Autobiography and the life-course

Autobiographical texts offer a fascinating window onto the intersections of religion and nature in the actual lives of individuals. In particular, the autobiographical concern with moments of change and development over the life-course allows readers and scholars to explore the particular pathways by which nature comes to shape or to possess personal religious meaning. How does the unique trajectory of each individual's life shape her or his construction of religion, nature, and the relationship between the two? How are religion and nature intertwined with all the other areas of a person's life – psychological development, family, social and cultural influences, historical circumstances, and personal beliefs and values? When and how in a person's life can religious traditions shape environmental experience – and when and how can religious traditions themselves be transformed by particular experiences of nature? Under what circumstances can natural beings and objects themselves function in a religious manner? Addressing these and other questions, the representative autobiographical texts discussed below illustrate the role of nature in selected religiously-charged moments across the individual life-course. (I acknowledge with regret the limitation of my discussion to English-language writings; authors are from the United States except where noted.)

1. *Childhood.* In his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1807), the English poet William Wordsworth provides the *locus classicus* of the idea of a special relationship between religion and nature in childhood. According to

Wordsworth, “Trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home: / Heaven lies about us in our infancy!” Recently present to God, the child can discern God’s presence in “meadow, grove, and stream, / The earth, and every common sight,” and thus is “Nature’s Priest.” This special sensitivity to the divine in nature fades as the child grows, but even in adulthood provides the “master light of all our seeing” and the basis for religious strength and artistic creativity. Along with shaping Wordsworth’s own autobiographical reminiscences in *The Prelude* (1850), these ideas subsequently have been reflected and reinterpreted throughout English-language culture and memoir. According to conservationist John Muir’s recollections of his childhood in Scotland and America in *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (1913), “the natural inherited wildness in our blood ran true on its glorious course as invincible and unstoppable as stars”; the book emphasizes the tension between this natural childhood faith and the distorting influence of humanity (especially the repressive childrearing of Muir’s father). Similarly, writer Mary Austin’s *Earth Horizon* (1932) highlights her childhood awareness of a deeper and truer self, “I-Mary,” encountered exclusively in solitude outdoors or with books. More recently, in an important revision of the Wordsworthian tradition, the supernatural or divine element has dropped out, leaving a direct religious relationship between children and nature. In her *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999), naturalist Janisse Ray recounts her family’s idiosyncratic “creation story,” in which each child was not born of human parents but rather found hidden in the leaves of some domesticated or wild plant; cradled in pine needles at birth, Ray would survive childhood poverty, isolation, danger, and ugliness in part through an intimate connection with the longleaf pine ecosystem that characterized her rural Georgia surroundings.

2. *Education and mentors.* Apart from (or along with) innate divinity, wildness, or ecological connection, many children come to a close connection with nature through education, often under the guidance of special teachers or mentors. Canadian naturalist Farley Mowat's *Born Naked* (1993) recounts the awakening of his sensitivity to natural beings ("the Others") with the crucial help of a long line of companions, teachers, and mentors, from the nameless, outcast "Marsh Boy" to the naturalist uncle who arranged and funded Mowat's first scientific exploration at age 16. For British ethologist Jane Goodall, the romantic and religious influences surrounding a favorite pastor of her teenage years infused her subsequent emotional life in subtle and mysterious ways; moreover, her *Reason for Hope* (1999) emphasizes the importance of mentors during adulthood, from renowned anthropologist Louis Leakey to the chimpanzee she called David Graybeard, who chose (consciously, Goodall thought) to invite her into a mutual exploration of his world. In non-Western societies, education and mentoring often take place through family and cultural tradition. In *The Names* (1976), writer N. Scott Momaday must tell the stories of his Kiowa, Cherokee, and white forebears as the integral center of his own origin; when he begins to emerge as an individual, beginning at age twelve, Momaday's existence is further shaped profoundly by the landscape and culture of the Jemez pueblo where he then lived, along with the continued presence, stories, and art of his immediate family. Stressing more explicitly intellectual and ethical dimensions, Mahatma Gandhi's *Autobiography* (1927) explores the future political leader's lifelong pursuit of truth, *satyagraha*, in various familial, social, and personal circumstances, with the treatment of animals and other living beings serving at many key points as a challenge and touchstone of his moral and religious development.

3. *Insight and conversion.* In adulthood, the natural world often serves as a setting or object of spiritual insight or conversion. Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards, recounting his conversion in his "Personal Narrative" (1765), portrays the joy and power of his connection with God as reflected in the "sweetness" of his heightened perception of the natural world. In other memoirs, such as John Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911), conversion is understood not so much with respect to God as to the divinity and beauty within wild nature itself: "We are now in the mountains and they are in us, kindling enthusiasm, making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us." An equally powerful but more ambiguous environmental awakening takes place in writer Jean Toomer's semi-autobiographical *Cane* (1923), in which the Washington, D.C.-born protagonist's encounter with the red dirt and smoky sunsets of Georgia evokes a visceral sense of connection with his Southern and African blood and heritage. Moving beyond the human, Aldo Leopold's *A Sand Country Almanac* (1949) includes the famous autobiographical vignette "Thinking Like a Mountain," in which an encounter with the "fierce green fire" in a dying wolf's eyes crystallizes Leopold's transformation from trigger-happy young hunter to environmentally-aware ecologist.

4. *Commitment to place.* With or without such moments of conversion, an adult decision to commit oneself to life in and with a specific place can carry profound religious roots and meanings. The first half of *A Sand County Almanac* illustrates Leopold's increasing awareness of and commitment to a specific patch of land, his "shack" in central Wisconsin, over a full calendar year, in a mutual relationship of education and healing; this genre of the "observation of the country year" constitutes a major tradition within American nature writing, from Susan Fenimore Cooper's *Rural*

Hours (1850) and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) to Sue Hubbell's *A Country Year* (1986) and others. For memoirists such as Wendell Berry (*The Long-Legged House,* 1969) and David Mas Masumoto (*Epitaph for a Peach,* 1995), a return and recommitment to a family farm allows the possibility of healing soil, self, and society by (in Masumoto's words) "trying to farm in a new way, working with, and not against, nature," grounded in family tradition and local wisdom but open to new knowledge and challenge from the wider world. Less ecological, more aesthetic, poet Kathleen Norris's *Dakota* (1993) parallels the spiritual influence of the harsh, sparse, beautiful landscape of the northern plains with that of ancient and modern monastic life; within both settings, one has a chance to be "alone with the Alone." Whether understood through explicitly religious language and traditions or not, commitment to place offers a spiritual center for life, an opportunity for "making a home in a restless world" (the subtitle of Scott Russell Sander's *Staying Put,* 1993).

5. *Affliction, death, and healing.* In many lives, religious power and solace emerge with special poignancy at times of affliction and illness, and the natural world can provide both context and content for such encounters. To be sure, in the Christian and Jewish traditions (from Job on), natural events (drought, storm) or landscapes (desert, wilderness) are themselves metaphors or vehicles of affliction at the hands of an angry, judgmental, or inscrutable God; Mary Rowlandson, in her *Narrative* (1678) of captivity by Native Americans during King Philip's War, recounts her trials and hardships in the "vast and desolate wilderness" outside the towns of the English colonists. However, "even as [God] wounded me with one hand, so he healed me with the other," and sometimes this healing comes through the natural world, as she becomes increasingly

adept at foraging for food and medicinal herbs. In much recent memoir, the natural world becomes more straightforwardly positive as a place of solace and healing: in Sally Carrighar's *Home to the Wilderness* (1973), as a source of emotional healing from a series of childhood and young adult stresses and traumas. In *Refuge* (1991), Terry Tempest Williams attempts to turn to the beloved birds and landscape of the Great Salt Lake as source of strength and solace in the face of her mother's cancer and eventual death; her quest is complicated, however, by the fact that the natural environment is itself undergoing change and damage as the result of both natural and human processes. Moreover, until the probable origin of the cancer in radioactivity from atomic bomb tests is revealed, Williams and the reader are lead to consider cancer and death as themselves natural processes, to which the spiritual response is conformation, not opposition. As with all these texts (and lives), a brief summary can scarcely capture the complex layers of meaning and mystery of engagement with nature at such personally and religiously-charged moments of human existence.

6. *Encounters with environmental damage.* As Williams suggests, in the modern world nature is not only a cause or context of human affliction but is itself subject to affliction at the hands of humans, and encounters with environmental damage can serve as moments of religious meaning and ethical transformation in individual lives. Often this takes the form of an awakening to environmental activism, as in Lois Gibbs's *Love Canal* (1982), the near-archetypal account of a regular citizen moved to political action to defend her family and neighborhood from toxic industrial pollution. For Jane Goodall as for Katy Payne (*Silent Thunder,* 1998), unorthodox scientific study of chimpanzees and elephants, respectively, fosters a sense of personal relationship with individual animals

and communities; when outside forces lead to the drastic culling of these animals, these scientists' careers and lives are sharply reoriented toward overt activism. By contrast, other activist autobiographies – for example, those of Janisse Ray and David Brower (*For Earth's Sake,* 1990) - do not center on dramatic awakenings but rather on lifelong concern with beloved yet threatened landscapes (Southern longleaf pine forests and Western mountain wilderness, respectively). Whether arrived at through dramatic transformation or gradual development, environmental concern and activism can itself constitute a religious practice or center, giving strength, direction, and meaning to an individual's life. Here as at the other moments of the life-course discussed above, a variety of specific factors – historical circumstance, psychological development, cultural context, individual creativity, and other-than-human presence – merge in the creation of a unique personal and religious reality.

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