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# The Spiritual Lives of Great Environmentalists: John Muir, Calvin DeWitt

William Ted Johnson

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## John Muir

Selected accolades about John Muir's contribution and role in the development of the modern environmental consciousness make ONE thing clear; he was Outstanding, Notable, and Exceptional. His environmental legacy appears to have no contemporary equivalent. Much has also been discussed concerning his spirituality. However, when it comes to his faith, there is little agreement about his beliefs. As we examine his background, the analysis of several scholars, and his own statements, we may not agree on his religion, but it is hoped that we will understand how important his faith was to his love of nature and his determined influence to keep the world as wild as possible.

### Environmental Legacy

According to the *Dictionary of American Biography*, "At the turn of the 20 th century Muir was the acknowledged leader of the forest conservation movement. " The *American National Biography* says, "John Muir is of such transcendent importance as an activist-conservationist that his worth as a naturalist is sometimes underestimated and his considerable skill as a writer obscured." Because of Muir's role in the creation of numerous national parks (Sequoia, Mount Rainer, Petrified Forest, Grand Canyon, and Yosemite) as well as our National Park System, which serves as a model for other such systems around the world, Muir is often referred to as the Father of the National Park System (*John Muir: A Brief Biography*, 1999; Downing, 1992). The brief biography cited here goes on to say that "John Muir was perhaps this country's most famous and influential naturalist and conservationist."

White (1996) stated, "In the United States, Muir has become a figure of almost mythic grandeur, revered, honored, and loved by millions who have been inspired by his books and achievements." Acknowledging Muir's influence beyond the US border, he stated, "In Great Britain, and particularly Scotland, Muir's spirit has galvanized a new generation of practical and political conservationists." White concludes that Muir should be "re-interpreted as the Living Spirit and Founder of the World Conservation Movement." Pyle (2001) considers Muir's contribution to the environment inestimable, having set the pattern for those who followed such as "Aldo

Leopold, Rachel Carson, E.O. Wilson, and all their lot." In fact, Pyle claims that Muir was and still is a model for everyone who simply loves nature. Finally, *The Importance of John Muir* (2003) compels us to consider this claim, "If you define a great American as one who helps change the direction of this country toward more socially desirable goals, then John Muir was a greater American than all but a handful of US Presidents."

## **Spirituality**

It seems unanimous that John Muir was among the world's most important environmentalists. While many factors and events from his childhood to his accident causing temporary blindness undoubtedly influenced his choice to concentrate on "God's inventions rather than man's," our focus is on his spiritual views. John Muir's expressions of spirituality cannot be separated from his actions to preserve wild places. His spirituality and environmentalism went hand in hand. They were inseparable. By focusing on his spirituality, we have the best chance to understand his conservation ethic. However, we must exercise great care so as to guard against dressing Muir in our own cloak of spirituality. Like anyone else, Muir believed what he believed because of how he was raised, the time in which he lived, what he read, heard, and experienced. In the end, Muir's own words shed the most light on his spirituality like his actions revealed his environmental commitment.

## **Childhood**

Born April 21, 1838 in Dunbar Scotland to Daniel Muir and Anne Gilrye, John Muir was their third child and eldest son. He attended Dunbar's common school taking the usual subjects of instruction such as Latin. Additionally, Daniel Muir required his children to study the *King James Bible*, including the memorization of lengthy passages. When it was all said and done, John knew by heart all of the New Testament and 75% of the Old Testament. He participated regularly in the training and activities of the local religious community, such as church services and his overall thirst for knowledge was unquenchable (Miller, 2005). In 1849 Daniel brought his three oldest children to America. The rest of the family followed once a homestead had been established in the Wisconsin wilds.

## **Personal Faith**

As John grew and developed his own spiritual identity, he often disagreed with his father's interpretations of the Bible. Muir considered himself a Christian but his personal faith was often at odds with the conventional and orthodox sects of his time (Miller, 2005). Turner (1985) states that "Muir

was first and forever a Christian even if the faith was uncomfortable in places and had to be adjusted to fit his own spiritual needs.” Religious labels often confuse rather than clarify. In addition to being called a Christian, Muir has been associated with Zen Buddhism (Dwyer, 1995). His religious beliefs have been explained in psychological terms rather than spiritual (Stoll, 1993). He has been called a Nature Mystic (Gates, 2000) and a pantheistic Transcendentalist (Brannon, 2006). Miller (2005), on the other hand, states unequivocally that John Muir was not a pantheist. Rather than rely on labels such as these, it would be more profitable to examine John Muir’s actions, statements, and sources of influence.

### **Actions of Faith**

No longer under his father’s direct influence, in 1861-62 while at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, he often visited and preached to Union soldiers at the state fair grounds, urging them to avoid temptation and live the Christian life. He was known around campus too as one eager to share his faith (Miller, 2005). In order to give something away, you must first be in possession of it. John Muir’s efforts to share his faith suggest that he was actually in possession of such a faith to begin with.

### **Words of Faith**

Like any writer, John Muir lived and worked in a world of words. He frequently mentioned God. Our question would be, what god? That answer may come from the next section looking at the people, texts, and places that influenced his spiritual development. For now, let’s consider selected passages where John Muir mentions God.

### **The American Wilderness in the Words of John Muir**

#### *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*

Two thousand years ago our Saviour told Nicodemus that he did not know where the winds came from, nor where they were going... The substance of the winds is too thin for human eyes, their written language is too difficult for human minds, and their spoken language mostly too faint for the ears. (p. 140)

#### *Our National Parks*

It took more than three thousand years to make some of the trees in these western woods - trees that are still standing in perfect strength and beauty, waving and singing in the mighty forests of the Sierra. Through all the

wonderful, eventful centuries since Christ's time - and long before that - God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods; but he cannot save them from fools - only Uncle Sam can do that. (p. 191)

### *My First Summer in the Sierra*

The snow on the high mountains is melting fast and the streams are singing bankful, swaying softly through the level meadows and bogs, quivering with sun-spangles, swirling in pot-holes, resting in deep pools, leaping, shouting in wild, exulting energy over rough boulder dams, joyful, beautiful in all their forms. No Sierra landscape that I have seen holds anything truly dead or dull, or any trace of what in manufactories is called rubbish or waste; everything is perfectly clean and pure and full of divine lessons. This quick inevitable interest attaching to everything seems marvelous until the hand of God becomes visible; then it seems reasonable that what interests Him may well interest us. When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. (p. 60)

The forests too, seem kindly, familiar and the lakes and meadows and glad singing streams... Bathed in such beauty, watching the expressions ever varying on the faces of the mountains, watching the stars, which here have a glory that the lowlander never dreams of, watching the circling seasons, listening to the songs of the waters and winds and birds, would be endless pleasure. And what glorious cloudlands I should see, storms and calms - a new heaven and a new earth every day, aye and new inhabitants. And how many visitors I should have. I feel sure I should not have one dull moment. And why should this appear extravagant? It is only common sense, a sign of health, genuine, natural, all-awake health. One would be at an endless godful play and what speeches and music and acting and scenery and lights! - sun, moon, stars, auroras. Creation just beginning, the morning stars "still singing together and all the sons of God shouting for joy." (p. 98, 100)

Letter to Miss Janet Douglas Moors, February 1887

Aye, my lassie, it is a blessed thing to go free in the light of this beautiful world, to see God playing upon everything, as a man would play on an instrument, His fingers upon the lightning and torrent, on every wave of sea and sky, and every living thing, making all together sing and shine in sweet accord, the one love-harmony of the Universe. (p. 148-149)

### *John of the Mountains*

Wonderful how completely everything in wild nature fits into us, as if truly

part and parent of us. The sun shines not on but in us. The rivers flow not past, but through us, thrilling, tingling, vibrating every fiber and cell of the substance of our bodies, making them glide and sing. The trees wave and the flowers bloom in our bodies as well as our souls and every bird song, wind song, and tremendous storm song of the rocks in the heart of the mountains is our song, our very own and sings our love. The song of God, sounding on forever (p.163).

## **Influences Leading to Faith**

The single greatest influence on John Muir's spirituality and love of nature is clear from his actions and words – the *Bible*. In spite of claims to the contrary (White, 1967), the *Bible* has much to contribute to preserving the environment (Johnson, 2000). The *Bible's* influence on Muir should come as no surprise since he had memorized so much of it. The quotes above mentioning Savior and Christ reveal a thorough knowledge of the New Testament. Suggesting that God's creation interests Him in the quote from "My First Summer in the Sierra" refers to a collection of biblical passages devoted to the fact that God takes pleasure in what He has made (Johnson, 2000). The next quote listed from that source refers to Job 38:6-8, likely to have been memorized by Muir. The other quotes discussing music refer to a large body of Scripture documenting creation's praise of its Creator (Johnson, 2000).

Interestingly, scholars consistently ignore the fact that Muir was a biblically based environmentalist, in an effort to invent a novel association with any politically comfortable faith with which they might be familiar. For example, Dwyer (1995) tried to turn John Muir into a Buddhist citing Muir's experience on Mount Ritter. However, that experience is described in terms used in Isaiah 40:28-31. This well known passage has recently been popularized by singer, songwriter Lincoln Brewster (2006). Miller (2005) cites this experience as an example of God's protection that Muir credited to "Heaven's care," not the attainment of Enlightenment in the Buddhist context as suggested by Dwyer.

Brannon (2006) labels Muir as the "most radical Transcendentalist of them all." Brannon admits that the influence of Emersonian transcendentalism was unclear, yet in the next sentence claims that Emerson's influence on Muir while in Wisconsin gave "birth to his brand of radical transcendentalism," one calling for experiencing nature rather than just thinking about it as was the case with the New England clique. However, one has only to read the fourth chapter of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Remarque, 1929) to understand that the so-called radical brand of transcendentalism associated with Muir was not as radical as Brannon would have us believe. If soldiers

trying to stay alive in the trenches of World War I speak of their relationship with nature like transcendentalists, it must be more of a basic component of who we are as living beings rather than something conceptually born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As a "nature mystic," Gates (2000) asserts that the identity of Muir's God was unclear. He seems confused by the Christian and orthodox language because of the "Dionysian or pagan" elements that spill through it all. He cites Muir's belief that the high mountains reflected their Creator and that nature herself seemed constantly engaged in worship but never associates these views with the Bible. He does suggest Zen, though, and concludes that Muir followed God in a way that was natural, by drifting across the mountains, a servant to the divine winds. However, he states that Muir didn't worship nature but nature's Creator through His creation. Gate's references to nature reflecting its Creator and trees worshiping God, are found in hundreds of biblical passages (Johnson, 2000). What could be less confusing, unless Gates does not know the *Bible* that Muir knew? He also seems to have forgotten that Muir did not just drift across the mountains. He was engaged in business, took care of his family, traveled the world and spent no small amount of time in civilized settings.

Stoll's psychological explanation of Muir's motivation to experience wild nature makes a distinction between the God of the *Bible* and the God of nature (1993). However, John Muir made no such distinction. The *Bible*, King James Version, includes nearly 3,000 verses related to the environment (Johnson, 2000). John Muir knew them all and he read them through eyes accustomed to seeing things in the context of wild places. When John Muir spoke of God, he did so in the context of nature. Speaking about nature, John Muir often spoke of God, the same God, from the texts he knew better than any other, God's word and God's creation. Nature revealed God to John Muir like a catalyst facilitates a chemical reaction. Neither substance is diminished. Biblical authors also understood God through His handiwork. They were much closer to the land than we are today, even closer than Muir was in his day.

Stoll suggests that Daniel Muir's concept of God and nature focused on "nature for man's use." This is 1/9<sup>th</sup> correct. Much more of the *Bible*, 8/9<sup>th</sup>, concentrates on other issues such as God's delight in His creation, creation's response of praise to its Creator, nature's witness to the reality of God, nature revealing the power of God, etc. (Johnson, 2000). Daniel Muir's reading of the *Bible* was in a different context than John's. Daniel saw nature as a thing to be conquered. He could not see it and himself as coming from the same stuff – dust. Therefore, his perspective was colored differently than John's who saw the same creation not as something to overcome but as

another expression of God's love (Matthew 5:43-48). The cultural context in which the *Bible* is read will influence its application in the life of the one reading it. The same text will be understood to a greater or lesser extent and applied differently depending on the one reading it. A notable example of John's different understanding of Scripture from his father's is found in the dietary decision of Daniel Muir to remove meat from family meals. John was quick to use a biblical example of God providing meat for the prophet Elijah and the decision was rescinded.

Whether John Muir followed Buddha or Jehovah and whether he was a nature mystic or a transcendentalist is subject to interpretation. One thing, however, is sure. The foundation of his religious faith and love of nature was the *Bible* in the context of wilderness experience.

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Unable to interview John Muir, we have sought to understand his spiritual views by examining elements from his life. We are not bound to this limitation with living subjects. Therefore, I have submitted interview questions to a number of individuals and organizations seeking to better understand the relationship between environmental activism and spirituality. As I receive their responses, I will pass them along. I have asked four questions related to the individual's environmental legacy, spiritual beliefs, how those beliefs developed, and how their spirituality relates to their environmental activities. I will not add to their responses, but let their own words tell who they are, what they believe, and how their spiritual beliefs have contributed to their environmental legacy.

### **Calvin DeWitt**

1. Please describe briefly your most important environmental contribution to local or global preservation/conservation efforts. In short, what is your environmental legacy?

My most important global environmental contribution is the development of Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies over the period of 1979-2005. Beginning in 1980 I arranged for the Institute to host a series of annual "Au Sable Forums" at which scientists, ethicists, and practitioners came together from across evangelicalism and the wider Christian world to contribute their research findings in relation to "Christian environmental stewardship." Numerous books resulted from these forums and in turn furthered the movement that came to be called "Creation-Care."



Alongside these Forums, I led the Institute to bring into partnership 60 North American evangelical colleges and universities with professors and institutions in south India, east Africa, and the United Kingdom to learn, teach, and spread Christian environmental stewardship. The theme of Creation-Care was built into courses and programs in environmental science and ecology, first at the Institute and later at these colleges and universities, all of which helped bring Creation-Care into evangelical and Christian thinking and action. Many of these professors along with contributors to the Au Sable Forums make up the Academy of Evangelical Scientists and Ethicists, an organization I have formed to support their ongoing research and contributions to Creation-Care.

At the local level, my most important environmental contribution was to lead in the development of a model conservation-based local government. As a member and Chair of the board of my rural community in the 1970s, I helped mobilize the citizens of my Town of Dunn (Dane County, Wisconsin) to develop an informed and active community, re-establish participatory town meetings, develop a land stewardship ethic, and implement a Land Stewardship Plan. In time this Plan was enhanced with a Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program. In 1995 and 2000 this work brought the Town of Dunn the national *Renew America* award.

2. Please summarize your spiritual beliefs.

In my life and work, I operate within a paraphrase of Chicago's Professor Emeritus Wayne C. Booth's definition of religion, as "the passion to live rightly and spread right living—all in accord with the way the world works." In doing this, I hold together, in full integration, a triad of questions: (1) How does the world work (science and *scientia*)? (2) What ought to be (ethics)? and (3) What then must we do (praxis)? My principal source material for the *science and scientia* corner of this triad is the natural world, sometimes called "the Book of Nature" or "the Book of God's World;" my principal source for the *ethics* corner is the *Bible*, sometimes called "the Book of God's Word." The praxis corner completes the triad, to bring the answers to the first two questions to bear on responsible and effective environmental stewardship and conservation.

My spiritual belief is that the pursuit of right living should emerge from reading the Book of God's World and the Book of God's Word coherently—coherently *within* each book and coherently *between* both books. I believe that I must live my life passionately, must do my

best to gain a coherent understanding of the two books, and must then put this to useful and practical work. My faith is that right makes might, and that in that faith I must dare to do my duty (to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln and make reference to Matthew 5:5 and 6:33).

3. How did your beliefs develop? What person, text, or event most influenced the formation of your spiritual beliefs?

My spiritual beliefs began in early childhood, and developed throughout my youth, and on into college. My cultural environment was a system of home, school, church, and community that religious scholars call a Reformed World-and-Life View. This worldview is not simply beliefs but it is a way of life. In the Reformed theological tradition all of life should be lived as a calling, whether that be a stone-mason, singer, nurse, pastor, politician, or professor. It was the rich cultural matrix of the Reformed Tradition—a cultural matrix of story, song, and exposition in worship, school, and life—that encouraged me to discover my gifts, honored every profession and vocation, respected seeking knowledge from the natural world—“which is before our eyes as a most elegant book” — and eventually brought me to become a scientist.

Sermons in church were rooted in Hebrew and Greek texts and based both on passionate belief and sound and exemplary scholarship. The Psalms and hymns we sang brought me to incorporate into my being what our Psalter Hymnal described as “the conditions of all art” with the poetry of the text being “good poetry” and the music satisfying “aesthetic laws of balance, unity, variety, harmony... and fitness.” The Reformed Tradition brought me to know that my every action is best done if it is done to the glory of God and to the furtherance of environmental and societal integrity. The development of my beliefs ultimately brought me to work toward living life as a psalm to God in gratitude for the two great gifts—the Creation and the Word.

4. How does your faith equip you to be environmentally aware, involved, and active?

My faith equips me to look at the system of humans and environment whole—as one coherent entity with everything connecting and interacting with everything else. The word we used for this is the same one E. O. Wilson uses for his most recent book, *The Creation*. From my childhood on, the whole idea of a thoroughly integrated world with its innumerable species of living things, the magnificence of great landscapes, the star-spangled heavens, and the greatness and expanse of what the Ojibwe in the place I grew up called Michi-Gan, translated (unknowingly) by my parents as the Big

Lake, was literally awesome! My faith allowed me to fall in love with the whole Creation, because of its Author, including its human creatures and all of this with great passion.

In my earliest years I perceived everything around me as quite wonderful, including people. Eventually, however, I came to discover what my pastor had been saying about us and others in some of his sermons: the good they would, they do not; and the evil that they would not, yet that's what they do. This was the human predicament! We needed help in keeping "on track." Later, thanks in large part to my students at the University of Wisconsin who worked to find the underlying causes of all of our environmental problems, I learned to summarize this as human arrogance, ignorance, and greed. Earlier, I had come to know in graduate school, and increasingly ever since, that the Creation is under assault from none other than ourselves! We don't really want to destroy the earth; and yet we proceed to do so!

My faith is that all of us, individually, and in all sorts of groups, can be brought to believe that right makes might. We have to spread that faith, with passion and resolve, daring to do our duty! And we have to refresh our values institutions, even demanding of them that they provide the leadership and foster the solutions to our predicament.

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