

Are You A Religious Naturalist Without Knowing It?

We humans are narrative beings. We are storytellers. Communication between beings is everywhere, but we are unique in that we communicate with symbolic language, wherein symbols point to underlying meanings and understandings. We then organize and remember our understandings as narratives. The logic of explanations, of descriptions, of instructions all take narrative form. Indeed, our very selves take narrative form: we each construct a narrative self.

Each religious tradition can be said to have its core narrative, often referred to as its Mythos, a term that connotes a large story. The life of the Buddha or Christ, the sagas of the peoples of Israel or the Greek gods, the elaborate adventures of the Hindu deities – these accounts can be said to “define” a tradition. Interpretations of the mythos and moral/ethical edicts are built into the fabric of each religious narrative and are elaborated by clerics. Spiritual responses to the mythos are elicited and supported by wondrous art and ceremony.

In these traditions, nature is usually framed with respect to the human. In indigenous perspectives, animals are endowed with human sensibilities; in theistic accounts, nature is created by a god with human attributes. The natural world is commonly depicted as a human resource.

Scientific inquiry has provisioned us with a mind-blowing core narrative—the story of the cosmos and our place within it – where its coherence is a very recent achievement. Of the many names on offer – the Universe Story, the Epic of Evolution, the History of Nature, the Epic of Creation, the New Story – my favorite is Everybody’s

Story, since it conveys a foundational concept: this is a narrative about us all. The account is based on human discoveries but it was not written by humans, and indeed, humans don't show up until the very last moment, albeit our evolution is anticipated in all of its biological chapters.

Here's a quick version of Everybody's Story:

Once upon a time, 13.7 billion years ago, a singularity let loose as the Big Bang, and then as galaxies with stars, and then as nucleosynthesis in dying stars, with supernovas spreading new kinds of atoms throughout the expanding universe.

Four and a half billion years ago, the detritus from a supernova swirled into our star and our planets, and since then the earth has been churning and shifting and subducting and uplifting in stupendous fashion.

Maybe three and a half billion years ago, life originated from non-life and then set out on its astonishing evolutionary trajectories, where all of modern life -- all the bacteria and fungi and plants and amoebae and humans -- all share common ancestry with ancient life forms and hence with one another.

Once animals with brains showed up, some 500 million years ago, we can tell the story of the Evolution of Minds, with social minds arising maybe 300 million years ago, hominid minds 6 million years ago, and human minds perhaps 160,000 years ago.

So -- clearly a very large story, one that merits the designation of Mythos.

Someone who takes nature seriously, who adopts this account as a core narrative, can be said to be a naturalist. A religious naturalist goes on to ask: Are there ways to work with this narrative religiously? What is its religious potential? What is its interpretive potential? Its spiritual potential? Its moral potential? Here are some thoughts.

The interpretive axis of any religious tradition – akin to the theological or philosophical -- entails probing the narrative for its Meanings: what does it tell me about Incarnation? Suffering? Death? Free will? And, of course, the big one: is nature all there is, or is there “Something Else” in addition, be it God, or an afterlife, or a timeless consciousness that moves in and out of beings?

Persons who couple the natural world with Something Else face a set of additional questions: What is the relationship of this Something Else to the natural world? What is its agency? Its presence? That said, the coupling also offers some answers; for example, the Purpose and Value of the natural world can be attributed to this Something Else, as in “God gives my life meaning.”

The alternative axis of interpretation, which I’ve adopted, can be called non-theistic: Nature is all that we know there to be; its source is a mystery; its dynamics generate emergent phenomena of increasing complexity. Full stop. How might one find Purpose and Value in such a perspective?

There are many responses, but my own is to suggest that Purpose and Value originated with the onset of life. I find purpose and valuation in every organism, every biological trait, every adaptation, every humming bird dipping into a flower with its exquisitely

shaped beak. Traits are about something, for something. They have been evaluated and selected in their ecological contexts. Therefore, for me, the continuation and flourishing of life has deep and intrinsic Value and Purpose.

Moving next to the spiritual dimension of religious experience, where the spiritual entails inward responses to one's core narrative, the menu is rich. Nature elicits both awe and humility. There's the gratitude and astonishment of being alive at all; there's reverence for nature's outrageous beauty and complexity; there's the joy of participation.

And finally, what about the moral/ethical, which entails outward communal responses to one's core narrative? Here many argue that while nature may tell us how things are, it doesn't tell us how things ought to be nor how we should behave; moral precepts must come, it is argued, "from without."

This perspective is countered by students of our primate lineage, like Frans de Waal, who lift up "the antiquity of our moral sense." Our moral history, as reflected in the group life of modern non-human primates, includes robust nurture of the young by all troop members, strong friendship bonds, empathy towards the suffering of others, and complex patterns of reciprocity and respect. These traits have not been left in the evolutionary dustbin. Nor are they experienced as non-human primates experience them. They are experienced the way human minds experience things: symbolically. Our symbolic language has generated the capacity to transfigure our proto-moral sensibilities into concepts, such that we speak of nurture in terms of care and love, empathy in terms of compassion, and reciprocity in terms of fair-mindedness.

Critically, the religious naturalist is also called to an orientation we can call **ecomorality** – the recognition that morality is a far larger concept than human interactions, that the earth itself merits our respect and responsibility.

Ecomorality, I would say, entails holding an intimate science-based knowledge of the history and the workings of the natural world, its interrelatedness and interdependence. (Timothy Ferris once quipped that “Some people will do just about anything to save the planet except take a science course.” If this describes you, I urge you to move past it: scientific understandings are thrilling!) Importantly, humans and their cultures are a part of the natural world and not something separate. Ecomorality entails accepting, and then rejoicing in, one’s critterhood, one’s connectedness with all other beings and all those beings who can be said to have “died for us”.

So what’s the difference between a naturalist and a religious naturalist? Both take nature seriously; both adopt Everybody’s Story as their core narrative. And then, in the words of Loyal Rue, the religious naturalist also takes nature to heart. Here’s how he explains this sensibility:

If I were to say that I have taken the Koran to heart, you might infer that the teachings of the Koran now shape how I think, feel and act. I now take Allah’s will as my own, and I have a newly clarified sense of who I am, where I came from, and where I am going. Taking the Koran to heart alters the fabric of my self-understanding, it shifts my teleological center of gravity, and I operate differently in my efforts to live in harmony with that reality.

Taking something to heart means, of course, that your heart can be broken: you experience moral outrage when that which is revered is desecrated, when the ice is melting and extinctions are rampant and too many children are starving.

And critically, taking Nature to heart means acting on that outrage, joining with other religious naturalists in a valiant quest for earthly balance and sustainability and dignity.

Reading of *Wild Geese* by Mary Oliver