth*, the late Joseph Campbell said,

People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonance within our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. (p. 3)

I think this is what Jesus was talking about. This is what the animals and birds, the plants and fish can teach us. They can help us to be at one with ourselves again. They can show us how to live each moment as an expression of hope and trust, each moment as a statement of who we are – not who we should be or wish we were. They can show us how to live each moment as a prayer and help us remember the rapture of being alive.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)

Call to Commitment: William Cleary

A Mourning Dove I be, small, grayish-brown with spotted tail,
A tiny dash of pink beneath my chin,
And though I mourn, I coo a song of courage through the pain,
to bravely never-mind what might have been.
Good God, beneath the mystery of sorrow and despair,
We also hear a clear creative call.
So doves accept the role of making music out of pain,
Yet adding tones of hope beneath it all.