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## **The Spiritual Lives of Great Environmentalists:**

**Gifford, Les Sponsel**

William Ted Johnson

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### **Gifford Pinchot, First Chief of the US Forest Service**

#### **Environmental Legacy**

Gifford Pinchot, better than anyone of his generation, understood the interrelatedness of natural resources as an avenue to world peace. He saw natural resources as a national heritage, which if not conserved, would be exhausted far sooner than others thought possible. He established scientific principles to manage resources and made effective use of politics to stir the American public to action on behalf of conservation goals. However, he was not without controversy and conflict, finding himself with enemies among preservationists, developers, and those resistant to federal control of local lands.

Born on August 11, 1865 into a wealthy class of merchants in Connecticut, Pinchot was encouraged by his father to pursue a course of study in forestry. His mother sought to develop his character and faith. He was able to satisfy both parents as a student of science at Yale, actively developing his spiritual growth as a deacon and Sunday School teacher. Believing that forests in America differed markedly from those in Europe, he returned home after only one additional year of study abroad in France to become America's first forester and founder of the American conservation movement (Miller, 2001).

Pinchot was appointed Chief Forester in 1899 by President McKinley, but dismissed by President Taft in 1910 after the Ballinger-Pinchot controversy. At that time Pinchot publicly spoke out against Secretary of the Interior Ballinger who moved forward with President Taft's plans to develop Alaska's coal fields. His outspoken stand for natural resource conservation cost him his job, making him a martyr and hero in the press and with the American people. With his insight into democratic action and concern for the ethical and spiritual basis of American life, Gifford Pinchot provided the initial national leadership in applied conservation. He is sometimes called the apostle of conservation, placing it in the context of a moral crusade for social reform (Naylor, 2005). Pinchot's conservation approach to managing natural resources occasionally sided with development interests however, as in the well known controversy with John Muir over the Hetch Hetchy water development project in Yosemite National Park, designed to supply water to San Francisco.

Pinchot popularized the term "conservation of natural resources" and focused on a utilitarian approach to managing natural resources. His progressive efforts to manage resources for the greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time constituted his unique blend of applied science and religion, which became the trademark of the Progressive Era (Naylor, 2005). Pinchot did not view proper forestry management in a vacuum. His holistic view saw forestry in the context of related issues such as irrigation, land reclamation, wildlife, recreation, and soil conservation. He developed "conservation of natural resources" as Theodore Roosevelt's primary domestic policy and masterminded the 1908 White House Conference of Governors on conservation and the sustained use of natural resources. This led to historic policies, a national inventory of natural resources, and paved the way for later conservation agreements with Mexico and Canada.

Pinchot believed that humanity was a natural resource for whose material, moral, and spiritual welfare the conservation doctrine was founded and directed. He affirmed in spiritual and ethical terms the principle of human rights, considering humans as children of God (Pinchot, 1949). He is also regarded as the Father of American Conservation, having founded the Society of American Foresters and the National Conservation Association.

Gifford Pinchot was far ahead of his time with a national vision of forest reserves. This stood in contrast to regional plans or privatization interests as championed by others of his time. He made it a high priority to professionalize the Forest Service and believed that a good forester was a good citizen: engaged, involved, knowledgeable, and committed to public service.

## **Spirituality**

### **Family Influence and Foundation**

As a youth, Pinchot was immersed in the evangelical Protestant movement, so widespread at the time. He read religious classics and attended Presbyterian services. His mother believed that his spiritual growth would determine the course and quality of his life over any other pursuit. She often reminded him of the importance of relying upon God and encouraged him to emulate the lives of godly men such as St. Paul (Miller, 2001).

As an adult Pinchot was active in the Episcopal Church. He was exposed to and involved in many social reforms through the work of the church and as Governor of Pennsylvania during turbulent economic times. He was quite comfortable with the spiritual aspect of environmental work which went hand-in-hand with its socially beneficial impact. He worked alongside several religious organizations with a forestry office in New York's United Charities Building where mission and tract societies were located.

### **Academic Mentor**

His mother encouraged correspondence with an acquaintance of hers, scientist A.H. Gesner, due to their common interest in nature. While Gifford was yet 18 years old and a second year student in New Hampshire's Phillips Exeter Academy, Gesner wrote to Gifford that he was dumbstruck by the number of men who failed to see God in nature. Gesner felt that the study of God's works never implied doubt about their Creator. Moral and scientific progress went together. According to historian Charles Rosenberg, this view was mainstream among nineteenth century Americans. Gesner and his peers moved seamlessly between works of religion (the Bible) and works devoted to scientific research (Miller, 2001).

As Pinchot neared the end of his academic term at Yale, he was torn between full-time work in the church, specifically the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and forestry. He had served as a leader in regular religious services at Yale and was elected deacon of the class of 1889. He conducted regular religious activities for the class such as prayer services and Bible studies (Naylor, 2005). However, he

was eventually persuaded to promote a social gospel of bettering the lives of individuals through natural resource conservation rather than direct service as a missionary.

### **Private Faith**

Mysteriously, Gifford Pinchot carried on a secret spiritual love affair with a dead woman, Laura Houghteling, for twenty years after her death due to tuberculosis. He experienced an unusual sense of the divine through his spiritual marriage to Laura Houghteling. After her death, he believed Laura was with God and that he was with them both in holy unity. Laura and Gifford shared the belief that her physical death would only result in a temporary separation here on earth, being reunited later for eternity (Bradley, 1999).

Pinchot's faith in God was never shaken by Laura's death, stating that things didn't always turn out as we wished but that since God allowed Laura to die, it was right. Defying earthly reason, Pinchot recorded in his diary that Laura had come back to be with him just as they expected. Pinchot's diary entries some thirty days and following after Laura's death state that "My lady is very near" (March 18, 1894) and "My darling is with me and I know it already" (April 3, 1894). His diary entries never mentioned Laura's death but only her closeness to him. He wrote that he could hardly help expecting to see her (May 16, 1895) and that she was beautifully near him (June 16, 1899). Throughout his secret inner life with Laura, he rejoiced in his relationship with God. For example, in the latter diary entry above, he wrote, "I can not thank our Father in Heaven enough."

Pinchot studied the Bible, often sharing this time with Laura. On April 22, 1894 he wrote that she spoke to him as he read St. John. God also spoke to him during this reading. Later Pinchot wrote that "In God's sight my Lady and I are husband and wife" (April 22, 1896). Throughout this period Pinchot studied many other books about God, Heaven, and the afterlife in an effort to lift his spiritual awareness to that of Laura's (Bradley, 1999).

### **Application**

Like the ancients, Gifford Pinchot did not compartmentalize his relationship with God. Instead, his spirituality, professional work in conservation and politics, education, and efforts to positively impact the world through socially relevant conservation programs were all woven together into a seamless fabric

called life. Consequently, he sought to partner with the church in conservation work. He co-authored two books on the country church published by the Federal Council of Churches. These remarkable works demonstrated how progressive churches could restore the value and care of the land. Pinchot believed that the country church was one of the greatest roots from which spring national integrity, vitality, and intelligence. He went on to say that its life and power was of national concern and that the permanent strength of any civilization was best measured by the soundness of life on the land by its people of faith. Pinchot felt that the tenacious spiritual ideals of the open country constituted our most resisting barrier against the growing laxity and luxury of our society. It is the country church rather than the city church which is in fact our best defense against the advance of the evils of our time, he wrote (Naylor, 2005). Pinchot's ideas are no less progressive today. The most effective means of establishing peace, he would claim, would be through sound conservation practices. His basis for such practices rested upon a biblical foundation of Christian faith.

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**Dr. Les Sponse**

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

At the personal level, I pursue voluntary simplicity in my lifestyle as well as conservation, recycling, and the like in order to reduce my ecological footprint. However, my main environmental legacy is through professional work encompassing research, publications, and teaching on human ecology and environmentalism. My graduate students contribute further to the environmental information, awareness,

and responsibility of others in their subsequent careers in universities or environmental organizations. As one specific example among my own initiatives, each Earth Day I organize a special public event, most recently a showing of Al Gore's documentary film "An Inconvenient Truth" with guest speakers as discussants.

2. Please summarize your spiritual beliefs.

For more than two decades my spiritual beliefs have encompassed a mixture of Theravada Buddhism and a personal generic nature spirituality. The core principles of Buddhism, such as mindfulness, nonviolence, compassion, right livelihood, right action, and moderation, are readily applicable to environmental concerns and practices in everyday life. For instance, when I discover that an insect has entered my residence I place the mouth of a clear plastic cup over it against a surface like a wall, slide a piece of cardboard underneath the mouth of the cup to contain the insect, and then take it to the door to release it outside by removing the cardboard from the cup of liberation. This may seem quite trivial if not even silly to many persons, but actually if one can practice such reverence for the life of even a miniature organism like an insect, then one has far greater respect for other beings as well. This treatment of an insect involves a very different attitude in contrast to trying to kill it with a fly swatter or insecticide spray. It has been decades since I engaged in hunting and fishing, I view such activity as only appropriate if there is no alternative for survival or subsistence. Causing the suffering and death of other beings for personal enjoyment is one of the more perverse acts in my view.

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

My German American parents appear to have been fairly typical middle class Christians in the Midwest. Moreover, they exhibited a profound appreciation and reverence for the wonders of nature that extended beyond mere topophilia and biophilia, an affinity for landscapes and biota, respectively. In addition, as a child I was fortunate to readily have access to islands of remaining forest and to streams in a neighborhood of suburban Indianapolis, and also to travel on vacations to large forest and lake areas in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota. Extensive travels as an adult through "wilderness" areas from the Rocky Mountains in Canada to the rivers and forests of the Amazon and elsewhere cultivated my personal ecospirituality as well. Through marriage to a Thai woman, I developed an interest in studying and eventually also practicing Buddhism, now for more than two decades. Buddhism genuinely

complements my ecospirituality. Extensive readings as well as summer field research in Thailand on Buddhist ecology and environmentalism, and on diverse aspects of spiritual ecology including sacred places in nature in relation to biodiversity conservation, have all reinforced my personal experiences in nature. The profound thoughts about the environment in the writings of Charles Darwin, Henry David Thoreau, Albert Schweitzer, Robert Frost, Rabindranath Tagore, and others have been seminal influences since high school.

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

Beyond all of the above, however, there is simply no doubt that ineffable extraordinary experiences in nature are the ultimate force motivating my personal and professional involvement in ecology and environmentalism, as appears to be the case with many if not most biologists and environmentalists. Sitting and walking meditation in nature can be among the most meaningful ways of connecting with it ecologically as well as spiritually. There are limits to intellectualizing environmental observations and concerns. Emotion can transcend reason in experiencing nature. Ecologists and other scientists, if candid, would have to acknowledge that they operate with emotion as well as reason, and that neither reason nor emotion alone or in some combination is sufficient to comprehend everything experienced in nature.

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Also see: <http://www.soc.hawaii.edu/Sponsel>

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