

God can always be found in the natural world

Sharon Abercrombie | Jan. 24, 2012 Eco Catholic

When Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr joined the order in 1961, he learned that no one in the community was allowed to cut down a tree unless the provincial gave his permission to do so.

This tradition was a "little bit of Francis that lasted 800 years," Rohr said, writing [in his daily meditation website last week](#) [1]. Rohr is founding director of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, N.M.

As the seesaw "we win-you lose" conflict between corporations and environmentalists continues and our poor planet grows sicker by the day, the priest's recent columns are especially timely. They present us with a concise overview tracing how we divorced ourselves from the natural world, and with it, part of our souls.

Rohr reminds us that before 800 B.C., the thinking of the whole planet, no matter the continent, was tribal, cosmic, mythic and ritualistic. He writes, "simply by watching the sky, birds and trees, the seasons, darkness and light, people knew they belonged. British philosopher Owen Barfield conjectures they might have had healthier psyches than we do because they lived in an enchanted universe where everything belonged, including themselves. The natural cycles of darkness and light, death and growth, loss and renewal, which were everywhere all the time, were their teachers."

Rohr continues: With the progression of civilization, "we decided we were better, smarter and more evolved." Yet before this began to happen, "most people were learning of the divine through the natural world. God did not leave them orphans. They perhaps saw and met God in everything."

Religion in those times was much more about healing and harmonizing. "Salvation was not a reward you got after you died for good moral behavior. God could be found now and in all things."

Rohr reminds us that Jesus' spirituality was immersed in the natural world: "Jesus says matter and spirit, divine and human are not enemies, but in fact are two sides of the same coin. They reveal one another and are finally one! That is the meaning of his two raised fingers in much of Christian art."

The Franciscan's words led me to the bookcase for my well-worn copies of *The Hidden Gospel* and *Prayers of the Cosmos*. American Sufi scholar Saadi Neil Douglas-Klotz's amazing research takes us to the Aramaic world of Yeshua (Jesus), a world filled with nature imagery.

Viewed through this ancient language in which he spoke and taught, Klotz says, Yeshua's wisdom opens up to us a window into the divine universe of his beloved *abba*. Klotz bases his translations on the Syriac Aramaic version of the Gospels, also known as the Peshitta. It was prepared by the Rev. G.H. Gwilliam and issued by the Clarendon Press in 1901.

Explains Klotz in *Prayers of the Cosmos*, "The Aramaic language is close to the earth, rich in images of planting and harvesting, full of views of the natural wonder of the cosmos."

"Heaven" in Aramaic -- "Shem" -- ceases to be a metaphysical concept and presents the images of "light and sound shining through all creation," he writes.

Consider the third beatitude. It is usually translated from the King James version of the New Testament as "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth."

The phonetic Aramaic looks like this: "Tubwayhun l'makikhe d'hinnon nertun ar'ah."

In Aramaic, Klotz said, the word translated as "meek" means literally, "those who have softened what is rigid inside." This softening implies a condition both inside and outside us. The phrase "inherit the earth" in Aramaic does not mean to acquire a piece of property -- the word for "inherit" also means to receive strength, power and sustenance. The word for "earth," "ar'ah," can also refer to all of nature as well as to the natural power that manifests through the diversity of beings in the universe.

The word tubwayhun can be translated to mean both "blessed" and "ripe," Klotz says.

"So a very plausible open translation of this saying, with the Aramaic nuances added, might sound like this: Ripe are those who soften what is rigid, inside and out; they shall be open to receive strength and power -- their natural inheritance -- from nature."

Klotz's poetic transliteration certainly might be an idea St. Francis of Assisi would embody wholeheartedly. And indeed, Rohr pays tribute to his order's founder by saying, "Francis granted subjectivity to the natural world. And when you grant subjectivity to the natural world, everything changes. You now share mutuality with all things."

What could be more mutual and relational than creating a poem naming the four elements as "Brother Sun," "Sister Fire," "Brother Air" or "Sister Water"? Rohr warns us: "Be careful because this [kind of subjectivity] will change your life! It will turn you into a contemplative individual who appreciates creation in itself, and for its own sake, until the end, when there is only Christ." An authentic believer should be on the frontlines of such, seeing "that God may be in all," he writes, quoting Corinthians 15:28.

Could we dare imagine what might happen if the barons of business were to lift up the natural world from the category of "object" and honor her as a beloved "subject"?

At present, this appears to be a long-distant dream. For corporations, there is no affectionate dubbing of the natural world as beloved brothers and sisters. Naming is threatening, as we all know, because it implies kinship.

And kinship is too dangerous. In regaining an appreciation and awe for the original green of the earth, corporations would lose their green-paper profits.

Kinfolk, if they are loving and caring, do not harm their families -- animal, vegetable, mineral or human -- with mountaintop coal removal, tar sands drilling, fracking for oil or mowing down rainforests for tissue paper and packaging.

Subjectivity reaches beyond the corporate world to the rest of us, as well. If we truly are caught up in contemplative love for our earth, basic at-home issues around automobile use and meat eating must be seriously looked at.

Rohr traces the split between the natural world and civilization to Plato, the Greek philosopher. Rohr sees Plato as having had "far more influence on Christianity up to now than even Jesus often has. Plato positions body and soul as irreconcilable enemies. Our moral theology, most of our sexual teaching, and our lackluster history of

Earth Care all show that we too have not seen matter and spirit, or body and soul, as friends and as a result, have been Platonists more than Christians."

Rohr explains that part of the reason for this is Paul's unfortunate use of the word "flesh" in opposition to spirit.

"He would have made his point so much better, so much cleaner, if he had used the word 'ego' instead. Embodiment is not the problems. Ego is," he writes.

In her essay "What is a Civilization, Anyway?", Cynthia Stokes Brown, professor emeritus at Dominican University in San Rafael, Calif., compares the common features shared by ant societies and human societies. Both have a rigid hierarchical caste system. They have communication. They have aggressive warriors and sometimes attack their own species over food and territory.

"Individual ants have relinquished their reproductive roles to the central queen, making their super-organism possible," Brown writes. And significantly, they have a major effect on their environment, "moving around as much dirt as earth as earthworms do, enriching the soil."

Then Brown delivers her stunning punch line. It gives us pause, shocking us into contemplating the consequences of our actions and choices, present and future.

"If all ants died, extinctions would increase; if all humans died, extinctions would decrease," she writes.

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Links:

[1] <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Daily-Meditation--Living-on-our-One-Earth----Jan--18--2012.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=HopNdukbsVs>