

Meaning in Mini Migrations

In this time of pandemic, I often reflect on what is *endemic* to our worldviews. What is the lens we see through, and do we even have “the eyes to see and ears to hear” what is really happening around us and *in* us?

I tend to turn to wise voices in history who exhibit a wiser, wider and wilder outlook on things—which quite naturally means a deeper “in-look” at things as well. They speak to the Big Picture while bringing it home to the human species and our minuscule part in the nature of things.

Are we willing to face up to how small we are, how powerless, how much we’re not in control? By the way, this is a question for all of us, religious or secular.

One of the most inspiring passages in the entire “Gospel of John Muir” concerns the self-importance of humans:

“The world, we are told, was made especially for [humanity]—a presumption not supported by all the facts.” (A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf, 1916)

Muir goes on to expose the arrogant brand of theology that assumes all animals are placed on the planet for our use and consumption. Sheep, whales, plants are all here “for us.” But then Muir turns the tables. What about predators? What was God’s plan with lions, alligators, bears, sharks (viruses!)—those creatures who can be deadly to human beings?

“Now, it never seems to occur to these far-seeing teachers that Nature’s object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one.” He continues his freethought sermon in the face of the orthodox preachers:

“Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit—the cosmos?”

Thus our secular saint brings us to this startling, stunning sentence:

“The universe would be incomplete without [humanity]; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest transmicroscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceitful eyes and knowledge.”

I’ve seen a copy of *The Origin of Species* in the Muir house in Martinez, California. Though Muir carried the Bible in his head from early memorization, he also carried Darwin, Humboldt and the poetry of Robert Burns in his active brain. He was a man of science and skepticism, though he still had a “Lord” in his life (often using “God” and “Nature” interchangeably). He wasn’t stuck in books though, holy or otherwise. He absorbed the world through his senses and responded as a student, with down-to-earth common sense and logic.

So here we have Muir—the mountain man who felt that he was endemic in Nature and the natural world was intrinsic to him. One use of the word endemic relates to a plant or animal that is “native and restricted to a certain place.” In this sense, Muir, in fact all human beings, are native to certain places—and, we might say, native to the earth itself.

Yet think of migration—the migrant movements of living things across the planet. As National Geographic describes it, “*Many animal species migrate, including species of fish, crustaceans, amphibians, reptiles, insects, and mammals. These animals might journey by land, sea, or air to reach their destination, often crossing vast distances and in large numbers*” (<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/migration/>). And while migration is often a return trip, emigration is moving to new habitation, re-locating to a new home (a good or bad journey for human migrants as well).

Enter one way of viewing viruses. As Muir reminded us, even the smallest of microscopic critters is a critical part of the whole picture, the complete natural creation. So, as creepy as it may sound, and as tragic as it may prove to our one species among all, *a virus is an animal on the move, using us for transportation, and maybe killing us along the way*. It means us no harm; there is no intention to sicken or kill, of course. But we still speak of “fighting a war” against these innocent “beasts” on the attack.

Would it help to re-frame a pandemic in this way, on this micro-level? No doubt there will be resistance, even as we try to build our resistance to the infection.

We may find another image helpful, or not: When Henry Thoreau was returning from a river journey with his older brother John in 1839, he was reflecting on what may await them back in Concord. Maybe they would find seasonal work as autumn began, or,

“Perhaps Nature would condescend to make use of us even without our knowledge, as when we help to scatter her seeds in our walks, and carry burs and cockles on our clothes from field to field” (A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, 1849).

But what if we *did* have knowledge, we were aware of what Nature is doing, of how Nature is using us to propagate? Would we happily participate in the fecundity, the endless process of new life on the planet? Maybe we would ... if it didn’t kill us!

Like all predators we want to kill this one before it kills us. It’s our grizzly, our wolf, our rattlesnake, our great white. Because we don’t know how to tame it, we fear it, and wipe it out—if we can. Or, we somehow find a way to co-exist with it, to live with our fear and manage it—if we can. And maybe we can’t always overcome that greatest of all our fears: our powerlessness.

I suppose a main lesson we have presented here is that *we are participants in the pageant, even the deadly parade*, the migration and emigration endemic to who we are. Humanity should keep in mind the significant but “small part” we play in the creative drama that is forever permeated (infected?) with the terrifying potential for destruction and death.

Medical professionals tell us we always have viruses in our bodies (viruses may be more numerous than stars in the universe! <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/factors-allow-viruses-infect-humans-coronavirus/>). *They are residents sharing the human hotel.* Biologists tell us we are made of a living soup of cells—bone, blood and brain in a watery broth of bacteria. Makes you proud to be human? I wonder. But maybe we ought to be proud, content to be hosting so many “guests” at one time and, generally, we all get along fairly well!

To be honest, maybe we should be proud of our soupy species and grateful for our wild, animal nature, while at the same time humbled by the humus we emerged from—the same teeming soil where viruses also live and move and have being.

Chris Highland
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