Nearer to Wonder—A Response to Religious Naturalism

-Specifically a response to "Old Trees, Stardust, and Moments of Wonder: An Introduction to Religious Naturalism," by Rex Hunt (*The Fourth R*)

Sometime in February of 1867, **Emerson** scribbled in his journal that when he used words like "God" or "soul" these were "not part of any system, but spontaneous, and the nearest word I could find to the thing." When considering the dirt and the divine, soil and the sacred, earthly and heavenly things, we might keep Emerson's guideline in mind. We're really on the search for words, ways to incarnate our experiences in language. And we often *blunder in the wonder*—we speak too soon, calling attention to ourselves, our beliefs about the world, instead of paying closer attention to what's there—the world in the raw, naked, without the shaming clothes of beliefs.

In his presentation of Religious Naturalism (full disclosure: I've been a member of the online **Religious Naturalists Association** for several years), Hunt chooses convenient terms like *sacred*, *spiritual* and of course *God,* though we find those placeholders hot and slippery to handle. "Placeholders"—that's perhaps the word I've been looking for myself. Like Emerson, we simply don't know what to say, what to call something or some experience, so we reach for the "nearest word" that seems to fit. That's human, natural. Yet, we ought to admit the inadequacy of our words and the fact that nonsense is not natural—we make up words to stand for something we imagine. We pick a placeholder.

The writer claims we are "enmeshed in nature," linked in a "web," and "we are the universe in the form of a human … the universe reflecting on itself." This holds a degree of attraction for me and I'm intrigued by the images. And yet, we see shapeless shadows of the old anthropomorphisms. Hunt asserts: "Such naturalistic wonder and awe counts as deeply spiritual." Does it? Remove the latter part of that sentence and we are left with naturalistic wonder and awe, and that "counts" as is, does it not? Deeply emotive, perhaps, but no "spirituality" necessary.

Sauntering in nearby **Great Smoky Mountains National Park** my wife and I are grateful to find well-maintained, well-marked trails. We need the signs; the first inhabitants did not. Others flout any regard for "Leave No Trace" by carving their names into trees or defacing rocks. I sometimes think of Religion that way. There is a tendency to deface the world, mark it up with distracting signs. We can't seem to help defacing a world—a universe—with our own faces. In doing this we disrespect both nature and ourselves.

Consider the assortment of "ologies" and "isms," particularly theisms. These can, if we're not careful, restrict our thinking and our expressions of our experience. I propose that what we are really talking about with these slippery spiritual semantics is what we may call **Wonderism** (or Wonderology). We are filled with wonder—wonder full—and the words come spilling out but we literally don't know what we're saying; all we know to say, if we have to say anything (and we don't, you know), is something about "spiritual things." But there are no spiritual "things," only ideas in our heads and they just don't correspond to what's there, what we see and hear and feel in moments of wonder. We are caught up in Wonderism and turn it into a babbling stream of meaningless words that somehow feel meaningful—because they're "supposed" to feel meaningful; that's what we've been hoodwinked to believe.

In Chile during his voyage on the Beagle (1834), **Charles Darwin** wrote: "I took several long walks while collecting objects of natural history … I did not cease from wonder." Arriving in San Salvador (1836), Darwin wrote: "When quietly walking along the shady pathways, and admiring each successive view, one wishes to find language to express one's ideas. Epithet after epithet is found too weak to convey … the sensation of delight which the mind experiences."

Darwin and Emerson identify our dilemma—how we describe our world delights or distracts. And we ought to be suspicious of those descriptions. Accuracy is important and actually elicits an indescribable delight (a phrase **John Muir** used). For the scientific or naturalist mind, an analysis of what is presented before their senses is worthy of wonder. Epithets may be weak and we wish to find language—accurate, descriptive, true language—to express what we see and how we see it.

What I suppose I've been preparing to say here is this: **Religion replaced God and God replaced Nature**. Nature must be restored to its rightful place, above all religion—even "naturalized" religion—, above any god. Religion destroys Wonder. It blocks our view; screens our perceptions. By laying traps for wonder, Religion attempts to capture it in the "holy" (set apart), in boxes of belief called holy spaces or holy scriptures, guarded by nonsensical words like "sacred," "divine" and "spiritual." All the while, the Wild, the wildness, the wilderness—full of wonder, saturated with wonder—runs free, impossible to dominate or domesticate. We could truly say Religion replaced God and God replaced Nature, as we wandered off the trail of truth, lost our way in the forest of faith.

In an essay on "Nature" (1844), **Emerson** poetically reflects on the wind in the trees and fields, the crackling of pine logs in a fire, and concludes: "These are the music and pictures of the most ancient religion." His interest is centered in the "original beauty" in

nature, marred by “the poorness of our invention” and the “ugliness” of our cities and impositions upon the natural world. Emerson was identifying a kind of religion behind Religion—something much deeper in fact, and yet, like the beauty presented by his senses, it is a religion that needs no “poorness of invention,” no religion or religious language.

I follow the conversations of Religious Naturalists because it’s clear they seek to appeal to progressive believers as well as “spiritually intrigued” scientists, naturalists and philosophers who are seeking to “discover the sacred” in nature. This might be understood as a step toward Emerson’s “most ancient religion.” However, I no longer find that satisfying or, frankly, all that honest. Labeling nature, or essential parts of nature, with ancient supernatural terms, does that same thing the old theologies do: attracts and distracts up, up and away from the world as physical world and nature as material nature. We don’t hear wind in the trees, the songs of the birds or crickets, or the crackle of the fire; we hear “spiritual” things, and we, and our world, are much poorer for it.

When Hunt lays out the four perspectives of “G-O-D” I quickly see I don’t accept any of them. Though during one stage of my emergence from theism I was comfortable with a pantheistic or panentheistic view, I personally don’t find a home with that thinking, no ground beneath my feet. Religious Naturalism as presented here, may be a step forward from traditional religious paths or a kind of backward step toward the intrinsic interrelationships practiced by indigenous peoples (most ancient religions?), yet I’m still left wondering where this is taking us. As Hunt says: “Nature can be a focus of religious attention.” Yes, it can, and has been for a long time in many cultures. Yet, all my questions remain and boil down to the most fundamental: Why isn’t nature enough to invite our attention and excite our wonder? In my mind, it is.

Scientific activity engages questions great and small, investigating, studying, naming, reaching tentative conclusions—and this process can seem like a cold box to package wonder in too. But the mission of the investigative mind is qualitatively different from the mission of the religious will. As Harvard biologist **E.O. Wilson** writes: “The cost to society as a whole of the bowed head has been enormous” (*The Meaning of Human Existence*). Nature does not need and cannot ask for worship or any kind of “reverence.” We have to lift up our heads, open our eyes, and look nature directly in the eye (the beetle, the bird, the elephant, the orca, the storm, the black hole) and not allow ourselves the sleight of hand or slight of mind that would make of nature a sanctuary with spiritual furniture resting on super-natural semantics.

Closing out his argument, Hunt presents the possibility of religiously-inclined naturalists to create new "rituals and practices … communal celebrations." That could be interesting to see, though a walk in the woods could accomplish something similar—if we're paying attention (not necessarily "religious attention"). At the conclusion, the writer offers an encapsulated definition or summary of RN: It is "an emergent religious ethical orientation." I understand. But this is one trail I can't take, because I've taken it before, and simply can't hike it again.

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