

# Coming to ecocentrism

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### About the author

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West Covina, part of the suburban sprawl of Southern California, was recently chosen as the location for the sitcom *Crazy Ex-girlfriend* based on its “cheery banality” (Shyong, 2018). That is where I grew up. When I was ten, we moved further inland to the town of Upland at the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains, home of the last recorded Stage Three smog alert in the nation. That was 1974 and I was a sophomore in high school, accustomed to tightness in my chest and tingling in my gums and the presence of smog as part of my immediate environment.

I was taught to be wary of the natural world. Without knowing it, my mother repeated the same instructions about sweet gum seed pods as the mom in Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*: “Never, never throw them at anyone. They can put an eye out.” To my parents, transplanted New Yorkers, Central Park was the ideal place to spend time in nature. Anything else made them jittery. In its particulars, nature was alien; in its expanse, it was an impressive backdrop to the human story.

Still, we went camping for two weeks at a time to some of the most splendid places on Earth – Lake Tahoe, King’s Canyon, and Yosemite – because it was “good to get out of the house” and it was a vacation we could afford.

We didn’t fish or bird watch or canoe or collect bugs, but my mother took us for day hikes. My father said he’d had enough hiking across north Africa and Italy in the war, so he stayed in camp, working on a pot of coffee and the *L.A. Times* crossword puzzle. We also spent a lot of time playing canasta at the picnic table. Our flannel sleeping bags were never quite warm enough and I dreaded getting

ready for bed at night and getting out of bed in the morning. But somehow, being outside and away from suburban life was, as my mother intuited, very good for us, though even now it’s hard to articulate why. I think it had something to do with refocusing our attention and uncramping us from our normal routines.

There was, nonetheless, a lot of yelling that accompanied these trips. My older sister was unhappy most of the time. My father was on his usual short fuse, with no way to escape to the office. I remember sitting on the rough bench of the picnic table, wondering how we were going to fill all the hours of the day, but also just breathing and listening to a world that was bigger than my home life. The fact that these crazy camping trips had a positive influence on my life says a good deal about the power of the natural world to shape the human psyche for good.

As with origami, there are dozens of folds and creases that give life its shape. I read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Pirsig, 1974) the summer before my senior year in college and though I only dimly understood it, I was stunned by its message. It seemed so right that thinking and feeling belonged together, as did ethics and aesthetics, and art and technology. Pirsig was my first dose of the problem with dualisms of all kinds and the importance of intrinsic value in overcoming them. I didn’t know then that Pirsig was consciously aligning himself with the radical empiricists, most especially Whitehead. But when I first encountered Whitehead’s statement that, “The teleology of the Universe is directed to the production of Beauty” (Whitehead, 1933: 341) it was like meeting the face I had before I was born.

In fact, it is Whitehead's philosophy and the process school of thought that have provided the foundation for my fidelity to ecocentrism. Whitehead's entire philosophy is based on a reintroduction of value into the world. Reintroducing value to the world deposes materialism and its claim that the really real things that make up the world are senseless and valueless units of some quantifiable measure. "It is the essence of life," writes Whitehead, "that it exists for its own sake, as the intrinsic reaping of value" (Whitehead, 1938: 184). Pan-valuism clearly implies ecocentrism.

I happily attest also to the enormous influence of my lifelong mentor, John B Cobb Jr, on my intellectual life. I went to Claremont Graduate University (in California) to study process thought with him, and ever since I have followed the widening currents of his theological commitment to creative transformation. From his 1972 book, *Is it Too Late?*, to his ground-breaking book on steady-state economics with Herman Daly, *For the Common Good*, to his shattering critiques of all institutions that undermine life systems (more than 50 books), John Cobb has been a leading voice in the movement to create eco-civilizations.

It was because of John that I began reading Lester Brown's *State of the World* books in the 1980s. John had included them as assigned reading for his classes in philosophy and religion, making global environmental issues a matter for theological concern. Reading about the serious decline in topsoil, fresh water and fisheries, about population growth and resource conflicts, among other things, changed the trajectory of my academic career from teaching religious studies to teaching sustainability studies.

I focused on the importance of replacing a mechanistic worldview with an organic or systems worldview. I don't remember when it became clear to me that the reintroduction of beauty as a value is fundamental to creating relations that are worth sustaining. I think it was Charles Hartshorne's assertion that "babies are

more beautiful than good" that got me thinking that the same is true for other forms of life. Beauty is the more inclusive values category – and the most basic.

By *beauty*, I don't mean fashion or art, but patterns of relations that engender life. In my opinion, sustainability is not an ultimate goal, just as mere survival does not fully describe the evolutionary process. Complex organisms are, as Whitehead pointed out, "deficient in survival power... [They] certainly did not appear because they were better at that game than the rocks around them" (Whitehead, 1929: 2). So it is with sustainability: mere endurance is not the ultimate objective. A far greater aesthetic-ethical vision informs the practical work of sustainability – a vision that returns values and aliveness into the structure of reality.

In the last ten years, I have struggled to understand how it came to be that we moderns mostly treat beauty as a trivial value. Even those of us who have fallen in love with the beauty of the Earth and its inhabitants find it difficult to speak of the importance of beauty. It is clear to me that the demise of beauty's status as a value inherent in the structure of reality is entangled with the rise of modern, mechanistic science. The 'death of nature' and the demise of beauty are co-victims of this worldview. To resuscitate the one requires the revitalization of the other. Aldo Leopold knew this when he imagined a new kind of science, one that could not be practised without the companionship of ethics and aesthetics. Beauty is fundamental to repairing our relations with life, and the inclusion of beauty leads to a more radical, more profound and more adequate understanding of sustainability.

For nearly 30 years now, I've lived in the high desert community of Flagstaff, Arizona. It is a delicate ecosystem in the 21st year of a long-term drought. It is not clear how long human life can continue on this thin-aired, fire-primed plateau. Its beauty is its holdfast, but most of us here haven't learned to live in ways that do justice to it. We are like children with an attachment disorder, in desperate need

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of love but unclear how to express it. To repair our relations, to affirm the inherent worth of all beings, to offer tangible and steady affection, requires that we suspend the deep cultural convention that beauty is of negligible importance, and that we make the practice of aesthetic intention an ecocentric principle. ■

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