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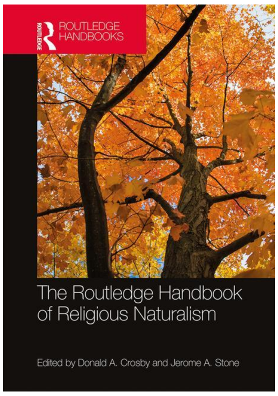

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Matter, Mind, and Meaning

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MATTER, MIND, AND MEANING

Donald A. Crosby

Matter, *mind*, and *meaning*: these three terms are bound inextricably together because the third requires recognition and interpretation by the second, and both of these are necessarily dependent on the first. Matter exists in great profusion in the universe and on our home planet, and it is generally devoid of mind and of mind's awareness of meaning. But there are also organizations of matter here on earth and probably elsewhere in the universe that are able to function as minds. There is no meaning without mind, and mind requires meaning for its effective operations. This statement is true of sensate meaning, conceptual meaning, artistic meaning, and existential meaning. Mind and meaning, in their turn, are functions of matter. Meaning lies in the relations of matter and mind and of mind with mind. Material existence gives rise to mind. Mind, in its relations to matter—the matter of its own embodiment and the matter of the world external to and interacting with its embodiment—becomes a field of meaning. The world external to itself with which a particular mind has relations includes material beings that, like itself, have varying degrees of mental capacity. With such internal and external relationships, *matter becomes meaning through the mediation of mind*.

There is a wide spectrum of degrees of both mind and meaning, from the most primitive forms of sentience and end-directed activity in relatively simple biological organisms to such extraordinary human intellectual and artistic feats as the invention of the alphabet in the second millennium BCE; the oral reciting and later writing of the Homeric epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey* toward the end of the eighth century BCE; the composition of the *Mahabharata* epic culminating about the beginning of the fifth century CE but with much earlier roots; the planning and building of the great Amiens cathedral in the thirteenth century CE; and the discovery of the DNA molecule and rise of molecular biology in the twentieth century CE.

Emergent matter, mind, and meaning

The version of religious naturalism I call *Religion of Nature* is based on a materialistic metaphysics or view of reality that regards all existence as diverse forms and functions of matter.[1] Its view of matter is neither Newtonian nor reductionistic. It is meant to take into account all that we have learned (and much we still have to learn) in physics about the nature and capabilities of matter since Newton's time, but it does not restrict its conception of matter to what can be described or explained by the discipline of physics. Rather than being reductionistic in this sense, it is emergentist or expansionist in its character. Approaches to a proper understanding of matter require the resources of all fields of thought, from physics, to chemistry, to biology, to psychology, to sociology, to philosophy, to art, to religion, and to the experiences of everyday life.

Matter *is* what matter has shown itself capable of *doing* and *becoming* from the origin of this universe about 13.8 billion years ago to the present, and that includes the myriad life forms on earth and us humans as one species of these life forms. With material life, material mind has come into being and, with that, material interactions, strivings, determinations, and purposes that crystallize into felt and intended meanings of many different sorts. Just as the phrase *material life* is not an oxymoron, neither are the phrases *material mind* and *material meaning*, when these are viewed in accordance with the metaphysical perspective to which Religion of Nature is committed.

Does the material universe as a whole have overarching purpose or meaning? Many religious thinkers hold that the answer to this question has to be positive; otherwise, human life would be deprived of the necessary basis for its immanent purpose and meaning. There can be no meaningful human life, they insist, in a purposeless universe. Such persons go on to reason that this overarching purpose or meaning must be bestowed on the universe by some kind of superconscious mind or spirit external to it or lying deeply within it. In other words, a primordial, purposive, and purpose-giving consciousness or mind must be regarded as the source and basis of the universe and the ultimate explanation for everything in it, including matter and finite minds and their meanings.

In my view, on the contrary, the universe has no overarching purpose or meaning conferred on it from without or within. It has come over time to contain many emergent purposes and meanings but does not itself have a comprehensive purpose or meaning. The material universe is for me self-explanatory and self-surpassing. It is self-explanatory in the sense that its existence, in all of its forms, is a given. It does not depend for its existence on something other than itself, unless that something is conceived as earlier versions of itself. Moreover, the face of the universe is not static in the way that Aristotle conceived it to be. Instead, it is dynamic and creative, surpassing itself with new creations and new kinds of existence over eons of time. The inherent dynamism brings new things into being even as it causes old things to cease to be. Its creations and destructions go hand-in-hand.

This analysis can be applied to an endless succession of universes, earlier ones undergoing eventual destruction, and the ashes of their destructions providing materials for the emergence of new ones. We should not think that a presumed fact of primordial infinite time entails the eventual emergence of some sort of infinite perfection over the course of that time, any more than it requires an infinitely powerful spiritual being to create, preside over, and give continuing support to the universe or a succession of universes. All existence, even over infinite time, can be presumed to be finite existence, with the ambiguities, uncertainties, perils, possibilities, opportunities, and joys of finite sentient existence—should this type of existence be present.

By my reckoning, all existence, including the various forms of mental existence, has and will have at its basis some form of matter at some stage of matter's irrepressible expansion and emergence. There is no reliable, publicly testable evidence for the existence of free-floating, non-material phenomena. Lewis Carroll's Alice, in his famous story *Alice in Wonderland*, remarks about her experience of the Cheshire cat that she has frequently seen cats without grins, but that she has never before seen the grin without the cat! Similarly, I have encountered many material things devoid of mind, but I have yet to encounter a mind separate from a material body. There is no reliable, publicly testable evidence for the existence of disembodied beings or for free-floating, non-material phenomena.

This observation is one of the reasons I do not accept a pantheistic view of nature, a view in which nature is seen as somehow God-like in character or suffused by a kind of divine presence.

Mine is a materialistic monism that allows for an extremely wide range of diverse phenomena. Over eons of historical change matter has done an astounding amount of different things. It is inherently protean and fecund in its materiality, something quite different from the externally related unchanging material atoms envisioned in Newtonian physics. My outlook is a kind of genuine pluralism consistent with a materialistic and monistic metaphysics. The universe is a ceaseless dance of nature natured with nature naturing. No external, underlying, or supplemental presence or power is needed to account for its ongoing dynamism and present character. Nature is unreservedly natural, through and through.

Within the present universe, which may well be only one member of a succession of universes stretching into the infinite past, new developments are the actualizations of possibilities brought to the fore by the more recent past, and these developments pose new possibilities for future actualities. This whole process of change and development is enabled by the creative capabilities of matter, ranging in the present universe from its earliest, simplest forms and functions (for example, plasmas, fields, forces, pulses of energy, particles, waves) to its ever more complex levels of organization and relationship as these emerge over vast reaches of time. Given a sufficiently high level of organization, life becomes possible. And with even higher levels, conscious minds and meanings in all of their manifestations become possible—first in minimal ways and later in the ways that enable me to write this essay and to transcribe it onto the glowing screen of a consciously designed laptop computer.

Purpose and meaning in human existence

Thus, even though the universe or nature has no purpose conferred on it from without or by some kind of superconscious purpose-giving presence or power within it there is abundant purposive activity and opportunity among sentient natural beings of various kinds, including us humans. There is no purpose of the universe, but it is replete with its own emergent purposive meanings and strivings toward meaning. According to Religion of Nature, we can find all the purpose we need for the living of our lives as we respond to, contemplate, and experience the innumerable challenges, opportunities, and meanings afforded by the natural world. This claim includes the existential purposes and meanings so fundamental to religious outlooks and religious faith.

Religion of Nature's answer to the question, "What is the meaning of or lives?" is that we humans can live our lives in order to express and seek to fulfil our maximum possibilities for creativity and good as natural beings—within ourselves, in our relations to other humans, and in our relations to nonhuman life forms and their earthly environments. The meaning of life is the meaning of natural, fully-realized, properly directed human lives, and the purpose of life is to strive ceaselessly as conscious, intentional beings for realization of this maximal natural meaning in everything we think, plan, and do.

This meaning includes such things as aesthetic appreciation and creation, advances in understanding the world, felt and practiced empathetic concern for others including nonhuman others, deepening sensitivity to all that is sublime and holy in the world, the envisioning, building, and maintaining of stable and just human societies, and joyous celebration and gratitude for the precious gift of life. It also includes growing ability to acknowledge and courageously cope with the ambiguities of nature, its inevitable sufferings and sorrows, diseases and disabilities, accidents and disasters, deprivations and losses, and inequitable distributions of gifts and misfortunes to its human and nonhuman creatures.

Environmental ethicist J. Baird Callicott wisely asks, "Why should we have a preordained *telos* to give meaning to our existence and a *raison d'etre*? Isn't it enough that we exist at all? Shouldn't we simply accept the mystery of our existence and pay it the homage it deserves by giving it a meaning of our own making?" (2013: 27). While applauding the spirit of his observation, I would prefer the phrase "meaning of our own *discovering*," because I do not think that we merely construct or invent all of the basic meanings that give point and purpose to our lives. We *find* many things to be intrinsically meaningful in our world; they are not just *made* meaningful by us or by our devising.

The most fundamental purpose and meaning of our lives, from the standpoint of religious naturalism, is to strive with all of our human capabilities to be grateful and responsible citizens of our earthly community, which includes nonhuman life forms as well as human ones and the whole earthly environment of which we are a part. To serve nature, our fellow creatures of nature, and the wellbeing of the planet earth, and not just to expect to be served by nature, is the ultimate meaning of life in a nutshell for Religion of Nature. In this religious outlook, nature as it exists both within us and outside of us—and nothing other than nature in its human and nonhuman, living and nonliving forms—is the appropriate focus of our religious devotion, commitment, and concern. Nature is sacred ground for us emergent beings. It deserves and demands our ardent recognition and response to it as sacred ground. Nature gives birth to us, nurtures us, enriches us, challenges us, empowers us, and sustains us through the course of our lives. Nature surrounds us with mysteries and wonders that constantly awaken astonishment and amazement, especially for minds that discipline and train themselves to be alert, expectant, and receptive. We can be thankful for these wonders even as we stand in awe of them.

Nature's wonders are obviously not always benign. Nature can shock us with sudden or incremental incursions or outcomes that remind us of the fact that we humans are not the sole or even the primary focus of nature, and that its contingencies, processes, and laws can sometimes harm us rather than help us. Nature can have for us as well as for its other creatures a bleak and threatening side as well as a benevolent and supportive side. The ambiguity of nature is the result, at least in part, of the ongoing creations and destructions that give nature its dynamic character. It stems from the numerous conflicts of goods that pervade nature and mark the lives of finite beings. The nourishment of the predator is bought at the price of the death of the prey, for example. The satisfaction of one creature's desires can mean denying or interfering with the satisfaction of another's desires. The best that can be hoped for or worked toward is a relative but significant balancing of needs, desires, and aspirations among the many creatures of earth.

There is considerable ambiguity, moreover, in the choices and behaviors of the human creatures of nature, ranging from deeds of great courage, compassion, and mercy to unbelievable acts of individual and social cruelty and evil. Ambiguity is not a unique fault or defect of nature, but it is an undeniable fact of nature. Formidable and frightening ambiguity also attaches to putative religious ultimates other than nature itself such as God, Shiva, or the Dao, at least to the extent that these relate in meaningful ways to the experienced world. Coping with nature's ambiguity is never an easy task, and in times of great trial, suffering, or loss can be an extremely demanding one. Grief and pain are real and cannot be brushed away by an airy romanticism.

The daunting ambiguity of nature should not deter us from reverencing, serving, and loving it in every way of which we humans are capable. We are fortunate to be conscious participants in the wondrous processes of nature, but with that good fortune also come unavoidable vulnerabilities and demanding responsibilities. We are not helpless in the face of nature's awesome powers, but we should not discount them or foolishly endeavor to lord over them. The nature spread over a vast universe does not depend on what we humans do or do not do. But we have the ability to contribute in lasting and significant ways to the good or ill of nature's creatures and their habitats here on earth.

Our present ecological crisis, with the prospects for thoughtful, effortful, and effective remediation it still affords, gives evidence of this fact. In this fact should reside a substantial portion of the challenge and meaning of our lives as human beings living in the twenty-first century of anthropogenic global climate change, worldwide species endangerment, and rampant habitat destruction. Our lives can have important and appreciable meaning to the extent that we live passionately for nature and do not just idly exist in nature.

The above is not the whole story of a meaningful life, but it is a significant part of it for us natural beings. Drawing on the boundless resources of nature and the capabilities of our own human nature can give joy and delight to our lives and provide incentive and strength for us to explore nature's depth and richness. It can give rejuvenation of spirit, and respite and rest in times of trial and adversity. The meaning of our lives as humans consists in nature's assurance and inspiration, not just in nature's demands. A meditative day in a quiet glen, in the mountains, or in the depths of a dark forest can enable us to return to our daily tasks with new motivation, insight, and hope. A reflective stroll in one's city or contemplation of the ultimately natural sources of everything in one's house or apartment can have this salutary effect, as can a tussle with one's frisky dog or a scratching session with one's itchy cat; and this is to say nothing of quiet attention to the astounding organization and functioning of one's own body. We can look around us and within us and exclaim, "I am part of all this, and I have a responsible role to play in relation to it." Coming fully to comprehend what it means to be a creature of nature and the beneficiary of nature's blessings, as well as being subject to its challenges and susceptible to its ambiguities and dangers—including those posed by actions or inactions of its human creatures—is the prospect and task of a lifetime.

The impersonalism of nature

I can imagine someone objecting at this point that nature by itself does not have sufficient resources to provide a fully meaningful human life. It does not, so the objection goes, because nature is impersonal. It cannot relate to us as what Alfred North Whitehead calls "the great companion-—the fellow sufferer who understands" (1978: 351). There is suffering aplenty in nature, but nature itself does not suffer. It cannot empathize with our sufferings or uphold us with personal help in time of need. We cannot pray to nature or enter into interpersonal communion with nature. Nature cannot personally guide us in the living of our lives. It cannot give us love or forgiveness in the way that a personal God is believed to do.

The Medieval and Renaissance scholar, essayist, story-teller, and Christian apologist Clive Staples Lewis tried at one point in his life to find in the Hegelian idea of the Absolute or in Berkeley's Idealism sufficient religious succor and meaning for his life. The Absolute or Divine of these two perspectives is certainly magnificent, all-encompassing, and awesome in its majesty and might. We can give our love and devotion to it. But Lewis remarks that despite our fervent *eros* reaching up toward it, there is no answering *agape* darting down from it. It is unable to share in our sufferings and delights and is, in fact, indifferent to them and to our lives as a whole. Since nature is like this too, he would claim, it can hardly be viewed as sufficient for a truly meaningful and sustaining religious life. It could be argued to offer us only what Lewis calls the "one-way street" of a "quasi-religion," not the reciprocal relationship and shared communion with a personal God of a fully adequate religious faith (1955: 210, 222–223).

Is a relationship with a personal God really *essential* to a meaningful and fulfilling religious life? I have no doubt that it is deeply meaningful to many religious people, but I do not think that it is necessary for an entirely adequate and sustaining religious outlook on the world or experience of the world. I think that religious naturalism can be such, despite its denial of the existence of such a God. We may desperately want to believe in God, especially in times of grave crisis. But *wanting* to believe and being *justified* in believing are two very different things.

I do not find it credible to believe in a being similar in many ways to us humans that is presumed to exist beyond and to support the whole vast universe. To me, this looks suspiciously like the wishful projection of a human face onto nature and raising it to the "nth" (and incomprehensible) degree, a kind of cosmic humanism or unconscious anthropocentricism. I regard conscious beings like us humans or other sentient beings as emergent from a material nature, not as giving rise to nature, sustaining nature, or existing outside of or along with nature. The notion of a personal, human-like God is to my mind far too small to fill the extraordinary bill assigned to it by theists. For Religion of Nature, the highest form of existence is that which is able to produce and sustain all other forms of being, personal and non-personal alike. This for Religion of Nature is nature itself. I do not set forth these brief remarks as knock-down arguments. To do so would be arrogant and foolish. I offer them mainly as the confessional conclusions of someone who has thought about these matters over the years.

To be without God is far from being bereft of relations with personal beings. Nature is full of "thous," both human and nonhuman. It is not just a collection of impersonal "its." We can commune with one another as human beings and find sources of help, encouragement, and empathy in one another. We can share our joys and sorrows with one another. We can look to one another for guidance. We can experience love in one another's company. We can forgive one another. We can find solace, help, and purpose in our relations with *nonhuman* forms of life. Nature is not bereft of love. There is love to be found within it and our own love to be given to it. And love can be given expression here on earth in individual and institutional forms of social and ecological justice. Our educational, political, economic, religious and other types of institution are of particular importance in this regard. They need in numerous ways to be radically reshaped, reformed, and redirected.

A nature without a personal God can still be suffused with personal relationships, institutional responsibility and care, and the spirit and experience of saving love. In the absence of God, we can turn our attention more firmly toward the needs of the world in our religious lives. There are no guarantees. There is no divine being to pick up the pieces after us or to compensate for the effects of our sins. We are responsible, and we can share this responsibility with others who, like ourselves, care for the wellbeing of the earth and all of its creatures, human and nonhuman

Religion of Nature and death

It is a pretty safe bet that within 150 years after their reading of this sentence every person doing so will have died— some sooner than others, but all of us over that span of time. An issue of great importance for most religious traditions is the inescapable fact of death. How does Religion of Nature propose that we interpret it or cope with it? Can life be affirmed in the face of the inevitability of death? Does not death bring our keenest hopes and aspirations to an abrupt end? Does it not bring crashing down all of the accumulated experience and wisdom, to say nothing of the continuing comforting presence, of the one who dies? And does not the frequent fact of premature death, death not in the fullness of time, call into serious question the meaningfulness of human life as a whole?

If we live only to die, and there is no kind of new life awaiting us beyond the grave, how can our lives here and now be said to be worthwhile? This is an especially pressing and poignant question for those separated by death from persons they earnestly love, persons who have meant most to them in the living of their own lives. If there is no respite from death, its inevitability for ourselves and our loved ones is bound to be a persistently haunting fact, one that casts the shadow of lingering uncertainty and dread—if not threatening despair—over even the brightest of our days. At the very least, this shadow lurks in our unconscious even when we are not fully aware of its menace. We know in the depths of our being that this hour, this day, this week, this year could be the last one for ourselves or for those we love. Death might come slowly or swiftly, but we know that it will come to each of us in due time.

All things material are subject to change, and the forms of material existence inevitably come into being and pass out of being. Even the most soaring, adamantine, majestic mountain face will eventually be eroded away and become part of the plains below. We humans, like all organisms, are material beings. We are born and eventually we will die. We share in this inevitable fact with all earthly creatures. Thanks to such factors as better nutrition, better sanitation, better living conditions, better understanding of diseases, and better medical care, we tend to live longer today—at least in peaceful, prosperous places—than did those of earlier generations. But we still must someday die and sometimes not in the fullness of time.

So-called near death experiences, when they occur, are more likely to be delusions than dependable revelations of a life beyond the grave. Religious claims to resurrection of the body or continued existence of the soul after bodily death are based more on the authority of long-ago teachers or alleged firsthand witnesses to a resurrection than on today's publicly accessible evidence. Philosophical or theological arguments for life after death are generally flimsy and tend, on careful examination, to be unconvincing. If all of this is true, where can we find the courage to live in the face of our own death and the deaths of those we love? How does Religion of Nature approach or propose that we deal with this question?

It does so, in the first place, by questioning the assumption of some persons that life can be fully meaningful and worthwhile in a religious sense only if it lasts forever. The logic of this assumption is not at all clear. Equally unclear is the idea that the loss of a loved one somehow cancels out or makes moot the inestimable value of the loved one or experience with the loved one while he or she lives. Our days as individuals and our time with one another are limited, but that is no reason for us to conclude that they must be utterly tragic and absurd.

This is not to deny the wrenching grief and profound sense of loss when someone near and dear to us dies. The grief and loss are real, and they will continue to ache in our hearts as long as we live. Naturalist, poet, and prose writer Helen MacDonald reflects on their inevitability in each human life:

> There is a time in life when you expect the world to be always full of new things. And then comes a day when you realise that is not how it will be at all. You see that life will become a thing made of holes. Absences. Losses. Things that were there and are no longer. And you realise, too, that you have to grow around and between the gaps, though you can put your hand out to where things were and feel that tense, shining dullness of the space where the memories are.
>
> (2014: 171)

I cannot think of the death of my parents without lamenting their deaths and missing their presence in my life. I experience surges of shock to this day when I must acknowledge once again that I will never be able to greet them, sit comfortably with them, laugh with them, reminisce with them, eat at their table, seek their advice, or bask in their love! But I do not resent the brute fact that my beloved parents had someday to die. This is an inescapable part of what it means to be a natural being, and all of us humans are natural beings. Our natural situation is not an either-or. There is room for both celebration and grief, and neither excludes the other.

We can affirm and be thankful for our relatively brief time as participants in the community of humans and other natural beings and for our conscious experience of the sustaining powers and wonders of nature, even while accepting the fact that the price of our lives here on earth is our inevitable deaths. I remember as a child not wanting to eat the chocolate bunny given to me at Easter because it would destroy the bunny. But I also very much wanted to enjoy the delicious chocolate! Similarly, having lives to enjoy—our own or the lives of those we love—requires that we accept and somehow come to terms with life's inevitable end. We cannot have the challenges and joys of life without the eventual destruction of life by death. And we cannot have them without the shadow of death and of the uncertain time of death for ourselves and those we love as their constant accompaniment.

I remarked earlier that nature's creations and destructions go hand-in-hand. One thing must be left behind in order that another thing can come into being. This is true even moment-by-moment. The past must be left behind in order that the present can come into being. The old must yield place to the new. Even a repetition of the past in the present is not quite that, because there must be a *new instance* of the past in the present. The old instance is left behind in order that the new one can occur. There could be no dynamism or change in nature without destructions, and nature is a dynamic system, as are all of its components.

Think of what the world would be like without routine deaths. There could presently be no lives, because each life form would have had to struggle with all of the others, and none of them would be able to die and thus to leave room for the others to continue to live. In our own case as humans, our population would long ago have become so horrendously large as soon to wipe us out as a species. And if we did not wipe ourselves out in this way—the way of having to live forever once we were born—voracious immortal insects would do so long before we have had sufficient time to bring about our collective demise. If these ruminations are not enough to remind us of how necessary death is to the continuance of life on earth, we have only to reflect on the history of biological evolution. In this history, close to 99 percent of past species have become extinct, and had they not done so, many of the present forms of life, including our own, would not now exist. Ongoing deaths are essential to the ongoingness of life.

Maybe humans are exceptions to this necessary connection of life with death. Perhaps we are special creatures destined for endless life in some other realm. This has long been the standard belief in religions such as Christianity and Islam. But this belief has no credence in Religion of Nature, because nature is the religious ultimate and human beings are creatures of nature. As such, they, like all the others of earth's creatures, are products of biological evolution and subject both to being born and to dying. Tasmanian writer on ecological sustainability Aidan Davison wisely acknowledges that throughout nature "death is the culmination, not the negation, of life" (2001: 210). There is a time to live and a time to die. Religion of Nature and other forms of religious naturalism can help to make us not only keenly aware of this inexorable fact but also able positively to affirm it.

This observation leads to a third way in which Religion of Nature addresses the issue of death, namely, that when we die something of our contribution can live on in the lives of the younger persons who come after us. They, in the freshness of their relatively young age, can go on to transform our contributions into new achievements of their own. In this way, progress is made possible from the older lives to the newer ones. The young are not weighed down by the established and often stubbornly entrenched beliefs and assumptions of the old. The former can dare new thoughts and hazard new paths of investigation. They can build on the contributions of the old without being blinded, inhibited, or engulfed by them. Death in this way of thinking is an instrument of needed progress, change, and refreshment through the generations of human beings. Individual human deaths make room for and can be a necessary stimulus to innovative futures in human history, culture, and life. A fond hope of those who must die is that they can leave something of use behind them, something to be reflected on, improved upon, or set aside. This hope can help to motivate and encourage them while they live. It can help to give meaning to their lives, mortal though they are.

These three lines of thought could be supplemented with others. But perhaps they are sufficient in this brief essay to provide insight into how Religion of Nature can address the fact of death and the pall it threatens to cast over the whole of life. These intellectual considerations do not dissolve or make unimportant the emotional side of the fearsome uncertainty of the impending time of death or the sad experience of the death of others, especially the others close to our own lives. Pervasive death as part of the pervasive life of this earth is indication of the unavoidable ambiguity of the world and life in the world. Frank acknowledgment of this fact may make it easier to cope with death, but it does not eliminate the existential agony and uncertainty of death. Somehow, even after a time of terrible and seemingly unquenchable grief, nature usually enables us finally to live with new confidence and hope when loved ones are lost. Somehow nature or our nature as human beings gives us the courage to live in the fact of death. There is mystery and miracle in the persistence and resolve of human lives when confronted with tragedy and grief that no amount of intellectual analysis can decipher or explain away.

A striking example of such courage and equanimity is this statement of neurophysiologist Oliver Sacks (2015), writing about his own impending death after learning that he had incurable metastatic cancer:

> And now, weak, short of breath, my once firm muscles melted away by cancer, I find my thoughts, increasingly, not on the supernatural or spiritual, but on what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life—achieving peace within oneself. I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one's life as well, when one can feel that one's work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest.

Sack's words, written while confronted with the inescapability of his own fast approaching death, are much in the spirit of Religion of Nature and of religious naturalism in general. They show clearly how it is possible to live a meaningful life and to leave that life as one's distinctive heritage and gift after one's death. We can strive to accomplish this with our lives in one way or another, and we are indebted to all who have done so in their own lives and are now gone before us. Their "work is done," but its influence continues to live on and have valuable effects in the world.

Sacks lived a rich and full life spanning many years. Not all are as fortunate as he. Some live lives of persistent pain, desperation, sorrow, and disappointment. These lives are sadly unfulfilled. The lives of those who die prematurely or in childhood are undeniably so as well. We should not pretend otherwise. But the latter and even the former—brief or unfulfilled though both types of life are—may contribute in important and cherished ways to instruction and deepening of the lives of those who continue after them. This consideration is not compensation for joyless lives or early deaths, but it may indicate that their subjects have not lived or died entirely in vain.

Mere words can do no justice to such things as the haunting mystery of the approaching death of each one of us, the terrible sorrow evoked by the deaths of loved ones, or the premature, accidental, violent, or suffering deaths of innocent persons. But meaning can be found in the face of the inevitability of death. Each life within the limits of its birth and death contains the possibility of making distinct contributions to the wellbeing of nature and of one's fellow humans as part of nature. The fact of death with no promise of further life beyond does not, or need not, make all of life absurd. The limited field of thought and action this fact affords can serve to give to life urgency and intensity of meaning it might otherwise lack.

Practicing Religion of Nature

This essay has been devoted mainly to the task of understanding how Religion of Nature as a species of religious naturalism can be thought of or conceived. But the question is bound to arise, "How should it be practiced?" How does one go about living as a religious naturalist in today's world? I do not have space here to do justice to this question, but here are a few brief suggestions.

One should be constantly aware of and resistant to the rampant consumerism that is so much a part of the culture of the United States and some other parts of the world today. One should fight against unregulated capitalism and an unconstrained free market ideology that benefit the few at the expense of the many. One should take with utmost seriousness the global climate change and sad endangerments of species that direly threaten the earth, and seek ways to work for their amelioration. One should not base one's career choice on the amount of money to be earned or power and success to be attained but on the best contributions one can make to the earth and its creatures. And one should be generous in the giving of one's time and money to deserving agencies and organizations devoted to social, economic, and ecological justice.

One should support political candidates, policies, and programs that are ecologically alert, well informed, and seriously responsible—and that demonstrate a keen sense of the urgency of finding ways to deal with the severe ecological threats of our day. One should develop a personal diet and a diet for one's family that is respectful of the creatures of nature and their habitats. One should seek to understand the science of one's day, and especially ecological science. One should educate one's children in this science and help to promote educational institutions that give due attention to pressing ecological realities and issues. One should engage in carefully focused meditative practices that help to attune oneself to the marvels of nature and to one's privileges and responsibilities as a devotee of nature.

In the final analysis, the issue of how best to practice religious naturalism in one's own life is a matter to be weighed and considered by each individual in his or her own ways and in light of his or her passions, interests, and strengths. But it is important to recognize that Religion of Nature and religious naturalism in general as religious worldviews are not just matters for thought and reflection but inspirations and incentives for the whole of life and action. Such outlooks are intended to be ways of living and acting, not just ways of thinking.

Even as a general way of thinking, much work remains to be done in refining and developing a plausible, relevant, engaging, and coherent religious naturalist view of the world. In all of these respects, intellectual as well as practical, religious naturalism is an ongoing program and work in progress. It has no experts or final authorities, and it is not immune to probing questions and criticisms. In fact, these are critical to its ongoing development as a convincing and commanding religious way of life.

I write this essay, not in the spirit of trying to proselytize, but in the spirit of sharing what has become religiously plausible, meaningful, and important to me in the living of my life. Religion of Nature may not be the most appropriate and helpful religious outlook for many others, but it is for me at this stage of my life. I respect those with a theistic or pantheistic outlook incorporating some kind of deity, for example, even though I cannot concur in this outlook. Such outlooks can do and have done much good in the world. Ours is a time when all of the religions of the world should give heavy emphasis to thinking about, motivating, and working for the health and wellbeing of the earth and its creatures. All of them have ample resources for doing so.

Note

1 Or, more properly, matter-energy, and I mean to include in this conception of matter radiant energy and anti-matter as well as so-called dark matter and dark energy.

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