

## SEARCHING FOR NATURE'S WAY

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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### [Play “No More Walks in the Wood” – song by the Eagles]

That song recorded by the Eagles has a special meaning for me, because it describes what happened to a significant place in my personal development—a place known simply as “the woods”—which was right next to the home where I grew up in small-town Ohio. During my early childhood years, I remember the woods as a wild and mysterious place filled with animals and poison ivy and a dark, murky pond we called “the swamp.” If you fell off the log that crossed the swamp, your sneakers would stink for days. When I was about nine years old, “the woods” was converted into Dogwood Park. The swamp was drained, bulldozed, and converted into a shallow ice-skating pond. The underbrush and unsightly trees were cleared out, and an enclosed picnic shelter was erected in what had been a briar patch.

In order to experience nature, we had to walk through the park into the “undeveloped” areas beyond it to play army with my childhood buddies or later, to experience in these comfortable natural surroundings a new form of wilderness in my first awkward explorations with my teenage girlfriend. But soon, these areas of wilderness also yielded to the relentless pressures of development: a golf course, a new municipal swimming pool, and eventually a new high school building—all of them constructed on the sacred ground where I had come of age. In subsequent years, my return visits to home were always accompanied by a sense of sadness and loss. The small but significant natural wilderness of my childhood and youth had been lost forever.

In his book titled *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv describes **three frontiers** through which Americans have passed in our relationship to nature. The **first** frontier was the seemingly unlimited availability of land available to European settlers who were bold enough to reach and exploit it. This era ended in the late 1800's, when the American western frontier was closed to further land claims, and the Native Americans who had occupied these lands were forced into reservations. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the **second** frontier in our relationship to nature involved both a domestication of the land and animals through farming, and a corresponding effort to preserve what was still wilderness. Teddy Roosevelt was a key figure in this movement. To his great credit, he was instrumental in establishing the system of national parks that we continue to enjoy. “In 1905, at President Roosevelt's inauguration, cowboys rode down Pennsylvania Avenue, the Seventh Cavalry passed for review, and American Indians joined the celebration—including the once-feared [Apache warrior] Geronimo. The parade, in fact, announced the coming of the second frontier, which existed mainly in the [American] imagination for nearly a century. . . . The second frontier was a time . . . of suburban manifest destiny, when boys still imagined themselves woodsmen and scouts, and girls still yearned to live in a little house on the prairie—and sometimes built better forts than the boys.” [Louv, pp. 17-18] I now understand that my experience of witnessing the transition from the woods to the park to the new high school were part of a much larger transition that marked the end of the second frontier.

As Richard Louv describes it, “Baby boomers . . . may constitute the last generation of Americans to share an intimate, familial attachment to the land and water. Many of us now in our forties or older knew farmland or forests at the suburban rim and had farm-family relatives. Even if we lived in an inner city, we likely had grandparents or other older relatives who farmed or had recently arrived from farm country during the rural-to-urban migration of the first half of the twentieth century. For today’s young people, that . . . linkage to farming is disappearing, marking the end of the second frontier. The **third frontier** is populated by today’s children.” [Louv, p. 19]

What are the hallmarks of this third frontier in our relationship with nature? According to Richard Louv, they include a disconnection from the sources of our food (which is brought to public attention with increasing frequency by threats of food contamination), highly publicized encounters between humans and animals whose natural habitat we have invaded, and “an increasingly intellectual understanding of our relationship with other animals.” [Louv, p. 19] For most Americans, our experience of nature and its creatures occurs by television. **We have become passive spectators rather than active participants in the dramas of nature.** As a fourth-grade boy from San Diego told Richard Louv: “I like to play indoors ’cause that’s where all the electrical outlets are.” [p. 10]

This raises the question of what we can do to **restore** our relationship with nature. How might we bridge the growing chasm that estranges us from the natural world? Let me offer some suggestions drawn from several different sources. In doing so, I am grateful to be part of a faith tradition that is deliberately **eclectic**—that honors variety in dealing with the important issues of life. There are some interesting overlaps among these source. In the span of a single talk like this, I can only point to them rather than explore each of them in depth. We’ll save that for another day.

The **first** bridge that comes to mind is the cluster of ancient traditions known collectively as **paganism**. Centuries before the Romans overran Europe and the British Isles, there existed a vast network of nature-based cultures. Their religious practices revolved around the repeating cycles of nature: the seasons and celestial events. They built impressive monuments such as Stonehenge to celebrate these natural cycles. As Riane Eisler and others have demonstrated, their religion and social structure were egalitarian, honoring the feminine aspect of nature. Their worldview posed a threat to the hierarchical and patriarchal bias of Roman (and later Roman Catholic) social structure. In spite of the Romans’ strenuous efforts to stamp out Earth-based religions, elements of this tradition survived, especially in Ireland and Scotland, in the form of Celtic and Wiccan spirituality. After centuries of persecution and concealment, the pagan tradition has enjoyed a revival in recent times. Paganism teaches us **gratitude for nature**.

Closely related to the pagan tradition is another revitalized tradition: **Native American spirituality**. Thanks to the popularity of best-selling books such as *Black Elk Speaks* millions of Americans have come to appreciate the nature-centered beliefs and practices of the North and South American Indians. There is a mounting body of archeological evidence indicating that there was interaction between the Indian tribes of northeastern America and Celtic explorers long before the arrival of European settlers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Ed McGaa (also known as Eagle Man) is a contemporary Native American writer who has described some of the most important Sioux

ceremonies in considerable detail—not always with the approval of other practitioners of Native spirituality, who warn against the casual use of Native practices by non-Indians. The rituals and ceremonies we enact to celebrate our relationship with nature must arise from our own first-hand experiences with nature, not from theirs. Nevertheless, Native American spirituality teaches us **reverence for nature**.

Another source of wisdom in re-establishing our connection with nature is the ancient Chinese tradition of **Taoism**. In his book *Everyday Tao*, Deng Ming-Dao tells us, “The ancients who first taught Tao were simple, rustic people. They formed their view by walking in granite-bladed mountains, digging in grainy soil, sailing down wide rivers. As they worked and traveled, they slowly discerned a grand order to life. They noticed the regular phases of the sun, moon, earth, and tides. They followed the seasons. They watched the births, lives, and deaths of people, as well as the rise and fall of kingdoms. In the nights, the ancients sat beside open fires and spoke to those who wanted to learn. As illustrations of their ideas, and to aid their students’ memories, they drew pictographs in the dirt. They taught their lessons from what they had experienced: life was a movement supreme—greater than humans, greater than heaven and earth. Nothing was fixed, for everything—from the cycles of the sun and moon to the making and destroying of empires—showed endless, cyclical transformation. All this they summed up by drawing a picture of Tao: a person running [moving?] along a path.” [p. 2] Taoism teaches us **respect for nature**.

Finally—and “closer to home” for most of us—**contemporary science** provides a bridge connecting us to nature on several different fronts. Modern theoretical physicists have drawn increasingly on metaphors from Taoism and other Eastern traditions to describe the fundamental processes of the material universe. In the words of physicist Fritz Capra, “The material universe is seen as a web of interrelated events. None of the properties of any part of this web is fundamental; they all follow from the properties of the other parts, and the overall consistency of their interrelations determines the structure of the entire web.” [*The Web of Life*, p. 39] There have also been serious attempts to integrate **evolutionary science** and traditional religion. One of the most energetic efforts is a book titled *Thank God for Evolution!* by Christian minister Michael Dowd, who along with his wife Connie Barlow, a science writer and Unitarian Universalist, traveled throughout North America as self-described “itinerant evolutionary evangelists,” a journey recently interrupted when Michael was diagnosed with potentially terminal cancer.

What I have offered today is a mere sampling of the possibilities for bridging the gap between ourselves, our children, and the incredible richness of nature. As Richard Louv says, “We have such a brief opportunity to pass on to our children our love for the Earth, and to tell our stories. These are the moments when the world is made whole.” [p. 316] Let me close with a poem titled “Clouds,” by Eveline Belimkes:

Clouds are flowing in the river, waves are flying in the sky.

Life is laughing in a pebble. Does a pebble ever die?

Flowers grow out of the garbage, such a miracle to see.

What seems dead and what seems dying makes for butterflies to be.

Life is laughing in a pebble, flowers bathe in morning dew.  
Dust is dancing in my footsteps, and I wonder who is who.  
Clouds are flowing in the river, clouds are drifting in my tea.  
On a never-ending journey, what a miracle to be!

[In *Earth Poems*, ed. by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, p. 22]