

The Ministries of Nature

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NATURE, or rather the joys which we receive in a vision of the splendour and glory of Nature, must be placed among the first of our pleasures. As children we found delight in her as we gathered the early flowers of spring, and that delight has grown with the thoughts and sights of later years. Many things have come and gone since our childhood days, but the wonders of the creation have retained their old-time sweetness. They are ever young, and the life-like studies of the artist will fade and stain, and the life-like studies of the sculptor will decay, but the lilies of the field are still arrayed in a glory greater than that of Solomon, and a star in the heavens might still guide the traveller on land and sea like the one that led the shepherds to the manger at Bethlehem.



BLOODROOT

It is not difficult to account for our delight in this beautiful world of Nature, for we are part of it. Man is the fruit which cost all the foregoing ages to form and ripen; he is the finite and summary of all things. In him, the life, which our Creator has put into all things, returns to its Maker. Apart from our intimate connection with Nature, the mother of us all, how numerous and varied are the aspects of her beauty; the summer glory of the woodlands; the majestic sweep of the hills as they rise and fall on the far horizon; the glassy lake hemmed in by trees—an emblem of sweet repose; the mighty ocean moved by tidal hanging its waves with a thunder-like roll, to the fast-speeding clouds; the soft carpet of grass making the earth so fair; spring with its wakening mystery of life; summer with many flowers of varied colors; autumn with its golden and winter with its crystal mantle of whitest snow; corn and many tints of falling leaves; the delicate scents of the rose and violet; the peach and pear; the sweet music of the lark as she greets the rising sun; the blue dragon fly as it darts like a javelin over the reeds in the slough. These are but a few of the glories and voices of Nature, and if we are not blind and deaf they must fill our hearts with gladness and our lips with praise. It is the palace of the King of kings and, as we wander through its courts we are filled with adoration and thanksgiving. The soul is satisfied with her loveliness. She delights to exalt and gladden us with a spectacle which appeals to the lowliest and for which the poorest have nothing to pay.

What more can be said of Nature's kind influence on the human life? One who is keenly alive to all the ministries to which he is called by The Almighty Giver has expressed that influence where he says, "There is religion in everything around us, a calm and holy religion in the unbreathing things of Nature which man would do well to imitate. It is a sweet and blessed influence stealing in as it were unawares upon the heart, it comes quietly and without excitement, it is untrammelled by the creeds and unshadowed by the superstitions of man; it is fresh from the hands of the author glowing from the immediate presence which prevades and quickens it; it is the poetry of Nature, it is this which uplifts the spirit within us until it is strong enough to overlook the place of our probation; which breaks link after link the chain that binds us to materiality and which opens to our imagination a world of spiritual beauty and holiness."

Having considered the aspects of Nature, let us now consider the Ministry of Nature. We find that she can attend to our needs in many ways as a ministry of joy, a ministry of beauty, of rest, of assimilation, and as a teacher.

In every scene of Nature we find joy, and into her elements she infuses a kindred mood. She pleases all who love her. She delights the child, being herself a perfect child, and she charms the poet because she revels in a spontaneous play of life that cannot be criticized by the intellect of man. When we turn to Nature as a friend there is not a flower on prairie, a leaf in the forest, or a bird in the air, which does not share its life with us and breath its benediction upon us.

We do not merely receive from Nature what we give, but

she gives us something better than we take. The joy of Nature is not the simple projection of our joy upon her, but as Wordsworth puts it, "The Joy of God in His own life." God, Himself, renews each moment His ancient rapture in the continuous act of creation. Therefore, though we may enter her presence weary and sorrowful, we soon catch from her some of her joy; her sunlight strikes in our hearts and she heals with her soft air the wounds received in the battle of life. For every sickness she has some medicine and for every hurt some balm. She takes our graves unto herself and covers them with flowers, the symbols of the resurrection.

Nature is a ministry of rest, a deep calm is in the heart of Nature. The sun makes no clatter with his fiery hoofs as he ascends the sky, and the moon glides on her journey with the silence of a silver dream. Nature's life is at peace, for her children never wage a foolish war with her, neither does self enter lives to make them restless. The peaceful things of Nature give of their own peace to restore our hearts. Wordsworth often tells us how in the midst of noisy sport the voice of Nature would still him for a time into thoughtfulness. Once when resting near the lakeside and the whole scene entered his soul, he wrote:

"The calm
And dead still waters lay upon my mind
Even with a weight of pleasure, and the sky,
Never before so beautiful, sank down
Into my heart and held me like a dream."

According to this great poet this peace of Nature is the ineffable calm of God's existence speaking to us for our own redemption.

The ministry of Nature is a ministry of beauty, exalting the soul. The poetry of the earth is never dead. Nature gives to every season some beauty of its own. All the gifts of God bring a double blessing, and many gifts in Nature are for beauty and for use. The wheat falls to the reaper in lances of gold, feeding the soul before it feeds the body. Water, too, is not for use only, but also for beauty, breaking into a diamond spray as it hits the rock in its downward race on the mountain side. Everywhere beauty is enthroned. The commonest piece of grass with its straightness of stem and flowing contrast of its leaves, is a wonder of loveliness, and for what purpose is this beauty given unless it is to win us from our meanness and shame us from our sin? The beauty of Nature speaks to us very much as the purity of the infant speaks to the sinner as he gazes upon its innocent face. It seems to say, "From this state thou hast fallen, such thou shouldest still become. What the flower is unconsciously such must thou make thyself consciously; by penitence and prayer thou must return to thy lost paradise."

It was by this sweet rebuke of Nature's loveliness that Wordsworth was redeemed from worldly pleasures. He was returning home after a night of merriment at a country dance, when through the vision of a glorious sunrise the will of

God was revealed to him and he was consecrated to his great calling as Nature's poet-priest.

Nature is a ministry of assimilation. There is in our human poetry in those lines of Russell Lowell in which he pictures himself as receiving some special gift from the things he loves. Turning to the forest oak he begs it to give him of its steadfastness

"That the world's blasts may round me blow
And I yield gently to and fro
While my stout-hearted trunk below
And firm set roots unshaken be."

Then to the granite he asks some portion of its
"Stern unyielding might
Enduring still through day and night
Rude tempest shock and withering blight."



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